

Positioning and Identity Construction in Posts on *Nairaland* on the Proscription of Twitter in Nigeria

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Abstract

Studies on *Nairaland* posts have focused on linguistic and pragmatic elements. Attention has not been given to how the discursive practice on the forum is used to represent social actors. Therefore, this paper investigates how Tweeters on *Nairaland* (General), henceforth NG, position self and other and the identities thereby constructed while foregrounding actions of social significance. The data examined comprised 161 tweets on the day the Nigerian government proscribed Twitter operation in the country. The study applies qualitative methodology by subjecting the data to the discourse analysis approach which relies on Positioning Theory and supplementary use of concepts of speech acts and common ground. The positions and identities constructed are data-driven and motivated by subcategorization, namely epistimization, labelization, voicing, and dis/solidarity which are derived from the micro context: i.e. the ban on Twitter in Nigeria. The paper finds that Tweeters assume reflexive positioning while positioning other interactively to realize identities, which include knowledge provider, accountability seeker, altruistic, “Us,” and patriotic in reflexive positioning; and ignorant, answerable, incompetent, “Them,” Machiavellian, and prejudiced via interactive positioning. The paper argues that NG Tweeters employ different modes of positioning in interpreting the behaviour of the “other” and invoke knowledge from macro (external) contexts to substantiate their positions. It concludes that social media have become an integral part of society which justifies NG as a discussion forum of social relevance and, thus, recommends an interface between government and citizens on the optimal use of social media for the promotion of national unity and advancement.

Keywords: Positioning, *Nairaland* General, Twitter ban in Nigeria, Tweeter, Self, Other

Introduction

Social media have become an integral part of society, especially among the youth of today in both developed and developing worlds. They have been characterized to have contributed to “the production of neoliberal subjects” (Schmeichel et al., 2018) and as sources for information on current events, cultural trends, and more (Calande, 2021). In Nigeria, the virtual space has been identified as “a site for the projection of both modern and indigenous youth identities” (see Oloruntoba-Oju, 2020, among others. One of these virtual spaces is *Nairaland* (General), henceforth NG, a virtual forum made up of a community of Nigerian youths at home and in the Diaspora to discuss burning national issues and others in the interest of the country. The site has

three for a, namely (1) *Nairaland* General (from where the data for this study were generated), (2) Entertainment, and (3) Science/Technology Programming. Among other issues discussed on the General forum are politics, business, education, culture, and agriculture. As of August 2021, its membership strength was about 2,723,456 and had discussed about 6,445,193 topics (www.Nairaland.com, August 19, 2021). This platform privileges Nigerian youths to publicly express their opinions on national issues without fear of intimidation or threat. The site has also provided data for scholarly investigations on in/security, crime, and identity construction (see Chilwa and Odebunmi, 2016; Akinwade, 2019; Oloruntoba-Oju, 2020; Adeola and Muhydeen, 2020).

Previous studies that have examined the use of language in posts on *Nairaland* include the sociosemiotic approach of Adeola and Akinwande (2019) in the investigation of comments on the crime of underwear ritual, the critical discourse approach of Adeola and Muhydeen (2020) in the examination of identity construction in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, and the content analysis of Oloruntoba-Oju (2020) on the sociolinguistic profile and identity formation of Nigerian youths. Other studies that have utilized data from *Nairaland* are those by Idehen and Taiwo (2016), Taiwo and Odebunmi, (2016) and Taiwo and Donte (2020).

While some of these studies have investigated identity construction which may be self-positioning (Adeola and Muhydeen, 2020; Oloruntoba-Oju, 2020), they have ignored how the language users construct others in their posts. Thus, whereas this paper might be similar with identity construction in some respect, it diverges by being theoretically more robust and differs by the utilized data. It is obvious that previous studies on identity construction addressed only an aspect of what the current study sets out to investigate. By adopting Positioning Theory, this paper focuses on the three tenets of the theory: (1) identity construction, (2) story line (context), and (3) speech acts. Thus, the three attendant questions this paper aims to address are the following: (1) How do NG subscribers position *self* and *other* in their posts in the context of the ban of Twitter in Nigeria? (2) What identities are constructed in the process of positioning? (3) What actions qualify as socially significant in the posts within the context? Before discussing these aspects, I will first provide a brief background of Twitter and the ban in Nigeria for those readers who do not know about what transpired.

Twitter and the Ban in Nigeria: A Brief Background

Twitter has been identified as a powerful data engine with wide-reaching social benefits and has the capacity to provide emergency, potentially life-saving data analysis in real-time. It is useful to researchers, business operators, the entertainment industry (Hutchinson, 2016) and reporters, and also enhances interpersonal relations (Forsey, 2023). According to Walsh (2021), Twitter ranks number nine (#9) among the top ten social media with monthly active users of 353 million and offers users from business-related to entertainment, sports, politics, technology, and marketing opportunities to enjoy tremendous engagement. With million daily active users and 500 million tweets sent daily (Forsey, 2013), Twitter is without a doubt a web platform for global news and much more. Nonetheless, the limited character count for writing posts/tweets limits its reliance as a primary source for news as the full story cannot be provided for lack of space. By the same token, Twitter's potential to provide users with economic, political and social power cannot be underestimated. With these enormous opportunities it provides users, Nigerians, especially the youths, have explored it for socioeconomic and political gains. With this background on the usefulness of Twitter, the ban on its operations in Nigeria by former President Muhammed Buhari triggered a lot of comments on NG, a discourse which this paper intends to interrogate from a discourse-pragmatic perspective.

On June 4, 2021, the Minister of Information announced the indefinite suspension of Twitter in Nigeria following the deletion of the post of the president which was considered a violation of Twitter's policy on abusive behavior (CNN World, 2021), a situation also perceived

as genocidal (Sahara Reporters, 2021) and offensive to the sensibility of the people of Eastern Nigeria (the Igbos). Moghalu cited in Erezi, who describes it as “bringing up evocations that are very unpleasant” (The Guardian Nigeria, 2021, 1). The government, however, “accused the American social media company (Twitter) of allowing its platform to be used for activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria’s corporate existence” (CNN World, 2021, 1). The offensive part of the president’s post read as follows: “Many of those misbehaving today are too young to be aware of the destruction and loss of lives that occurred during the Nigerian Civil War. Those of us in the fields for 30 months, who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand” (CNN World, 2021, 1). This threat makes reference to the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 when millions of Igbos lost their lives. This statement by the president met the disapproval of Twitter operators who pulled down the post which warranted the president’s pronouncement through his minister. This became a topical issue of national significance which the users of NG engaged by posting tweets and retweets to ventilate their views on the matter. It is worthy of mention that the president (Mohammadu Buhari) was democratically elected and served two terms, 2015-2023. Also, the same president was in the military during the Nigerian Civil War and fought as a soldier, a reference which he made explicit in the controversial post on his Twitter handle. I will now discuss Positioning Theory which is used to ground this essay.

Theoretical Framework

Positioning Theory is a discursive approach to identity construction through a consideration of rights and duties. It is used as an alternative to the idea of “personhood” and to the concept of “role” (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré and Moghaddam, 2003; Harré and van Langehove, 1991, 1999). According to van Langenhove and Harré 1999, people take positions within discourses that allow the presentation of a certain identity, or certain aspects of an identity in a particular context or situation and that by positioning themselves and others within conversations, people can give meaning to their behaviour and make it intelligible in the light of the storyline of the conversation (the social world). They opine that the adoption of a position always assumes a position for the interlocutor as well; hence, positioning processes involve both self and other positions. Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) situate their theory on three elements: (1) position, (2) storyline, and (3) the speech acts or social factors. While position involves the construction of identity, the storyline is the context upon which the conversation is premised, and the speech acts are those actions that provide meaning within the unfolding conversation (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003). According to these theorists, it is the interaction of these three elements (i.e. the “position triangle”) that determines the unfolding of a conversation, and that a change in the storyline will result to a change in both position and speech acts. They go further to identify five modes of positioning, namely (1) first, second or third order positioning; (2) performative and accountive positioning; (3) moral and personal positioning; (4) self and other positioning; and (5) tacit and intentional positioning (van Langenhove and Harré 1999). The ones relevant to the current study will be expounded in the course of the analysis. The theoretical literature on positioning at the general level opines that positionings are interactively and reflexively achieved. Davies and Harré (1990) aver that the former is exhibited when a person or a group of people position other persons based on the latter’s behaviour and what they say, while the other is the positioning of oneself in response to others. Andreouli (2010) opines that social discourses make people to identify with different positions that at the same time generate their meanings.

This essay relies on the concept of “position triangle” in investigating the collected data by examining how both *self* and *other* are positioned in the posts in the context of the proscription of Twitter in Nigeria. The declaration of the government’s ban of Twitter (story line) which is invoked into the posts creates what this paper refers to as a “micro context” which constrains the affordances of the tweeters. The speech acts are embedded in the linguistic choices of the tweeters. So, a profitable question that emerges here is the following: What can we learn from

some of the theoretical perspectives on “positioning”? The ensuing subsection provides an answer to the question.

Some Theoretical Perspectives on Positioning

The concept of “positioning” has been greatly deployed in discourses. Among others, it has been applied in areas such as pedagogy (Anderson, 2009; Gonsum and Cavusoglu, 2019); foreign language learning (Dressler and Dressler, 2016; Ritzau, 2020); electronic media (Waribo-Naye, 2020); and Internet discussion sites (Edet et al., 2021).

Anderson (2009) examined classroom positioning from an integrated micro-, meso-, and macro-social perspective. She proposed an analytic framework that unpacks the lived and ideological resources for positioning and their social and curricular implications for understanding classroom interactions. The paper highlights how teacher formulations of goals and objectives, affordances of curricular tools, and patterns of participation together mediate opportunities to learn by positioning students as *kinds* to arrive at how different ways of participating are recognized and valued across interactions. She concludes that by appealing to persons and settings as *kinds* that span interactions, acts of positioning can be linked to the construct of identity in ways that Positioning Theory has not yet attempted, largely due to the constraints of its imminentist ontology.

Dressler and Dressler (2016) used Positioning Theory to study how sojourners use Facebook to document and make sense of their experiences in the host culture and position themselves with respect to language(s) and culture(s). They utilized the Facebook posts of one teen’s identity positioning through her Facebook posts from two separate study abroad experiences in Germany. They found that the teen used Facebook posts to position herself as a German-English bilingual and a member of an imagined community of German-English bilinguals by making a choice on which language(s) to use, reporting her linguistic successes and challenges, and indicating growing language awareness. They shed light on the role Facebook plays especially regarding second language identity positioning. Nonetheless, they concluded that the findings are not sufficient for making a generalization as they are from one individual’s lived experience.

From a social constructionist perspective and using Positioning Theory, Gonsum and Cavusoglu (2019) examined the interactional strategies that interactants use in establishing their social positions in interactions in a registration office. Micro-discourse analysis was adopted for the analysis of both the ethnographic and discourse data in order to account for the influence of context and other nonverbal behaviors on the interactants’ choices and the discourse data. The study revealed that sociocultural expectations, knowledge and perceptions significantly influenced the choice of the interactional strategies used for the negotiation and construction of social positions by both the teachers and the students in their interactions. The study also showed the discursive variables of power relations and ages of the interactants as impacting on their use of face acts as deliberate social positioning strategies in the interactions. The study concluded that interactants’ pragmatic awareness of context is crucial in establishing their negotiated positions in meaningful and cordial interactions. Before getting into my own analysis of the data collected for this essay, I will first provide in the next section a brief review of the research methodology and design that also helped me to ground my analysis.

Research Methodology and Design

Qualitative methodology was used for this study; these means that words were emphasized instead of numerical values. Data were purposively selected and subjected to discourse-pragmatic approach to address the objective of the research. A total of 161 posts tweeted on NG on June 4, 2021, the day FGN announced the ban on the operations of Twitter in Nigeria, were collected

from the platform. The posts were carefully selected to exclude retweets in order to avoid duplication.

Next, the data were categorized into four subcategories. Although these groupings appear as themes, they are within this study labelled as contexts derived from the data and explained within general context categories. This is to enable the identification of assumed and assigned positions in the discourse since by positioning self, one positions an interlocutor. The pronouncement of the government, which is the storyline, is taken as the macro context that is invoked into the discourse, while the tweets foreground linguistic elements that actualize the positions. The top-down analytical approach was adopted. This means that the analysis begins by identifying the overarching category (context) and subcategories which are defined by the discourse content. Each analysis is guided by the tenets of the main theory adopted and elements of the supplementary theories based on the constituent linguistic choices. Positioning Theory, as delineated by van Langenhove and Harré (1999), and described earlier, is the main theory. The theory, as mentioned earlier, consists of the “positioning triangle” which comprises three parts: (1) the identities constructed, (2) the speech acts (those actions that provide meaning within the unfolding conversation), and (3) the storyline which in the data is the macro social context of the ban of the operation of Twitter in Nigeria is fixed. Insights from common ground (Clark and Brennan, 1991) are deployed since NG subscribers are all Nigerian youths with shared situational knowledge (Mey, 2001). The varying orientations to the discourse underscore the utilization of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and general pragmatics elements in the discussions. In addition, the fact that identities are negotiated within social contexts gives this study a pragmatic underpinning and legitimizes the proscription act(ion) as a social context. Finally, since the literature identifies Positioning Theory as a discursive approach to identity construction, the identities constructed via positioning of self and other are mentioned in the discussion in the ensuing section.

Analysis and Discussion

The ban of Twitter’s operation in Nigeria, which is the storyline, is taken as the micro context which embeds four subcategories derived from the data and identified in this paper as (1) epistimization, (2) labelization, (3) voicing, and (4) dis/solidarity. These subcategories are generated from the linguistic choices in the posts, and they are reinforced by a varying number of discourse issues conjured into the micro context to make meaning in the asynchronous communication, and to understand what underscores the action of FGN in a digitalized world as discussed in the analysis. These subcategories are further broken down into different layers for effective discussion. The positionings are interactively or reflexively realized (Davies and Harré, 1990) and supports the view of Andreouli (2010) that social discourses make people to identify with different positions that at the same time generate their meanings. The Tweeters position self in the storyline, thereby positioning other (Van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). Thus, identities such as knowledge provider, accountability seeker, altruistic, “Us”; ignorant, answerable, incompetent, “Them”, Machiavellian, and prejudiced are constructed via different modes of positioning. These are discussed in the following subsections.

Epistemization

The context of epistemization orients to matters of knowledge which is in the general psychological context that, among others, deals with attitude, behavior and state of mind (Lawal, 1997). Epistemization highlights the attitude, level of or lack of knowledge regarding the operations of Twitter (the Internet/social media) and related technological instruments or devices. Epistemization comprises two discourse issues identified as (1) techknowledge and (2) relational knowledge. Each of them is defined and exemplified.

Techknowledge

This refers to knowledge about social media/web-based activities. In this regard, reference is made to other and the knowledge they lack about Twitter or Internet operations. The term is a neologism formed from the blending of technology and knowledge. Here, the position is reflexively realized.

Text 1

“So FG don’t [doesn’t] know what is called VPN? This is an own goal” (LegendHero).

Text 2

“And more ridiculous is the fact that most of these "COCONUT HEADS" are university graduates. if not, common sense would have availed the ... that Twitter as a corporate body does not operate from Nigeria. More so, the suspension has nothing to do with Twitter's corporate existence. Am seriously Smh right now” (bergs2).

Two deficiencies of other are foregrounded in the preceding texts. These portray a lack of knowledge of VPN (virtual personal network) and Twitter operations. The VPN is an encrypted tunnel that links the Internet with personal devices. It offers Internet users protection against any form of interference and censorship by making their IP (Internet Protocol) address to change location in order to stay connected to the World Wide Web. This means that the ban by the FG is inconsequential to individual device users. By asking the question, “So FG don’t know what is called VPN?,” the Tweeter takes up a first order (tacit) positioning of self as knowledgeable about VPN. Tacit positioning is part of our day-to-day social interaction and mostly is a first order positioning that is happening unintentionally and even unconsciously (van Langenhove and Harré 1999:22). In assuming this position, other (FGN) is interactively positioned as ignorant. This lack of knowledge is described by the register of football “...an own goal,” a situation in football where a player scores a goal against his own team. The phrase is a face damaging act which generates the inference that the pronouncement by FGN only brings an embarrassment to itself by making public its ignorance, thereby performing the speech act of condemning FGN’s action. Text 2 utilizes least collaborative effort (Clark and Brennan, 1991) to align with a previous writer by the use of the phrase “And more ridiculous ...” to reinforce the positioning of other (FGN) as ignorant as in Text 1, and by presenting knowledge of Internet operations as *common sense* which foregrounds the psychological context exploited by the current Tweeter. The authorial voice in (2) engages deliberate self-positioning and presents self as an educator. Deliberate positioning is a kind of identity portrayal usually in pursuit of a strategy or goal (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991; van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). The goal in this situation is to align self with the previous writer as educator and also to support the positioning of FGN as ignorant. The inconsequentiality of the ban is overtly stated in Text 2, “... the suspension has nothing to do with Twitter's corporate existence.” The two authorial voices therefore engage first order positioning to construct self as educators (possessing knowledge of the operations of Twitter), while positioning other (the government) as ignorant. In both texts, the linguistic expressions, *own goal*; and the netspeak, *smh* (shaking my head) decry the ignorance of the government. The positioning triangle is therefore established as follows: the Tweeters use the posts to position self as educators, ones with knowledge on the operations of Twitter, and the FGN as ignorant in the situation. The storyline—the ban of Twitter in Nigeria—is sacrosanct as the micro social context, while the speech act of condemning means FGN’s ignorance of the resourcefulness of Twitter (social medium) in the present age of digital technology. Another kind of knowledge is expatiated next.

Relational Knowledge

Relational knowledge is situated within a social context of relationship and refers to the incompetence with which the issue with Twitter was handled. In this connection, the posts make reference to the absence of Twitter office/presence in Nigeria and connect it particularly to the irrationality or inappropriateness of the ban. In this regard, positions are interactively realized. This is illustrated in the following texts.

Text 3

“Funny country. Is *this* the best way to resolve this issue? What a country rule[d] by unfortunate people!” (Xcape, 1993).

Text 4

“... See reasons why *these guys* chose Ghana over Nigeria? Assuming they have an office here, your guess[is] as good as mine. No wonder foreign investors are always avoiding *the country* like a plague. Facebook also removed *his* post, *they* should [ban] it ban also. Dumb ancestors in power” (Olatade).

In texts 3 and 4 (lines 1 in both), FGN’s action secures an uptake which is a questioning speech act. By the questioning act, the Tweeters orient to moral positioning to foreground their right as citizens to whom the elected government is accountable. Moral positioning is constituted by any attempt to make reference to one’s role, and the rights and duties that come with it, within a group or society (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). This presupposes their (Tweeters) performance of civic duty; and exploiting the background knowledge that a democratic government (an ideal one) is answerable to the people (citizens) that voted them into power; the Tweeters activate moral positioning by representing self as deserving accountability from the elected government, By so doing, they position the other (FGN) as one to be held accountable. Also, the adjectival phrases *Funny country*, *unfortunate people*, and *Dumb ancestors* trigger malevolent positioning of the other. Malevolent/malignant positioning is activated when what is said about a person leads others to think about and treat that person in a harmful way (see, for example, Davies and Harré, 1990). The goal of the negative positioning is to implicitly elicit the negative value judgment of other subscribers and to pragmatically condemn the action. The use of the first deictic reference *this* in Text 3 bifurcates into (a) the tactless pronouncement of the ban and (b) the pulling down of the president’s post, respectively. The tactlessness therefore becomes the context for the invocation of Twitter’s choice of Ghana over Nigeria. By the malevolent positioning of the other, the Tweeter yields the ground to the putative reader who has shared situational knowledge (Mey, 2021) to work out the supposition, hence, “your guess [is] as good as mine.” There is the performance of a direct speech act/illocutionary act of blaming, “No wonder foreign investors are always avoiding the country like a plague” and reinforced by another speech act of blaming in another tweet “Buhari has failed Nigerian's, would someone like him still go ahead to ban a social app that Nigerian's love?” (LilMissFavvy). The tactlessness in handling both internal and external issues by the government therefore forms one of the salient issues in the situational context.

The positions conjectured in the texts 3 and 4 are moral and malevolent positionings which respectively represent the Tweeters as deserving explanation and FGN as accountable to citizens. The salient speech act is blaming of FGN for its tactlessness in handling the critical issue of the social medium (Twitter) which has global implication for national interest (see discussion in the subsequent subheading).

Labelization

In labelization, dysphemism is used to criticize the other by drawing from historic context to make a past action relevant in the current context. This is realized through an inferential process. The linguistic selections in this context indexicalize two types of labelizations, namely (1) representation and (2) identification. Representation describes the social actor(s) while identification describes the action. Third order positioning (positioning based on previous social interactions and observation) is used to interactively position the other. Adjectives and nominal groups are used to realize labelization. Both subcategories are discussed together in this section.

Text 5

“APC can and will never win *this* fight. *Clueless* APC suspends Twitter for leaving Nigeria to site Twitter Africa Hq [headquarters] in Ghana” (goldenceo).

Text 6

“Tinpot dictators comparing themselves with China when it comes to crude *censorship*... But when it comes to economic progress and lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty, not so much” (9jaRealist).

In Texts 5 and 6, the adjectives *clueless* and *tinpot* are dysphemisms used to represent other. Genericization, a strategy “Where specific participants are ‘specimens’ of those classes” (van Leeuwen, 1996, 1) is utilized to make reference to APC, which is the president’s political party and is used to background him. In doing this, the post writer attributes the responsibility of the ban to the political party of the president, thereby calling the party “clueless.” The use of “dictators” in Text 6 coheres anaphorically with APC, the ruling party, while the ban of Twitter is represented as “crude.” The deictic (phrasal) element “this fight” elicits two possible interpretations: (1) the possible resistance by Twitter/social medium users in the country against the action of FGN, generating the implicature of a “fight” between Twitter (social medium) users versus FGN; and (2) its coreferentiality with “crude censorship” in 6.

Text 5 implicates a vindictive act, thereby construing the act as retaliation against “Twitter for leaving Nigeria to site Twitter Africa Hq in Ghana.” “Dictators” as used in Text 6 buttresses the in-group categorization in 5 (APC), which is a collective noun, while “crude censorship” coheres with “this fight.” In sum, it can be inferred that the incumbent government is dictatorial in its action against Twitter. A contrast is drawn to criticize the Nigerian government for copying a past action of China and pointing out the divergence in the two governments.

Again, the idea of “fight” is a distancing act that invokes an “Us/Them” dichotomy and negotiates a membership categorization move by taking up the moral duty of protecting others (i.e. citizens with whom s/he identifies) from the oppression of the other/the government to construct an altruistic identity for self through deliberate positioning. This is strengthened by expression “But when it comes to economic progress and lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty, not so much” (in 6). The position assumed for self therefore situates the government in a malevolent position by highlighting the failed duty in comparison with China. This foregrounds the socially relevant speech act of criticizing the other (FGN) as incompetent in handling issues in the interest of the citizens to legitimize the label “tinpot dictators” and sets up the Tweeters as protectors of the citizens. The lexical choices achieve cohesion through the lexical relationship in the next text.

Text 7

“How else can you describe *tyranny* other than *this*? APC has shown Nigeria that there is no hope for any positive change. No one is wise no not ONE in this government!!” (PARACLETOS).

The lexical item “tyranny” shares a synonymous relationship with *dictators* and also coheres with “this” (in 5), and “crude censorship” (in 6). All writers in this section deploy deliberate positioning in order to achieve definite goals borne out of the way they perceive the other (FGN), thereby referring to the other respectively as “clueless,” “dictators,” and “tyranny.” The writers are self-positioned as knowledge providers to other subscribers of a warped system of government. These texts therefore underpin the social relevance of projecting the incompetence and oppressive nature of FGN which is a third order positioning. The identities constructed from the positionings are contextually motivated. The speech act that is socially relevant in the positions of the preceding Tweeters is that of disapproving undemocratic practices by the government of the day.

Voicing

Voicing orients to social context and demonstrates interpersonal issues. It captures posts that perform different pragmatic functions. In voicing, positioning is realized among the users of NG who take certain stances in relation to the situational context. It shows a dichotomy of “Us versus Them” (van Dijk, 2006). The former constitutes dissenting opinions toward the proscription whereas the latter favors the action. Thus, “Us” represents Twitter users and “Them” comprise FGN and its supporters on NG. Five kinds of voices have been identified in the data. These are voices of (1) information, (2) optimism, (3) expostulation, (4) caution, and (5) taunting. Both interactive positioning and reflexive positioning are employed in this category. Each voice type is demonstrated in the ensuing discussion.

Voice of Information

Information is used to educate the people on the likely implication of the ban.

Text 8

“We’re getting there, North Korea Lite” (BigSarah).

In the preceding text, the Tweeter analogously explains the implication of the ban by drawing from the experience of North Korea, scholars claim that it places restrictions on the use of social media but harnesses them to boost its global propaganda efforts. By implicitly making this information available to readers, the Tweeter positions self as knowledge provider to explicate what the ban portends to fellow NG users. This information is, however, pragmatically encoded for the reader to recover its meaning by going through an inferential process to understanding “North Korea Lite.” By assuming the position of knowledge provider, the Tweeter positions the other (i.e. NG users) as knowledge receivers. The term “Lite” in the situational context has two possible connotations: as (1) clipping the media (social media) freedom of citizens or (2) the use of the social media to promote self (of the government) or both. This interpretation is anchored on the definition of *lite* in technology as the lite (light) version that may have limited functionality or be supported by advertisements, or both, which respectively correlates with the clipping of media freedom of citizens and government’s use to ‘advertise self.’ This meaning agrees with the Machiavellian behavior earlier identified, thereby making it prominent in the discourse.

Voice of Optimism

Optimism expresses hope for the improvement of the prevailing situation in the country which tends to clip some fundamental rights of the citizens.

Text 9

“Don’t worry, they only have less than two years left. Abi Apc no they use twitter before [Was APC not using Twitter before the ban?]”. (Princewill, 2021).

The writer of the foregoing text updates common ground by utilizing a grounding marker, “Don’t worry,” to signal an efficient communication process among the Tweeters and to endorse the position of the information sender. “Abi” is simultaneously a try marker and an interrogatory word eliciting an interlocutor’s confirmation aimed at clearing the doubt of the writer as to whether the president’s party (APC) was hitherto not using Twitter. The text orients to mutual positioning with the main communicator to construct an in-group identity while simultaneously performing the illocutionary act of encouraging/persuading other citizens to hope for a better government. The expression “less than two years” is indicative of the writer’s knowledge of the constitutional provision on election. The linguistic context coopts the text receiver via the grounding marker to achieve the least effort based on the shared situational knowledge of the context and to change the storyline (context) from social to political by hinting on tenure in Nigerian democracy. By the persuading act, the self is positioned as knowledgeable while the other interactively positioned as one that needs reassurance. The pidginized second sentence is, on the one hand, an interrogation (“abi”), and on the other hand, a pragmatic act of indicting FGN of its action as a repressive as it used Twitter to come to power as well as to disseminate the proscription information, thereby foregrounding the relevance of Twitter. This category manifests two types of other: (1) FGN and (2) fellow citizens. An ideological act of categorization is performed by the textual voice to blanket the president (who ordered the ban) with the entirety of the supporters of his political party (APC). This categorization strategy is used to implicitly attack the positive face (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987) of the party (see Texts 5 and 7) and to infer that the incumbent government is insensitive to the governed.

Voice of Expostulation

Expostulation expresses a form of protest or disappointment motivated by the ban.

Text 10

“Naija is a joke. How can the whole naija suspend Twitter because of one Fulani?” (benweezy).

Through an indirect speech act of complaining framed as an interrogation, the Tweeter deploys the material process (Halliday, 1989) “suspend” to construct the entire country “naija” (Nigeria) as the Actor and negotiates a reflexive subject position for self as the Goal, the one affected by an action, to communicate displeasure toward the proscription. The outburst of the writer commits s/he to take up a first order position where the self becomes the Goal.

Put differently, the writer implicitly assumes a personal right to use Twitter, hence describing other citizens who s/he presupposes may be comfortable with the ban as jokers. Again, by giving the agentive role to all of “naija,” s/he suppresses the actual agent while simultaneously recovering it through genericization (van Leeuwen, 1996) as “one Fulani.” Both the government and other citizens are consequently represented as Actors. The identity constructed by the Tweeter is that of freedom fighter/one standing for their rights while other citizens are represented as accomplices to FGN. The speech act is that of querying an inappropriate action in society. Another type of voicing is demonstrated next.

Voice of Caution

Voice of caution is used to forewarn against an unfortunate event in the nation with regards to the ban action. It bifurcates into caution against internal and external social actors invoked into the context. The former directs warning to citizens of the country while the latter warns against

external influence on the country. These are respectively instantiated.

Text 11

“There are people even on this platform who worship Buhari. We deserve *it*. We must all get sense or die trying” (Franking).

Text 12

“*Twitter was protecting their country against domestic terrorists that invaded the Capitol Hill but see nothing wrong in allowing twits [tweets] that encourage the destruction of Nigeria. God punish Twitter, IPOB, Boko Haram, Killer Herdsmen, Bandits and Igboho. Facebook should also be suspended. China and many developing countries did and they brought sanity to their country*” (SaintLucia).

Two types of illocutionary force, (1) blaming and (2) challenging, are implicated in Text 10 and they are directed at the citizens of the country, the writer included. Whereas the blaming captured in the first sentence addresses other, “... people even on this platform who worship Buhari,” the self-inclusive “we” in the expression, “We deserve it,” also a blaming act, orients to reflexive positioning achieved through tacit first order positioning and speaks to ‘Machiavellian’ behavior of deception. The writer constructs an in-group identity to hold every Nigerian responsible for the ban. The pronoun “it” refers to the micro context of the ban. Within the context of politics invoked into the current situational context, the writer blames the loyalists of Buhari for supporting his current action. “We” also connotes that the main communicator may have played a role in the election of the president. The blame is nevertheless borne out of moral positioning of the responsibility of citizens to exercise their franchise in an election, thereby also orienting to an in-group identity of patriotic citizens. Nonetheless, the dichotomy of “Us versus Them” is a construction established between being patriotic and being a supporter of dictatorial tendency. By this separation, the loyalists are given the identity of blind hero-worshipper. This other positioning is captured in the existential phrase, “There are people even on this platform...,” to strengthen the categorization of the citizens. Notwithstanding, the second clause in the third sentence, “...We must all get sense or die trying,” challenges the self and the other for a possible change to attend to reality.

In Text 11, the Tweeter exemplifies a loyalist (to the government) who directs the blaming act at Twitter by enlightening the readers of what Twitter had done wrongly to deserve the ban. There is however an ironic twist in text “...see nothing wrong in allowing twits [tweets] that encourage the destruction of Nigeria” because the propositional content in the first sentence contradicts Twitter’s action (pulling down the president’s post) which it considers as a potential security threat to Nigeria. The Tweeter creates high understanding cost (Clark and Brennan, 1991) for the reader who will have to process the content of the proposition in the first sentence outside of the immediate context before establishing a common ground. Also, s/he fails in coordinating the process by the display of the lack of understanding of what other tweeters say, thereby misrepresenting the action of Twitter. The writer therefore malevolently positions Twitter as prejudiced by making apparent Twitter’s protection of the “Capitol Hill invasion” in America. Again, by juxtaposing Twitter with IPOB, Boko Haram, Killer Herdsmen, Bandits and Igboho, which are groups that pose security concern to Nigeria, Twitter is constructed as an enemy of Nigeria—thus, the support for the proscription and the call for the same for Facebook. In other words, the Tweeter constructs for self an anti-social media identity, one who fights the ills of the social media, while simultaneously constructing a nationalistic identity. Also, by this positioning act, the Tweeter negotiates the role of knowledge provider by educating other Nigerians of what happened in the United States.

Voice of Taunting

Voice of taunting is used to ridicule agents connected with the ban action.

Text 13

“Foolishness. If you have [had] directed this kind of anger towards fighting fulani herdsmen and other terrorist groups Nigeria would have been a better place by now. Na igbo bi your problem abi na twitter? [Is it the Igbos or Twitter that is your problem?]” (sdm4christ).

In preceding text, the macro context of insecurity in Nigeria is invoked into the storyline—the micro context of the ban of Twitter—to challenge the other in the direction of its fight. The tweet is simultaneously declarative and interrogative and performs the indirect speech act of ridiculing the suppressed agent for not being able to direct such effort to tackle terrorist activities in Nigeria—i.e. “fulani herdsmen” and others. The subjective and possessive case markers, “you and your,” refer to the other (FGN), and it is discoverable endophorically from the succeeding contexts” “Na igbo bi your problem abi na twitter? [Is it the Igbos or Twitter that is your problem?]” Also, it highlights the moral right of citizens to complain or ventilate N opinion in a democratic system, one of which is the insecurity the nation is grappling with “If you have directed this kind of anger towards fighting fulani herdsmen and other terrorist groups Nigeria...,” thereby considering the action against a lesser danger as “foolishness.” The assigned position also brings to focus the failed obligations of the referent. Hence, the Tweeter is enlightening Nigerians on the taken-for-granted issue of insecurity which is of social relevance. The fourth context in the data is discussed next separately for the sake of clarity.

Dis/solidarity

The term “dis/solidarity” is used to capture two divergent terms: (1) dis-solidarity and (2) solidarity. In the data, these present as against and in support of the ban action by deploying reflexive positioning. Both rely largely on psychological context to portray attitude and value judgement. An instance of each is provided.

Text 14

“They will use social media to get to where they are but would turn around and crucify it later Bunch of modaf.. kers!!!! As if that will reduce anything from twitter” (Abdulquadrimuha).

The preceding text writer tacitly positions FGN by highlighting the “Machiavellian” behavior in the ban of Twitter. According to van Langenhove and Harré (1999), tacit positioning is part of our day-to-day social interaction and, as mentioned earlier, is a first order positioning that is happening unintentionally and even unconsciously. Among other Machiavellian behaviors, it is the deception of FGN which the Tweeter criticizes by threatening its positive face want (Brown and Levison 1978, 1987). In other words, rather than giving approval for the action, it condemned/criticized the other for using Twitter for its gains and proscribing it against the interest of the citizens. The deceptive behavior thus attracts the writer’s disparaging expression, “Bunch of modaf..kers!!!!” and also hints on the ignorance of the other (see Text 2). The writer morally positions self by questioning the action of the other as a way of expressing his democratic right. By “They will use social media to get to where they are...,” the writer questions the morality of the others by pragmatically accusing them of “selfism” to condemn the action through a direct speech act. The other is represented as being self-centered and unfair to Twitter. This is realized by the use of the contrastive device, “but,” that conveys the two positions in sentence one. Lack of techknowledge highlighted in Text 2 is resonated here. The action is captured indirectly as one that will yield no effect: “As if that will reduce anything from twitter.” Hence, the authorial voice simultaneously assumes the role of direct informant to other NG users on FGN’s exploitation of

Twitter for self-promotion and foregrounds the inconsequentiality of the action. The extract exemplifies dis-solidarity with the other. In sum, the text writer through moral positioning derives for self the identity of an informant and positions the other as self-seeking, thereby emphasizing the negative side of the other and pragmatically criticizing its action. The text spotlights self-promotion (the other) and knowledge of technology (the self) as socially relevant factors while degrading unfair action within the society.

Text 15

“A step in the right direction... Social media has become a tool for creation of fake news that ends up leading to anarchy. It's a tool setup by the western world to disrupt any progress being made in our country. I stand with the Federal Government on this” (uptimumOne23).

Contrary to the previous text, the preceding Tweet strengthens the ban action with an overt illocutionary force of endorsing by pointing out the negative impact of social media (the spread of fake news) while tacitly accusing Twitter of inciting chaos in the country: “...Social media has become a tool for creation of fake news that ends up leading to anarchy.” The self is reflexively positioned as protecting the country to construct a patriotic identity in this text, while deliberate positioning is employed to present FGN as being proactive in its approach in the interest of the nation. Deliberate positioning of the other can take place in the presence or absence of those to be positioned. It is positioning the self or the other in terms of agency, point of view, or biographical details as a move to gain advantage (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999, 24-25). The Tweeter’s positioning is therefore derived from his/her point of view that “Social media has become a tool for creation of fake news ...” The explicit speech acts of supporting “A step in the right direction..., I stand with...” are commendation and positive representation of the government.

Thus, a socially relevant positive image of FGN is alluded and the Tweeter appears as a patriotic citizen. It is worthy of note that the identity of a patriotic citizen also contrasts with the patriotic identity earlier constructed (see Texts 11, 12 and 15), thereby licensing an “Us versus Them” dichotomy and “citizen-for-citizens versus citizen-for-government.” The speech acts of endorsing or supporting in the preceding text contrasts with other speech acts (questioning, blaming, indicting, and so on) earlier demonstrated in the texts. This speaks to the divergence of opinions and perspectives of people in a society, making it a socially relevant element.

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated how Tweepers on *Nairaland* (General) orient to posts by positioning the self and the other within the social context in which the texts are produced. It has, in particular, established that the various positionings and the identities constructed in the posts are context-motivated and they are significant to the ongoing discourse on the ban of Twitter’s operation in Nigeria. To make meaning in the current discourse, the Tweepers also rely on shared knowledge of relevant macro contexts or exophoric references. Also, whereas the story line, or the micro context, is maintained, the identities constructed and the speech acts are dynamic based on the linguistic choices of the writers. The paper therefore argues that underscoring these positions, identities and speech acts hinges upon the Tweepers’ understanding of the role of social media (in this case, Twitter) and technology in the advancement of society in the digital age. The interactions demonstrate the importance of social media as indispensable tools in contemporary times as both the positioner (the self) and the positioned (the other) rely on the same media to make their discourse contributions.

The paper makes a contribution to the discourse on social media by examining how Tweepers (citizens) have used the medium both to express their views and to challenge an inappropriate social practice, the action by the Nigerian government, thereby making social media an essential tool in issues of governance. Theoretically, the findings in this paper

demonstrate how Tweeters on NG exploit the three elements of positioning triangle to make salient the importance of Twitter and, by extension, the social media, an issue of national importance. In addition, since the focus of the paper is on a discursive practice (positioning) on social media and how it is used to spotlight an act in governance, the government of Nigerian and, by implication other societies, could organize fora to interface with their citizens, especially the youths who constitute the majority on social media, on how to use such fora in the promotion of national unity and advancement.

The paper concludes that social media have become an integral part of our everyday life in all its ramifications and justifies the purpose for the creation of NG. Finally, although the tweets mainly foreground disagreement with the ban action, the few consenting tweets speak to the divergent opinions among the Tweeters and underscore the varied stances of Nigerians on the government of the day. Whereas the story line or the macro context remains sacrosanct, the identities constructed and the speech acts are dynamic based on the linguistic context of the posts.

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