

THE SEMIOTIZATION OF BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY: A CRITICAL LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper presents the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria as a semiotic construct with the aim of critically describing and interpreting the various pictorials that have emerged from the crises from a socio-semiotic viewpoint. The paper adopts signification as a linguistic concept in relation to Critical Discourse Analysis to explicate the issues that have emerged from the crises. In this paper, we assume that visual semiotics emphasizes the way pictorials communicate and the system dominating their usage. The choice of semiotics as a theoretical framework is anchored on the fact that as an apparatus directly associated with culture, semiotics is fundamentally diverse from traditional criticism because traditional criticism primarily analyses the aesthetic object or the text according to its face values. Nevertheless, semiotics predominantly enquires into the ways through which meaning is created rather than simply investigating what it is, in the belief that meaning is not obviously stated, it often exists latently and waits to be disclosed, analyzed and read. This study therefore focuses on the analysis of pictorials elicited from a crisis situation, from a purely linguistic perspective. The aim is to clarify the meaning construction process and its interpretation by the reader at the perceptive level and explicate the course of shallow meaning units into the deeper levels of meaning in the selected pictorials generated from insurgency in Nigeria.

Key Words: Semiotization, Boko Haram, Insurgency, Critical Linguistics

La sémiotisation de l'insurrection de Boko Haram: une perspective linguistique critique

Résumé

Cet article présente l'insurrection de Boko Haram au Nigéria d'une perspective de construction sémiotique dans le but de décrire et d'interpréter de manière critique les différentes images, issues des crises du point de vue socio-sémiotique. L'article adopte la signification comme concept linguistique en relation avec l'analyse critique du discours pour expliquer les problèmes qui ont émergé de ces

crises. Dans cet article, nous supposons que la sémiotique visuelle met l'accent sur la façon dont les images communiquent et le système dominant leur utilisation. Le choix de la sémiotique comme cadre théorique est ancré sur le fait qu'en tant qu'appareil directement associé à la culture, la sémiotique est fondamentalement différente de la critique traditionnelle car celle-ci analyse avant tout l'objet esthétique ou le texte en fonction de ses valeurs nominales. Néanmoins, la sémiotique recherche principalement les moyens par lesquels le sens est créé plutôt que de simplement l'enquêter sur ce qu'il est, dans la conviction que si le sens n'est pas clairement énoncé, il existe souvent de manière latente, le moyen par lequel on l'attend d'être divulgué, analysé et lu. Cette étude se concentre donc sur l'analyse des représentations, issues d'une situation de crise, dans une perspective purement linguistique. Le but est de clarifier le processus de construction du sens et son interprétation par le lecteur au niveau perceptif et d'expliquer le cours des unités du sens superficielles dans les niveaux plus profonds de signification des images sélectionnées et générées par l'insurrection au Nigéria.

Mots clés: Sémiotisation, Boko Haram, insurrection, linguistique critique

INTRODUCTION

There can be no words without images - Aristotle

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

On a daily basis, media houses churn out details of the activities of the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria in forms of news reports. Those reports come with pictorial evidence to substantiate the claims of the media houses. The field of language has so expanded that pictures constitute texts especially at the level of semiotic analysis. Based on the foregoing, this study undertakes an analysis of the pictures that constitute part of the newspaper reports on the activities of the Boko Haram in Nigeria. This study is built on the platform of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA); an approach which is targeted at enabling an assessment of what is meant when language is used to describe and explain. CDA systematically explores often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power' (Fairclough 1995: 132).

Communicative and/or discursive studies, texts, language, etc. are expected to be considered in their social context, because they both shape and are informed by wider processes within society. In this manner texts do not merely passively

report upon the world, but they imbue it with meaning, fabricate it, shape perspectives and call the world into being. Discourse can be employed in these circumstances as it refers to the various ways in which communication between people is achieved; it can also be considered as an 'active relation to reality' (Fairclough 1992: 41). Fairclough (2003: 26) has delineated three characteristics of discourse which describe its operation within social life, as 'part of the action.' These are:

- Genres (ways of acting)
- Discourses (ways of representing)
- Styles (ways of being)

'Genres' refer to a particular way of manipulating and framing discourse; examples of genres are church, media texts, sermons, interviews and political speeches. Genres are significant because they provide a framework for an audience to comprehend discourse, though evidently due to this quality, 'genres' can be the locus of power, domination and resistance. 'Discourse/representation' is crucial in assessing the means by which apparently similar aspects of the world can be appreciated and understood from different perspectives or positions. Finally, 'styles' are the ways in which discourse is used to constitute a sense of being and identity, how identification is located through the application and manner of particular discourses.

The structure and relationship of these three and their interplay through political and cultural concerns develop the myriad of social effects of discourse guided as forms of ideologies as Ebim (2017) posits, the ideology that legitimizes in-group power and its consequent exploitation and oppression is simply not imitated from discriminatory actions by other in-group members. This is dependent upon the audience accessing, comprehending, using and resisting the discourse. Discourse should not be considered in isolation; rather, discourses act upon and influence one another in an act of intertextuality. This term concerns the way that specific discourses are understood only with reference to separate discourses. The Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) described this situation as 'dialogism', thus referencing implicitly or explicitly other discourses as a further indication of the social life of discourse. Bakhtin (1986: 121) stated that, 'the author has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener also has his own rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights.'

There are however more subtle domineering discourses which function to maintain perceptions and attitudes. These may operate on a subtle level; van Dijk (1991) for instance examined the racist discourses which operated within the

British press. By practicing certain modes of exclusionary discourse, particularly the use of pronouns, 'we', 'us', 'them', newspapers in Britain were shown to participate and propagate in a discourse of a dominating, white, overwhelming middle-class Britain. The mode of reporting was shown to be less subtle as the 'dominant definition of ethnic affairs was consistently been a negative and stereotypical one: minorities or immigrants were seen as a problem or a threat, and were portrayed preferably in association with crime, violence, conflict, unacceptable cultural differences, or other forms of deviance (van Dijk 1991: 20). This situation is certainly opposed and disputed by alternative discourses, but the power of the position the Press hold ensures that it is the former discourse which is heard. Bakhtin (1984) referred to this variety of discourse as 'heteroglossia', a term which recognizes the multitude of forms of discourse and the means by which some succeed in their dominance.

Critical Discourse Analysis therefore examines the form, structure and content of discourse, from the grammar and wording employed in its creation to its reception and interpretation by a wider audience. The employment of verbs, pronouns and nouns within discourse is as much part of this analysis as the assessment of the content and tone of the discourse. This approach facilitates an assessment based upon more than simple quotations but upon what the discourse is doing and what it is being asked to do in its production, dissemination and consumption. Therein lies the need for the critical representation of the Boko Haram insurgency and the major actors as sources of data for the analysis of this study. These pictorials constitute the media portrayal of the insurgents, the multinational joint task force and the federal government.

SEMIOTICS AND PICTORIAL ANALYSIS

This study focuses on the visual and material culture of insurgency in Nigeria by using the Peircean classification of Icon, Index and Symbol as linguistic concepts to explicate the data. An icon, simply put, is a sign that is linked to a signifier through similarity in appearance such as: portraits or abstract paintings where colour is, for example taken to be black. The point is that we can gain information about the signified by looking at the sign. An indexical sign ties the signifier to the signified; the index is therefore described as a visible sign which points to the invisible. The indexical sign is then described as *the registration of the real*; the sight of smoke, for example, could indicate fire, a bullet hole would refer to a specific act, or the sight of tears suggests sadness. A symbol links the signifier and the signified in a purely arbitrary or conventional way; the link is not physical or logical. These classifications are best understood as dynamic when applied to images and objects.

Peirce applied ideas of semiotics, as a linguistic approach to the analysis of visual images and sought to analyze how the meanings attributed to images are not a “natural” result of what we see; that is, images are not self-evident and universal in how we understand what we see. He also opines that the meanings given to images are linked to culturally specific associations, though it is very necessary to note that culture cannot entirely determine our response. Peirce referred to the immediate visual impact denoted meaning (or first order or basic meaning) and the cultural meaning we attach to its connoted meaning (or second-order meaning). In other words, denoted meaning refers to the recognition of what is registered by the image or photograph and connoted meaning refers to the possible invitation of the image to interpret, give meaning to, the forms even against or beyond the authors’ intention. This provides a useful backdrop to the application of semiotics to visual and material culture. In terms of cultural meanings, we may also usefully note Peirce’s influence on poststructuralist thinking where post-structuralism does not view language as a structure but rather as a *structuring process* in terms of the relationship of the reader, or viewer, or consumer. In this respect, there is a greater emphasis on the *impact* of language and the role the individual plays in creating meaning.

SIGNIFICATION MODELS IN MEDIA DISCOURSE

Signification is the meaning that a term, symbol, or character regularly conveys or is intended to convey. It is also a system of signs. For instance, when one signifier is associated with one and only one signified, it is called a symbolic system. Example, Traffic lights and the "language" of flowers are examples of symbolic systems (roses = 'love', tulips = 'friendship', etc). Again, the correlation between a colour and its signified is arbitrary (unmotivated) and any signifier may in theory be joined with any signified. In order to be correctly interpreted, the sign relies on a convention.

PEIRCEAN APPROACH TO SIGNIFICATION AND REPRESENTATION

Charles Sander Peirce distinguishes three modes of signs: iconic (a photograph, or a school crossing sign with a silhouette of a person), index (signs belonging to the if ... then ... type, such as smoke for fire, a cat's tail for the whole cat), and symbol (the word "daddy"). The most arbitrary sign is obviously the symbol, which relies completely on codification: there is no similarity (icon), no contiguity or proximity (index) between "daddy" and the thing it designates. One sign may be used in several ways, for example, as a symbol of one thing and an index of another; e.g., the traffic signal, is primarily a symbol, but may also serve as an index for an invisible intersection.

All languages are composed of signs and rules, with some degree of constraint on what combinations of signs may be used. In the "language" of traffic signals for instance, as in real language, two signs cannot be produced at one time. At least in the oral manifestation of language, phonological reasons explain this rule: It is not possible to pronounce two phonemes at once. With traffic lights, this possibility is excluded for reasons of safety and coherence: the signs may only be produced in succession, with no concomitance and no silence. We can say that the signs are mutually exclusive: only one sign may be actualized (present) at a time; the other two must remain virtualized (in absentia). This eliminates the possibility of what we call a contrast, which is the simultaneous presence of two opposite signs ("red light" and "green light").

Given the root of '*representation*' in notions of resemblance and imitation, visual images have been thought of as more direct and straightforward in their meanings than language itself, which varies from culture to culture. This means that there has been a strong tendency to think of visual images as not a language, as uncoded and possibly universal in their meaning. In this respect it can be useful to think of visual images as text-like, though one necessarily needs to be wary of linguistic models dominating the understanding of visual representation. In the first instance, the elements of images do not have established rules, unlike words, which require them to be combined in certain ways to form a sign. Furthermore, images and meanings are not entwined as a dictionary links words with their signified; while images are linked with particular meanings, for example, allegories or images of Buddha, the meaning doesn't require a distinctly or distinct visual language. The meanings of particular images can be explained in words and therefore one can conceive many different visual forms where the meaning is intrinsic (Potts 1996: 24-26).

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

ANALYSIS 1: OCTOBER 1ST BOMBING AT ABUJA



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	Images of burning cars, buildings and a very thick smoke and flame emanating from the inferno, at the background, white house facing the fire.	This is iconic of a devastated security network, which is hit at its core, a pointer to insecurity in the country.
2	Index	The bombing of Police Headquarters in Abuja by Boko Haram	The bombing of the police headquarters is indexical of the height of impunity by the Boko Haram insurgents.
3	Symbol	Nigerian security network in shambles, the very heart of the nation's security under heavy attack by Boko Haram.	This symbolises insecurity in the moment of turbulence.

DISCUSSION

On the 16th of June 2011 a suicide bomber who was said to be trailing the convoy of the then Inspector General of Police, Hafiz Ringim, rammed his car into the Luis Edet headquarters of the Nigerian police force. There were reports that the bomber and a traffic police officer who stopped him at the gate and prevented him (the bomber) from entering the premises got killed. But there were however conflicting reports as per the number of casualties in the attack. Some days later, the Boko Haram sect, a dreaded insurgent group that abhors western education in Nigeria claimed responsibility for the attack. In the photograph, the flames and

the thick smoke are blowing to the right in the wind. Dark, heavy smoke is coming off the flames and is hiding the background in the top right corner. The flames are chaotic and look like they could not be contained, yet they are very focused in the specific area surrounding the environment. The thick smoke is rising above the towering whitish building thus denting the colour of the building---a metaphor for a stain which has come to stay with the Nigerian society despite all efforts being made to curtail the excesses of the militant Boko Haram. The vehicles under destruction are a testimony to the name of the sect group “Boko Haram” anything that emanates from the western world of civilization is evil and therefore should be destroyed. The direction of the smoke into the building and not away from it is a clear indication that even the natural environment understands the message of the insurgents---seeking to destroy whatever is western to impose a sharia law style of governance in Nigeria. The white colour of the house under destruction is a symbol of neutrality or peace. At the far background are people who are looking on, observing the act that is occurring in front of them, but doing nothing to stop it.

ANALYSIS 2: INSPECTION OF THE POLICE HEADQUARTERS AT ABUJA



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	President Goodluck Jonathan being led by the Inspector General of police and other security personnel in inspecting the bombed police headquarters	This is iconic and calls for a more serious cautious approach to the issue of Boko Haram insurgency.
2	Index	Presidential inspection of the bombed Police Headquarters in Abuja	The presence of the president at the scene of the bombing is indexical of the seriousness of the act.
3	Symbol	Security and the president in a state of confusion	This is symbolic of a temporary defeat of a security outfit that is meant to secure the entire nation.

DISCUSSION

The above image from the destruction by the insurgents, shows the then Inspector General of Police Hafiz Ringim pointing to the carnage done by the Boko Haram sect on the police force headquarters in Abuja. In his full regalia as the police helmsman, the then IGP points the direction of the carnage to the then president but he (Ringim) turns away from what he was doing at the time. This picture seems to suggest the existence of “eye service” mentality in the civil service where the then IGP Ringim is seen trying to impress the president at the expense of the damage done to the nation’s security outfit. The former president’s attention is neither on the police helmsman nor the damaged building but he seems to be engaged in a deep thought. A critical look at the then president’s vision suggests confusion, frustration and regret. The army officer at the background is only revealed by the uniform, his face is hidden thus giving him anonymity. The members of the presidential entourage at the background look confused and frustrated. They also look helpless as the leadership does not seem to know where the solution to the crises lies. The man in the crowd who is putting on white is looking away from the scene of the incident.

ANALYSIS 3: A B/H LEADER BEING MONITORED BY THE NIGERIAN ARMY



Boko Haram Leader speaks: I am here, very close to you; I dare you to get me, if you can” |...
 The Boko Haram insurgency group, Abubakar Shekau announced that he and his group are the soul perpetrator of last Monday morning's bombing...

S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	A desperate situation in search of an elusive fugitive	The challenge of the sect leader of his closeness to the security operatives is iconic of the search for a fugitive whose rampaging militancy is worrisome.
2	Index	The Boko Haram leader purportedly surrounded by Nigerian soldiers	The pictorial representation is indexical of the notoriety of the leader of the sect, it also exposes his alleged invisibility.
3	Symbol	Confusion in the military	This is symbolic of the confusion in the military at the time of the search for the sect leader. His audacity is exposed through the lexical items on the picture.

DISCUSSION

With the message *“I am here very close to you; I dare you to get me if you can the Boko Haram leader Shekau announced that he and his group are the soul perpetrators of last Monday’s bombing”* the Boko Haram leader seems to have acquired a notorious, illusive and invincible status where he can challenge the security operatives at will without any iota of fear. The security officers are well kitted and combat ready for an “enemy” who professes invincibility thus substantiating the claim that members of the sect are everywhere and can hardly be seen. They are faceless but can unleash terror at will and go unchallenged. The background is a thick forest with a blue sky overlooking the soldiers and the terrorist leader; and for openly stating that he carried out the attack on the police

headquarters and that if the security can they should come and get him is an open confrontation from a man who operates with impunity and at will.

ANALYSIS 4: A PRESIDENTIAL MEDIA CHAT UNDER WATCH BY THE B/H



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	Terrorists have their ears in Aso Rock.	The attentive nature of the insurgents is iconic---they are getting information from the seat of power.
2	Index	President Jonathan in a media chat where terrorists are listening to him	The pictorial representation is indexical of the challenges of insecurity in the country at the time. The attention being paid to the presidential media chat is indexical.
3	Symbol	A government without secured information with regard to terrorists	This is symbolic of a nation that is not secured even at the highest level.

DISCUSSION

In this picture we see the president in a media chat while the militants inside the bush are attentively listening to the presidential comments. The leader of the sect Shekau’s hands are folded to the back with an AK47 riffle crossing his chest. He is focusing on the president as he speaks as if to say “I know what he is talking about but I cannot be moved”. Other members of the sect are holding tenaciously to their weapons and paying attention to the media chat. But the president seems to be vehement in his gestures as his two hands are pointing to his chest saying “*I am in control and on top of this security challenge; we shall overcome*”. But the looks on the terrorists faces are those of confidence and the assurance that at the

end of the battle they (militants) will triumph. The bush where they are standing seems to be far from where the president is addressing the nation but they are not separated from the rest of the people by distance because their network is spread over all sectors and facets of the economy thus prompting the fear that “Boko Haram members are all over the place even in the president’s administration”.

ANALYSIS 5: BOKO HARAM LEADER IN A PRESS RELEASE



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	Boko Haram enjoys the creation and beauty of western education and civilization	The book being held by the sect leader is iconic; though the sect abhors westernization their liking for education is absolute.
2	Index	Boko Haram leader holding a book “Boko” which is “Haram” and backing two brand new jeeps in company of his lieutenants.	At least the sect leader carrying a book is indexical of a movement that somehow believes in the western education. This is ironical.
3	Symbol	A contradiction of the sect’s ideological stance	This symbolises an ideological contradiction on the part of the sect, which though does not like western, education takes delight in using western materials.

DISCUSSION

In the above picture there is a deviation from the usual style of Shekau that appears on videos. In this frame, he is not backing the armour tanks as always but is rather backing a Honda jeep and another one that looks like a Land Cruiser Prado jeep. He is also holding a typed document---a “Boko” which his ideology says is “Haram” that western education is a sin. But looking at the above picture, the scenery violates all the believes that Boko Haram stands for. It is an irony that the same person who condemns the acquisition of western education is pictured here carrying a book which epitomises western civilization. Again the same person drives porchy cars and wears expensive clothes all produced through the knowledge of western education. Just like chichidodo the bird in Ayi Kwei Ahmah’s *The Beautiful Ones are not yet born*, that hates excreta but lives on maggots, Boko Haram hates western education and western civilization but benefits from the same knowledeg that they love to hate.

ANALYSIS 6: THE B/H LEADER MOCKING THE MASSES IN A VIDEO



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	Boko Haram leader mocking the Nigerian state and her security outfit	This posture is iconic of mockery of the security outfit by a sect that terrorises a nation.
2	Index	Boko Haram leader taking a salute from an imaginary audience	This is indexical of deviance, defying all the military strategies of the nation to stamp his authority and acclaimed supremacy in the face of the challenge of insecurity.
3	Symbol	A demonstration of callousness and brutality in the face of security challenges	This symbolises deviance in the face of insecurity by the insurgent.

DISCUSSION

The Boko Haram leader is flanked by his subordinates in that picture where he is “hailing” his followers and taking an imaginary salute from his cohorts. The three armour tanks at the background provide security and confidence for the insurgent leader while his lieutenants provide a back up in case of any eventualities. The right hand that is raised up is a symbol of acceptance of whatever role his followers have been playing and a further encouragement to continue in their nefarious activities. The Boko Haram flag flying at the back of the “soldiers” is a symbol of authority that legitimizes their actions as “an independent” republic of Boko Haram; a country devoid of corruption and moral bankruptcy. The other leaders of the sect that are covering masks are invincible and have no identity but the leader Shekau who is not masked is saying “You have known me, you have known my identity but you cannot get me”. His boldness gives him the courage to go about unmasked knowing quite well that he cannot be caught.

ANALYSIS 7: A DESTROYED COMMUNITY BY THE B/H



S/N	Triadic Model of the Sign	Semiotic Resources in the Image	Semiotic Significance
1	Icon	Hopelessness, helplessness and despair	This is iconic of a helpless situation. This has led to despair in the children.
2	Index	A girl peeping out of a dilapidated building surrounded by ramshackled walls and buildings	This is indexical of a generation of youth whose future is not certain. The security situation has exposed them to a very difficult situation.
3	Symbol	A younger generation that has no future left as a result of insurgency	This symbolises uncertainty. A devastated environment and an insecure society.

DISCUSSION

The picture is that of a completely destroyed community, walls are coming down and the trees destroyed while a girl is standing in a dilapidated building and peeping out in fear, horror and anguish. The destroyed trees signify the destruction of the natural environment, the black smoke on the wall shows the lasting legacy of the Boko Haram insurgency that has come to torment the world. Outside the shattered walls is a set of chairs blown outside. This symbolises a state of rejection and torment. The girl is wearing a white cloth which symbolises innocence and purity but under heavy attack. The left over wall she is holding on to has the colour “green” which symbolises the nigerian national flag. By holding on to the green colour the girl seems to be saying that she still has faith in the nigerian dream despite the level of insurgency that has permeated the landscape. The bright sky symbolises hope and a sign of better things that are definitely to shine upon the girl. The age of the girl itself is a pointer to the fact that the insurgents are on a mission to render the younger generation homeless or cow

them into submission to their own faith and ideology. This picture of the girl looking out in despair shows some teenager who is in need of help from anywhere. Her staring into space points to a believe in divine intervention.

CONCLUSION

This paper has through the application of the Peircean semiotic triadic model of icon, index and symbol constructed the Boko Haram insurgency as a linguistic realization of the crises. By adopting the signification model as a linguistic concept in relation to Critical Discourse Analysis the paper explicated the issues that have emerged from the crises based on the assumption that visual semiotics emphasizes the way pictorials communicate and the system dominating their usage. The paper therefore focused on the visual and material culture of insurgent activities in Nigeria as represented in the media.

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