

## A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POLITICALLY-MOTIVATED HATE SPEECHES IN PRE-2023 GENERAL ELECTION ARTICLES

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### Abstract

*Politically motivated hate speeches in Nigeria, especially before the 2023 elections, threatened societal cohesion and democracy by exploiting ethnic and religious divisions, underscoring the need for semantic analysis to reveal manipulation tactics. This study, therefore, analysed the semantics of selected politically motivated hate speech in pre-2023 general election articles. The study is hinged on the Systemic Functional Theory (SFT) and the Social Identity Theory (SIT). In studying politically-motivated hate speech during the pre-2023 general election, Michael Halliday's SFT facilitates the exploration of semantic strategies employed to manipulate social perceptions. At the same time, Tajfel and Turner's SIT uncovered strategies used by politicians to manipulate voter behaviour through identity-driven language. Being a descriptive study, the target population comprised politically-motivated hate speeches in four (4) selected print media: The Sun, The Punch, The Guardian, and The Vanguard newspapers between February 2022 and February 2023. Thirty-four (34) of the samples were purposively selected for analysis. The samples were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative analysis included descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages, while qualitative analysis involved the semantic analysis of the hate speeches. The study revealed that personal attacks were the predominant form of hate speech in pre-2023 general election articles, especially in The Vanguard and The Sun, with ethnic/regional discrimination and generalised insults also being significant, illustrating the intense and divisive nature of the political discourse through inflammatory language.*

**Keywords:** Semantic analysis, Politically-motivated hate speeches, pre-2023 general election articles

### INTRODUCTION

The escalation of politically-motivated hate speeches in Nigeria raises significant concerns. Hate speech has the potential to incite violence and animosity, exacerbating instability and conflict in a nation already grappling with a history of ethnic and religious violence. Such rhetoric fosters an environment of fear and

coercion, dissuading individuals from engaging in the democratic process, thereby undermining the foundation of democracy reliant on universal participation. Additionally, it cultivates an atmosphere of intolerance and division, corroding societal cohesion and contributing to various social ills, including poverty, crime, and conflict. Combatting hate speech presents formidable challenges, yet it is

imperative for all stakeholders to actively engage in fostering a more inclusive and tolerant society. While some scholars (Ayansola & Oamen, 2018; Chilton, 2015) assert that hate speech falls under the protection of freedom of speech, others (Aboh, Onuoha & Kalu, 2020; Ezeibe, 2015) contend that its deliberate intent to foment violence or animosity renders it unprotected.

Moreover, analyzing politically-motivated hate speeches from a semantic perspective offers a specialized focus on language and meaning behind hate speeches; it will uncover hidden meanings, emotional triggers, and the linguistic strategies employed by politicians and other political influencers to manipulate and influence public opinion. Political leaders employ language as a multifaceted tool for persuasion and influence. They utilize language to evoke emotions, present logical arguments, establish credibility, shape narratives favorably towards their stance, and mobilize their audience into action. Emotional language, including anecdotes and metaphors, serves to forge personal connections and elicit empathetic responses from the audience. Moreover, leaders employ factual evidence, statistics, and expert opinions to bolster their arguments and convince the audience of the validity of their position. Political leaders build constituent confidence by communicating their knowledge of relevant subjects. They strategically frame issues to align with their agenda while portraying opposing viewpoints less favorably. Ultimately, language catalyzes inspiring action among the audience, whether it be through voting, volunteering, or financial contributions.

Relatedly, hate speech in the literature is largely seen as any verbal or written derogatory appellations or pronouncements directed at individuals or groups based on gender, religion, politics, race, or affiliation (Ayansola & Oamen, 2018). Political speeches are defined as speeches by the government or candidates in an

office in any discussion of social issues or political issues. They are speeches, strategies, or techniques that the government officials or candidates in the government offices use to persuade and make the public to believe in them. Political speeches focus on the public or on the opposition party, either to convince or to confuse them on a particular political decision. Hate speeches occur when a religious group or a political movement systematically attacks a specific group or groups in society through mass and/or social media of any kind. Some of these media involve radio, television stations, newspapers, and social media. It is a speech that demeans based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, and disability (Aboh *et al.*, 2020).

Hence, the analysis of politically-motivated hate speeches from a semantic lens provides a specific emphasis on dissecting the language and significance within these discourses. According to Ofoegbu and Usar (2018), semantics is the study of the meaning of sentences; thus, the understanding of semantics gives an understanding of the study of meaning in sentences. Also, semantic analysis is indispensable for uncovering concealed meanings, identifying the intended recipients, and understanding the potential for manipulation. Many politicians and political influencers frequently use euphemisms and rhetorical tactics to mitigate the impact of their hate speech, and semantic analysis can reveal how these linguistic choices create an impression of acceptability while conveying harmful ideas. Hate speeches are adept at crafting narratives that cast specific groups or policies in an unfavourable light, and through semantic analysis, we can uncover the linguistic methods employed to construct these narratives. This analysis provides valuable insight into how such speeches manipulate public opinion by influencing and moulding perceptions. In view of previous studies about hate speeches, few or no study has been carried out on the semantics of selected politically-

motivated hate speeches, specifically on the pre-2023 general election articles. Thus, this is the gap that this study fills. It is therefore imperative to analyse the semantics of selected politically-motivated hate speeches in pre-2023 general election articles.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to carry out a semantic analysis of selected politically-motivated hate speeches in pre-2023 general election articles. Specifically, the study intends to:

1. Examine the contexts of selected politically-motivated hate speeches in pre-2023 general election excerpts;
2. Analyse the lexical, formal, and cognitive semantic items of politically-motivated hate speeches in pre-2023 general election excerpts; and
3. Assess the impacts of hate speeches in public discourse, political polarization, and social cohesion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Politically-motivated Hate Speeches**

Hate speech, defined as speech that offends, threatens, or insults a particular group based on attributes such as race, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, or political affiliation, becomes politically motivated when it serves as a tool for political agendas, manipulation, or mobilization. Political discourse has long been an arena where language plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes. Hate speech, when wielded in the political sphere, becomes a potent tool to rally support, polarize communities, and marginalize opposition. The utilization of hate speech for political purposes raises ethical concerns and poses challenges to the democratic ideals of free speech and open discourse. Researchers such as Chilton (2015) emphasize the importance of analysing hate speech within the broader context of discourse analysis.

Politically-motivated hate speeches often exploit existing social tensions.

Perpetrators of politically-motivated hate speeches in Nigeria span a spectrum of actors, including politicians, media influencers, and grassroots agitators. Adewuyi (2018) notes that politicians, seeking to gain or maintain power, may exploit ethnic, religious, or regional fault lines to mobilize support. Media influencers, both traditional and online, contribute to the dissemination of hate speech, amplifying divisive narratives. Grassroots agitators, often aligned with particular political or ethnic groups, may use inflammatory rhetoric to advance their agendas. The targets of politically-motivated hate speeches in Nigeria are diverse, reflecting the country's rich tapestry of ethnic, religious, and regional diversity. Ethnic and religious groups are commonly targeted, with rhetoric that exploits historical tensions and deep-seated grievances. Additionally, political opponents, journalists, and civil society actors critical of the status quo may become targets, facing threats and intimidation, taking advantage of historical grievances, economic disparities, or cultural differences.

### **Semantics**

Semantics is generally known to be the study of the meaning of words. Babatunde (2015, p.1) opines that “semantics is coined from a Greek verb which means to signify; it is the study of meaning, which seeks to convey and classify experience through language”. It can simply be defined as “the branch of linguistics which studies the meaning of words and sentences of language” (Ogbulogo, 2015, p.4). Semantics deals with the mind to give appropriate meaning to a word or an expression. It also studies the meaning in language, including the relation between language, thought, and behaviour (Pei, 2016, p.313). The relationship between language and meaning helps in

bringing out the embedded meanings in expressions.

The semantic dimension of language engages in interactions with other linguistic components or levels, including syntax, as is conventionally delineated in linguistics. In linguistic discourse, the customary terminology employed to describe these interactions between components or levels is "interfaces." In the realm of semantics, the most vital interfaces are recognized to be those with syntax (the syntax-semantics interface), pragmatics, and phonology, particularly with respect to prosody and intonation. This linguistic theory explores the meanings of words by positing that the complete meaning of a word is intricately entwined with its context. According to this theory, the meaning of a word is composed of its contextual relationships, making distinctions based on degrees of involvement and modes of involvement. To differentiate between these aspects, any part of a sentence that conveys meaning and amalgamates with the meanings of other constituents is denoted as a semantic constituent. Semantic constituents that cannot be deconstructed into more fundamental constituents are termed minimal semantic constituents (Kroeger, 2019). Semantics could be lexical, cognitive, formal, or computational.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **Systemic Functional Theory (SFT)**

Systemic Functional Theory is a comprehensive approach to understanding how language functions within social contexts. It views language not merely as a set of rules or structures but as a system of choices that speakers use to achieve specific communicative goals. This theory was developed primarily by Michael Halliday, who proposed the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Hassan, 1976). Halliday's work has significantly influenced the field of linguistics by emphasizing the functional

aspects of language. At the core of Systemic Functional Theory is the concept that language operates through three simultaneous metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction concerns the representation of reality, enabling speakers to convey their experiences, thoughts, and the relationships between different entities and events. It is through this function that language expresses content and logical relations.

The relevance of Systemic Functional Theory to the study of semantic analysis of politically-motivated hate speeches, particularly in the context of pre-2023 general election articles, is significant. Politically-motivated hate speech often serves to influence public perception, mobilize supporters, and marginalize opponents. By using SFT, researchers can dissect the language used in these speeches to uncover underlying meanings and intentions. Through the ideational metafunction, analysts can examine how political figures represent social realities and construct ideological positions. For example, hate speech may portray certain groups as threats or enemies, thereby justifying exclusionary or aggressive policies. By identifying these representations, researchers can understand the content and logical structures that underpin such rhetoric. The interpersonal metafunction is crucial for analysing how hate speech attempts to manipulate social relationships and power dynamics. Politicians may use language to assert dominance, invoke fear, or galvanize a sense of unity among their supporters against a common enemy. By examining mood, modality, and appraisal in these speeches, analysts can uncover the strategies used to influence emotions and social alignments.

In addition, the textual meta-function helps researchers understand how hate speeches are cohesively constructed to ensure their messages are clear and persuasive. Analysing how politicians structure their discourse, use

rhetorical devices, and create logical progression within their speeches can reveal how they aim to maintain audience engagement and reinforce their messages. In the context of pre-2023 general election articles, Systemic Functional Theory offers a robust framework for examining the complex interplay of language, power, and ideology. It enables a detailed analysis of how politicians use language to construct social realities, negotiate power relations, and organize their discourse to achieve specific political ends. By applying SFT, researchers can gain deeper insights into the semantic underpinnings of politically-motivated hate speech, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of its impact on public discourse and social dynamics.

## METHODOLOGY

The descriptive research was adopted for the study because it is a qualitative study. Hate speech analysis, especially in a politically charged context, involves real-world data that is not easily manipulated. Therefore, the descriptive design was suitable when researchers cannot randomly assign participants to conditions, as is often the case with observational studies involving naturally occurring phenomena. Given the sensitive nature of hate speech and its occurrence in real-world political contexts, it may be impractical or ethically challenging to manipulate and control variables in a true experimental design. Descriptive designs allow researchers to study phenomena as they naturally unfold. The purposive sampling technique was used to select 34 politically-motivated hate speeches in written articles from four (4) selected print media outlets, which are *The Sun*, *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, and *The Vanguard* newspapers, between February 2022 and February 2023. By using a type of media (print) and selecting major outlets, the study considers the diverse ways in which hate speeches may be disseminated, but it narrowed the population to

a particular media form for proper representation. The analysis was subjected to descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages, as well as semantic analysis of the hate speeches. The analyses were done without anonymizing the names of the speakers because they were already captured in the sources of selected data (the newspapers). Using them in this study would not create any ethical issues, as they were used mainly for academic purposes.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

### Categories of Hate Speech in the Pre-2023 General Election

**Table 1:** Categories of Hate Speech in the Pre-2023 General Election

S/N	Newspapers	Vanguard		The Punch		The Guardian
		No.	%	No.	%	
	<b>Categories</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No.</b>
1	Personal Attacks	6	40.0	0	0	1
2	Ethnic/Regional Discrimination	4	26.6	3	27.3	1
3	Accusations of Corruption	1	6.7	2	18.2	0
4	Health-Related Insults	1	6.7	0	0	0
5	Generalized Insults and Name-calling	3	20.0	6	54.5	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 1 provides an analysis of hate speech categories in pre-2023 general election articles across four Nigerian newspapers: *Vanguard*, *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, and *The Sun*. The table categorizes hate speech in articles from four newspapers—*Vanguard*, *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, and *The Sun*—leading up to the 2023 general election. *Vanguard* exhibited the highest frequency of personal attacks, accounting for 40% of its total hate speech instances. This newspaper also showed significant instances of ethnic/regional discrimination at 26.6%, with fewer occurrences of accusations of corruption,

health-related insults, and generalized insults and name-calling.

In contrast, *The Punch*, while recording no personal attacks, had a substantial proportion of generalized insults and name-calling, which made up 54.5% of its total hate speech. It also featured ethnic/regional discrimination and accusations of corruption prominently, but no health-related insults. *The Guardian* had an even distribution between personal attacks and ethnic/regional discrimination, each constituting 50% of its hate speech instances. *The Guardian* had no recorded instances of accusations of corruption, health-related insults, or generalized insults and name-calling. *The Sun*, similar to *Vanguard*, showed a high proportion of personal attacks at 50%. It also had instances of ethnic/regional discrimination, accusations of corruption, and generalized insults and name-calling, but no health-related insults.

When viewed collectively, personal attacks emerged as the most frequent category of hate speech across all newspapers, making up 31.4% of the total instances. Ethnic/regional discrimination and generalized insults and name-calling followed, each comprising 22.9%. Accusations of corruption accounted for 14.3%, while health-related insults were the least frequent at 8.5%. This analysis indicates that personal attacks were the dominant form of hate speech in the pre-2023 general election articles, particularly prevalent in *Vanguard* and *The Sun*, with ethnic/regional discrimination and generalized insults/name-calling also being significant across these newspapers.

### **Contexts of Selected Politically-Motivated Hate Speeches in the Pre-2023 General Election**

The contexts of the thirty-four selected instances of politically-motivated hate speech published in various newspapers in the lead-up to the 2023 general election vary. This is given

in a table in the appendix section of this paper. The contexts identify the specific hate speakers, their comments, and the newspapers that featured these remarks. *Vanguard*, a prominent newspaper, recorded a significant number of hate speeches in 2022 and 2023. Among the notable speakers, Fani-Kayode accused Atiku of adhering to outdated and divisive ethnic and regional views. Similarly, Mr. Onanuga criticized Atiku for being a "tribal jingoist" and questioned his health and integrity. Mr. Phrank Shaibu dismissed the APC's promises as nonsensical and called Tinubu a comedian. Tinubu himself also contributed to the inflammatory rhetoric by disparaging Atiku's repeated presidential runs and questioning his fitness for office. Additionally, the Atiku/Okowa campaign organization accused Tinubu of corruption and unfitness for the presidency, while other statements from *Vanguard* highlighted regional and ethnic biases in political endorsements.

### **Lexical Semantic Items of Politically-Motivated Hate Speeches in Pre-2023 General Election Excerpts**

#### **Ethnic/Regional Discrimination**

*Fani-Kayode: "Atiku belongs to a dying breed of ethics, who still sees things from a regional, ethnic, and religious prism."*  
(Excerpt 1)

Fani-Kayode's statement categorizes Atiku's viewpoint as limited to regional, ethnic, and religious perspectives, implying a narrow-mindedness unfit for national leadership. Fani-Kayode's characterization not only paints Atiku as incapable of transcending regional and ethnic biases but also perpetuates stereotypes that reinforce divisions among Nigeria's diverse population. By framing Atiku's perspective as inherently limited, such rhetoric not only undermines his credibility but also stokes ethnic

tensions, potentially alienating voters who identify with different ethnic groups.

### Personal Attacks

*Mr. Onanuga: "A man who has been campaigning as a so-called 'unifier' of our disparate groups is a tribal jingoist, who has now totally eviscerated all pretensions to being a detribalized Nigerian."* (Excerpt 2)

Onanuga criticizes Atiku for his claimed unifying role, accusing him of tribalism and hypocrisy in portraying himself as a unifier. Onanuga's critique not only challenges Atiku's credibility as a unifier but also attacks his integrity by accusing him of hypocrisy and tribal bias. Such personal attacks divert attention from substantive policy issues and can polarize voters along tribal lines, undermining efforts to foster national unity and constructive political discourse.

*Tinubu: "There are few of us left running, one says he is Atiku. How many times has he been running? He is always on the run, and he is tired. Tell him to go and sit down. Enough is enough!"* (Excerpt 6)

Tinubu dismisses Atiku's candidacy by questioning his stamina and credibility, portraying him as unfit and tired of political pursuits. Tinubu's statement not only undermines Atiku's political endurance but also diminishes his legitimacy as a viable candidate, framing him as exhausted and lacking in perseverance. Such personal attacks detract from substantive policy discussions and can polarize public opinion by focusing on

personality rather than issues affecting the electorate.

### Generalized Insults and Name-calling

*Mr. Phrank Shaibu: "Tinubu is a comedian."* (Excerpt 5)

Shaibu trivializes Tinubu's seriousness and capability, implying that his political claims are unserious and not to be taken seriously. Shaibu's characterization of Tinubu as a "comedian" diminishes his political stature and competence, suggesting he lacks credibility or seriousness in his political endeavors. Such name-calling can degrade public discourse by reducing complex political issues to simplistic insults, potentially polarising voters based on personal rather than policy-based considerations. This type of rhetoric may also obscure genuine debate about substantive issues, focusing attention instead on personal attacks and undermining constructive dialogue in electoral campaigns.

*APC campaign organization: "You are a failed politician. APC tackles Babachir."* (Excerpt 30)

The APC labels Babachir Lawal as a failed politician, undermining his credibility and effectiveness in politics. By branding Babachir Lawal as a "failed politician," the APC attempts to discredit Lawal's political career and diminish his influence, potentially swaying public opinion against him. Such generalized insults not only attack Lawal personally but also detract from substantive discussions on policy and governance, fostering a divisive atmosphere in political discourse. This tactic highlights a broader trend where parties resort to name-calling to delegitimize opponents, which can erode trust in political institutions and candidates, impacting overall civic engagement and democratic processes negatively.

### Health-Related Insults

*Dr. Babangida Aliyu: "I saw a picture of somebody trying to prove he is healthy. If there is health, we don't need to tell people that we are healthy, but we all are aware that Atiku is the healthiest of the Presidential candidates in this country." (Excerpt 23)*

Aliyu subtly criticizes Atiku's health, implying that others are trying to prove their health whereas Atiku's health is questioned. Dr. Babangida Aliyu's comments subtly cast doubt on Atiku's health while suggesting that other candidates may be less forthcoming about their own health statuses. By emphasizing Atiku's health as a topic of awareness, Aliyu indirectly questions Atiku's fitness for office without directly accusing him, potentially influencing public perception of his candidacy. This type of health-related insult can polarize public opinion and distract from substantive policy discussions, focusing instead on personal characteristics that may not directly impact governance or leadership effectiveness.

### Accusations of Corruption

*Atiku/Okowa campaign organization: "APC candidate, i.e., Tinubu is corruption personified." (Excerpt 10)*

Accuses Tinubu of being synonymous with corruption, suggesting that his candidacy would perpetuate corrupt practices. The statement by the Atiku/Okowa campaign organization accuses Tinubu of embodying corruption, implying that his leadership would be marred by unethical practices. Such accusations aim to tarnish Tinubu's reputation and undermine public trust in his candidacy by associating him with negative connotations. These accusations

of corruption can significantly impact electoral dynamics by shaping voter perceptions of candidates' integrity and trustworthiness, influencing electoral outcomes based on ethical considerations rather than policy or governance capabilities alone.

*Olusegun Obasanjo: "If I speak about Atiku, Russians will come for his arrest within 24 hours. Atiku committed the worst fraud in the history of the Russian Federation." (Excerpt 21)*

Obasanjo accuses Atiku of severe corruption, implicating him in fraudulent activities of international significance. Obasanjo's statement dramatically accuses Atiku of engaging in severe corruption, suggesting that his actions would lead to international legal repercussions. By invoking the image of Russians coming for Atiku's arrest, Obasanjo amplifies the gravity of the accusation, potentially influencing public opinion against Atiku's candidacy based on ethical and legal concerns. Such accusations not only damage Atiku's reputation but also shape public perception of his suitability for high office, highlighting the enduring impact of corruption allegations in electoral contexts.

### Formal Semantic Items of Politically-Motivated Hate Speeches in Pre-2023 General Election Excerpts

#### Ethnic/Regional Discrimination

*Fani-Kayode: "Atiku belongs to a dying breed of ethics, who still sees things from a regional, ethnic, and religious prism." (Excerpt 1)*

Fani-Kayode employs the term "dying breed of ethics" to suggest that Atiku's worldview is outdated and divisive, focusing on regional and

ethnic identities rather than national unity. Fani-Kayode's characterization of Atiku as belonging to a "dying breed of ethics" underscores his belief that Atiku's perspective is rooted in outdated and divisive notions of identity based on regional, ethnic, and religious affiliations. By framing Atiku's worldview in this manner, Fani-Kayode not only criticizes Atiku's leadership potential but also implies that such perspectives hinder national unity and progress. This kind of ethnic and regional discourse can exacerbate social divisions and undermine efforts towards inclusive governance, highlighting the contentious nature of identity politics in electoral contexts.

*Mr. Wale Oshun: "We have only one Yoruba candidate, and that is Asiwaju Bola Tinubu. For our interest as Yoruba people, we can only be protected by a Yoruba presidential candidate."*  
(Excerpt 12)

Oshun's statement uses "protected by a Yoruba presidential candidate" to imply that ethnic identity is crucial for political representation and security, potentially alienating non-Yoruba candidates. Mr. Wale Oshun's assertion that "we can only be protected by a Yoruba presidential candidate" underscores the perception that ethnic identity is pivotal in ensuring political representation and safeguarding community interests. By emphasizing the need for a Yoruba candidate for protection, Oshun implies that non-Yoruba candidates may not adequately prioritize or understand the concerns of the Yoruba people, thereby promoting ethnic divisions in political discourse. Such sentiments can deepen societal cleavages and hinder efforts towards fostering national unity and inclusivity in governance.

## Personal Attacks

*Tinubu: "There are few of us left running, one says he is Atiku. How many times has he been running? He is always on the run, and he is tired. Tell him to go and sit down. Enough is enough!"* (Excerpt 6)

Tinubu's remarks ridicule Atiku's candidacy as repetitive and exhausted, questioning his credibility and implying that he lacks the vigor for political leadership. Tinubu's disparaging comments about Atiku underscore a strategy of personal attack by portraying him as a worn-out and ineffective candidate, suggesting that his repeated attempts at the presidency signify a lack of fresh ideas or capability. By characterizing Atiku as perpetually on the run and tired, Tinubu aims to diminish his stature and appeal to voters, potentially influencing public perception of Atiku's fitness for office based on endurance and commitment to leadership responsibilities. Such personal attacks can polarize political discourse, diverting attention from substantive issues while shaping public opinion through derogatory portrayals.

## Generalized Insults and Name-calling

*Mr. Phrank Shaibu: "Now they are selling a message of renewed hope. It is common knowledge that darkness cannot cure darkness and sickness cannot cure sickness. How can the APC promise to fix problems exacerbated by the APC? This is balderdash."* (Excerpt 4)

Shaibu dismisses the APC's promises as "balderdash," using exaggerated language to discredit their platform, implying incompetence and deception. Shaibu's critique employs strong

language to cast doubt on the APC's credibility, suggesting their promises are not just misguided but outright nonsensical ("balderdash"). By likening their efforts to curing darkness with darkness and sickness with sickness, he implies that the APC's solutions exacerbate rather than resolve issues, painting them as ineffective and unfit for governance. Such generalized insults and name-calling in political discourse can deepen polarization by undermining trust in opposing parties and reinforcing negative perceptions among voters.

*"The race is not for Kindergarten leaders.' This time around, it is not an opportunity for a Kindergarten leader like Tinubu."* (Excerpt 32)

Formal semantics are employed to dismiss Tinubu's leadership capabilities ('Kindergarten leader'), suggesting he lacks the maturity or competence required for political leadership, aimed at discrediting his candidacy. In Excerpt 32, formal semantic elements are employed to denigrate political opponents by likening them to 'Kindergarten leaders,' suggesting they lack the maturity or capability for high office. The statement uses formal semantics to position the electoral contest as a serious endeavor ('The race is not for...'), contrasting it with the perceived incompetence or immaturity ('Kindergarten leader') of the targeted candidate, thereby undermining their suitability for political leadership.

### **Cognitive Semantic Items of Politically-Motivated Hate Speeches in Pre-2023 General Election Excerpts**

#### **Personal Attacks**

*"All you need to do is speak to him for ten minutes to know that his head is empty and that*

*there is nothing between his ears."* (Excerpt 29)

Here, cognitive semantics are employed to disparage someone's intelligence ('empty head'), aiming to diminish their credibility and leadership qualities. In Excerpt 29, cognitive semantics are utilized to construct a metaphorical image ('empty head') that portrays the targeted individual as intellectually deficient, thereby undermining their suitability for leadership. This choice of language taps into cognitive associations of intellect and capacity, strategically framing the individual as lacking essential qualities for effective governance, aiming to sway public perception negatively.

#### **Ethnic/Regional Discrimination**

*"There are few of us left running. One says he is Atiku. How many times has he been running? He is always on the run, and he is tired. Tell him to go and sit down. Enough is enough!"* (Excerpt 6)

Tinubu's statement diminishes Atiku's candidacy by questioning his stamina and commitment to leadership roles, portraying him as tired and ineffective. By focusing on Atiku's repeated attempts at running for office, Tinubu not only criticizes his political longevity but also implies that Atiku lacks the vigour and capability needed for the presidency. Such remarks can reinforce negative stereotypes and contribute to ethnic and regional divisions by reducing complex political debates to personal attacks based on perceived physical and mental endurance.

*"Our region will not accept an ethnic bigot and tribal champion as their president."* (Excerpt 15)

This statement appeals to regional identity ('our region') and employs cognitive semantics by framing the candidate as an 'ethnic bigot' and 'tribal champion', invoking emotional responses to sway voter sentiments. In Excerpt 15, cognitive semantics are employed to label the candidate as an 'ethnic bigot' and 'tribal champion', leveraging cognitive associations to provoke negative perceptions based on identity politics. This strategy aims to mobilize regional sentiments ('our region') against the candidate by framing them as divisive and unfit for national leadership, strategically influencing voter attitudes and electoral outcomes.

### Generalized Insults and Name-calling

*"Tinubu is a comedian" by Mr. Phrank Shaibu reduces Tinubu's image to a mockery,"* (Excerpt 5)

Mr. Phrank Shaibu's characterization of Tinubu as a comedian seeks to undermine Tinubu's credibility and seriousness as a political figure. By labelling Tinubu in this way, Shaibu attempts to portray him as someone whose statements and actions are not to be taken seriously, thereby diminishing his potential appeal as a presidential candidate. Such generalized insults and name-calling can contribute to a negative political discourse by reducing complex issues to simplistic ridicule, potentially influencing public perception unfairly.

*"Tinubu shouldn't be contesting to be the Grand Commander of the Federal Republic; instead, he should be contesting to be the Grand Comedian of the Federal Republic."* (Excerpt 31)

This statement uses cognitive semantics by juxtaposing Tinubu's political ambitions with the role of a comedian, framing his candidacy

as unserious and inappropriate for high office, thereby influencing public perception negatively. In Excerpt 31, cognitive semantics are employed to undermine Tinubu's political ambitions by juxtaposing them with the role of a comedian, implying his candidacy lacks seriousness and suitability for high office. This rhetoric aims to shape public opinion by portraying Tinubu as unfit for leadership based on perceived characteristics rather than substantive qualifications, potentially influencing voter sentiment against him in the election.

### Accusations of Corruption

*"APC candidate, i.e., Tinubu, is corruption personified" from the Atiku/Okowa campaign organization directly accuses Tinubu of being synonymous with corruption, influencing perceptions of his integrity* (Excerpt 10)

The accusation by the Atiku/Okowa campaign organization that Tinubu is "corruption personified" is a severe indictment aimed at tarnishing Tinubu's reputation and credibility. By equating him with corruption, the statement suggests that Tinubu's leadership would perpetuate or even exacerbate corrupt practices in governance. Such accusations can significantly impact public opinion, casting doubt on Tinubu's suitability for public office and potentially influencing voter decisions based on perceptions of integrity and ethical conduct.

### Health-Related Insults

*"Worry about ex-VP's health, credibility, not me. Tinubu tells Nigerians,"* Excerpt 9)

Tinubu's statement shifts attention away from his own qualifications and directs scrutiny towards Atiku's health and credibility, implying that these factors should be of greater concern to the electorate. By raising doubts about Atiku's health, Tinubu seeks to undermine his opponent's suitability for office, potentially influencing voter perceptions of Atiku's physical fitness and leadership capabilities. This tactic not only aims to divert attention from other campaign issues but also seeks to cast doubt on Atiku's ability to effectively fulfil the demands of the presidency.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**Ethnic/Regional Discrimination:** The present study found that ethnic and regional discrimination constituted 22.9% of all hate speech instances in the selected Nigerian newspapers, manifesting through statements that explicitly invoked ethnic identity to delegitimize candidates and polarize the electorate. These findings resonate with the conclusions of Ezeibe (2015), who established that ethnically charged political rhetoric in Nigeria systematically inflames inter-group tensions and undermines the democratic process by redirecting electoral competition from policy-based debate to identity-driven antagonism. Similarly, Adewuyi (2018) observed that Nigerian politicians routinely exploit ethnic and regional fault lines as mobilization instruments, a pattern fully consistent with the Fani-Kayode and Oshun excerpts analyzed in this study. The framing of candidates as “dying breed” ethnic thinkers or the appeal to Yoruba solidarity as a prerequisite for political protection demonstrates precisely the mechanism that Adewuyi (2018) described.

A point of divergence, however, emerges when the present findings are compared with Chilton (2015), who argued that politically charged discourse, including ethnically framed speech, does not always carry a deliberate intent to

incite hostility and therefore should not be conflated with hate speech in the strict sense. While Chilton's position is theoretically defensible in liberal democratic contexts characterized by robust institutional checks, the Nigerian electoral environment analyzed in this study presents a socio-political configuration in which such speech demonstrably translates into tangible inter-ethnic tensions. The justification for this divergence lies in context: the pre-2023 election period in Nigeria was marked by unprecedented ethnic mobilization, a fragile national cohesion, and an electoral system in which identity-driven rhetoric carries immediate social consequences.

**Personal Attacks:** Personal attacks emerged as the dominant category of hate speech in the present study, comprising 31.4% of all analyzed instances, with particularly high concentrations in Vanguard (40%) and The Sun (50%). This finding accords strongly with Okafor and Alabi (2017), whose speech act analysis of the 2015 Nigerian general election campaign revealed that ad hominem attacks against political opponents constituted the most frequently deployed discursive strategy in Nigerian electoral politics. The present study corroborates this pattern across a different election cycle, confirming that the tendency to substitute policy debate with personal vilification is a persistent structural feature of Nigerian political communication rather than an isolated occurrence.

Divergence arises when the present findings are set against Ayansola and Oamen (2018), who, while acknowledging the frequency of personal attacks in Nigerian political discourse, argued that a significant portion of such speech falls under the legitimate exercise of free expression and political accountability. The present study, however, observes that the analyzed personal attacks go beyond accountability discourse: they rely on demeaning imagery, physical stereotyping, and emotional baiting rather than

on substantive criticism of governance records or policy positions. This distinction justifies the classification of such statements as hate speech rather than political critique, as they serve to stigmatize rather than to inform or engage the electorate.

#### **Generalized Insults and Name-calling:**

Generalized insults and name-calling accounted for 22.9% of the total hate speech corpus, tied with ethnic/regional discrimination as the second most frequent category. The Punch alone accounted for 54.5% of its total hate speech instances in this category, suggesting that tabloid-oriented print media may favour sensationalist name-calling as a rhetorical register. This finding is consistent with the observation by Aboh et al. (2020) that name-calling and derogatory appellations are among the most prevalent forms of politically motivated hate speech in the Nigerian media landscape, serving to trivialize opponents and manufacture consent among partisan audiences. The labeling of Tinubu as “a comedian” and APC’s policy promises as “balderdash” are prototypical instances of what Okafor and Alabi (2017) identified as illocutionary insult acts, deployed not to assert factual claims but to performatively diminish the dignity and credibility of political opponents.

A divergence emerges, however, when the present findings are compared with Ng’ang’a (2013), whose semantic analysis of Kiswahili political language suggested that name-calling in African political contexts often functions within culturally established traditions of competitive verbal sparring and should therefore be interpreted through culturally relativist rather than universal normative lenses. While the cultural specificity argument has merit in other African linguistic contexts, the present study argues that the Nigerian electoral environment is sufficiently different in its stakes and consequences: the 2023 general election was contested at a level of political

tension with documented cases of electoral violence and civic unrest, making the normalization of name-calling through cultural relativism analytically inadequate and potentially dangerous.

#### **Accusations of Corruption and Health-Related Insults:**

Accusations of corruption (14.3%) and health-related insults (8.5%) were among the less frequent but semantically potent categories of hate speech in the analyzed corpus. The accusation that Tinubu is “corruption personified” and Obasanjo’s dramatic invocation of international legal consequences for Atiku are exemplary of what Chilton and Schaffner (2017) described as discursive strategies of moral disqualification, through which political actors seek to render opponents unfit for office not through policy critique but through the association of their person with socially condemned vices such as corruption and dishonesty. This finding is consistent with Adewuyi (2018), who documented that corruption allegations in Nigerian political discourse frequently serve performative rather than evidential functions, aimed at emotionally discrediting opponents before the electorate rather than initiating genuine accountability mechanisms.

#### **Overall Impact on Political Polarization and Social Cohesion:**

Across all five hate speech categories, the present study found consistent evidence that politically motivated hate speech in the pre-2023 election period intensified political polarization, deepened ethnic cleavages, and eroded the foundations of constructive democratic discourse. This overarching finding is in strong agreement with Ezeibe (2015), who conclusively demonstrated that hate speech is a significant antecedent of electoral violence and democratic instability in Nigeria. It also accords with Aboh et al. (2020), who argued that the sustained deployment of hate speech in Nigerian political communication normalizes hostility as an

acceptable feature of public life, with long-term corrosive effects on social cohesion and civic trust.

A point of divergence worth noting relates to the medium of analysis. Unlike Ayansola and Oamen (2018), whose study of hate speech legitimation focused primarily on online and social media platforms, the present study draws exclusively from print media. While Ayansola and Oamen (2018) found that social media amplifies hate speech through user sharing and algorithmic reinforcement, the present study demonstrates that print media, despite its more traditionally gatekept editorial processes, remains a significant conduit for politically motivated hate speech in Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION

Personal attacks emerged as the most common form of hate speech, illustrating the intense rivalry and lack of constructive dialogue within Nigeria's political landscape. This pervasive use of derogatory language not only threatens the integrity of democratic processes but also highlights the urgent need for accountability and reform in political discourse. However, politicians frequently employed derogatory language, framing opponents as narrow-minded or unfit for leadership. This rhetoric often invoked regional and ethnic stereotypes, exacerbating societal rifts and fostering distrust among different groups. Personal attacks were prevalent, diverting attention from substantive policy discussions while challenging opponents' integrity and competence. Insults and name-calling reduced complex political debates to simplistic grievances, complicating public engagement with meaningful discourse. Health-related and corruption accusations served to delegitimize candidates, questioning their fitness for office and moral integrity. Such strategies reflect the heightened tensions within the electoral landscape and underscore significant challenges to democratic

engagement. This divisive language prioritizes personal animosities over constructive dialogue, resulting in a political atmosphere rife with mistrust.

In addition, the use of cognitive semantic items also highlights this troubling trend. Candidates employed derogatory imagery to portray opponents as lacking intellect or stamina, aiming to diminish their credibility. Ethnic discrimination manifested in framing adversaries as “ethnic bigots” or “tribal champions,” leveraging cognitive associations to provoke emotional responses that further polarized the electorate. Generalized insults trivialized serious candidates, while accusations of corruption painted opponents as synonymous with unethical practices, manipulating public perception of integrity. Collectively, these rhetorical strategies contribute to an environment where political discourse is characterized by animosity and division. The pervasive use of negative language signals an urgent need for more responsible political communication that fosters unity and constructive dialogue. This shift is essential for promoting social cohesion and a healthier democratic process moving forward.

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