

Language, Action Negotiation in Lassa Fever Health Discourse in Nigeria

Patience Obiageri Solomon-Etefia

Department of Linguistics Studies, University of Benin
patience.solomon-etefia@uniben

Samuel Edem

Department of English
Nigeria Police Academy, Wudil, Kano State
dmsamuel19@gmail.com

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Abstract

The progressively worse health condition in Nigeria increased the need for appropriate health information that the people can understand, and the case of the Lassa fever endemic disease is not an exception. This study, from a pragmatic perspective, examines language, action, negotiation in Lassa fever health discourse. This study aims at three goals. First, it underscores ‘speech act theory’ as a pragma-communication model that accentuates language, action negotiation. Secondly, it substantiates the significance of the model in the creation of shared understanding and coordination as well as contextual representation of texts that are pragmatically exploited by the text producer to exert some perlocutionary effects on the reader of such texts. Thirdly, it situates the place of the speech act theory in the explication of health discourses by interrogating its relevance in such context. A total number of nineteen texts were purposively selected from **five banners** through a qualitative design. The study employs Searle’s model of speech acts as a pragmatic framework complemented by Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics (social semiotic model). Research such as this will contribute not only to the understanding of the speech act model but has fundamental communicative implications to the functional status of health discourse in particular.

Keywords: Nigeria, Lassa fever, health discourse, speech act theory, pragmatics, perlocutionary.

1. Introduction

Language is a system of communication, and communication, in turn, is seen as a tool in the hands of speakers or writers in solving problems. Language, according to Odebumi (2016: 3), is a distinctively human endowment that has empowered the human race with expressivity. Expressivity in this sense authenticates that peculiarity which characterizes the human race from other creatures, thus, language accredits humans to communicate their thoughts as well as engage in interactive or shared association. This definition substantiates Malmkjær (1991: 141) perception of language as an “instrument through which people can enter into communicative relations with one another.” To Halliday (1978:39), language evolves as the systems of "meaning

potential" or a "social semiotics" (a resource for meaning), which influences what the speaker can do with language, in a particular social context. With it, humans negotiate, construct, and change the nature of social experience. By this, language becomes a fundamental phenomenon for the communication or expression of ideas, knowledge, and intentions amongst human beings.

The knowledge of language use is the knowledge of how to use it effectively. This implies channelling it to do what one wants to do with the appropriate context¹. This is pragmatics in its totality as this present study intends to unveil. A writer uses language to achieve his aim, this infers that the hearer, in turn, is expected to understand and interpret the message or utterance of the writer in a particular way (Edem, 2018: 99). This negotiating commitment validates the production of a written or spoken text as a social process which entwines the interaction between the writer and the reader. Thus, the significance of language in health discourses cannot be overemphasized as the present study tries to explicate in language, action, negotiation in Lassa fever health discourse.

2. Language and Health Discourse in Nigeria

Language has an astounding human capacity that defines humanity. It is used as an instrument of communication as well as development in all spheres of life. Amuseghan (2008) states that despite the global efficacy of the English language in many countries due to its educationally favourable language policies, Nigeria has effectively understood the necessity of using both the national and all minority indigenous languages on its radio and television transmission and special programmes, especially on health and political issues. The recognition and practs of these languages have enabled all the linguistic groups to participate as well as contribute enormously to national development. This, to Amuseghan (2007) showcases that language and communication have been recognised as indispensable instruments of achieving national aims, goals, objectives and development. Crystal (1987:35) conceptualises language as having, perhaps, "magical and mystical" and "unique role in capturing the breadth of human thought and endeavour." This ascertains that language and thought are related. Such a relationship unveils that language is the vehicle for thought and understanding.

The progressively worse health condition in Africa has increased the need for health information that people can understand. The concern for appropriate communication and passable information on health centres on language. According to Djite (2008:109):

Many more information packages will need to be put out in order to raise awareness, spread information and educate the masses on

¹ (For context, see Adegbite, 2000; Solomom-Etefia, 2015; Capone, 2016; Levinson 1983; Odebunmi, 2006; Palmer, 1996; Salmani Nodoushan, 1995, 2006a,b, 2011a,b; 2012a,b; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996, cited in Solomon-Etefia and Nweya, 2017).

various critical issues such as condom use, counselling, mother-to-child transmission of diseases, and treatment and care. Whilst no one would want to suggest that finding a balanced solution to the language situation will solve all the health problems in sub-Saharan Africa, the importance of such communication and information dissemination as a primary health care intervention tool cannot be overstated.

For local languages in primary health care to profit adequately in the information process, a language may not be the only and final means of solving health problems. However, it is very vital because of the difficulty in understanding medical speech. Djite (2008) avows that Medical speech is already difficult to comprehend, even when one is communicating with medical staff in the same language. To Djite, packaging medical information in a supposedly simple (European) language that the patients do not understand as prevalent in many countries today, is not only a continuous waste of scarce resources but frustration on the best intentions in the world. For him, the use of local languages can function effectively in a primary health care system in Africa where foreign languages are deployed to serve. This point is equally sustained by Cameron and Williams (1997: 419), cited in Djite (2008):

Although we may think that the primary tools of medicine are technological, the most fundamental tool, upon which all use of technology depends, is that of language. Language allows patients and care providers to make their intentions known, a crucial step in the process of identifying a problem investigating how long it has existed, exploring what meaning this problem may have, and setting in action a treatment strategy. Thus, if problems in linguistic encoding interfere with this process, there may be important consequences.

Language aids the care-providers and the patients to interact effectively, thus, arriving at solutions to health problems. Djite (2008) further elucidates that in a situation of crisis characterised by great pain and suffering, patients often resort to eloquent languages, usually their mother tongues or the regional Lingua Franca rather than a European language which they struggle to speak under normal circumstances. This is predominantly true for elderly patients from the rural areas and particularly women when the health pertains to private parts and intimate behaviour since they are illiterate in European languages.

According to Djite (2008:110), information exchange is an intricate and tedious procedure; only a diminutive percentage of the patient population in Africa can read in European languages or/and local language. Consequently, to get simple information written in such a language becomes enormously difficult. It is also apparent that most people in Africa only

depend on word-of-mouth messages from community development workers whenever there are critical health issues. Adequate information which entails effective communication is a two-way process, which includes:

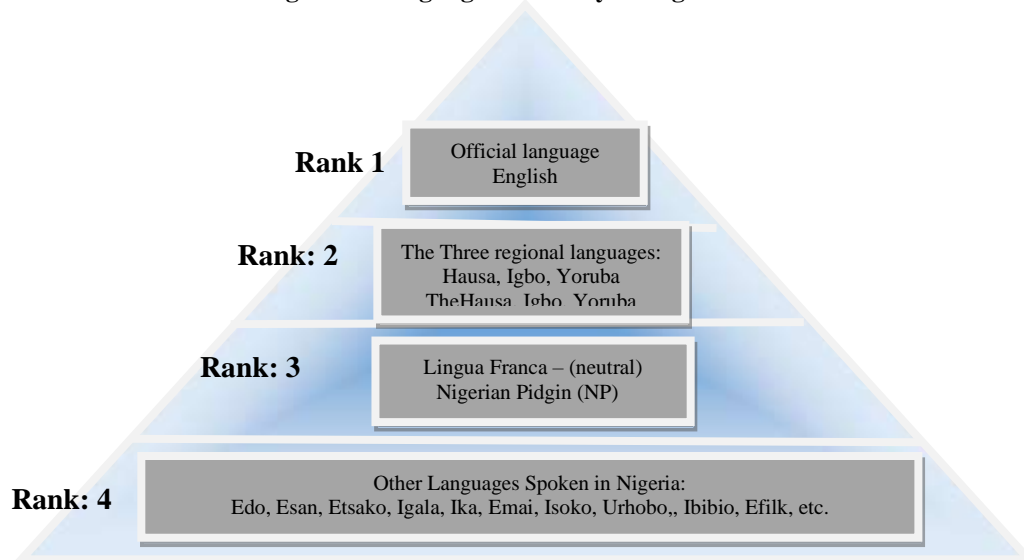
- i) A doctor or patient interaction,
- ii) Dissemination of health-related information to the patient population.

For people to adequately comprehend health-oriented information, the processes should not be subjected to a one-way process. The populace should be made to understand what the real message is all about if they are to adhere to it. In this sense, written documents must go with educational videos and all health-related information on the radio as well as television in both European and indigenous languages. This must go beyond satisfying the self-esteem of those who put such materials together but focus on making a difference for the target populace in terms of achievement. As Djite (2008:110) has pointed out, “communication itself is a tool of empowerment.” As a result, language has been regarded as a viable component in the delivery of health services such as therapy, drug prescription, health information and education. (Pugh, 1996; Drenna, 1998; Ainsworth-Vaughn, 2001; Youdelman and Perkins, 2002). To further credit these claims, Abioye (2011:71), orates that “Communication whether in English, the mother-tongue or the father tongue is crucial and, in this case, effective, educative and entertaining in health care delivery.” The submission of the above discourse is that language is a very crucial component in the propagation or dissemination of information in the health sector as well as in campaigns to the populace.

3. Language Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria harbours various language groups. These language groups include Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, which are the three national languages; other languages spoken in Nigeria include Esan, Igala, Etsako, Ika, Ibibo, Urhobo, Emai, Ukwuani and many other minority languages. The Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is also another language variety widely spoken in Nigeria. NP is the Lingua Franca of most states in various parts of Nigeria. Besides, it is a language used by both the literate and the illiterate. Therefore, it bridges the communication gap between the literate and the illiterate. The NP spoken in Nigeria is English-based. Thus, it could be termed Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) as well, but in this work, NP is preferred. English is the official language used in Nigeria. It is the language used in government offices and schools. Hence, most of the documents used are devised or written in English. Represented in Figure 1 below is a language hierarchy of Nigeria.

Figure 1: Language Hierarchy of Nigeria



(Adopted from Solomon-Etefia, 2015)

From the schemata above, English (**dubbed Rank 1**) is unveiled as the only official language used in Nigeria; (**Rank 2**) captures the regional languages used in different regions of Nigeria and (**Rank 3**) discloses NP as neutral since it is the most widely used language (among the literate and illiterate persons). The other languages considered as **Rank 4** in the schemata are regional languages also spoken in Nigeria. In this paper, all the Lassa fever campaign messages are written in the English language.

4. Lassa Fever: An Overview

The name *Lassa* is stemmed from a village called *Lassa* in Bornu State in Nigeria, where the virus was first ascertained in 1969 due to its ravaging effect on two missionary nurses. The virus that causes Lassa fever illness or haemorrhagic fever as medically inferred, is initiated by an African rat or rodent ‘*Mastomys Natalensis*’. This rat-type is often seen as the natural host, and as such, is widely found in endemic areas. Contacts with the rats, which include through contamination of food by saliva, urine, excreta, or other body fluid as this present study tries to unveil lead to the infection of this virus. Nosocomial transmission may also occur via droplets from one person to another or through the contamination of needles. The incubation period of the Lassa fever virus spans from 6 to 21 days. The symptoms and signs include fever, nausea and vomiting, chest pain, puffy face, puffy checks, oedema, dehydration, bleeding from orifices, shock and coma, and so on. Besides, the disease embraces symptoms and signs that are related to other types of fever such as malaria, typhoid, yellow fever as well as upper respiratory tract infection and other viral illnesses, hence, a proper diagnosis and confirmation of the virus via

laboratory test to detect the virus RNA antibodies are needed for a defined and clear-cut disparity.

There are various documented cases of deaths from undiagnosed clinical entities resembling Lassa fever between 1920 and 1950, in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and other West African countries. This devastation amidst others is what has inaugurated on motion diverse Centre for Disease Control across the globe. For instance, the earliest verification of the disease was in the 1950s, but in 1969, the virus was isolated by the Centre for Disease Control (CDC), Atlanta, USA, from a sample taken from a missionary worker in a Lassa village in northern Nigeria. Conversely, the northern part of Edo State, Nigeria seems to be one of the most affected parts compacted by the disease.

The Lassa fever pandemic in the northern part of Edo state started in the year 2004 as substantiated by laboratory analysis of samples forwarded to the Bernhard–Nocht Institute (BNI) for Tropical Medicine Hamburg, Germany. The account of that study captured and presented in percentage translates to the number of persons in the hospital and the area as follows: 12,000 persons presented with febrile illness at the Irrua Specialist Teaching Hospital (ISTH), Irrua; 832 (6.5%) had Lassa fever confirmed by reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR). 4,096 (32.26%) of those with febrile illness had an acute infection as they tested positive for IgM antibody. 333 (33.33%) of about 1000 staff of the hospital had a sub-clinical infection as they tested positive for IgG and negative for IgM antibody.

At least 208 of the 832 patients (25%) of the hospital with a confirmed Lassa fever must have died in the year 2004. 967 (5.9%) of relatives or members of the public who had contact with infected persons had confirmed Lassa fever. 555 (66.67%) of those with confirmed Lassa fever are close relatives. Eze. *et al.* (2010: 1), encapsulate that since the widespread of Lassa fever occurs in clusters of households, houses, streets or villages, the high rate of activity will have wider effects in an area than what is observed in a hospital where patients are admitted. From this report, it was apparent that Lassa fever exists in the northern part of Edo State, hence, leading to the huge numbers of death of both inhabitants, visitors, health care workers, as well as other individuals that are at great risk in the region. For the fact that contacts with infected persons pose a huge risk not only to indigenes but travellers and health aid workers as well; there is the need for adopting multiple criteria and capacity building in tackling the menace of Lassa fever generally in this State. According to (NCNC, report on Lassa fever 2020). Over 41 persons have died from 20 to 26 January 2020. This report further highlights the prevalence rate of the virus per states in Nigeria as follows:

In week 04, the number of new confirmed cases has increased from 81 cases in week 3, 2020 to 95 cases. These were reported from 19 states (Ondo, Edo,

Ebonyi, Enugu, Kano, Borno, Nasarawa, Kogi, Rivers, Abia, Adamawa, Benue, Kaduna, Delta, Taraba, Plateau, Bauchi, Osun and Ogun (Table 3). • *The number of deaths has increased. The overall case fatality rate (CFR) for 2020 is (15.9%) which is lower than the CFR for the same period in 2019 (19.7%) (Table 2).* • *In total for 2020, 19 states have recorded at least one confirmed case across 60 Local Government Areas (Figure 3).* • *Of all confirmed cases, 89% are from Edo (38%), Ondo (38%) and Ebonyi (11%) states.* • *The predominant age-group affected is 11-40 years (Range: >1 to 60 years, Median Age: 33 years). The male to female ratio for confirmed cases is 1:1 (Figure 4).* • *The number of suspected cases has increased but is lower than the numbers reported in 2019.* • *Five Health Care Workers -Kano (3), Taraba (1) and Borno (1) were affected in the reporting week 04.*

Source: (NCNC Lassa fever Situation Report Epi Week 04: 20 – 26 January 2020)

Since the inception of the occurrence of Lassa fever, there has been a series of campaigns to create and recreate awareness of the symptoms and preventions of the virus in Nigeria. With the recent development, campaigns are at their peak to curb the spread or eradicate the disease and the task of this present study is to showcase the successes via the use of language or simply put, how language has been deployed to negotiate and curb the spread of the virus.

5. Statement of the Problem

In health and language discourses, the focus has been on HIV/AIDS and other diseases with little attention on Lassa fever disease. Previous studies on Lassa fever are mainly from the medical perspective. For instance (Omeh, *et al.*, 2017; Akhuemokhan, O. C, Ewah-Odiase, R. O., Akpede, N., Ehimuan, J., Adomeh, D. I., Odia I, et al. 2017). No research to the best of our knowledge has focused on Lassa fever campaign in Nigeria. Thus, this research aims to breach that gap.

6. Aim and Objectives

The research is aimed at indicating the success of speech acts and its negotiation function or commitment in the comprehension of Lassa fever campaign messages in Nigeria. Specifically, the study intends to achieve this through three goals; first, it underscores ‘speech act theory’ as a pragma-communication model that accentuates language, action negotiation. In other words, the present study emphasizes how language is netted to curb or control Lassa fever malaise through communicative campaigns. Secondly, it validates the significance of the speech acts in the creation of mutual understanding and coordination or organisation as well as contextual representation of texts that are pragmatically exploited by the text producer to exert some perlocutionary effects on the reader of the texts, and thirdly, it substantiates the place of the

speech act theory in the explication and mediation of health discourses by interrogating its significance in such context.

7. Research Methodology

The data for this research is collected from relevant written campaign documents on Lassa fever from various hospitals. A total number of fifteen texts were purposively selected through a qualitative design. The study employs Searle's model of speech acts as a pragmatic framework alongside Halliday's social semiotic aspect of SFL in the critical analyses of both the textual and pictorial aspects of the campaign messages.

8. Theoretical Framework

This research draws theoretical insights from the combination of speech act theory and systemic functional linguistics to the multimodal analysis of Lassa fever texts. The synergy of both theories provides for us systematic explanations of the entire discourse. While the Searle's speech act model, on one hand, provides the reader with the intention that motivates the constructions of the Lassa fever texts, Halliday's social semiotic model of SFL, on the other hand, validates the intention through a meaning expansion which occurs as interactions of semiotic resources deployed in the context. In systemic functional linguistics (SFL), every act of language is an act of meaning; hence, it describes and explains how social reality is determined in language. This includes how language is deployed within a social system to replicate things as well as propel action. Thus, Halliday (1978:112) substantiates language as a system organised to perform the following functions known as metafunctions:

- (i) Ideational function:** This relates to the field of discourse. This functional level helps us to interpret ideas about the world or our experience of the real world.
- (ii) Interpersonal function:** This relates to the tenor of discourse. It establishes and maintains certain kinds of social and interpersonal relations that may exist among participants in a specific discourse situation, and
- (iii) Textual function:** This is concerned with the mode of discourse, that is, the organization of the message. At this level, ideas and interactions are patterned into meaningful texts per contextual relevance.

Halliday's social semiotic model is fundamental here because it provides the basis for the analysis of semiotic resources such as images, gestures, mathematical symbols, etc. more importantly, its fundamental role in multimodality or multimodal discourses. Halliday (1994: xiv) specified that "Systemic theory is a theory of meaning as a choice, by which a language, or any other semiotic system, is interpreted as networks of interlocking options". In other words, the choice of language use, as well as any other semiotic resource, is hinged on the exploitation of a network of meaning potentials by the writer of a message. To further buttress this, Kress et

al (2001:5) orate that choice and the use of modes are based on “the assumption... that the relationship between form and meaning, signifier and signified is never arbitrary, but that it is always motivated by the interests of the maker of the sign to find the best possible, the most plausible form of the expression of the meaning that she or he wishes to express”. Therefore, in any context, linguistic conduits such as the mode, the organization of information and so on used by the writer to embody meanings or to convey the meaning potentials of a text are matters of choice.

In speech act, there is an attempt to elucidate how speakers deploy language to accomplish intended actions and how hearers, in turn, infer intended meaning from what is said. Austin’s (1962) speech act theory is the first attempt to classify speech acts. Perceptibly, his work on speech acts unveiled a significant development in the model even though he did not use the term ‘speech act, but ‘performative sentence or utterance’ (Austin, 1962:6). The term was first employed by Searle in his *Speech Act: Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, where he substantiated that Speech acts are the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication and that talking is performing acts according to rules (Searle, 1969). His model consists of three components: *Context* (which entails speaker, hearer, time, place, and the possible world), *Illocutionary Force*, and *Propositional Content*. To him, an illocutionary force consists of *illocutionary point* (that is, the purpose, e.g. to assert, to direct etc.), *the mode of achievement of the illocutionary point* (that is, the manner, e.g. humble way to ask), the *strength of the illocutionary point* (e.g. To ask vs. to command), *preparatory conditions* (that is, the speaker issuing the order has the power to do so), *propositional content conditions* (e.g. One cannot ask to draw a triangular ellipse), *sincerity conditions* (unveils the notion of commitment/obligation, e.g the speaker who promises have in mind to do what he has promised), and the *strength of sincerity conditions* (which indicates what extent one believes in what one says). Deploying these notions, he further classified illocutionary acts into five categories:

Assertive (also called representative; expresses a speaker’s belief or commitment to something being the case).

Directives (it ascertains a speaker’s attempts to get the hearer to do something),

Commissives (it commits a speaker to a future course of action),

Expressives (it expresses a speaker’s attitude or feelings on the state of affairs), and

Declarations (brings some new state into the world).

An essential aspect of Searle’s work is the notion of commitment. When someone performs a speech act, it is expected that he or she commits to what he/she is saying. It is this commitment that brings about the success of speech acts since it is speaker oriented. The illocutionary point, which is the essence of the act, forms a central device in defining the commitment. However, this commitment can only be dubbed successful if and only if the

speaker performs a speech act that is understandable by the hearer within a valid context. Hence, the study of speech acts facilitates the understanding of the social, psychological, cultural, historical and other dimensions of communication.

9. Analyses and Discussion of Findings

This section of the study showcases how the producer or writer of the selected Lassa fever campaign messages deploys language and other semiotic resources to negotiate intended actions and how the intended action negotiations through language, in turn, provoke some level of effect in the reader of the messages.

FIG I. Occupational Safety and Health Tips on Lassa Fever



Source: Health Promotion and Occupational Health Unit. Irrua.

Fig I is split into the following selected texts:

1. a. Occupational Safety and Health tips on the Prevention of Lassa fever infection
- b. Unsafe act condition / safe act condition
- c. Unprotected handling of blood and body fluid/proper use of protective equipment
- d. Poor housekeeping / Keep your working space organized and tidy
- e. Poor lighting / adequate lighting of work environment
- f. Sharp object at workplace/ No recapping of needles and dispose sharps properly,
- g. Presence of disease vectors/proper vector control, etc.

Fig 1 unveils various forms of safety and health tips complemented by a series of linguistic resources as interactive frames. Frames or Framings as they are referred in this sense are structural configurations of interactive events that enable both the producer and the reader of texts to achieve a set of shared expectations. In fig 1, we noticed the following linguistic framings deployed by the producer or writer, which determine the communicative commitment or potency of the discourse: **(i)** The use of the **phrasal headlines** as a quick **communicative unit** to wheedle the reader into the context. **(ii)** The use of binary /oppositional sense relation. **(iii)** The use of the **arrow schemata** that ascertains the acts in the context as **Directive Speech**

Acts (DSAs) and (iv) The use of **visual** or **pictorial signs** to organize the discourse as social interaction, achieve a set of shared expectations, foreground the relevance of the information and extend the readers' understanding capacity of the verbal texts. That is, pedagogically, the visual framings are outputs of the verbal texts which help to give readers a structured understanding of what the producer requires and what is expected of the reader. As outputs of verbal texts, they equally guide readers adequately towards those safety tips that are pivotal for the prevention of the virus.

This essence of the functions of language assents with Halliday's observation of the structural arrangement of language that the internal arrangement of language is not arbitrary but represents a positive reflection of the functions that language has evolved to serve in the life of social man. Therefore, taking into cognizance all the linguistic trappings deployed by the producer of the aforementioned texts, it can be inferred that within SFL, language use can be observed from two semantic facets:

- (i) As a semiotic system; this signifies the full meaning potential available to a speaker what he or she can mean in contrast to what he or she cannot mean.
- (ii) As text; signifying a socially constructed instance of the system. Here, 'text' represents the output of the meanings or semiotic system that is selected.

All the communicative acts in Fig 1 ranging from the heading to the inherent texts are typical **Directive Speech Act** (DSA) deployed to negotiate an advice/ warning. In DSA, the speaker tries to make the hearer or reader do something like in the case of fig 1. This could be in the form of a request, advise, command, urging, warning, etc. This is what Searle refers to an *illocutionary point*. Interestingly, in Fig 1, all the DSAs in the context are unveiled and achieved through the arrow schemata, which to the writer are quick semiotic resources for texts (1a-g) to get the reader or hearer to do something, such as adhering to some relevant **preventive measures** as against those **measures** that could attract the infection of the virus.

This is **binary or oppositional sense relation**. The use of this linguistic framing in the context lends credence to the whole essence of language action negotiation illustrated in fig 1 above. In addition to the verbal text, these oppositional sense relations are well complemented visually to broaden the meaning of the message intended by the producer of the texts.

Again, semantically, the use of **binary or oppositional sense relation** seems to be a means by which the discourse value of information encoded in Fig 1 is well decoded and interpreted. To Adegbite (2000), discourse value refers to the meaning which the speaker or writer expects his hearer/reader to decode or interpret. Hence, the meaning of a text is determined by the linguistic behaviour of the language context.

FIG II: Lassa fever info and admonitory



Source: World Health Organisation (WHO)

Fig II is made up of two texts, which this study has labelled (2a & b) for simplicity.

- 2a. Beware of Lassa fever
- b. Did you wash them?

The organization of figure II is induced through the following linguistic trappings or framings: (i) the interrogative form (ii) the visual form and (iii) the pigmentation/colouration of texts. This all intentional act by the producer of the text accentuates Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) position that modality rests on the multifaceted interaction of several cues such as degree of colour saturation, colour differentiation, brightness and detail which composition may invite viewers to interpret visual representation as more or less naturalistic, abstract, sensory or technical. The entire context in Fig II brings again to the reader the reality of the dreaded virus. The speaker intends to **warn** as well as **inform** and **educate** while creating awareness simultaneously to those who may have been left in the dark concerning the existence and spread of the fever. While acceding to text (2a) as a direct means of achieving a Directive Speech Act as a result of the nature of directness, text (2b) is an indirect means of arriving at the same act.

Consequently, the interrogative form is deployed, first, as a strategic means by the producer or writer to establish **a fact** that one of the preventive measures of the Lassa fever is by appropriate washing of hands especially when assessing public places. Secondly, to achieve elicitation or cause response from readers, thirdly, it is used as a means to achieve politeness. Rather than sounding too audacious or disrespectful by saying 'wash your hands or 'cultivate the habit of hand-washing', the producer employed the interrogative form to mitigate the context of the discourse. The interrogative frame or form, therefore, becomes a language mode that necessitates the success of the act of communication. This is what Searle refers to **the mode of**

achievement of the illocutionary point and fourthly, the interrogative is used as indices to construct a mental context that spurs the reader to take serious thought of the dreaded disease.

The entire process as well as social interaction is well articulated and represented through the use of the visual mode or schemata of hands widely spread in the banner. The essence of the visual mode is to further expand the meaning of the syntactic structure “Did you wash them?” The visual or pictorial mode saves the reader from any form of misinterpretation or asking the question further ‘wash what?’ Thus, the visual mode helps in the apt interpretation of meaning by the reader. It ascertains the speaker’s intended meaning. Its complementary role and discourse value in any discourse exercise cannot be overemphasized. This assertion is further enunciated by Ogungbe and Alo (2014: 67) that visual report has greater ability to appeal to the emotions as well as to logic than the verbal or visual reports deployed independently.

Besides, the pigmentation or the colour of the communicative text has a cognitive value in the context due to its symbolic trait. To some linguists, symbols are seen as a subcategory of signs; hence, they can stand for something, convey meanings or can be a repository of meanings because of their contextual connotations. As a result, a word, an image or colour is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. Colours generally are symbolic, and their meaning interpretations vary from society to society. Sometimes, they assigned meanings in the context separately or with other semiotic resources, and also in a certain context, their meanings are universally interpreted. For example, a traffic light has the following systemic notation options represented in colours; *red* which potentially means ‘stop’ or ‘wait’, *yellow*, which infers ‘caution’ or ‘get ready’, and *green*, which means ‘go’. In the same way, colours generally have their place value in discourses. Again, in some culture, the use of black or white clothes conventionally informs people that one is bereaved. Subsequently, the umbrella text in fig II ‘Lassa fever’ is foregrounded or engraved in red not only as a **caveat notation** to readers but to create a perlocutionary effect of fear concerning the dreaded diseases. The colour portends that the virus is a killer and so caution should be taken to prevent it. Part of this caution is broadly spelt out as washing of the hands.

FIG. III: The Authenticity of the Lassa Fever Virus



Source: World Health Organisation (WHO)

Fig III is also grouped into the following texts:

3. a. Lassa fever is real.
- b. Adhere to standard precaution
- c. Always practice good infection and control
- d. Regular hand washing is the key

Text (3a) is a simple sentence with an Assertive Speech Act (ASA). An assertive speech act is a speech act that asserts the state of affairs in the world. Here, the speaker has used it with a particular reference to the Lassa fever context to inform, expose and warn. The essence is to jolt the reader back into existence concerning the fever. However, texts (3b&c) are intentionally structured to take the Directive Speech Act (DSA). The reason is that they serve as a continuum to text (3a). Note, text (3a) is calculatedly constructed by the speaker to herald the reality of Lassa fever, thus, creating a perlocutionary effect on the reader while texts (3b&c) galvanize the reader to take action by adhering to those health directives or instructions.

How the language of texts (3b&c) is deployed presupposes that the reader is already conversant with the health directives or codifications of Lassa fever prevention before now. This scenario situates that the success of speech act requires that the speaker and the hearer have a shared understanding of the context, speaker succeeds in performing an understandable and valid speech act, and the hearer understands the content and illocution of the preceding speech act and accepts its validity claims.

Another interesting marker here is also the symbolic use of colour on texts (a) and (d) respectively-‘Lassa fever is real’ and ‘Regular hand washing is the key’ Unlike, fig II, the umbrella or introductory text of fig III-‘Lassa fever is real’ is engraved in green colour to

authenticate its communicative value. Here, green is symbolically deployed to mitigate fear while heralding to the reader the factuality of the virus. This mitigation process is further enlivened through prevention tips which to the producer will be a huge success in the controlling or eradication process of the disease when they are imbibed and practised adequately. The prevention tips are all engraved in just two colours: blue and red. The essence is to communicate specific ways of adherence. The OK iconic signs or schemata are further deployed by the producer to attest to the affirmations of the assertions.

Note, text d--‘*Regular hand washing is the key*’ is intentionally engraved in red serving as a warning signal. The colour is symbolically deployed as a red alert bringing to bare once again the danger of not washing the hands. Furthermore, the separation or use of different colours for the texts also indicates why hand washing is more paramount in the fight against the virus. The use of the red print is an indicator that the virus easily gains access through unwashed hands. So, hand washing is crucial, a strategic measure to combat the virus.

FIG. IV: The Vectors responsible for the Lassa Fever Virus



Source: World Health Organisation (WHO)

Fig IV exposes the vector (animal) responsible for Lassa fever infection as well as the symptoms that the public or reader should watch out for to limit the risk of the disease as well as save the life of an infected person. Given this, the poster belongs to the category of Declaration/declarative Speech Act (DCSA) achieved through a **retrospective approach**. The essence is to be informative as possible, thereby, satisfying what **Grice’s cooperative principle** calls maxim of quantity. A declarative act is an act that also unveils some levels of the exercising of powers, and influences. They often change the state of the world directly.

4. High fever, sore throat, back pain, chest pain ... bleeding through body openings ... If you notice any of these symptoms go to the nearest Health Centre Immediately.

This text above, no doubt has some level of influence on the reader towards caution and vigilance. Remarkably, the producer of the text further complemented the texts with visuals that showcase vectors or carriers of the virus. They are specific rats called multimammate--- rats with many breasts. The essence is to guard against misinformation; as a result, there is a need for explicitness. An ‘X’ marker is used to accentuate disapproval, hence, readers or the public should desist from them, more importantly, cultures that encourage the eating of such rats. The colour red is equally deployed in engraving the text ‘*If you notice any of these symptoms go to the nearest Health Centre Immediately.*’ The colour essence is used to foreground the seriousness of the context indicating its urgency.

FIG V: Lassa Fever Preventive Measures



Source: BIOFEM Limited

Fig V also belongs to the category of the Directive Speech Act (DSA), unveiling a visual or pictorial demonstration of the causes and the preventive measures to be taken in the case of Lassa fever infection.

5. a. Avoid contact between rats and human beings
- b. Block all rat hideouts
- c. Store foodstuff in modern food container
- d. Cook all food thoroughly
- f. Always wash hands

A close study of texts (5a-f) shows that the texts are informatively constructed by the writer intentionally to help the reader take the necessary and right steps. The whole essence of this interactive information is to motivate and reinforce behaviours. The introductory text is engraved in red to arrest the readers’ attention to the discourse or simply put, to negotiate discourse. A look at the texts indicates that one utterance is logically connected to the other. This

is validated by labelling. The labelling is for educational and instructional purpose. It showcases a step by step method of what act(ion) should be done and how it should be done or carried out. For one to successfully achieve text (5a) he has to fulfil text (5b). The same implies to texts (5c&d) respectively. For instance, step 1 avows ‘avoid contact with rats. The seriousness of this directive is captured through an inclined red streak marked across the image of the rat. This again connotes stern disapproval.

Step 2 avers that if you must ensure the success of step 1, you must block all rat holes. This is symbolically represented by the image of a light bulb. What the producer infers with this image is that all rat hideout should be exposed or illuminated by blocking. Step 3 goes ahead unveiling to the public proper ways of storing food to prevent contamination using adequate containers. The writer or producer of the text is much aware that some households may not be conversant with modern storage containers, hence, has deployed visual and verbal text framings to validate language, action negotiation process. In furtherance of this, step 4 goes ahead to collaborate step 3 that in addition to the proper storage method, to have the desired output, it is equally mandatory to cook all food properly before eating. This is language action negotiation in its totality, which help in situating speech acts commitment to Lassa fever discourse.

Another educative aspect of the entire social interaction is step 5 which has the image of the tap with running water as against a bowl full of water to the brim, a common method or practice employed by some persons when washing the hands. The essence of the image is to properly instruct the public that the best way to wash hands properly is under running water especially after contact with sick persons. The ways the texts are visually aided give readers the right sense of judgment concerning the text and also save them from any misinterpretation of the producer’s intended meaning, that is what and how the text means.

10. Conclusion

Communication notifies and creates awareness. It shapes and reinforces the behaviour. Communication is only successful when an interpreter assigns values to the meanings intended by the writer. Searle’s theory of speech act alongside Halliday’s SFL suggests a structure for meaningful communication as this study tries to indicate in language, action negotiation in Lassa fever health discourse. The theory clarifies the conditions for success and creates a speaker-oriented view of understanding what success entails when a speech act is performed. All the sample texts used indicate that communication or a communicative act necessitates the ability of the writer to articulate his message in very clear terms so that the receiver can decode the content very well. Every line of texts in the campaign posters instils levels of fear and seriousness on the reader that comes across the text. The use of symbols and colour as a complement to text show a communicative effect of the seriousness of the Lassa fever disease. These elements are used as

pointers for effective communication to readers. Thus, each message has a perlocutionary effect on the populace

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