



THE USE OF MENTAL SPACES IN CONCEPTUALIZATION OF HATE SPEECHES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines language use in the Facebook status updates of subscribers to determine how human perception or mental images are used to conceptualize statements or utterances as hate speeches. The research, thus, studies the Mental Spaces Theory as a cognitive linguistic model suitable for investigating such derogatory utterances among interlocutors in an emotionally charged context of utterance. In the data analysis, the research found out that the conversation that ensued depicts the feelings of disaffection among the interlocutors. This was triggered by provocative and counter-provocative statements they made against one another's in-groups. The result indicates that a fundamental factor that is sensitive in every speech situation is how the addressee/receiver perceives and interprets an utterance made by his fellow speaker, using the base space which is the shared assumptions between them, and the space builders which are the neural motor transmitters in his brain that inform his perception and interpretation of the speaker's utterance. Whether or not his perception holds truth is not shared with the speaker. So, rather than viewing the slur language that ensued as hate speeches, it should be seen as the reflection of the assumptions each interlocutor holds against the other on account of the different ethnic nationalities, religious or political affiliations.

KEYWORDS

Mental Spaces, Conceptualization, Hate Speeches, language.



1. INTRODUCTION

Language, as the most viable means of communication, performs two functions, according to Geoffrey Leech (*Principles of Pragmatics* 1983). The first is transmission of message by a speaker and the second function is the interpretation of the message by the addressee. This study was informed, among others; by this inalienable role language plays in understanding of communication among speakers in relation to the context of utterance. Most times, speakers, resulting from their different experience of the world which forms their perceptions of socio-cultural issues, interpret utterances or statements made by fellow speakers based on the assumptions they hold on or against one another. Because of such assumptions, or what Roberto Carston (2) calls 'contextual nuances', certain statements are interpreted by addressees as hate speeches.

Hate speech is one of the polemic issues in the public domain that has continued to cause disaffection amongst the diverse people of Nigeria. Though it is yet to have acceptable definition, the concept of hate speech is seen by Adibe (2018) as employing discriminatory epithets against individuals or groups on account of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, cultural or political affiliations. This is more accentuated with the fast growing social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, twitter, skype, et cetera where individuals have opportunity to air their views on certain issues in the society without any censorship. In most cases, given the ethno-religious colorations that define socio-political relationships in Nigeria, interlocutors use the opportunities availed by the social media platforms to express their grievances against certain individuals, groups or even the government. Such conversations often end with hurtful exchange of words that may result to hate speech.

Given the furore the concept of hate speech has continued to raise, therefore, researchers in language have been exploring linguistic theories and specific language models that will determine whether or not certain utterances, made in specific contexts, may be viewed as hate speeches. This paper explores speakers' or addressees' use of their mental spaces (mental frame of mind) in relation to their perceptual experience (or their assumption on their fellow interlocutors) to interpret utterances and determine whether or not such could be termed hate speeches.

The paper has reviewed some studies that explore hate speeches in relation to the perception of the addressees. One of such studies is by Terfa Alakali et al entitled "Audience Perception of Hate Speeches and Foul Language in the Social Media in Nigeria: Implications for Morality and Law" (2016) which examined the moral and legal aspects of hate speeches. However, the researcher is yet to come across any study that investigates the concept of hate speech using the theory of Mental Spaces.

The aim of the paper is, therefore, to examine the relationship between language and the human cognition, or human mind. It looks at how metaphorical expressions used by certain speakers in their Facebook Status Updates are interpreted by the other speakers in the groups, using their Mental Spaces. This is taking into cognizance political, cultural and religious sentiments that form the context of the conversations. The objective of the paper is, therefore, to study how the mental spaces and perceptual experiences of the speakers who come from different ethno-cultural and religious backgrounds can account for interpretation of utterances made in emotionally-charged contexts and whether such mental exercises could justify a reason for terming certain utterances as hate speeches.

Theoretical Review

The theoretical framework in this paper is adopting The Mental Spaces Theory as conceived by Gilles Fauconnier (1985) in his *Mental Spaces; Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Languages*. This is to examine the relationship between language and the human cognition, or human mind. The adoption of the theory is to find out its suitability in accounting for the stereotypical language of the social media, especially Facebook status updates of subscribers.

It is important to state here that the evolution of the Mental Spaces Theory was to concretize the notion that language and human perception are inseparable. It was argued that the form of language alone cannot account for language use without connecting it with the context of utterance (of which perception or human thought is cardinal). Janda sums this by inclining that cognitive linguistics “can be understood in the context of realistic view of conceptualization and mental processing” (5). The last phrase, “Conceptualization and mental processing”, is central to the theory of mental spaces. It concerns human perception, thinking, reasoning and how these contribute to form ideas and beliefs in the human brain.

The Mental Spaces Theory is one of the sub-branches of cognitive linguistics referred to as cognitive semantics (others are Metaphor Theory and Blending Theory) which explains construction of meaning through knowledge representation, conceptual organization, and the structure of language (Evans 2). It was conceived by Fauconnier (1985) as a correspondence to the fact that all aspects of human mental life such as our perceptions, thoughts, memories and language understanding depend on the function of our brain. In other words, the term mental spaces, also refers to as mental function or cognitive function, is designed to determine how human perception, thinking, imagination, ideation, emotion, reasoning and beliefs are used to account for language in use.

According to Barbara Oakley, “Mental Spaces Theory explains how the addressee might encode information at the referential level by dividing it into concepts relevant to different aspects of the scenario (3). Here, what is paramount in Oakley’s argument is how the addressee interprets not only the message but also the context surrounding the utterance. It implies that, in encoding the information and taking the speaker’s intention into account, the addressee considers certain factors, including his relationship with the speaker, the context in which the information was passed and their shared assumptions. This is what Fauconnier in Evans and Green (2014) means when he classifies mental spaces into two categories; the first one he terms Base Space and the second is Space Builders. The Base space, according to Fauconnier, is the interlocutors’ shared knowledge of the world while the Space Builders are those assumptions or non-linguistic elements of the sentence which the addressee creates beyond his shared knowledge with the speaker. This implies that the assumptions which the addressee creates outside his shared knowledge with the speaker only holds truth to him, according to his perception and conceptualization of the speaker’s utterance, but may or may not hold the same truth in reality.

In this situation, therefore, the addressee divides the speaker’s utterance or message into two cognitions or mental spaces. The first is derived from the linguistic elements of the sentence which suggest their shared knowledge of the world. The second is the perception of the addressee which are non-linguistic elements he derives from memories of related but distinct scenarios from the actual utterance. These memories trigger his conceptualization and, indeed, his interpretation of the

speaker's utterance and or intention. For instance, the utterance "you are a Fulani" could be assumed to have been made by a native of a State in North – Central Nigeria where there have been records of crises between farmers and herdsman. The addressee, who was presumed to be a Fulani, will divide the statement into two spaces. The first, which is the Base space, is the actual utterance "you are a Fulani." This is a fact which becomes the "shared knowledge of the world between the interlocutors."

The second are a group of Space Builders – the non- linguistic elements such as his [the addressee's] perceptual experience with the speaker's ethnic group which has been unwholesome over the years; his conceptualization of the speaker's utterance as a taunt meant to instigate an impolite or aggressive reaction; and, indeed, his thinking that by saying "you are a Fulani", the speaker is being scornful, referring to him as a violent man, a farm destroyer and a man with non-forgiven spirit. These space builders, while they hold truth to the addressee as conceptualized by his brain-imaginative mind, that may or may not be true in reality; that is, his assumptions may not be the true reflection of the speaker's intention. The speaker might, perhaps, be making a form of compliment to the addressee.

It, therefore, implies that mental spaces are generated through individual's experience of socio-physical happenings around him and, or in which he has a stake. These happenings develop to form his perception and conceptualization through his imaginative thinking. When reacting to issues that are sensitive to him, therefore, if his perception of such issues is in variance with his beliefs and values, there is a high tendency that his response will be an outburst of his emotions which maybe scornful and derogatory. Explaining how his brain works in this scenario, Janda said that his nervous system, which he calls "neurological disorder" will trigger the motor transmitters in his brain to release emotional hormones, thus, causing his reaction to be emotive or affective (15).

Fauconnier claims that mental spaces" are used to refer to the real world, rather than being referred to themselves" (XXXVI). They are abstract phenomena built upon the imaginative thinking of the addressee in correspondence to the speaker's utterance. This postulate underlies the fact that linguistic meaning does not lie on the forms of language, as claimed by Chomskian generativists. On the contrary, linguistic meaning lies in the intention of the speaker which must correspond with the interpretation of the addressee. This is because the addressee determines the felicity of an utterance. This suggests that speaker's intention alone cannot provide the meaning of an utterance but also, and most importantly, the perception of the addressee which determines whether or not the speech should be seen either as a compliment or derogatory, therefore hurtful. As Shire Hornsby (qtd. in Janda 6) argued, a speaker may likely make a slur statement without realizing it hurts (4). This is because he hardly controls the speech situation when he is emotionally disabled.

The addressee's interpretation of the speaker's statement should, therefore, be given the most prominence because the speaker's intention does not wholly capture the essence of communication. This view is accentuated by Hornsby that words or phrases (epithets) have a life of their own in the sense that they are independent of the speaker's intention. This is why the concept of mental spaces specifies that an utterance such as "you are a Fulani" has its base space as the reality or knowledge which both the speaker and the addressee share. This cannot be disputed as it is the universal truth. What goes beyond the control of the speaker is how the addressee interprets the statement, using his assumptions and his perceptual experience of the socio-physical world. This, however, only holds

true to him and may not hold true in reality. Even so, the addressee's interpretation should be paramount as it makes or mars the success of communication.

The Mental Spaces Theory, therefore, presupposes that, given the nature of human interaction, there is always bound to be differences that range from cultural, ethnic, religious, and even ideological. This is more so in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria which is acclaimed as one of the countries with diverse groups in the world. A unique feature of the Mental Spaces Theory is the Base Space which denotes the shared knowledge between or amongst interlocutors. This aspect of the theory presupposes that the socio-political experience shared among the diverse groups should always facilitate the understanding of language. "To understand what speakers mean, we must look at the joint activity or social practice they engaged in (HerbertClark 140). The shared knowledge, which Clark refers to as Common Ground, is "the sum of (the Speakers') mutual common or joint knowledge, beliefs and suppositions" (93). And it is a necessary factor that makes or mars the success of communication. This, according to Clark, is because both the speaker and the addressee, who, invariably, belong to different socio-linguistic and cultural backgrounds, come to the communication ground with different perspectives.

The different perspectives are their different socio-physical experiences which they don't share. This becomes the breach of their shared knowledge and, actually, the space builders that generate stereotypical assumptions in the mind of the addressee whenever the speaker makes a statement that is perceived hurtful. The addressee feels slighted because the speaker does not share the knowledge which his (the addressee's) in-group share about themselves. In other words, the speaker's knowledge of the addressee's in-group is the outside information he has on them. On the other hand, the speaker, who has outside information on the addressee, begins to develop a thought that the hue, the addressee, behaves or responds to his comment in a certain way because he comes from a cultural or language group that has been stereotyped. This creates what Clark calls "the false consensus effect" which presupposes that the speaker ought to have shared the knowledge of the addressee's in-group. All these are the spaces the addressee builds in his brain which may trigger lack of understanding of language use.

1.3 Research Methodology

In collecting the data for this paper, two sources were used. They are the primary source and the secondary source. The primary source is gotten from a sampled corpus from the Facebook status updates often emotionally inclined. The secondary source comprises the various literature that explores cognitive linguistics in general and mental spaces in particular. The Mental Spaces theory is, thus, used as a linguistic model to analyze these speeches with a view to determining whether the linguistic model used could account for the language use in the data collected. The status updates are gotten from two groups. The updates are purposely sampled on certain thematic thrusts of ethnic, religious, cultural and socio-political issues.

1.4 Data Presentation and Analysis

1.4.1 Data Presentation

Facebook Status Update I

A: President Buhari is a religious bigot. His Islamization policy is gradually taking shape. Look at all his appointments in strategic positions; President, North; Senate President, North, all service chiefs, north – no single Igbo person in all these positions. Why?

B: It is because Igbos are fools. They don't know how to play their political card. Their politics is always about money.

C: Leave them, they are Biafran dogs.

D: It is your father, Buhari that is a dog. He is a jihadist that sucks people's blood in the name of Islam, a religion of violence.

E: Buhari the sponsor of Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen, you mean?

C: And who told you that all Fulani are herdsmen?

E: Shut up my friend! No matter how you want to dress it, all Fulani are herdsmen.

F: You people should sheath your swords. This hatred against each other will not fetch us anything in Nigeria. We will never progress with this.

D: See who is talking. So you can also open your stinky mouth and talk? You this boot licker.

A: Why won't he talk, since Buhari has bought their conscience? He gave them Vice President and other big appointments. He is constructing beautiful roads in Yoruba lands. Fools!

G: Hahaha! You are crying because you have lost your foolish calculation again. You will never smell the presidency. Even your grandfather Ojukwu lost it talkless of you these rats...hahaha!

D: It is your grandfather Ahmadu Bello that has lost it. He is the first religious fanatic in Nigeria. That is why all Northerners have no brains.

H: Not all Northerners, say the Hausa Fulanis. We in the Middle Belt pass their power.

D: Yes. You are right, because the Middle Belters are wise people. They refused to be colonized by these blood sucker-Fulanis. The spirit of Christianity is in you, my brother.

G: See this wawa, fool! Who told you the Middle Belt is Christian-dominated? Go and check the statistics and, by the way, where is Middle Belt in Nigeria? Karnuka kawai!

D: Onyara! Which statistics are you talking about, the son of a terrorist?

E: He is a terrorist himself. You know they baptize them with terrorist water after birth. That is why they are always thirsty for Blood.

D: Yes and Boko Haram are terrorists. In fact, all Muslims are terrorists.

C: Ubanka Ojukwu was the father of terrorism. He spearheaded the massacre of more than three million people in Nigeria. Banza dan iska, a product of child-factory kawai!

D: Onyoshi! See this bastard! Your mother was f***cked by many terrorist Fulanis in the bush and you were also born in the bush. Stupid!

Facebook Status Update II

A: I am not a religious fanatic; I believe in the freedom of religion. But what I don't like is some people hating or loving a politician on religious basis. This is most noticeable among the Igbos... the Christians tried it in kaduna and lost uselessly. And, the way they are trying to reed Buhari's policies using religion is alarming.

B: Your support for Buhari has made you a religious Jihadist, fanatic and extremist. No real Muslim supports Buhari's forced implementation of Jihad on a country like Nigeria with so many religions.

C: Igbos are not dragging position with you. They are blessed right from town.

D: Nonsense! This shows up your bigotry...son of Jihadist pay masters.

E: Let's never vote on religious basis and see whether their god. Buhari will win. Have you forgotten he contested based on religion three times but failed stupidity and that's because of his jihadist agenda.

F: Let it be known to you Mr Poster, that Kaduna state's results did not reflect the actual reality which is that the Christians are the owners of the land.

G: You are very stupid! Mr. Poster,who are the religious bigots If not Muslims? They are also corrupt because corruption is their hereditary. If a Muslim loves you, it is because you are corrupt like them.

H: Elections Nigeria can be decided without Igbos. Just check the 2015 and 2019 results- Igbos didn't vote Buhari because of their hatred for him. Which runs in their blood. But he still won.

I: You lack common sense. You and your violent Muslim brothers who feedon human blood are stupid.

H: Truth is bitter.

J: Look this olodo rapata. How many Muslims are in Nigeria? All of you are Almajiris and sons of Almajiris that flood the street for food. You an illiterate!

K: It is better to be born Almajiri than a born throwaway that sleeps in the street and becomes area boys disturbing the peace of the people.

I: Muslims are the worst in religious hatred. Why is it that in the core Northern states, Christians are not allowed to hold political positions?

L: Buhari is the worst religious bigot. You remember in 2003, he went to Sokoto to campaigned. He said no Muslim should vote 'arne'. But what happened, he lost and was crying like a baby. It took Nigerians Christians 12 years to consider his apology and vote him in 2015.

M: Mr Poster, you are an unrepentant fanatic and a selfish shit bag from your Muslim brothers. Did you conduct census to arrive at the deceptive conclusion that Muslims are the majority in Nigeria? Keep deceiving yourselves, you these blood thirsty animals?

1.4.1 Data Analysis

In analyzing the data collected for the study, it is important to reiterate that two factors are cardinal in understanding language in use. These are the speaker's intention and the addressee's interpretation. While the speaker expresses his views with an intention to pass a message to the addressee, the latter's task is to either accept the message as intended by the speaker or reject it after interpreting it, using his mental spaces which may be cognitive (rational) or affective (emotional).

In doing so, the addressee divides the speaker's utterance or message into two cognitions or mental spaces. The first is derived from the linguistic elements of the sentence which suggest their shared knowledge of the world. The second is the perception of the addressee which is non-linguistic elements he derives from memories of related but distinct scenarios from the actual utterance. These memories trigger his conceptualization and, indeed, his interpretation of the speaker's utterance and or intention.

For instance, the first utterance from the data collected above; "President Buhari is a religious bigot. His Islamization policy is gradually taking shape" was made by a native from the South – Eastern Nigeria where there have continued to be the feelings of marginalization against them by the government of President Muhammadu Buhari. Whatever the intention of the speaker, the receiver/addressee has to divide the message into two mental spaces. The first is the base space which is the assumption he shares with the speaker that Buhari was the president at the time of utterance and that there was actually the feeling of marginalization by Igbo compatriots.

The second aspects of the mental spaces are the space builders which, according to Fauconnier, are the non-linguistic elements that the addressee visualizes. They include, for instance; the addressee's perceptual experience with the speaker's ethnic nationality (Igbo) who have been advocating for either secession or restructuring of the country; his [the addressee's] perception that the Igbo either have a natural hatred for Buhari as a person or his ideology, or have bought into the narratives that Buhari has come to Islamize Nigeria; or, even, the receiver perceived that the speaker was this scornful because his in-group failed to make political calculation that will make them relevant in the government of the day by voting massively for an opposition candidate who could not win the presidential elections. Thus, his response "You will never smell the presidency. Even your grandfather Ojukwu lost it talkless (sic) of you these rats...hahaha!"

Because the platform is made up of diverse people with diverse sentiments (political, regional, cultural and religious), these were reflected in the conversation. The counter-provocative statements, therefore, were triggered because of these sentiments. It goes to state that, to the receiver who shares the same perceptual experience with the first speaker, the statement that "President Buhari is a religious bigot. . ." resonates with his space builders. Thus, the other space builders formed by the receiver who does not share the first speaker's sentiments do not hold truth to his perception. They are only conceptualized by former's brain - imaginative mind that may or may not be true in reality.

By the same token, the counter expression by one of the speakers that ". . . Boko Haram are terrorists. In fact, all Muslims are terrorists", has two varied assumptions. The first assumption is realized in the

first phrase “. . .Boko Haram are terrorists” which has created a base space – an experience that is shared by all well-meaning Nigerians. The statement has succeeded in transporting the feelings and mental images (mental spaces) of Nigerians into the reality of the dreaded group that has achieved notoriety in shooting, slaughtering and bombing human beings in some parts of Nigeria. This is because the expression “. . .Boko Haram are terrorists” connotes danger which mention sends shivers down our spines.

However, the second part of the expression “. . . all Muslims are terrorists”, as expressed, will create two different space builders in two sets of receivers. The first space builders are formed in the minds of Muslims who view this as hate speech against the religion they profess. But to the other receivers who share the same sentiment with the speaker that these people who kill human beings wantonly do so in the name of the religion of Islam, their space builders could not perceive any wrong in the statement because they, like the speaker, were not sorry for the utterance“. . .all Muslims are terrorists”.

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