

## COVID-19 INDUCED HATE SPEECH AND AUSTIN'S SPEECH ACT THEORY PERSPECTIVE: IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE BUILDING

**Agwuocha, Ugomma Anaekperechi**

Directorate of General Studies

Federal University of Technology Owerri

Imo State

ugommaagwuocha@gmail.com

DOI: 10.13140/ RG.2.2.23433.67684

### **Abstract**

*Hate speech has become a matter of grave concern globally. It has continued to generate defamatory and stereotypical language which has perverted various platforms of information dissemination especially the social media. As the world is currently battling the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of information on it is being disseminated via online platforms. Based on the COVID-19 'infodemic', a lot of hate speech has emerged and language use has come to be at the centre of it all. Such use, from the Speech Act Theory perspective, elicits actions and reactions which most times are detrimental to people's harmonious existence. Using Austin's and Culpeper's models of Speech Act and Impoliteness Theory, respectively, this study analysed various data on COVID-19 related information shared on the social media to determine the level of toxicity of language use, and the effect on peace building amongst nations, Nigeria inclusive. Amongst other findings, this paper discovered that communications on the social media, in reaction to COVID-19 issues are laden with hate speeches which have given rise to instances of violence, unrest, stigmatization and racism against the target people. It recommends, amongst other things, that all social media/online platforms should put in place strict guidelines for users, in its fight against hate speech. It also advocates the inclusion of language and communication arts as a course of study in the tertiary education curriculum.*

**Keywords:** Language, communication, hate speech, social media, covid-19 and peace building

### **Background Information**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, 2019 the world woke up with a new wave of disease at her hands, the 2019 novel corona virus (also named Covid-19 by WHO on 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2020), which later became a pandemic. It was first discovered in Wuhan, Hubei province of China and is believed to belong to the sister clade of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus. The virus has practically brought the world to her knees. It spared neither

world powers such as the USA, UK, Italy etc, nor the developing nations such as Nigeria, Ghana, Madagascar etc. Just like a wildfire and to the chagrin of respectable world leaders, the disease has continued to ravage the human system, take lives, cripple economy, close borders, ignite political tension, widen social relations, cause scientific and medical confusion, closed schools etc. It literally brought the world to a standstill. There became total lockdown of activities! The way and manner of its modus operandi beats the human comprehension and elicited questions on its possible origin, whether it was natural or manufactured.

Nations are asking questions, world powers are perplexed, scholars are reading and scientists are researching. All of these have a common goal of demystifying the supposedly existing mystery surrounding COVID-19. Exciting about them all is that there are accusations that the disease must have been manufactured in its country of origin (China) by their scientists'. In addition, questions are asked on the proper handling of information about its discovery and its virulent nature. The WHO seems to be at the centre of it, having been accused to be in complicity with china. Consequently, there were accusations on whether COVID-19 was actually manufactured or natural. The media outfits did well to capture and document events as they unfold. People gave various interpretation to the to various news items. They took their reaction & outburst to the social media.

A cursory study of these reactions reveals that the gains of language use have not been properly harnessed by the interlocutors. To release pent-up emotions and frustrations, derogatory and toxic comments have been directed to China. The handlings of it by various nations have also been generating hateful accusations. The social media such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, etc. are replete with these inciting comments which are threat to the existing peace in and amongst nations. Language has come to be at the centre of this because it is a tool for such communication. More so, some of the pieces of information circulated via these media outfit could be classified as "infodemic" (unverified and false information). The "infodemic" has led to toxicity in language use which is capable of disrupting a nation's peace building process. They constitute data for hate speech as aspersions are being cast on China. Part of the 'infodemic' has it that COVID-19 is man-made, not natural orchestrated by the communist China. Little wonder it has been derogatorily labelled the "Chinese Virus" by Trump (Twitter-@realDonaldTrump) and the "communist virus" by the anti-Chinese government narrative

(Kozłowska, 2020). Since language is core to communicating these feelings, there abound rich resources therein for investigative studies.

One of the tenets of academic investigations from the arts and social science perspective is to engage in objective enquiry into the philosophical as well as pragmatic underpinnings of events of particular concern. They are studied and explained through concepts, theories, experiments as well as ideologies with the aim of achieving set objectives. To this end, this research seeks to draw from the rich sources of data on COVID-19 communications on the social media to analyse toxic comments which are identified as hate speeches. Using Austin's model of speech acts and Culpeper's model of (im)politeness as theoretical lens, the data would be examined to verify how they constitute instances of impoliteness. It seeks to argue that such improper language use in its perlocution acts has dire implication on peace building of any nation, especially Nigeria.

The objective of this study therefore is to identify toxic comment generated on social media discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic. They would be analysed and thus adjudged hate speech, using the mentioned theories, to portray their possible implication on peace building.

### **Language competence in a social discourse/ context**

Given the vital role of language in peace building of a nation, it is appropriate to understand the required level of competence in its use in any social discourse. Language is structured for and by communication, and as such it is indispensable in every discourse, whether it is as a sign language, Meta language or human language, its use is for communication. It is used in various ways, for several intentions and at different context to achieve effective communication. Language is used for communication and Communication is made possible through language, therefore, they are intertwined, hence will be used interchangeably here. It is therefore pertinent to also point here that the use of language competence in this study also refers to communicative competence (hereafter known as CoC).

The notion of language has been defined by various scholars according to the perceived function it performs. Some of them are limiting or encompassing while others are abstract rigid. Very important to this study, is that given by the International Language Services Translation. The ilstranlation (2020) defines language as "a distinctly human activity that aids in the transmission of feelings and thoughts from one person to another". This means that human feelings and thoughts are communicated via language. Be it as it may, one important fact that cuts

across all definitions of language is that language is used for communication. It is the primary means of communication for humans. This entails that language and communication are inseparable. Again, Lucey, quoted in Adedun (2010:3) defines communication as involving the “interchange of facts, thoughts, values, judgments and opinions”. This is also beneficial to this study because it brings to fore the fact that speakers’ opinion, perception, interest and judgment on key issues are expressed during communication.

Furthermore, communication is also described as “an act of interchanging ideas, information or messages from one person to another, via words or signs which are understood to both parties” (ilstranlation, 2020). The above definition stipulates that communication makes way for exchange of feelings and messages, and such ensures cooperation amongst users. Having said that, we should note that language is made functional when it is used to achieve the desired aim of communication. Communication is usually done to achieve such purposes as information dissemination, enlightenment, requests, command, admonition, persuasion and most importantly to foster sustainable relationship among human beings. And they are all achieved using language. Hence, this important aspect of language breeds peace and stability at any given time. Language is used to maintain peace, in other words, if not properly used can promote chaos. This brings to fore the notion of language competence also referred to as communicative competence (CoC) in this study.

The term CoC is credited to Dell Hymes, an American sociolinguist in 1966 in contrast to Noam Chomsky’s linguistic competence (1965). The concept is defined by Hymes (1972) as “the ability to communicate in everyday situation and includes both structural and functional aspects of language”. The author posits that it also “includes the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, rules of speaking and responding, and use of language appropriately in different context”. For Hymes, CoC primarily involves knowing what to say to whom in what circumstances and how to say it. However, he posited that it includes knowledge of linguistic performance, which basically involves language function and use; as well as linguistic competence which involves grammaticality, language forms and structures.. One of the above facts stipulates that interlocutors must use language appropriately, and such ensures peace. Language is indeed crucial in determining the course of communication in a social discourse.

Otagburuagu’s (1995:7) CoC typology reveals that speakers should make right choices to generate intended meaning. It suggests the use of language appropriately to suit discourse contexts. More so, for Holmes

(2013:440), language competence involves the “adapting to the sociolinguistic rules for speaking in a community”. This takes cognizance of the appropriateness of language use in various social contexts. A speaker should possess language competence to ensure peace and harmony. In addition, Yule (1995:197) also talks about sociolinguistic competence as a component of COC which refers to the ability to use language effectively while taking into consideration the social as well as cultural context. The understanding of CoC is influenced by works in related fields of speech acts and pragmatics. Due to speech act functions of our utterance in a social discourse, speakers must possess the knowledge of the required politeness for social cohesion in different contexts. Therefore, for effective communication, great competence must be employed while using language. This is why Ahumaraeze and Nwachukwu stated that “language constructs the way we think and the way we act” (2016:78), and thus great care must be exercised in its use to breed peace.

Be that as it may, one discovers that the trend in social media is one that reveals a negative use which language has been put to. Language as used herein is replete with toxic comments and statements which are considered as hate speech. This anomaly in language use has generated concerns for researchers. To the language scholars, it elicits questions on where lies the competence of language use as buttressed by Yule, 1995, Otagburuagu, 1995, Holmes, 2013 and Hymes, 1972, Ahumaraeze and Nwachukwu, 2016.

Competence in language use in a social discourse promotes the ‘howness’ in the use of a language. However, users are constantly violating this principle through unguarded comments which are inimical to the peace building of a nation. To an African, language is culture and context specific. By implication culture and context comes to bear when using a language. The Igbo culture (Igbo – a tribe in eastern part of Nigeria) would say- “Onye ire oma ga enweta udo, nwetakwa ihe o na acho” (He, who is courteous in the use of his tongue – language, will have peace and also obtain any favour he seeks). This further buttresses the fact that language competence in a social discourse is very key to progress and peace building process of any individual, society or nation. Politeness of interlocutors is a tenet of language or communicative competence which therefore must be ensured in any interaction.

### **Hate speeches on the social media: An overview**

This section reviews definitional and empirical studies on the concept of hate speech with reference to its use on the social media. The social media

has become a platform that aids the quickest and fastest spread of communication with the speed of a lightening. It has fostered good relationship amongst families and friends. It has also reconnected lost friends and also helped to form new ones. Above all, it has made information dissemination easier, faster and with a wide coverage. The social media is a virtual community where everything relating to life and relationships are lived out. There are many platforms of social media where all these are possible. Cohen-Almagor (2015:29) defines social media platforms as those “internet based application that enable every individual to share contents such as ideas, photos, audio and video files, etc”. Again, Sangsuvan (2014:721) sees it as that “group of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. Such platforms include blogs such as Twitter & Instagram; content communication such as YouTube; networking sites such as Facebook and Whatsapp. Amongst these, the Facebook and Twitter enjoy the highest number of users, just as Joseph (2012:147) asserts, they are “among the most popular with billions of users”.

Information dissemination and relationship building on the social media is done using language. In as much as it provides avenue for these, however, it has been noticed recently that language use therein are eliciting actions which are capable of disrupting the peace building of any nation. Just as Brittan and Larry (n.d ) opined, some of the interactions on the internet are used “to demean, insult and abuse”(1) Globally, defamatory and stereotyped language has perverted the social media platforms. It constitutes what is globally identified as hate speech.

Hate speech has been in existence, Bleich (2011) has it that its emergence as a public concern dates back to the events of the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war. However, it has become a matter of grave concern since the advent of the social media in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Brittain and Larry ( n.d ) in their study defined hate speech as being “*more than just harsh words*”. They said it can be a form of expression intended to vilify, humiliate or incite hatred against a group or class of people” (1). More so, they opined that “it can be communicated using words, symbols, images, memes, emojis and videos”, which could “occur offline or online or both”. (1) In their recommendation, they proffered that educators should lead by example in showing their students how not to use hurtful words. They also commended the implication of digital citizenship curriculum which started in elementary school S1 continuing in high school.

For katarzyna (2018), hate speech is defined as “an expression of hostility towards individual or social groups based on their perceived group membership which can refer to their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation” (2). Again, the above authors quote the council of Europe in their definition of hate speech as “all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin” (2). The reality in the above is that the social media is constantly under exploitation as a platform for racism, xenophobia, etc.

Another interesting observation of hate speech is that, by the United Nation (UN). The UN understands hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colours, descent, gender or other identity factor”(2019:2). They posit that hate speech can be demeaning and divisive, thus, they decided to play active part in addressing the issue around the world. In a five paged document titled “United nations strategy and plan of action on hate speech” and signed by the UN secretary – Anthonio Gutteres, on May, 2019, it is maintained that “*hate speech is a menace to democratic values, social stability and peace*”. (1) Part of the UN’s key commitment is to “recognize, monitor, collect data and analyse hate speech trends” with the view to engage “with new traditional media to address hate speech narratives and promote the value of tolerance” (4), amongst others.

The concept of hate speech in many researches has various interpretations and connotations due to context and objectives of study. In line with the others, this study would refer to hate speech as all manner of online or offline expressions both in linguistic and non-linguistic forms made to incite, induce or justify intolerance and hatred, which are capable of destroying the peace building of a nation. Hate speech also is looked at here as those speech acts which insult the sensibility of individuals or groups based on their ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, association and literacy level. More so, it refers to any speech act capable of causing hatred, violence, insecurity, dehumanization and breach of peace building of any nation.

From the foregoing hate speech is seen as an evil wind which blows no one any good. Just as Gelber and McNamara in their 2016 study on 'evidencing the harms of hate speech' discovered, hate speech causes the following types of harm on its targets. Such include, "unfairly ranking target persons as inferior, risk of self-esteem destruction, silencing the victims, harms to dignity, making onlookers to believe negative stereotypes that would make them carryout harmful conflict, discriminatory behaviour, restrictions on freedom of movement and association, etc" (5)

### **Theoretical Framework: Austin's Model of Speech Acts and Culpeper's Model of Impoliteness Theories**

#### **Austin, J.L's Speech Acts Theory**

The speech act theory is a theory propounded by J.L Austin in the series of Williams James's lecture he presented at Harvard University in 1955. The basic of the theory is '**How to do things with words**', which is also the title upon which the series was published in 1962. Through this theory, Austin posits that people make utterances where they state facts; make predictions, accusations, requests or promises; issue order or give advice. Such utterances are made to elicit actions and reactions. It holds that words are not used to convey information only, but are also used to initiate and carry out actions, sometimes actions which have dire implications. To the philosopher, language is considered as a sort of action, more than a medium to convey information. In other words, the theory postulates that for every speech made, there is an act elicited or performed. Austin explicated his idea through the philosophical triad of locution, illocution and perlocution.

A locutionary act according to Austin (1975.92) quoted in Osisanwo (2003.58) entails the meaning which is derived through phonemic components of an utterance. Simply put, it refers to the meaning inherent in any utterance performed by a speaker. While an illocutionary act is the effect which the utterance of a speaker has on the listener. Technically put, an illocution is non-linguistic acts performed upon the understanding of a linguistic act or a locution. For instance, the utterance 'shut the door!' uttered by a speaker, is a locutionary act. Its **interpretation** as a command or request which requires the listener to close the door is considered to be an illocutionary act. When the listener closes the door, he has performed a perlocutionary act elicited by the illocutionary force of the utterance. This is to say that a perlocutionary act is an action which a listener performs upon the interpretation and understanding of an utterance. To illustrate



more, let us take a look at this example: Speaker A says to speaker B – ‘You Ghamas are infidels.’

The above utterance is a locutionary act, which is the act of speaking. If speaker B understands and interprets the statement as an insult on his religion, an illocutionary act has been performed. And when speaker B then chooses to engage the speaker A in a duel, the combat is said to be a perlocutionary act elicited by the utterance.

Therefore, Speech act theory analyses instances where language is used in a communication to perform various acts which in turn elicits or is capable of eliciting reactions. A speaker through an utterance might be advising, informing, requesting, asserting, insulting, admonishing, predicting, etc., and any of this is expected to elicit an appropriate reaction referred to as a perlocutionary act. It is pertinent to note here that sometimes the interpretation (illocutionary act) given to an utterance is culture and context specific.

### **Culpeper’s Impoliteness Theory**

Impoliteness theory is a theory propounded by Culpeper, Jonathan, with its preoccupation on how impolite linguistics and non-linguistics practices can lead to face-damaging, face aggravating of an interlocutor. The theory was incorporated into language scholarship in 1977. Researchers such as Culpeper (1996, 2008, 2011, and 2015), Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann (2003), Rudanko (2006) & Bousfield (2007, 2008) have made significant impact on the area. Culpeper’s point of view on impoliteness will be vital to this study. To this scholar, impoliteness is ascertained in a communication where it is the intention of a speaker to damage the face of the listener during communication. Impoliteness is defined by Culpeper (2015) as the “communicative behaviours that attract negative evaluations in context and course”. Furthermore, Culpeper (1996; 2008) sees impoliteness as that linguistic behaviour which is aimed at attacking the face of another. His model of impoliteness presents these impoliteness super strategies which threatens the face of an interactant. They include: bald on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock impoliteness, off-record impoliteness and withhold impoliteness. The principles of the first three strategies would be adopted in this study as analytical lens.

Bald on record impoliteness is a situation where a speaker uses a direct, clear and unambiguous impoliteness strategy, be it linguistic or non-linguistic to threaten the face of another speaker where face is relevant.

While positive impoliteness entails a situation where a speaker uses impolite strategies aimed at damaging a receiver's positive face want. Positive face want means the desire to be appreciated and talked good about during a social interaction.

The impolite strategies amongst other strategies include:

1. The use of taboo words – swear, abusive or offensive words, or profane language.
2. To call the other names as well as using derogatory terms or names labels against them.

Finally, the negative impoliteness is a situation whereby an interactant uses strategies designed to damage the addressee's negative face wants. Negative face wants of an interlocutor means the desire of the person to be free from all forms of imposition or force to coerce one into a perceived action. It also includes impolite actions which frightens ridicules or associates an addressee with negative things. One of its output strategies vital to this study is the strategy of frightening and instilling a belief that action detrimental to the other would occur.

Impoliteness is achieved whenever a face of an individual is threatened, association is threatened and enhancement is also threatened. It is otherwise known as a face threatening act perpetuated by the speaker or by the listener in response to a speaker's language use. Impoliteness theory is interdisciplinary, just as Kuntsi (2012) states that impoliteness in its interdisciplinary nature cuts across research fields such as media, psychology, conflicts studies and sociology.

Culpeper's Impoliteness theory just like Austin's Speech Acts is context and culture specific. This is to say that most times, the context or cultural background of the speakers determines what interpretations to be given to utterances. In harmony with this, for the social media, what might be termed impolite as well as the expected perlocution depends on the cultural, contextual, philosophical or ideological stance of the speakers. This study would therefore, tap into the rich tenets of these two theories to reveal the appropriateness or inappropriateness of language use from the comments emanating from COVID-19 pandemic discourses. It would also reveal the possible perlocution effect of such utterances on peace building of any nation, Nigeria inclusive.

## **Discussion of Data**

As the COVID-19 is currently raping the world of its will to survive amidst already existing health, economic and political harsh realities, another wave of disease has been induced through it on the social media. This new wave of disease is in the form of toxic comments, which is equally threatening the existing peace amongst nations. Language competence has been mis-used in reaction to series of 'infodemic' and misinterpretation of the possible origin, and handing of the rising cases covid-19. In reaction and response to covid-19 related issues, people practically fulfilled Austin's philosophy of 'how to do things with words'. Generally, to speak or use a language is to perform speech acts. The acts are meant to follow the dictates of language competence so as to ensure harmonious existence in a society.

However, it has been discovered that communications on COVID-19 events have sparked off series of comments, reactions and actions. Language use in all these has reflected hatred and bitterness felt by the users. There is so much impoliteness of language dictated amongst the related communications on the social media. The result could be nothing other than stigmatization and violence against the target group or persons. Let us take a cursory look at the president Donald Trump of the USA controversial tweets on the social media. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of March, his twitter handle @realDonaldTrump has it that - "the United States will be powerfully supporting those industries like air lines and others that are practically affected by the 'Chinese virus'". More so, in another tweet, in response to Cuono, @realDonaldTrump wrote "Cuono wants 'all states to be treated the same', but all states are not the same some are been hit by the 'Chinese virus'...". Similarly, Trump was also reported by euro news and DFRLab to have retweeted one of his Twitter handle followers who called the virus a 'Chinese virus'. More so, in fulfilling a locutionary act, @realDonaldTrump also tweeted on May 28, 3:34pm saying "all over the world, the corona virus, a very bad 'gift' from China, marches on. Not good!"

Some of the reactions to this tweet are as follows: @errol/webber for Congr - "we can't let china get away with this" (28<sup>th</sup> may). @awn Micheal, PhD, tweeted - "china must pay for what they unleashed on the world, so that this never happens again!" @Dawn Michael, PhD- "China not only was irresponsible in allowing the virus to get out of the lab, but once it spread(sic) they did not inform the world and that is unacceptable". Then, @Luke bryans, on 28<sup>th</sup> May, tweeted "Yes! It came from China! \*\*ChinaLiedAndPeopleDied\*\*". It is pertinent to note here that tweets from @error/webber, @Dawn Michael threatened the negative face want

of the addressee, just as Culpeper's negative impoliteness strategy stipulates.

There were lots of chain reactions following this Trump's tweet. Some aligned with him while others raised concern on the implications of such use of language on harmonious living. The majority are in agreement, though. One of them is from the twitter handle @intymedia whose response is "thank you Mr Trump! This 'vrisu' made in China! It is a Chinese virus". While @cody84 tweeting on 17<sup>th</sup> march asked if Trump was "trying to start a hate movement so that we can have a war to bring us out of the depression like WWI? These responses reveal that Trump has not harnessed the rules of language competence in his comment. His level of impoliteness and use of defamatory labels against China has yielded illocutionary acts through the evoked feelings of prejudice and resentment against China in the ensuing tweets. In reaction to the fire of hatred ignited by this, Geng Shuang, the Chinese foreign minister spokesperson tweeted that such hurtful comment amounted to China's stigmatization. Similarly, Major Bill de Blasio of New York said that such statement was tantamount to "fuelling more bigotry" especially at the Asian-Americans, (BBC News, 2020). While @ajRAFAEL also tweeted "...and I hate to bring more attention to the fact that he said 'Chinese virus'.... but I'd like us to continue to look out for our Asian brothers and sister who are experiencing attacks against them because people are assuming they have the virus because they are Chinese".

Again, according to an analysis from the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Lab (DFRLab), the US republican representative Paul Gosar had tweeted on March 8 referring COVID-19 as 'Wuhan Virus'. While the republican house leader Kevin McCarthy on March 9, also used the term 'Chinese Virus' in his tweet. It was further gathered by the BBC News (2020) that Michael Pompeo, the US secretary of state repeatedly referred to the virus 'Wuhan Virus'.

The description of the novel coronavirus as the 'Chinese virus', the 'China virus' and the 'Wuhan virus' are examples of offensive language according to impoliteness strategy, used by these speakers. The tweets are analysed here as performing Austin's locutionary act. They are statements made by these speakers which revealed defamatory words against China. They are instances of bald on record strategy of impoliteness. Furthermore, the series of re-tweets of the derogatory labels against China, against the Asian community shows the respondents agreement and alignment with the US tweets on the claim that China manufactured

the coronavirus as a form of third- World War weapon against the world. The traffic such use of offensive labels generated is captured in DFRLab's analysis report which posits that the re-tweet of the terms 'Wuhan Virus', 'Wuhan Coronavirus', 'China Virus' and 'Chinese Coronavirus', which were relatively non- existent, became re-tweeted about 24,049 times just within an hour of the Paul Gosar's March 8, tweet at 9:08 pm. Quartz analysis of data from Crowd Tangle, a social media monitoring tool owned by Facebook also has it that there is "a similar rising trajectory in mid - March for terms like 'China virus', 'Chinese virus' or 'Wuhan virus', on Facebook" , (Kozłowska, 2020).

Still on the traffic generated by the top US men's tweet, Aljazeera found more than 72,000 and 10,000 post with the tags 'Wuhan virus' and 'Kung flu' respectively , while a Chinese-owned app TikTok as at Saturday, April the 14 has a record of 110 million views of similar posts tagged Chinese-corona virus. For Aljazeera, 'Kung Flu' label was found within march alone, noting that it is possible the number is higher considering the variations of the phrase used across the site. The foregoing brings to fore Austin's concept of illocution. An illocutionary act refers to the effect an utterance has on the receiver. It also implies the feelings evoked by a speech or an utterance. This analysis posits that there seems to be a general feeling of agreement by all those who re-tweeted the various corona virus labels to the fact that china is indeed responsible for inflicting the world with corona virus. They are analysed here to be saying that china manufactured the disease, thus manifesting the illocutionary force of the speech acts theory. According to Culpeper's bald on record and positive impoliteness strategy, these discriminatory and stereotypical language labels of Covid-19 are unambiguous and by implication are direct uses of offensive language against China. Reiterating, they evoked the feelings of hatred and belief in the culpability of China in the accusation, and this is analysed here as illocutionary act taking place.

A perlocutionary act is the consequence or result evoked by the interpretation of an utterance. In a research x-raying the current trends and challenges of language use on the social media, Agwuocha (2019) opined that if destructive language use on the social media is not checked, the perlocutionary act might be in the of violence or war. True to the above author's findings, the analysis here has justified such postulation. The data analysed here reveals that the impolite use of language against the Chinese nationals elicited several perlocutionry act. One of them is that it resulted in the stigmatization of the Asian communities. Reports have it that it also resulted in violence against the Chinese all over the

world. For instance, the Euronews reported on March 20 that Trump's constant reference to the 'Chinese virus' have already sparked off xenophobia in Asian communities. There has been anti-Asia hate which has continued to spread online amid Covid-19 discourses. (Macquire, 2020). Kozłowska (2020) similarly has it that several countries have reported violence towards Asians since the corona virus began spreading. For Bloomberg News, there has been "fuel added to fire with Beijing" since Trump's 'Chinese virus' tweet. To worsen the matter, the Vanguard newspaper (2020), reported that there is even a video on Skynews Australia with the title- "China wilfully inflicted Corona-virus upon the world", which it gathered to have sparked off "toxic and hateful" comments reaching over '5k comments' (Five thousand comments).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the impolite use of language in Covid-19 communications has threatened and is threatening the face want of the interlocutors from this particular region, nation and race. It has violated their desire to be talked good about and be appreciated as unique and good people in such social interaction. It has induced hate speeches against this target audience. Just as the vanguard newspaper, quoting the tech startup report states that "the Coronavirus outbreak has led to a 900 percent uptick in hate speech towards china and Chinese people on Twitter". Through this, the peaceful coexistence between China and USA and also China and the rest of the world has been threatened,

Coming down to Nigeria, it is also discovered that hurtful comments are trending on the social media following communications on events around the Coronavirus pandemic. For instance, a tweet from the Federal Ministry of Health Nigeria on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, through the twitter handle @Fmohnigeria, on the confirmed index case of COVID-19 in Nigeria generated series hate speeches. Responding to the tweet by @Fmonigeria on the COVID-19 index case in Nigeria, @naija..., on the 28 of February tweeted- ".....turns that it's an Italian that brought this virus to Nigeria, our useless @FAAN official and Ministry of Health didn't realize that Italy already has a worse case of Coronavirus outbreak..., yet they allowed this guy into our country". Also, @Sunday Lhino... responded- "what do you expect from unserious govt.". And, @real\_gloria sarcastically responded- "Lai Mohammed said Nigeria has what it takes to tackle it, you remember? Watch him now; he will blame PDP for this". In a response to @real\_Gloria's tweet, @nigeria will be great, yet another twitter account, tweeted- "that mna (man) na fool, I hope he will be among the beneficiary".

The above tweets are laden with sarcasm and derogatory remarks capable of inciting hatred and lack of trust and belief one's government. In line with Culpeper's model of Impoliteness theory, @paldron use of a direct, abusive and derogatory label- 'useless,' against Italy is considered highly impolite. The twitter account has it that "Italy has proved itself to be useless. It should be a country in Africa". Besides, a derogatory remark has also been made against Africa, which Nigeria is part of. An illocution act of asking if Africa is made up of useless countries has been initiated. Therefore, @gosh\_12 referred to @paldron as an imbecile, questioning what right the person has to talk to Africans in that way. Precisely, @gosh\_12 tweeted - "Such imbecility, Africa is better than your country, your people are idiots, worse than Africa".

In addition, the Coronavirus has been labelled 'Almajiri Virus', just as the case with the 'Chinese Virus'. The 'Almajiri' / 'Almajirai' (singular/plural) is a system practiced in the northern part of Nigeria where children are literally abandoned in the care of an Islamic teacher for an Islamic education. As a result of 'Almajirai's cluster accommodation, they were easily infected by the virus in a large number. This study therefore discovered tweets referring to the Coronavirus as 'Almajiri' virus. For instance, @teniolu tweeted- "their government should not import those 'Almajiri virus' to our state or else....". The 'Almajirai' became a symbol of Coronavirus and thus were stigmatized and rejected even by their states of origin.

The above analysis revealed the new dimension of hate speeches and how it is creating a divide in nations and amongst nations, threatening the existing peace therein. As Culpeper's impoliteness theory suggests, any language use should be devoid of profane usage, abusive and offensive words which are capable of threatening the positive face want of an interactant in any discourse. Apart from threatening the face of an addressee, Austin's Speech Act theory as already explicated shows that for every locutionary act of utterance, there is an induced illocutionary effect on the receiver. The analysis of all the hurtful comments, derogatory and defamatory remarks against the target audience which sum up to be termed hate speeches. They are instances of locution which sparked of illocutionary effect of hatred. Their perlocutionary act lead to several Almajiri stigmatization as well as anti-Asian violence and stigmatisation, and has equally pitched China against the world.

### **Conclusion**

The issue of hate speech especially on the social media has been a matter of great concern. But, with the emergence of Covid-19, it has taken a

drastic turn as it has been discovered in this study to have already instigated violence and stigmatization against a particular people, posing a threat to the existing peaceful co-existence amongst nations. The 2019 novel Coronavirus lesson has exposed what harm hate speeches are capable of causing. It has given the growing concern for online/social media hate speech a new dimension. The implications on peace building amongst nations are glaring as has been explicated through the analysed data. Although they are discourses online, the data analysed here as hate speeches however, have shown that they are capable of causing offline harm which are inimical to the peace building process of any nation. Their implications are on the rising anxiety, fear and insecurity amongst the target group, in this case, amongst the Asian community as well as the Almajirai community. While there is resentment, dehumanization, negative stereotyping, stigmatization and violence from the rest of the world towards these people. These have pitched nations and tribes against one another thereby inhibiting any possible peace building processes. All these implications are as a result of lack of communicative competence amongst most of the social media speakers of the English language. Given the role and indispensability of language in any society, be it virtual or physical society, there is the need to assess and comprehend its implications on existing interpersonal relationship in any context before it is used. Any language use capable of endangering interpersonal relationship as well as peace building of a nation should not be used. In other words, communicative/ language competence should be effectively utilized for the surviving peace of any society and nation especially in this era of social media revolution, giving the coronavirus lessons learnt.

### **Recommendation**

Going by the revealed consequences of Covid-19 induced online hate speeches; this study thus recommends the following:

- Language and communication arts should be taught as a Course in the language departments as well as the General Studies Units of all tertiary institutions. While language literacy in the social media and communicative competence should be composites of the course.
- Secondly, administrative managers of all social media platforms should be mandated to put in place measures to ensure that hate speeches are not allowed to go viral. Some of the measures could be removing offensive contents and giving warning labels to users who post such. Then, upon consistent receipt of warning labels without change, such accounts can be blocked from access to the site.



- In addition, there should be constant sensitization on every platform by the administrative group on the need to be courteous in every social discourse.
- Finally, digital literacy should be incorporated into the senior secondary school curriculum.

## **References**

- Agwuocha, U.A. (2019). Language use in the social media and national integration: Current trends and challenges. In *International journal of development and management review*. (INJODEMAR) 14(1) June.
- Adedun, A. (2010). *Effective English for business and professional communication*. Lagos: University of Lagos Press. ISBN: 978-704-846-5
- Ahumaraeze, C.I & Nwachukwu, U.A. (2016). Language use: Implications for peace and global reconciliation. In *Review of arts and social sciences. Quarterly journal of inter-university friendship association with contributions from science and technology*, 76-83
- Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- BBC News (March 17, 2020). Trump angers Beijing with 'Chinese Virus' tweet. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia>, on 16-06-2020
- Bleich, E. (2011). *The freedom to be racist? How the United States and Europe struggle to preserve freedom and combat racism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bousfield, D. (2007). Impoliteness, preference organisation and conducting. *Multilingua*, 26(1-2), 1-33.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2008). *Impoliteness in interaction*. Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing.
- Brittain, H. & Larry, M. (n.d). The parent's and educator's guide to combating hate speech. Retrieved from <https://www.connectsafely.org>, on 08-06-2020.
- Cohen-Almagor, R. (2015). *Confronting the internet's dark side: Moral & social responsibility on the free highway*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Culpeper, J. (1996). Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. In *Journal of pragmatics*, 25, 349-367.

- \_\_\_\_\_ (2008). Reflections on impoliteness, relational work and power. In D. Bousfield and Locher, M. (eds.) *Impoliteness in language: Studies on its interplay with power in theory and practice*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 17-44.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2011). *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence*. In *Studies in interactional sociolinguistics*, 28, 263-287. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2015). *Impoliteness*. International encyclopedia of language and social interaction. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118611463.wbiels.i0>
- Culpeper, J., Bousfield, D., Wichmann, A. (2003). *Impoliteness revisited: With special reference to dynamic and prosodic aspects*. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, 1545-1579.
- Euronews & bullet (17<sup>th</sup> march, 2020). 'Chinese virus'- Donald Trump sparks backlash over coronavirus tweets. Retrieved from <https://www.euronews.com>, on 15-06-2020
- Gelashvili, T. (2018). *Hate speech on social media: implications of private regulation and governance gaps*. International human rights law, 30 higher education credits. Faculty of law, Lund University. Retrieved from [lup.lub.lu.se](http://lup.lub.lu.se) record, on 9-6-2020.
- Gelber, K. & McNamara, L. (2016) *Evidencing the harms of hate speech*. *Social identities*, 22(3), 324-341. Retrieved from [https:// doi-org/ 10.1080/13504630.2015.1128810](https://doi-org/10.1080/13504630.2015.1128810).
- Gutterres (May, 2019). *United Nations strategy and plan of action on hate speech* Retrieved from <https://www.un.org>.UNst, on 8-06-2020
- Herskovitz, J. (Bloomberg news, March 17, 2020). *Trumps 'Chinese Virus' Tweet adds fuel to fire with Beijing*. Retrieved from <https://www.bloomberg.com> > articles, on 16-06-2020
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An Introduction to sociolinguistics* (5<sup>th</sup> ed). England: Pearson Education Limited.
- Hymes, D. (1966). "Two types of linguistic relativity" In Bright, W. (ed.) *Sociolinguistics*. The Hague Mouton, 114-158. OCLC 216 44 08.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1972). *On communicative competence*. In Pride, J & J, Holmes (eds.) *Sociolinguistics*. Harmonds Worth: Penguin books, 269-293
- International Language Services (2019). *Language vs communication. They are not the same thing*. Retrieved from [www.ilstranslations.com/blog/ language](http://www.ilstranslations.com/blog/language), on 08-06-2020
- Joseph, S. (2012). *Social media, political change and human rights*. Boston College International and Comparative Law. Review 145, 35(1) 3. Retrieved from

<https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/iclr/vol35/iss1/3>, on 08-06-2020

- Kanu, I. A. (2020). COVID-19 and the Economy: An African Perspective. *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*. Vol. 3. No. 2. pp. 29-36.
- Katarzyna, B. (2018). The dynamics of hate speech and counter speech in the social media-Summary of scientific research. Centre for Internet and Human Rights, Europa- Universitat Viadrina Frankfurt. Retrieved from [cihr.eu](http://cihr.eu)>2018, on 08-06-2020.
- Kozłowska, H. C. (March 25, 2020). How anti- Chinese sentiment is spreading on social media. Retrieved from [qz.com](http://qz.com). (Quartz), on 9-6-2020.
- Macguire, E. (April 5, 2020). Anti-Asian hate continues to spread online amid Covid-19 pandemic. Retrieved from [www. aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com), on 03-05-2020.
- NDTV Coronavirus (2020). Donald Trump tweets describing corona virus as a very bad 'gift' from China. Retrieved from [https://www.ndtv.com/Trump tweets](https://www.ndtv.com/Trump%20tweets), on 03-05-2020.
- Okogba, E. (March 29, 2020). Coronavirus: Huge surge of hate speech towards Chinese on Twitter. Retrieved from <https://www.vanguardngr.com>, on 16-06-2020.
- Osisanwo, (2003). An introduction to discourse analysis. Lagos: Otangburuagu, E. (1995). New perspectives in business communication. Onitsha: Africa First Publisher Plc.
- Rundako, J. (2006). Aggravated impoliteness and two types of speaker intention in an episode in Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. *Journal of pragmatics*, 38(6), 829-841.
- Sangsuwan, K. (2014). Balancing freedom of speech on the internet under international law. *North Carolina journal of international law & commercial regulation*, 39,701. Retrieved from <https://scholarship.law.unc.edu/ncilj/vol39/iss3/2>, on 16-06-2020.
- World Health Organization (2020). WHO Timeline-Covid-19. Retrieved from [tps://www.who.int./new](https://www.who.int/new), on 05-05-2020.
- \_\_\_\_\_(April 8, 2020).WHO Director - General's opening remarks at the media briefing on Covid-19. Retrieved from [tps://www.who.int](https://www.who.int), on 05-05-2020.

\_\_\_\_\_ (May 4, 2020). Rolling updates on coronavirus disease (Covid-19). Retrieved from [tps: //www.who.int /diseases](https://www.who.int/diseases), on 05-05-2020.

Yule, G. (1995). *The study of language*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.