

## Multimodality of Tact Enactment to Stay Safe during the COVID-19 Pandemic-ridden Period

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examines drama of reality orchestrated on the heels of the outbreak of a pandemic known as CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19). The disease which erupted in China around December 2019 started killing in hundreds and thousands without any tested drug in sight to quell its furnace except precautionary measures like ‘social distancing’ ‘Hand wash with sanitizer’, ‘wearing of face mask’ and the like. Cases were purposely selected through the affordances of newspapers, recorded newscast, social media applications like WhatsApp, and You-tube. Multimodality as well as Tact Maxim was considered an apt theoretical framework to capture selected instances in the Nigerian situation owing to the exploitation of semiotics and other linguistic nuances involved in the data collection. The critical analysis of the drama revealed that the world had never been the same, and that in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new world-order was imminent ; just like it had happened after the historic 1720 , 1820, and 1920 occurrences. The pandemic period was therefore a show of insincerity in governance, ingratitude, display of abject poverty necessitating renewed dedication to salient essentials of life. The religious circle was not spared as adherents became wiser when the hitherto mammoth crowd as a show of affluence and generosity became replaced with defined gathering, The paper concluded on a note that it is time non-realistic and non-productive policies were jettisoned in order to forestall future re-occurrences of the pandemic. These, in the Nigerian situation should take the form of reducing the recurrent expenditure of the legislature, avoiding mono-economy and re-diversifying, redefining the essential and non-essential services, intensifying e-learning/banking, etc, curbing the excesses of law-enforcement agents and civilians alike. These would go a long way to better the lot of the masses, provided sincerity, transparency and accountability become the watch-word of governance.*

**KEYWORDS:** coronavirus pandemic, Nigeria, reality, insincerity, laxity, staying safe

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## INTRODUCTION

When an ill wind blows, it spares no one in its wave. The extent of damage felt in its course or even left in the aftermath varies from one individual, community or nation to another. In the case of a pandemic like Coronavirus (COVID-19), a country like Nigeria could not afford to be a theatre of the absurd, given her peculiar pedigree as a nation with leadership problem, a nation where majority of its citizens live below the poverty line in spite of the abundant natural resources. With stories of underdevelopment characterizing nearly every sphere of life, the leadership cannot but be worried with total absence of preparedness for emergencies.

The global pandemic – COVID-19- , which broke out in China, spreading to other European countries like Italy, Korea, Germany and even America was first reported in Nigeria February 27, 2020, which by then had already affected close to three million people globally. The first coronavirus case in sub-Sahara Africa, particularly in Nigeria was on March 18, 2020 (Mawatha, 2020). In the words of Sunday (2020), ‘between 1918 and 1920, a similar pandemic broke out in Spain, known as Spanish Flu (NINI Virus). It was estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world population became infected with the virus. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States alone. High mortality in healthy people, including those in the 20-40 years age group, was a unique feature of the pandemic.

Like the common saying, history repeats itself. 1720 was said to be a year of Plaque, 1820 was noted for Cholera before the 1920 Spanish Flu, translating to the fact that history repeats itself every 100 years. Just as it happened at that time, people at the period of the COVID-19 could not but stay at home, read books, do exercises, rest,...learn new ways of being, meditate, think differently, abandon ignorant ways, mourn the dead, make new choices and dream of new visions in order to chart new ways of living. Within the short period of the latest outbreak, a few articles have highlighted the need to understand the pathogenesis of COVID-19 in order to navigate responses in the uncharted arena. These include the write-ups of Zhou et. Al, Wu and McGoogan, (2020). Gandhi, Lynch and Rio based their study on ‘Mild and Moderate Covid-19 while Berlin, Gulik and Martinez (<http://www.nejm.org/cor...>) studied ‘Severe Covid-19’.

To stem the tide of this kind of pandemic, the usual notice to the public from the people in the corridors of power is ‘...to prevent the spread of....., all schools, public and private, Churches, Mosques, Theatres, Markets and other places of amusement are to be closed until further notice’.

In the Nigerian situation, the instruction from the national or state level was in form of total or partial lockdown, or curfew. With no tested vaccine to protect against the devastating spread of COVID-19, control efforts were limited to self-isolation, quarantine, good personal hygiene, use of disinfectants and limitations to public gatherings, including the mandatory use of face masks. Below is an instance when the law enforcement agents made arrest of people who violated the restriction order at public gathering:



Figure 1. All public gatherings consisting of ten or more are prohibited.

To attest to the danger posed by the pandemic with no healing vaccine in sight, the record shown below calls for concern.



Figure 2. NCDC Update as at 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2020

What is of utmost concern in this write-up was the Nigerian case. With all the hues and cries, with the spectacular input of the Nigerian media about information dissemination concerning the disease, one needs to be bothered about how Nigeria recorded daily highest ever Coronavirus: 196 cases in May, 2020! Could it be as a result of deviance to precautionary measures?

If yes, what could have informed such an attitude from the public? Or was it a confirmation of the view that majority have dangerously low levels of information about the virus and its transmission?

These questions were what ‘the drama of reality’ that played out in the wake of the pandemic attempted to rationalize. To achieve this, selected episodes were purposively sourced, which included an open letter, sermons on radio and social media as well as newspaper captions and jingles.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Tact, ordinarily defined, is the ability to avoid upsetting or offending people by being careful in utterances or deeds. Being tactful, therefore, entails sensitivity and employment of diplomacy in order not to ‘attack’ the feelings of people as such. Analogically, a man dreamed that all his teeth became worn-out. On waking up, he decided to consult a clergy man for the interpretation of his dream. The clergy, having had the narration, said the dreamer would lose all his children, having no child to survive him. With sadness, the dreamer decided to consult another man of God believed to possess the spirituality to ‘see’ beyond ordinary mortals. This other man of God in his interpretation of the dream said, “Members of your family will live long to old age, none of them will die young; however, you yourself are so blessed that you will live extra years, and be the last to leave”. The utterance of the second clergy was fashioned in this way given the fact that the dreamer had initially informed him that he had been to a clergy man before and relayed what the man told him as the meaning of the dream. While the dreamer had some relief with the second man of God, it was not so with the first. Looking at the implication of the two interpretations, there is hardly any difference, the only difference lies in the ‘manner’ of relaying the information contained in the dream. The second clergy man’s delivery of information, given the background knowledge he had about the circumstance that brought the dreamer to him is a demonstration of good manners, technically described as tact. Tact can also be said to be an ally to the principle of positive politeness especially Lakoff’s principle.

Politeness, as a functional linguistic tool implies the most appropriate Speaker-addressee relationship; “if we do not see the relationship between ourselves and the person who addresses us as they do, we will be upset by the strategies they employ, since these strategies imply the nature

of our relationship as they see it (Grundy 2000:147). Politeness principles in the views of some scholars (Lakoff, 1972, 1973, Leech 1983, Brown and Levinson 1987) have been considered to have wide descriptive power as far as language use is concerned.

It should be noted that Lakoff's principle stems from Grice's (1957/1975) Cooperative Principle (C.P) which states that in every communication, there is a cooperative principle guiding the participants which are maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner. In addition to the traditional school of politeness is the postmodern view which centres in the common sense of notion. Scholars like Felen, Mills, Watts and Locher are exponents of the second school of thought. Tact and politeness can be said to meet at a point; the point is that they are 'a system of interactional relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interactions.' Hence, Leech's proposition of Tact Maxim is to minimize expression of beliefs which express or imply cost to other. The maxim is 'others-centered' and it mostly appears expressives and commissives.

The modes used, labeled Excerpts 1-6, included an appreciation letter to a government representative, two (2) sermons from clerics sourced from the social media acknowledging awareness of the pandemic as well as the extent of love the government representatives have for the people they represent, slogans, sourced from the website of Nigeria Centre for Disease and Control; a visual message, jingles and a caption sourced from the Nigeria newspaper, *The Guardian* as well as *The Nation*, all implicating government insincerity. The texts were subjected to discourse analysis below. Translation was included where the text language was indigeneous.

### **Analysis**

The analysis shows how several modes were deployed to demonstrate the reality with respect to the concerns of the government and the people being governed.

#### **Excerpt 1 (Open Letter device)**

Appreciation Letter For Giving 2 Bags of Rice To 2,400 "Houses"  
As Covid.19 Lockdown Palliative

A community has written the Speaker of Ogun State Assembly Taiwo Oluomo, a hilarious appreciation letter for giving 2,400 houses 2 bags of rice.

An open Letter To:

The Attention of

Hon. Taiwo Oluomo

The Hon. Speaker, Ogun State House of Assembly

State Secretariat, Abeokuta.

#### A SINCERE MESSAGE OF APPRECIATION (?)

On Wednesday, 1st April, 2020, the Chairman of Ajumo-se-rere Community Development Council (CDC) of Ifo L.G. summoned the EXCO hierarchy of each of the sixty (60) CDAS to an emergency meeting.

At the meeting, the Chairman, Mr. Anifowose, of the CDC surrounded by this EXCO members showed the gathering the largesse, from you Sir, which of course happened to be ‘two bags of 50kg rice’.

The CDC Chairman urged the gathering to collectively come up with a strategy for sharing of the largesse.

...One suggestion struck the attention of member in attendance,

Having asserted that there are roughly \*2,400 houses\* in the CDC . . . , the members started by humbly appreciating you, “Mr Speaker” for remembering the CDC in this Coronavirus disease pandemic induced trying lockdown times in the country. . . .

However, and according to the contribution of the members, he suggested that we should successfully reach ‘each’ of the 2,400 houses in the CDC if the 2 bags of rice is shared using the “tin of Rob”.

The committee resolved that using a tin of milk for the sharing may leave many houses untouched.

The Speaker was however advised to reach out to them if he had a better approach to sharing the largesse.

They hope to meet the Speaker again come 2023 election campaign.

The summoning of the meeting by the EXCO is an avenue for optional decision taking in somewhat difficult situation which the EXCO find themselves regarding the distribution of the so-called largesse. ...the phrase ‘...from you Sir’ is an indication of distancing, indicating the position of power which the Honourable Speaker occupies. Other linguistic items buttressing the

power issue include ‘humbly...’, ‘Mr...’. the essence of such choices of language is in tandem with bivalent politeness, a means of honorification whereby linguistic properties are deployed to show respect to Mr, Speaker. This is based on “evaluation” of vertical and horizontal distance (‘power and distance’) between the S (the EXCO) and the H (Mr. Speaker), what Kasper (1990) calls politeness as ‘social indexing’. The decision to reach each of the 2400 houses is suggestive of fairness and equity which essential ingredients of responsible democracy; hence the inevitable choice of using ‘a tin of Rob’ instead of ‘a tin of milk’. The clause advising the Speaker to reach out to the EXCO in case he had a better sharing formula is another window of option. The last submission of the EXCO IN THE letter where they “... hope to meet the Speaker again come 2023 election campaign” demonstrates deployment of tact maxim, which is meant to suppress expression which may be costly to the Speaker.

### **Excerpt 2 (Sermon (1) on social media )**

Sanu Sheu, on Lagelu FM (96.7) on a programme anchored by Kola Olootu, on May 20, 2020 opined that coronavirus was a calamity, the hint of which is in the holy Qur’an, and that it was not a show of God’s anger like the Tsunami. He went ahead to give meaning to each of the letters in the name, CORONAVIRUS: C-Creative, O-Organized, R-Religion, O-Obedient, N-Nice, A-Amazing, V-Virtuous, I-Intelligent, R-Reasonable, U-Up and down, S-Smart. He said, reasoning along lexical items, every citizen was involved in the outbreak. The tact embedded in the sermon, particularly the name – CORONAVIRUS turned to an acronym is that there is no occurrence without its prospects and constraints. The full meaning implied in the definition comprises both the good and the bad. Consider ‘creative’, ‘religion’, ‘up and down’ as lexical items! Being creative suggests that whenever the unexpected occurs, man must be creative enough to find solution. This was implied in the Madagascar solution which was handed over to President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria as a way of curbing the pandemic. Find solution equally entails the use of ‘intelligence’. ‘religion’ is suggestive of the fact that whatever is the lot of any individual or group must be accepted in good faith. ‘Ups and down’, of course, is undoubtedly the trade mark of any calamity let alone a pandemic.

### **Excerpt 3 (Sermon (2) on social media)**

Anonymity and disguise combine to implicate the use of tact in another sermon that became virile in the social media at the period of the pandemic. This was a situation when only part of the hand holding a substance like half-a-congo of rice was visible. The hand shown was a demonstration of the ‘largesse’ donated to every household by a given government functionary. The voice behind the scene was that of a muslim cleric appreciating the donor tactfully by saying,

‘If this gigantic content of rice could be given to every household, God should, in his infinite mercy, pay back the donor in like manner, because, it could be seen that hardly could any household finish the content for a long time to come’.

The ‘appreciative prayer’ of the cleric was obviously ironic and a demonstration of tact to show to the public that most of the representatives in government are ingrates. They were people getting millions of naira on monthly basis who find it difficult to donate generously especially in a period when most people already impoverished through bad governance find it difficult to get three square meals per day. Little wonder Marinho (2020) opines that:

The biggest health challenge to the world is not Covid19. It is the carelessness towards the poor who the politicians and economic leaders deliberately ignore. Politicians out of maliciousness, greed or ignorance systematically denied life-sustaining facilities like adequate sanitation, health, housing, transport to the less-than wealthy citizens. (the nation, may 13, 2020, back page)

Many other sermons, preaching and sensitization which did not have any religious alignment were heard at this period which questioned the rationale behind noise making in the name of vigil, false claim to power of healing any human calamity, ability to foretell the future among other strategies meant to hoodwink the gullible in the society.

#### **Excerpt 4 (Slogans)**

In the Nigerian situation, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) ESTABLISHED in 2011 had the mandate to respond to the challenges of public health emergencies and to enhance Nigeria’s preparedness and response to epidemics through prevention, detection and control of communicable and non-communicable diseases. The reality was that most of the clusters where index cases were identified were in the urban centres. In the light of this, the Nigeria Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Lagos and Ogun states happened to be areas where imposition of self-isolation was pronounced from March 17,2020. Initial problem showed in the fact that not many people obeyed the need to wear face mask or wash hands at public places. Inconsistency characterized the ‘Operation lockdown’. That imposed by the Fed. Government was different from the state governments. Lockdown without palliatives created some reactions. Pessimism surrounding the authenticity of the outbreak in Nigeria led to government use of ‘minors’ as well as ‘Very Important Persons’ to attest to the fact through jingles in the media, for example: the NCDC engages A monarch, the onibara of ibara, Abeokuta as a campaign strategy to authenticate



the outbreak of the pandemic. The channel used was the Ogun State Broadcasting Corporation (OGBC). Here is the jingle:

Emi Oba Adedamola Adedapo, the Onibara of Ibara n fi asiko yi  
so fun eyin eniyan pe ajakale arun\_ covid-19 wa lode.  
E je ki a ma lo ibomu, ki a si maa fowo wa lore koore, kia si  
sa fun akojopo ni awujo; arun ko ni fi ile wa se ibugbe o.

Translation:

I, the Onibara of Ibara, His Royal Majesty, King Adedamola Adedapo  
uses this medium to say that the pandemic, COVID -19 IS REAL.  
Let us adhere to the precautionary measures of using nose cover,  
washing of our hands with sanitizer from time to time and  
let us avoid gathering in large number. Affliction will not be our portion.

A similar occurrence applied to the Ooni of Ife, who used to appear on some television channels preaching the gospel of belief in the authenticity of the pandemic. The linguistic device of code-switching and code-missing is a veritable tool in jingles of this nature apart from translation of messages from English to other languages of Nigeria's ethnic diversity.

### **Excerpt 5 (Visual Message)**

Reactions from the poverty-ridden people in the face of the lockdown included stealing by trick whereby youths organized themselves in groups in the daylight, going from house to house, brandishing dangerous objects and carting away food items from houses on target. Some did not hesitate to waylay vehicles carrying food items, either to extort money or remove some of the food items from the trucks. Law enforcement agents who created roadblocks on the highways were not spared in this menace. The outcry of the masses bearing the brunt of hunger mostly got to a point where food being cooked on fire was no more safe; imaging the scenario below:



Figure 3. A chained cooking pot on fire

The chained cooking pot on fire seen outside the house tells much about a number of households in Nigeria whereby the most people live in one room building with no other accessories attached. Many families who could not even afford the cooking stove resort to the use of the traditional firewood for cooking. When stealing of food being cooked on stove became rampant, rather than raising an alarm of stolen food, the chain remains a tactics of safeguarding food being cooked on fire. The scenario, no doubt, is a testimony to the level of impoverishment in Nigeria.

### **Government Insincerity**

Can the Nigerian public be blamed about government insincerity when there were even conflicting pieces of information from Federal government functionaries on the 15-man team of Chinese medical experts who flew into Nigeria on April 8, 2020.

For instance, Minister of Interior Ogbeni Rauf Aregbesola disclosed that the team came on a 30-day visa issued in Beijing to help fix the Idu Isolation centre and the Thisday Dome. (*The Guardian*, Wed. May 20, 2020 Front page)

The Minister of Health, Prof. Osagie Ehanie had claimed that the team was coming to assist the government in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. At another time, he declined to give information about the whereabouts of the same team. Statistics as raised by the House of Representative said, 'Before the coming of the Chinese medical team, COVID-19 data stood at

254 confirmed cases, with 44 successfully treated by the Nigerian medical personnel, with only six deaths who reportedly had other underlining ailments. As at May 20, 2020, the data stood at about 5,959 cases, with 182 deaths, implying that the contribution of the supposedly Chinese medical team and their supposed medical expertise was yet to be felt. The House of Representatives resolved at the May 19, 2020 plenary, demanding a “full status report” on the expatriates is a demonstration of tact. Imagine the headline:

### Excerpt 6 (Caption)

**“Reps tackle Health Minister over explanation on Chinese doctors”p.10**

([www.guardian.ng](http://www.guardian.ng))

Though the caption above has a semblance of a face threat, the narrative is face-saving, minimizing the threat and wasteful moves in governance.

Sylvester Odion Akaine contributed to the debate about whether COVID-19 is natural genetically modified with his objective of analyzing and helping to find solution to the common affliction. Scientists differ on the origin of the COVID-19, but no disagreement on China as the point of dispersal. Two animal sources were noted in the debate: pangolin and bat.



Figure 4. Demonstration of Distancing while Receiving Gift

(*THE NATION*, April 30, 2020. p. 10)

## CONCLUSION

The use of tact, which is in tandem with the principles of politeness phenomenon in different scenarios as dictated by the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19 Pandemic has been examined and analysed in the Nigerian situation. The study concludes that tact maxim has been used to expose ingratitude on the part of political functionaries who live in luxury and are fond of giving paltry donations to the people who gave them their mandate. Tact also has implication for lack of trust in governance- disbelief to the authenticity of information as well as the daily increase in outbreak of the pandemic. This necessitated the tactics of 'use of VIPs/minors to authenticate information'. Exposure of exposure of religious gullibility and fake predictions was part of the drama of reality orchestrated during the period. Through the semiotics of visuals, poverty in the land was implicated with stealing of food items on fire with the demonstration of the new normal of social distancing. The Madagascar solution to the pandemic presented to Nigeria, which was alluded to, tactically implicates benevolence, while indirectly, it is a sign of laxity on the part of Nigerian academia in terms of quick response to national challenges. The various devices employed through the letter medium, visuals, translation, code-switching/code-mixing via the different media platforms amount to multimodality in linguistic parlance.

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