

**A DISCOURSE STUDY OF THE NIGERIAN ARMY AND BOKO
HARAM COUNTER-PROPAGANDA RHETORIC**

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Abstract

The paper explicates the pattern of propaganda rhetoric in the media to enact and represent the prevalent realities of the Boko Haram crises in Nigeria by examining and analysing the responses, reactions and the utterances by the major actors in the raging insurgency war. The security outfits have been dishing out press reports on the “death” of the leader of the Boko Haram sect only for the same leader to resurface and counter the report and show proof of his existence. This paper therefore examines the patterns of discourses that have emerged from those utterances by the major actors in the crises from the perspective of counter-propaganda rhetoric. Data were generated from two Nigerian print media outfits - *The Guardian* and *The Sun* Newspapers while the theoretical concepts of promises and persuasion as sub-genres of propaganda served as analytical parameters.

Key Words: Counter-Propaganda, Rhetoric, Violence, Shekau, Nigerian Army, Boko Haram,

Résumé

Une étude du discours rhétorique de l'armée nigériane contre la propagande de boko haram

L'article explique le modèle de la rhétorique de propagande dans les médias pour comprendre et représenter les réalités courantes de la crise Boko Haram au Nigeria en examinant et analysant les réponses, les réactions et les déclarations des principaux acteurs de la guerre contre l'insurrection. Les services de sécurité ont annoncé plusieurs fois la «mort» du chef de file de la secte Boko Haram, mais on constate qu'il se réapparaît pour contrer le rapport et montrer la preuve de son existence. Cet article examine donc les modèles de discours qui ont émergé de ces déclarations des principaux acteurs dans cette crise du point de vue de la rhétorique de la contre-propagande. Les données ont été générées à partir de deux groupes de médias imprimés au Nigeria - The Guardian et The Sun Newspapers, tandis que les concepts théoriques de promesses et de persuasion en tant que sous-genres de propagande ont servi comme paramètres analytiques.

Mots-clés : Contre-propagande, rhétorique, violence, Shekau, armée nigériane, Boko Haram

Introduction

JTF: *Intelligence report available to the Joint Task Force Operation RESTORE ORDER (ORO) revealed that Abubakar Shekau, the most dreaded and wanted Boko Haram terrorist leader may have died. He died of gunshot wounds received in an encounter with the JTF troops in one of their camps at Sambisa Forest on 30 June 2013.*

Shekau: *“The world should know that by the grace of Allah I am alive and will only die at the appointed time. Those underrating my capacity should have a re-think because the war we are waging will consume all of you”, July 1 2013.*

Introduction

The raging insurgency war in Nigeria has got to a critical stage where the security agencies engage the Boko Haram sect leadership in open verbal confrontations. Sometimes the leadership of the security networks releases information countered by the Boko Haram sect as unsubstantiated. In such situations, the media reports arguments and counter arguments from both parties. While the sect members

view the security leadership as propagandist, the security agencies also view the sect members as propagandists.

In this paper, we set out to examine the newspaper reports that contain claims and refutations by both the Boko Haram and the security agencies. It should be noted that identifying a message as a form of propaganda is suggestive of negativity or dishonesty. It is used to describe words such as: lies, distortion, deceit, manipulation, mind control, psychological warfare, brainwashing. Besides being associated with unethical, harmful, and unfair tactics, propaganda is also commonly defined as “organized persuasion” (DeVito, 1986: 239). Persuasion differs from propaganda, but the term is often used as a catch-all for suspicious rhetoric, it is described as organized mass persuasion with covert intent and poor or non-existent reasoning. It is the work of organizations or groups to win over the public for special interests through a massive orchestration of attractive conclusions packaged to conceal both their persuasive purpose and lack of sound supporting reasons.

Rhetoric as a Linguistic Tool

Rhetoric is obviously not only important for argumentation, but for the production, analysis and evaluation of any kind of persuasive discourse. The study of audiences by rhetoric is very important, because of the new kinds of audiences derived from new forms and modes of communication, in a time where information technologies applied to communication systems are fast evolving. Reflecting on the concept of rhetoric, Aristotle avers that:

Rhetoric sets out to discover the real and apparent means of persuasion, just as it belongs to Dialectic to discover the real and apparent syllogism... Rhetoric then may be defined as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever. This is the function of no other of the arts, each of which is able to instruct and persuade in its own special subject; thus, medicine deals with health and sickness, geometry with the properties of magnitudes, arithmetic with number, and similarly with all the other arts and sciences.” (*Rhetoric* I, 1355b15-20 and 25-30).

From the above position, Aristotle is of the view that the best rhetorician is that who is expert in syllogisms. It is noteworthy that in the composition of a discourse, Aristotle gives a special importance to the *taxis*, that is, to the configuration and ordering of the elements of the discourse. This is particularly

applicable to argumentative discourses, where the aim of persuading takes the form of convincing by way of argumentation. The analysis of argumentative discourse, taken as “verbal, social and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by advancing a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint” (van Eemeren 2001), is done by the study of the points of view, unexpressed premises, argument schemes, argumentation structures and, particularly, fallacies. Rhetorical strategies are interpreted and reconstructed in that way, in order to get a clear view of the process of argumentation. This is the main reason for emphasising the relevance of the structure of discourse as it is fixed in the *taxis* phase of its composition (Reboul, 1991). This idea was renewed by enlightenment rhetorical theorists such as Campbell (1776), Whately (1828), and Perelman & Olbrecht-Tyteca (1958).

Propaganda as a Linguistic Tool

The propaganda machinery especially during crises situations is to work on people’s psychology by using every available means to lure them to the side of the propagandist in order to blur their visionary insight into events, erase their critical power, making them docile and amenable to the wish of the propagandist. It is also aimed at brainwashing people into accepting whatever comes their way uncritically. Propaganda could be the systematic effort at manipulating people’s beliefs, attitudes, or actions by means of linguistic or extra linguistic features where the propagandist has a specified goal or set of goals, primarily to change the cognitive narrative of the people (that is, to alter a people’s perception of the true situation). To achieve this goal, the propagandist deliberately selects facts, arguments, and displays of symbols and presents them in ways he thinks will be most effective. To maximize effect, s/he may omit pertinent facts or distort them, and may try to divert the attention of the reactors (the people he is trying to sway) from everything to suit his own agenda. And for the propagandist to achieve his aim, he resorts to the use of rhetorical devices which could be diversionary tactics.

A Review of Relevant Literature, Theoretical Underpinning and Analytical Framework

It has been observed that counter-propaganda rhetorical studies facilitate inquiries into inequality, ethics, critical pedagogy, news media, and institutional practices. Rhetoric considers the interplay between power and language as Cheryl Glenn explains: “rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment (including who may speak, who may listen or who will agree to listen, and what can be said)” (1–2).

From Norman Fairclough in *Language and Power* as a way of explicating the issues of power and ideology in discursive events. The relationship between power and language has been examined by other scholars who are concerned with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Bizzell and Herzberg's *Negotiating Difference*, and Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa and Virginia Clark's *Language Awareness*). Geneva Smitherman's *Talking' That Talk* explicitly recognizes the power of Critical Discourse Analysis in drawing attention to the "socio-cultural rules" of language use "within a paradigm of social transformation" (7-8). Smitherman's significant contribution to the development of the field and understanding of the tensions between African American Vernacular English and Standard Edited English is relevant here.

In James Paul Gee's work on defining "big-D" Discourse as necessarily constructing insiders and outsiders has influenced many in exploring the relationships between language, culture, and inequality (23). James Sledd has also worked on power differentials in language, linguistic dominance and power imbalances between adjunct and tenured workers in composition. There is also significant research on discourses about race and gender in rhetorical studies. Jennifer Clary-Lemon's "The Rhetoric of Race and the Racialization of Composition Studies" examines the notion of *race* in composition studies problematizing any unitary sense of the term in contemporary rhetoric and composition scholarship, thus exposing the relations of history, power, and language. Scott Lyon examines the rhetorical construction of identity and nation for Native Americans, considering, in part, the role of naming and labelling.

This literature review is only a fraction of such scholarship, revealing a nexus of interest in issues of inequality that establish a clear link between rhetoric and propaganda. Rhetoric is concerned with civic engagement and the ethical uses of language, so as to reveal specific ways in which language use reflects power inequalities. By using a variety of discourse-analytic and rhetorical concepts (genre, textual silences, interdiscursivity, insinuation, pronoun use, face work, relevance theory), the speaker exposes a fundamental incoherence and a condescending, nondemocratic stance in exposing utterances during crises situations.

Another convergence of interests between rhetoric power relations in counter propaganda discourse is the analysis of news coverage. Just as rhetoric has concerned itself with the events of the day from the Aristotelian era, modern-day rhetoric focuses on issues of inequalities and power relations. This is clearly spelt out in Stewart's analysis of a set of news texts and press releases about "reparative therapy" for homosexuality. By using the concepts of framing and

“micro-rhetorical” choices (Johnstone and Eisenhart 8), Stewart shows how scientific claims can be manipulated in the news media, affecting how lay audiences interpret those claims. In a similar demonstration of how discursive framing can affect the interpretation of journalistic texts, Thomas Huckin used a corpus of 163 news articles to analyse an editorial and a feature story about homelessness, showing how contrasting patterns of what he calls “textual silences” promoted contrasting ideological frames. Over time, scholars whose interest has been in institutional discursive practices apply Rhetoric concepts and methods. For example, Patricia Dunmire analyses the rhetoric deployed in national security policies that works to legitimate future political action. Also interested in government documents, Christopher Eisenhart analyses governmental accounts of the FBI’s involvement in the Waco disaster, showing how they controlled the public response to the event and to the government’s involvement in it.

In “A Legal Discourse of Transparency,” Jennifer Andrus interrogates the legal presumption of linguistic transparency to show that it negatively affects the victims of intimate violence by appropriating their speech for legal purposes while the issue of health care is taken up in Ellen Barton and Susan Eggly’s study of informed consent, which argues that in discussions about clinical trials the line between care and research is blurred. The systematic nature of rhetoric keeps analysis close to the linguistic data, looking for patterns at the stylistic, verbal, syntactic, and figurative structure and considering the ways in which such discursive structures circulate or articulate with ideology. The present study takes on a critical examination of the rhetorical strategies adopted by Nigerian security agents tackling the Boko Haram insurgency and the various reactions of the insurgents in countering the messages by the government propaganda machinery. The aim is to draw a line between the truth, the near truth and the lies that permeate both sides of the divide.

Methodology

The study explores an aspect of language use, media discourse focusing on language used in reporting insurgent activities in Nigeria. It uses the theoretical framework of Counter-propaganda rhetoric (CP-R) to explicate the data generated. This approach goes beyond understanding and explanation to developing critiques which can contribute positively to social change. The approach explicates the ‘objectivity’ claimed by positivist views of linguistic analysis and it is in accordance with qualitative kind of study, which ‘...is fundamentally interpretive, meaning that the study outcome is ultimately the product of the researcher’s interpretation of the data.

Sampling Technique

In this study, the choice of sampling is purposive which enables us pick the data based on our judgment on their relevance to the study. This method is based on our conviction that the data so chosen meets the need of the study. This is because in studying conflict we must assume that it is possible to sample not only people, but situations that vary in conflict (magnitude or type) as well and that the sample of conflict is reasonable in terms of its range on a variety of variables. In this study, we adopted the purposive method of sampling. Print media reports were generated through the process of purposive sampling technique. Basically, the study was conducted by means of a sample on the basis of which generalisations applicable to the population from which the sample was obtained were reached. In our sampling methodology we made use of the universe sampling technique and narrow down to purposive sampling.

Universe Sampling Frame

The universe sampling frame in this study is the sum total of all sampling units or as Bailey (1982:85) observes ‘is the sum total of all the units of analyses. Seltiz and Jehoda (1965:509) see the process as ‘the aggregate of all cases that conform to some designated set of specifications. Based on the above postulations, the population in this study is the militia groups in Nigeria with emphasis on the Boko Haram sect within the period 2010-2014.

Sources of Data

This study made use of the purposive method of data collection. Data gathering was based on the knowledge of the population while the purpose of the study and the sampling model adopted here ensured that the population fit the specific purpose. Through this method we generated data from two newspapers published in Nigeria with topical issues on the claim of having killed the leader of the Boko Haram sect. These newspapers are: *The Guardian Newspaper* and *The Sun Newspaper*. The data were gathered from, the research section of the University of Lagos library (Gandhi Library), the websites of the media houses under study well as articles from the library. Data gathering covered the period 2010 to 2014.

Method of Data Analysis

Through the application of Counter Propaganda Rhetoric (CP-R) we described, interpreted and analysed the data for this study. The analysis was done based on: language of the reports in relation to their ideological stance by focusing on the sentiments expressed in the reports in relation to the rationale that informs such sentiments, and the conflict communication and strategies of the reports and militia’s activities in relation to their signification.

Textual Analysis

On several occasions, the Nigerian government has tried to negotiate the insurgency war by calling on the sect members to lay down their arms and sue for peace while the Boko Haram on the other hand has consistently insisted that there is no room for negotiation with “infidels” thus leading to persistent fighting between the sect and the federal government. Based on this situation, the leader of the sect Abubakar Shekau had been speculated to have been terminated by security agents while the sect leader resurfaces at will to deride the claims of the security operatives and prove his existence. The decision to keep mum on the issue of whether the leader of the sect was killed in an operation is “speculative” and is capable of raising tension among the militants. The contradiction in the text below is whether the “*reportedly killed*” Shekau is still the one being suspected of “hiding around Gwoza hill near Cameroun in the video being watched that is marked “*confidential*” as evidenced in the text below:

Boko Haram’s Shekau Likely Dead JTF Says: Military authorities in Borno State yesterday said *Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau might have died from gunshot injuries sustained on June 30*. The Joint Task Force said in a statement in Maiduguri that “*Shekau might have died between 25 July to 3 August*” at Amitchide in Cameroon while nursing fatal wounds inflicted on him when troops attacked the Sambisa Forest. *The JTF revelation came just a week after a video posted on the internet showed a man claiming to be Shekau speaking on various events that happened days after the dates of his supposed death.* **EXTRACT A1**

In the video released on August 12, the man spoke on the Eid el-Fitr celebration of August 8, as well as on the attacks launched by sect members in Gamboru-Ngala, Bama and Mallam Fatori in the first week of the month. *The 32-minute video showed the man claiming to be Shekau alone, wearing a green caftan, a cap and a turban. He had an AK-47 resting on his chest while holding a paper in his left hand and a chewing stick in his right hand.* His face and pattern of speech in Hausa and Arabic languages matched the previous videos released by Shekau, our correspondent said. But JTF yesterday said the *video must have been dramatized by an impostor as intelligence reports show Shekau had died days or weeks earlier.* **EXTRACT A2.**

The above expressions are both semantically and syntactically similar, featuring the usual information for initial lead sentences. In both cases, the purported

Shekau is sentence topic, in the Extract A1 sentence subject of a passive clause, and in *Extract A2 subject* of the intransitive verb. The cause in the *Extract A1* sentence is described in an embedded temporal clause, whereas the *Extract A2* sentence uses a complex adverbial phrase. In both cases noun phrases are qualified with several embedded clauses: the relative clauses appended to Shekau in the second sentence of the *extract*, A1 and the relative clauses in *Extract A2* that specify the result of the alleged killing. In both cases the information is embedded in declaratives, a passive "was said" in the *two extracts* and a postponed declarative main clause, "our reporter said". Both statements are typical for news discourse strategies, and comprise a routine strategy to embed new information within specified or unspecified information about sources or declarations.

Final position main clauses used as declaratives are especially typical in news discourses and emphasize the background nature of the source and the foregrounded nature of the contents of the declaration. Thus, the general pattern is a complex sentence, in which a declarative is often the formal main clause, but the main news actor remains subject and topic of the sentence as a whole, such that the major actors are modified by one or more relative clauses or adverbials. Note that even simple sentences may be rather long and complicated, due to the use of nominalizations and adverbials to give a detailed analysis of the scenario as purportedly found in the news report. This is based on speculations more or less referred to as "intelligence reports as portrayed in *Extract A3* below:

"Intelligence report available to the Joint Task Force Operation RESTORE ORDER (ORO) revealed that Abubakar Shekau, the most dreaded and wanted Boko Haram terrorists' leader may have died," JTF spokesman Lt-Col. Sagir Musa said in the statement. "He died of gunshot wound received in an encounter with the JTF troops in one of their camps at Sambisa Forest on 30 June 2013. Shekau was mortally wounded in the encounter and was sneaked into Amitchide, a border community in Cameroun for treatment which he never recovered. "It is greatly believed that Shekau might have died between 25 July to 3 August, 2013. "He was reported to have masterminded the kidnap of the seven French citizens and that of the elder statesman Alhaji (Dr) Shettima Ali Monguno in addition to many murders of Islamic clerics in Northern Nigeria. He was also responsible for bombings of many places of worship and public buildings including Police and United Nations headquarters in Abuja. **EXTRACT A3.**

The very first sentence in extract A3 above betrayed the news content to be solely reliant on hearsay to presume the “death” of the most dreaded and wanted Boko Haram terrorist leader” thereby not being in a better position to substantiate the killing of a man who has been described as “a dreaded terrorist” by both the media and the populace---government inclusive. The reporter in this article relies on quotations to prove his point but fails to substantiate the claims of the news report. This is because of the fact that if the leader “died” of gun wounds sustained from the operatives in a battle, why then the use of a conditional statement “*It is greatly believed that Shekau might have died between 25 July to 3 August, 2013*” in the subsequent line thus giving an indication that the news item itself is speculative and a rhetorical strategy built on the framework of propaganda that lacks a sense of direction.

This usage is incoherent with the more general lexical framework of violence terms associated with a terrorist group action and expresses prominent underlying prejudices about the Boko Haram sect as Ruhrmann & Kollmer (1984:69) show that negative evaluations in the press are usually framed in terms of criticism, deviation of the norm, and stereotypes. The deviation leads the reporter to move from the core of the news to the activities carried out by the “late Shekau” thus further compounding the whole issue of not presenting a clear picture of the unfolding scenario. The woes of the security agents and those of the federal government were further compounded when after the above news extract subsequent news report contradicted government’s position:

SHEKAU APPEARS IN NEW VIDEO: We’re studying clip – Army: The leader of the Jama’atu Ahlis Sunnah Lid Da’awati Wal Jihad, also known as Boko Haram, *has resurfaced and claimed responsibility for recent attacks that left more than a hundred people dead in Borno State.* Abubakar Shekau, who military authorities said in August might have been killed, released a video yesterday in which he said: “*The world should know that by the grace of Allah I am alive and will only die at the appointed time.*” The video was sent out through intermediaries who had previously passed on similar messages by the sect leader. “Those underrating my capacity should have a re-think because the war we are waging will consume all of you,” Shekau said in his usual boastful style.
EXTRACT A4.

The headline above is manipulative, printed in bold letters and topicalized to portray the unrealistic events that had followed the “alleged” dead of Shekau who is said to have appeared in a new video. The reaction of the security agents which

is captured in form of news lead is also speculative as we are told they “are studying it” (the video) thus raising more suspicion about the military’s claims of Shekau’s elimination. Shekau not only reappeared on different occasions, but claimed responsibility for atrocities that obviously took place after his alleged demise:

...has resurfaced and claimed responsibility for recent attacks that left more than a hundred people dead in Borno State”. The use of a categorical statement “The world should know that by the grace of Allah I am alive and will only die at the appointed time” is followed by a threat to national security “Those underrating my capacity should have a re-think because the war we are waging will consume all of you”

The above rhetorical propagandist approach places the nation on a red alert. According to the sect leader, the announcement of his possible death by the Joint Task Force in Maiduguri is misleading and might have been aimed at provoking him to speak. He however chose to bid his time before responding:

“I deliberately kept quiet all this while, laughing at Nigerian authorities who misled the world that I am dead. I wish they would stop bothering themselves because I cannot be stopped,” he said. In the video, Shekau is seen dressed in military fatigue, sitting on a rug and surrounded by lieutenants who wielded sophisticated guns. He spoke in Arabic, Hausa, English as well as his native Kanuri language. Shekau taunted President Goodluck Jonathan and his counterparts, U.S.’s Barack Obama and France’s Francois Hollande, saying they would be sad to hear he is still alive. “The claim that I was injured in Sambisa and taken to Amichide in Cameroon for treatment is not true. By Allah, I was never in Cameroon. *Only Allah knows my whereabouts because I only give orders and I will never tell anyone where I am,*” he said. **EXTRACT A5.**

The opening sentence in the above extract is paradoxical where someone who “kept quiet” is at the same time “laughing at the Nigerian government”. It is also a way of dramatizing the “incompetence” of a security outfit which relies on mere information to release press statements on the alleged dead of a known terrorist. He also expresses his unrestrained abilities to manoeuvre his way out of difficult situations even at difficult times thereby daring the authorities to confront him by any means.

The reporter’s statement and personal opinion that “Shekau taunted world leaders including the US president, the French president and the Nigerian President” is an

attempt to engage and stir the emotions of leaders to rise and crush the rampaging militant sect. Shekau rather sees himself as a man who commands and not he who follows as he asserts: *“Only Allah knows my whereabouts because I only give orders and I will never tell anyone where I am,”* thus aligning himself with the Almighty Allah who *“is in support of his actions”*. Still relying on the machinery of propaganda, the nation’s dailies captured a more shocking headline:

Boko Haram resurrects, declares total Jihad: The Islamic sect Boko Haram has declared total Jihad in Nigeria, threatening to Islamise the entire nation by force of war. In a statement dated August 9, 2009 and made available to Vanguard, the sect whose activities led to the loss of hundreds of lives in northern Nigeria recently declared that their leader Yusuf, who was killed in controversial circumstances during the crisis, lives forever. In what looked like a declaration of war on the rest of the nation, the Boko Haram sect said it will unleash terror in Southern Nigeria this August, beginning with the bombing of Lagos, Ibadan, and Enugu to make good its words. **EXTRACT A6.**

From “appear” to “resurrect” to “declare war” the Boko Haram becomes a living entity through speculative tendencies as created in the media. A critical examination of Extract A6 above reveals the fact that the headline is an embodiment of personification. This is partially explained by the fact that, overall, the most frequent target domain in the news item is the sect group. In addition, given that the newspaper report is about speculations on the sect leader’s death, the need to persuade through discourse and to rouse the nationalistic sentiments of the people becomes probably greater than any other interest. Almost half of the personifications describing the sect in this extract seem to support the argument that in the struggle to overcome the stronghold of the Boko Haram sect the security agencies and the media use metaphors in their attempt to construct a discourse of national security. The conceptual metaphor Sectarian Crises as a RESURRECTING PERSON becomes the most common personification that the media relies on to describe the security situation at the time. Examples of this metaphor include such statements as: “has declared total Jihad in Nigeria” “threatening to Islamise the entire nation” “by force of war” “their leader Yusuf, who was killed in controversial circumstances during the crisis, lives forever” “it will unleash terror in Southern Nigeria” “beginning with the bombing of Lagos, Ibadan, and Enugu to make good its words”. This metaphor sees the Sectarian Crises as a RESURRECTING PERSON implying a new beginning. This interpretation draws from the idea that the Boko Haram via Shekau was “dead” and “finished,” but now that the same Shekau has

“reappeared” the group has been reborn consistent with the national security discourse of propaganda and speculations.

Conclusion

It is a known fact that language is the means of communication and that there is the need for language users to communicate at all times especially during crises situations. Language users account for the semantic imports of their utterances for a clearer understanding. It is on this note that this study makes use of the media reports of the Boko Haram crises to unravel the hidden meanings imbedded in them. This study has revealed that the chosen data are embedded in and constrained by cognition, social principles of communication and the context that surrounds them through the use of rhetoric. This study has shown that language users are careful users of words that are capable of performing many actions with few utterances. This study has investigated the counter propaganda rhetorical strategies in the media reports of the Nigerian security reactions to Boko Haram insurgency and the insurgents’ reaction to the security handling of the crises. The study discovered that propaganda reigns supreme in the struggle to subdue the insurgents while the insurgents remain dogged in ensuring that they outsmart the Nigerian security outfit. The study through the use of rhetoric reveals that the various agencies adopt certain strategies that are aimed at keeping the masses at peace whereas the real issues remain unresolved. Although the rhetoric of the security operatives tends to frustrate the insurgents; the insurgents’ style of reaction rattles the security operatives and keeps them in perpetual search for the much illusive leader of the sect. The study paid attention to some of the ways in which the major actors in the crises use language to advance their ideological concerns in the course of securing peace in a society that is ravaged by violence.

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