

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Placards and Visual Symbols in the 2024 End Bad Governance Protests in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This study examines how Nigerian protesters used both words and images during the 2024 End Bad Governance protests to speak out against poor leadership and hardship. It focuses on the placards (signs) they carried and the symbols they used to send powerful messages. The research used Multimodal Discourse Analysis to study how words and visuals work together to create meaning. Pictures and news reports from the protests were used as the main data. The study is based on the Social Semiotics theory by Kress and van Leeuwen, which helps explain how different signs (words and images) carry meaning. The findings show that many of the messages on placards expressed pain, hunger, and the need for change. Protesters often used English, Nigerian Pidgin, and local languages to reach a wide audience. These messages helped bring people together and push for action. The study shows that combining language and visuals is a powerful way to protest. It suggests that schools and civic groups should teach young people how to use words and images to speak up for their rights.

Keywords: Protests, Placards, Symbols, Multimodal Discourse, Social Semiotics

Introduction

In recent years, Nigeria has seen an increasing number of protests, particularly led by young people, who are dissatisfied with the country's poor governance and economic struggles. The End Bad Governance protests of 2024 followed a similar pattern to the #EndSARS protests in 2020, where young Nigerians used protests to demand better governance and solutions to economic hardship. Protesters used placards, slogans, and visuals as powerful tools to communicate their messages. These placards not only carried textual messages but also incorporated visual symbols such as images, colors, and gestures that played a significant role in expressing emotions and rallying people around shared grievances (Oluwole, 2020; Taiwo & Alabi, 2021).

Many Nigerians took to the streets in 2024 to protest against rising living costs and poor governance. They carried signs with messages like "Enough is Enough" and "Hunger is Killing Us" to express their frustration. These signs were written in everyday language and designed to grab attention. The main issues they highlighted were economic hardship, the removal of fuel subsidies, and a lack of basic services like electricity. Although the protests started peacefully, some turned violent, especially in the northern parts

of the country. Despite this, the demonstrations brought national and international attention to the problems Nigerians are facing, pushing the government to acknowledge these concerns and consider taking action.

A key feature of these protests is the multimodal nature of communication, where verbal language and visual symbols combine to create stronger and more impactful messages. The use of Nigerian Pidgin, English, and indigenous languages on placards ensured that the messages were accessible to a wider audience. In addition, colors like red and black were used strategically to evoke feelings of anger and mourning (Akintoye, 2022). The incorporation of these multimodal elements can be understood through the lens of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), which studies how different modes of communication—such as language, images, and symbols—work together to create meaning (Jewitt, 2017).

Research Questions

- (i) How did protesters express their grievances through placard messages?
- (ii) To what extent did the placard messages reflect the protesters' demands?
- (iii) What themes emerged from the placard messages?

Research Objectives

- (i) To find out how protesters express their grievances through placard messages.
- (ii) To find out the extent to which the placard messages reflect the protesters' demands.
- (iii) To find out the themes that emerged from the placard messages.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach to analyze protest placards from the 2024 End Bad Governance protests. Data were collected through photographs of the placards shared on social media and taken during the protests and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) of the words and images on the placards was adopted to understand how they work together. Thematic Analysis was equally done to help identify the main themes explicated in the placards.

Significance of the Study

The findings will influence how activists and policymakers view the role of placards in social movements. It will also help to understand protest communication as it will help us understand how protest placards express political messages. The study will add to the research on multimodal communication thereby showing how words and images combine to convey powerful messages. It will help in youth activism as it will provide insights into how young people use protests to challenge the government and demand change.

Conceptual Framework

Protest Discourse

Protest Discourse refers to the language and communicative strategies used during social movements to express dissent, critique authority, and demand political or social change. Protest discourse includes not only verbal communication (such as slogans and speeches) but also the visual elements used to support and enhance the message, such as symbols, placards, and posters. Tilly (2004) defines protests as “public displays of grievances,” which often aim to alter political, social, or economic systems. In his view, protests serve not only as platforms for the expression of dissatisfaction but also as mechanisms for social change.

According to Fairclough (2001), social movements highlight how language serves as a tool for resistance, where protesters challenge dominant ideologies and offer alternatives. The slogans and language on protest placards, as Van Dijk (1993) emphasizes, represent discursive acts of resistance aimed at changing public opinion and influencing political decisions.

Protests like the End Bad Governance movement are a form of public discourse where protesters use both speech acts (such as demands for accountability) and symbolic acts (such as visual representation of anger and solidarity) to challenge governmental actions and injustices. Lemke (2005) argues that the way protesters use both language and images is critical in shaping the narrative of protest and building public support for social change.

Protest placards, in particular, are often designed to attract attention and provoke reaction. According to Tufte (2001), protest placards work by simplifying complex issues into short, memorable phrases, making them more effective in conveying political messages. He emphasizes that the visual component (such as bold fonts or striking images) serves as a tool for amplifying the message. Furthermore, Gitlin (1980) explains that protests use symbolic representations to construct collective identities and foster a sense of unity among participants. For example, the use of red, as seen in various protests, often signifies urgency or revolution, while images of fists can represent resistance and solidarity.

The End Bad Governance movement in Nigeria has seen the widespread use of placards featuring slogans like “End Corruption” and images of public figures with exaggerated expressions of anger or frustration. This aligns with Baker’s (2017) argument that the choice of visual elements on protest placards is designed to evoke emotion and create a shared sense of urgency and solidarity among the protesters.

Youth Activism and the Role of Multimodal Communication

Youth activism refers to the participation of young people in social and political movements to address perceived injustices, promote social change, and engage in acts of resistance against oppressive systems. Young people often lead social movements, especially those that involve direct action and protest, as they seek to challenge political authorities and fight for justice. According to Bennett (2008), youth activism

today is increasingly digital and multimodal, using both online platforms and physical demonstrations to make their voices heard.

Youth-led protests have become significant in recent years, especially in developing nations where the younger population is both a large demographic and an active political participant. Youth activism in Nigeria, especially in the context of the #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance protests, reflects the younger generation's dissatisfaction with governmental corruption and systemic failure. According to Mohammad et al. (2020), young people are increasingly using digital platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram to mobilize and share protest messages.

The combination of social media activism and traditional protest symbols like placards is an example of multimodal communication in action. Baker (2017) highlights that young activists often leverage both visual media and written messages to create a hybrid form of protest that can capture attention both online and offline. These online-offline strategies, including the use of placards, play a significant role in shaping both local and global narratives around political issues.

Furthermore, Friedman (2018) emphasizes the role of youth culture in protest movements. She explains that young people often create protest messages using familiar pop culture references, humor, and visual memes, which are highly relatable to their peers. This trend is visible in the #EndBadGovernance protests, where placards and social media posts are filled with memes, slang, and graphics that resonate with a younger audience.

In this study, protest placards are analyzed as part of the protest discourse, with an emphasis on the language of protest used by young Nigerians to express their frustration with poor governance, corruption, and economic hardship. As Odebunmi and Ayoola (2020) argue, the simple language of protest placards, often using Nigerian Pidgin or slang, communicates dissent in ways that are accessible to a wide range of audiences.

Empirical Studies

Kanu, C. & Chukwueloka, C. (2024) 'in their study titled: A Multimodal Analysis of Social Media Texts and Placards during the #EndSARS Protest in Nigeria was aimed to understand how visual elements and language on placards and social media posts influenced public perception during the 2020 #EndSARS protests. Using qualitative analysis, the researchers examined selected placards and social media texts, focusing on their visual and linguistic features. The study revealed that protesters deliberately used strong visuals and aggressive language on placards and social media to convey powerful messages, effectively engaging the audience and pressuring decision-makers.

Makinde, et. al (2024) studied 'Linguistic Appeals in Political Discourse: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of 2023 Presidential Election Billboards and Posters in Nigeria.' The research investigated how political candidates used language and visuals in campaign materials to appeal to voters. The study employed a qualitative design, analyzing campaign posters and billboards using Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal framework. The findings revealed that candidates effectively combined language, visuals,

slogans, and colors to convey nuanced political messages, influencing public perception and election outcomes.

Omole, D. M (2024) studied 'A Multimodal Study of Campaign Posters of the Labour Party's Presidential Candidate in 2023 General Elections in Nigeria.' The study focused on how the Labour Party's presidential candidate used campaign posters to express political identity and ideology. Using social semiotic theory, the researcher analyzed six campaign posters sourced from Facebook and WhatsApp. The study concluded that the candidate effectively disseminated information and projected political ideology through visual and linguistic elements in the posters, influencing voters' decisions.

Bamgbose, Ganiu & Alugbin, Matthew (2022) researched on 'Ideological Constructs in Placards on the #EndSARS Protest in Nigeria.' The research explored how language on protest placards reflected the ideologies and grievances of Nigerian youths during the #EndSARS protests. The study analyzed eight placards collected from Twitter, employing #Halliday's transitivity system and van Dijk's ideological square. The analysis revealed that the placards depicted themes of government brutality, youth self-vindication, and challenges to social norms, using specific linguistic processes to convey these messages.

Ayuwo, Jones, (2022) studied A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Some Newspapers Campaign Advertisements for Nigeria's 2019 Elections and Their Appeal Strategies. The study examined how political campaign advertisements in newspapers used multimodal resources to appeal to voters during the 2019 elections. The researcher analyzed six advertisements from national dailies, focusing on their communicative elements and appeal strategies. The study found that the advertisements employed various rhetorical appeals, such as performance, endorsement, and freedom, effectively conveying significant political messages through multimodal means.

Summary

These empirical studies collectively demonstrate the effectiveness of combining visual and linguistic elements to convey powerful messages in political and protest contexts. They highlight how multimodal discourse -through placards, social media, and campaign materials- can influence public perception, mobilize support, and challenge existing power structures. The current study on the 2024 End Bad Governance protests builds upon this foundation by specifically focusing on the multimodal elements of protest placards and visual symbols used by Nigerian youths.

Data Analysis

Research Question 1: How did protesters express their grievances through placard messages?

The study reveals the use of multimodal strategies such as textual elements which embodies the use of colloquial language, capitalization, and imperative forms to convey urgency and relatability; use of color and layout, where bright colors and bold fonts are employed to attract attention and emphasize key messages. Again, visual elements were such as images and symbols were incorporated in some of the placards to reinforce the message and evoke emotional responses.

Protesters utilized a combination of textual and visual elements to communicate their dissatisfaction with the government's policies and the prevailing economic hardships. The placard messages were crafted to be direct, emotive, and easily comprehensible, ensuring that the grievances were effectively conveyed to a broad audience.

The use of colloquial language and straightforward phrasing made the messages relatable to the general populace. For instance, slogans like "Enough is Enough" and "Cost of Living Don Finish the Living" employed familiar expressions to articulate the protesters' frustrations. The researcher observed the use of visual elements. The placards featured bold, capitalized text to draw attention and emphasize the urgency of the messages. The layout was typically simple, with the central message prominently displayed to ensure immediate recognition.

In addition, bright colors were frequently employed to attract attention and convey the intensity of the sentiments. The colour 'red', is associated with urgency and warning, reinforcing the critical nature of the issues at hand. These elements combined to create placards that were not only visually striking but also linguistically potent, ensuring that the protesters' grievances were communicated effectively.

The repetition of "Enough" in 'Enough is Enough' emphasizes a collective sense of frustration and a demand for change. It therefore has a representational meaning. An Interactive Meaning is equally explicated as the directness of the phrase engages the viewer, urging them to acknowledge the protesters' dissatisfaction. The use of colloquial language ("Don Finish") in 'Cost of Living Don Finish the Living' reflects the everyday struggles of Nigerians, making the message relatable; it has representational meaning. The informal tone embodies interactive meaning as it invites empathy and solidarity from the audience.

The bold, capitalized text draws attention, reinforcing the urgency of the message and the phrase's structure mirror spoken language, enhancing its emotional impact. "Stop Anti-Masses Policies" has compositional meaning and the term "Anti-Masses" positions the government as opposing the general populace, highlighting perceived injustice. The imperative "Stop" calls for immediate action, compelling the viewer to consider the need for policy change and the straightforward layout emphasizes clarity and directness. The phrase "We Are NOT Slaves in Our Country" evokes a strong image of oppression, likening current conditions to enslavement. The declaration is interactive and asserts dignity and rights, challenging the viewer to recognize and respect them. The capitalization of "NOT" intensifies the defiance and strength of the statement.

In "Hardship is Unbearable", the word "Unbearable" conveys the extreme nature of economic difficulties faced by Nigerians and it has interactive meaning in the sense that it seeks to elicit empathy and a sense of urgency from the audience. The simplicity of the message ensures its accessibility and immediate comprehension. The demand for reinstating the fuel subsidy ("Fuel Subsidy Must Be Back") reflects a desire to alleviate economic burdens. The imperative "Must" conveys determination and necessity, urging the viewer to support the cause. The directness of the message highlights its importance and urgency.

The phrase 'We Are Dying of Hunger in Our Own Country' paints a vivid picture of starvation, emphasizing the severity of the situation. The personal pronouns "We" and "Our" foster a collective identity, encouraging solidarity. The emotional weight of the words aims to provoke a strong response from the audience. The phrase 'say no to bad governance' positions "Bad Governance" as the antagonist, calling for rejection. The imperative "Say No" empowers the viewer to take a stand against perceived injustices while the concise wording makes the message easily digestible and memorable. The call to "Restore" in "Restore Fuel Subsidy", suggests a return to a previous, more favorable state. We must reiterate that the directness of the message encourages the viewer to support the reinstatement of the subsidy.

Research Question 2: To what extent did the placard messages reflect the protesters' demands?

The placard messages were a direct reflection of the protesters' core demands, encapsulating their calls for policy reversals and systemic changes. The protesters demanded for economic relief. Slogans like "Fuel Subsidy Must Be Back" and "Hardship Is Unbearable" highlighted the protesters' demand for the reinstatement of fuel subsidies and immediate relief from the escalating cost of living. Messages such as "Stop Anti-Masses Policies" and "Say No to Bad Governance" underscored the call for the government to implement policies that prioritize the welfare of the general populace. Such messages called for good governance in Nigeria.

The phrase "We Are Not Slaves In Our Country" emphasized the protesters' demand for respect and dignity, rejecting any form of oppression or disregard for citizens' rights. These placard messages served as a concise and powerful medium through which the protesters articulated their demands, ensuring that their voices were heard and their concerns acknowledged.

Research Question 3: What themes emerged from the placard messages?

Several recurring themes were evident in the placard messages, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the protesters' grievances.

- (i) **Economic Hardship:** The escalating cost of living and economic challenges were central themes. Placards like "Cost of Living Don Finish the Living" and "Hardship Is Unbearable" highlighted the severe financial strain experienced by the populace.
- (ii) **Policy Reversal:** The demand for the reinstatement of fuel subsidies was a prominent theme. Messages such as "Fuel Subsidy Must Be Back" underscored the desire for the government to revert policies that were perceived as detrimental to the citizens' well-being.
- (iii) **Good Governance:** Calls for improved leadership and accountability were prevalent. Slogans like "Stop Anti-Masses Policies" and "Say No to Bad Governance" reflected the demand for policies that serve the interests of the general populace.
- (iv) **Rights and Dignity:** The assertion of citizens' rights and dignity was a recurring theme. The phrase "We Are Not Slaves in Our Country" encapsulated the demand for respect and fair treatment.

These themes collectively illustrate the protesters' primary concerns and the motivations behind the demonstrations, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the issues at hand. Different types of meaning were explicated in the study: interactive, compositional, and representational. The focus on children (We Can No Longer Feed Our Children) appeals to the viewer's sense of compassion and responsibility. The straightforward structure ensures the message is clear and impactful.

Conclusion

The placard messages from the 2024 End Bad Governance protests in Nigeria were a powerful medium through which protesters expressed their grievances, articulated their demands, and highlighted the central themes of economic hardship, policy reversal, good governance, and rights assertion. Through the application of Multimodal Discourse Analysis, the study revealed the deliberate and strategic construction of these messages, ensuring their effectiveness in communicating the protesters' concerns to a broad audience. The slogans served as powerful tools to convey urgency and foster solidarity among diverse groups. The protests succeeded in drawing national and international attention to Nigeria's socio-economic challenges, compelling the government to acknowledge public grievances and consider dialogue, thereby underscoring the populace's resilience and desire for meaningful change.

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