

SECTION B: STUDIES IN DISCOURSE

4

New Media Discourse Analysis: A Text Linguistic Analysis of Facebook Posts on the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract

Many studies have been done on text linguistics (Umera-Okeke, 2007, Ashipu, 2012, Ezeifeke and Osakwe, 2013), but little or no study has been channeled towards analysing social media texts on the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The study adopted the Relevance theory by Sperber and Wilson as the theoretical framework for the study. All the Facebook posts written on the Russian invasion of Ukraine formed the population of the study. Through simple random sampling, four Facebook posts were chosen as data for the study. Data were collected using screenshots on a laptop. Findings revealed that the writers of the various Facebook posts used different cohesive devices to tie their texts together and equally achieve coherence. And these cohesive devices helped them communicate relevant and sufficient information to their readers. The readers, on the other hand, were convinced that the writers helped them keep abreast of the political happenings in Ukraine by making posts that are relevant. This is evidenced in the different positive reactions garnered by the posts on Facebook.

Keywords: text linguistics, cohesive devices, coherence, new media discourse analysis, social media texts

Introduction

Russia and Ukraine were part two of the fifteen countries that made up the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was a defunct nation or country made up of fifteen countries that are now independent nations including Ukraine. As a result of an unsuccessful coup in Soviet Union (USSR), the politics of interference by the west e.g. Europe and America – brought an end to the union in 1991. Among the now independent states, Russia is a bigger nation just like Nigeria is the giant of Africa. In the former USSR, Ukraine was where the Nuclear power plant was sited. Upon separation, Russia had a treaty with Ukraine over stoppage of programs in the site and taking over intelligence of the nuclear power plant. On the other hand, Russia promised not to interfere with the government and politics of Ukraine.

Contemporarily, Ukraine stands a position of greatness in the world in the area of food production and others. Now, the west started liaising with Ukraine, and this undermines the regional power of Russia. Ukraine also started nursing the ambition to join North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) led by the west (America and Europe). NATO wields enormous military power (air, land and sea). NATO as a conglomeration of nations can defeat any country with their combined military power. Therefore, Russia found it very uncomfortable to allow Ukraine join NATO considering that her regional power and nuclear power plant are at stake. Allowing Ukraine join NATO will eternally and grossly make Russia susceptible to external aggression and threat from Europe and America, and may lead to Russia losing her enormous power.

At this stage, Russia began to interfere with Ukraine's internal politics indirectly. First, they annexed a part of Ukraine called Crimea seven years ago. Second, they installed a pro-Russian government in Ukraine which the west ended and aided a democratic government for the first time in Ukraine led by President Zelenskyy. Third, Russia started supporting rebels in breakaway regions of Ukraine – Dornesk and Lugansk – against the government. These actions expedited the interest of Ukraine to join NATO. It, therefore, escalated the age long quest for Russia's regional power over the defunct union by invading Ukraine.

On 24 February 2022, the world woke up to the news of Ukraine getting invaded by Russia due to issues bordering on border control and political interest. Ukraine is aligning with US and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) forces to the chagrin of Russia. In 2020, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy approved Ukraine's new National Security Strategy whose aim was membership in NATO. On 24 March 2021, Zelenskyy signed the *Decree No. 117/2021* which approved the reintegration of the temporarily occupied territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol. The invasion of Ukraine is understandably targeted at reclaiming the nation and the region. More so, the invasion is aimed at deterring the West from Ukraine, and Ukraine vows never to retreat.

Ukraine's NATO membership does not sit well with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin. They believe the closer US gets to Russia, the easier it is to penetrate and destabilize them. Russia feels that a possible Ukrainian accession to NATO and the generic NATO enlargement is a massive threat to its national security. The world at large has accused Russia of political bullying and many people took to social media to assess the situation and express their angst against Vladimir Putin. These political analysts/people have taken to the new media because it has the widest reach -which is global- to register their displeasure on what is going on in Ukraine.

A plethora of academic researches has been carried out on computer mediated communication and social media, generally. Many researches have been dedicated towards (im)politeness strategies, conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, turn taking and cyber bullying on social media. But there has not been enough researches carried out on how new media discourse participants engage their readers/listeners text linguistically. It is pertinent to analyse how these discourse participants employ cohesion and coherence in constructing their texts, or the lack thereof. The need for this current research is predicated on this premise. This academic research breaks new grounds by flashing its torchlight on new media discourse engagements on the Russia – Ukraine war.

New Media Discourse Analysis

Communication has come a long way in its rite of passage as the primary purpose of language. From town criers, letter writing, old media, phone calls to the rave of the moment; new media which is also called social media. Globally, people communicate on different social media platforms using both written and spoken discourse. This new media avails its users the opportunity to have real-time conversations, exchange pictures, chat and even have conference calls. The new media is interactive, social, multimodal, and circularly networked, as opposed to the linear source-message-audience flow of traditional media. Discerning distinctions between content produced by ordinary individuals (User Generated Content) and institutionally commissioned content produced by professionals, is eroding (Khosravini, 2014, p.287). The new media has come to be reckoned as the norm in language communication in the 21st century.

Taiwo (2021) says:

New media refer to any interactive digital media production which is distributed through the internet or the World Wide Web. New media formats include mobile apps, video games, weblogs, e-books, email, podcast, threaded discussions, wikis, chatrooms, instant messaging, text messaging, social network sites, video and teleconferencing, among others ... a sub-set of new media that many contemporary people can relate with is the social media. Social media relies on networking, collaboration and interaction. Social media is driven primarily by web 2.0 technology, which allows sharing and collaboration opportunities to people and help them to express themselves online. (p. 266)

Kaplan and Haelein (2010) concur:

social media is “[a group of] internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. In this definition, what user generated content means is digital discourse “published either on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site accessible to a selected group of people; [showing] a certain amount of creative effort; [. . .] created outside of professional routines and practices. (p. 61)

The new media has many socializing processes that mimic offline social associations. It has given global visibility to many businesses, and digital marketing has become a trend. Most of these online socialising processes – adding/blocking friends, discourse participation, tagging people to a discourse, trolling – are prototypes of the offline discussions/face-to-face communication that humans engage in. This justifies the basis for which the new media is adjudged viable for discursive practices. Discourse participation is a frontline characteristic of the new media. . . . “different social media (platforms) providing the discourse data for detailed investigation offer very different affordances for participation (and impose different constraints), including for identity work. However, these affordances do not necessarily straitjacket the actions of participants, who may also adopt and appropriate media (platforms) for their playful or critical purposes” (Leppänen, S., Kytola, S., Westinen, E., Peuronen, S., 2020, p.9).
Taiwo elaborates:

New media are sites for expression of social practices through discourse (discursive practices). Discursive practices address the processes by which cultural meanings are produced and understood. Through the new media, social realities are linguistically/discursively constructed. Such socially constructed realities are what critical discourse analysts focus on as they investigate any form of discourse. Beyond these, new media interactions feature conversational forms and these forms can be observed and described based on the existing approaches to talk in interaction. Likewise, language use in new media discourse resembles writing. It means features of written discourse such as thematic organisation and coherence can be investigated in them. (270)

Theoretical Framework

The theory on which the present study is based is relevance theory as proposed by Sperber and Wilson. Relevance theory is majorly based on Grice’s cooperative principle and its four sub-maxims; maxim of quantity (information), maxim of quality (truth), maxim of relation (relevance), and maxim of manner (clarity). These are laid down rules that interlocutors are believed to adhere to in discourse for effective human communication. Relevance theory considers the understanding and interpretation of an utterance based on human psychology. It believes that human communication is deeply rooted in relevance.

Ezeifeke (2018) elaborates:

Relevance theory is an approach to communication which takes Grice's third maxim, *be relevant*, as the central and the core to explaining how information is processed in discourse. The theory assumes that linguistic communication is based on two important variables: 1. ostension: speaker-oriented: speaker's manifestation of what s/he means through a linguistic code. The speaker must show commitment to his/her intention to communicate something relevant. 2 inference: audience/hearer-oriented: receiver's interpretation of the utterance based on his/her conviction that what the speaker is saying is relevant. (p. 204)

Relevance theorists define relevance based on two principles: cognitive principle and communicative principle. Human beings (readers/hearers) are generally blessed with the sense of perception and learning, and this is maximized in seeking relevance in discourse. Speakers/writers, on the other hand, always show their commitment towards producing texts that are optimally relevant. The all-encompassing idea in relevance theory is that a speaker encodes a message and transfers it to a hearer who decodes the message through inference and context. The hearer determines the relevance of the message/utterance with regards to his/her cognitive environment – “a set of facts that a person has manifest to him/her for a fact to be manifest to an individual means that he/she is capable, at that time, of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true” (Ezeifeka, 2018, p. 205). Relevance, in relevance theory, is assessed based on two factors; cognitive/contextual effects and processing efforts.

Cognitive/contextual effects

A positive cognitive effect is ‘a worthwhile difference to the individual's representation of the world’ (Wilson and Sperber 2004, p. 608), such as a true belief or conclusion. According to relevance theory, an input is relevant to an individual just in case positive cognitive effects result from the processing of that input (Mambrol 2020). When new information is processed, it is likely to yield one of these three types of positive cognitive effects: 1. Contextual implication where new assumptions are formed, but conclusions are basically drawn from new and (old) existing assumptions. 2. Modification: old/existing assumptions get modified. 3. Contradiction: new information contradicts the old/existing information, so old information is exchanged with the new.

Processing efforts are borne out of the effort of perception, memory and inference that must be expended in computing cognitive effects (Mambrol 2020).

Methodology

Data for the study comprised four Facebook posts from one personal account and the Facebook page of a newspaper organisation. Data were collected using a laptop to take screenshots of the aforementioned Facebook posts, and analysed using Sperber and Wilson's Relevance theory.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Excerpt 1



Obinna Aligwekwe
February 26 · 🌐

No matter how you see it, Russia was beaten at a very legitimate game, and responded the only way its leader knew, force, a method that should be frowned upon by every right thinking individual.

No matter how you see it, posterity will never be kind to Vladimir Putin, and there is a way this game will play out, that posterity will be rough on him even in the eyes of his fellow Russians.

I once said, from a state of basal amoral existence, humanity develops itself into a state of humane and moral reality.

Genocide once used to be a weapon of war, it took collective morality to out law it.

Slavery was once legal.

Colonialism was once law.

We evolved from these partly because we consciously decided to abhor them.

Not everybody wanted to stop slave trade, nor colonialism, nor genocide.

Many were compelled to stop by those who were their former comrades in the trade.

Yes, the world is still a jungle where might is right, but from that state of survival of the fittest, we evolve to a higher state of morality and compassion, not regress further into a state of Hobbes.

That United States invaded Iraq (and believe me even American historians will make sure George Bush pays for that misadventure) does not mean Russian invasion of Ukraine should be tolerated.

What any right thinking person should do, should be to make sure the American establishment responsible for that war, answer either to the law, or to history and posterity.

And please, do not bring up the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, only a totally ignorant person does.

Barring the Bay of Pigs attack, there was a lot in that episode that America under JFK did right, that Putin totally messed up.

👍❤️👍 111 121 Comments 6 Shares

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

Analysis

Cohesion

Text	Grammatical cohesion	Lexical cohesion
No matter how you see it, Russia was beaten at a very legitimate game, <u>and</u> responded the only way it knew how, force, a method that should be frowned upon by every right thinking individual.	Additive conjunction	
No matter how you see it, <u>posterity</u> will never be kind to Vladimir Putin, and there is a way this game will play out, that <u>posterity</u> will be rough on him, even in the eye of his fellow Russians.		Repetition
<u>Many</u> [] were compelled to stop by those who were their former comrades in the trade.		Ellipsis
Yes, the world is still a jungle where might is right, <u>but</u> from that state of survival of the fittest, we evolve to a higher state of morality and compassion, not regress further to a state of Hobbes.	Adversative conjunction	
What any ¹ <u>right thinking person</u> should do, should be to make sure the American establishment responsible for that war, answer either to the law, or to ² <u>history and posterity</u> .		¹ Collocation ² Reiteration (antonyms)

Coherence

The Facebook post is quite situated in its correct context, and the writer employed the right register (genocide, war, invaded, invasion, war, law, history, posterity) for the post. On intentionality, the writer was quite intentional in communicating a meaningful piece to his Facebook audience. The commitment to communicate a relevant piece is palpable. The one hundred and eleven positive reactions (like, love and laughter) on the post show that the audience is convinced that the post is relevant. The post garnered one hundred and twenty-one comments plus one hundred and eleven positive reactions in support of the post. These reactions and comments in support of the post show acceptability. Facebook allows one to make a maximum of a sixty-three thousand two hundred and six (63,206) word post, unlike Twitter. This shows

that the writer was not constrained by space, yet he failed to deliver sufficient information on the subject matter. On the other hand, he could have been avoiding boring his readers. Informativity was not adequately considered in the text. The Russia Ukraine war was just forty-eight hours old; therefore the text was adequately situated in a real time occurrence. Situationality was adequately employed in the text. The text is very relevant to the situation of occurrence: the Russia-Ukraine war. On intertextuality, the writer's knowledge of other texts, which are relevant to the present text, is not in question. The writer enriched the text with his knowledge of US invasion of Iraq, Cuban missile crisis of 1963 and Bay of Pigs attack by John F. Kennedy.

Excerpt 2



Obinna Aligwekwe
July 24 at 12:15 AM · 🌐



Breaking:

Ukraine has surrounded about 2000 Russian troops in Vysokopillya, near Kherson, at the southern theatre of the war in Ukraine.

The Russian Federation has requested a green corridor for their trapped soldiers.

Ukraine however is demanding an unconditional surrender of troops and fighting equipment, or face complete destruction.

In other news, the Russian Duma meets to discuss the deteriorating economic situation in Russia as the military is complaining it is running severely short on supplies.

Ukraine still stands after five months of Russian invasion that Putin thought would take only days. May Vladimir Putin be thoroughly humiliated and disgraced in this misadventure of his.



Myke-mbata Blessing, Basil Ovu and 272 others

94 Comments 4 Shares



Analysis

Cohesion

Text	Grammatical cohesion	Lexical cohesion
Ukraine <u>however</u> is demanding an unconditional surrender of troops and fighting equipment, or face	Adversative conjunction	

complete destruction.		
May Vladimir Putin be thoroughly <u>humiliated</u> and <u>disgraced</u> in this misadventure of his.		Reiteration (synonyms)

Coherence

Troops, trapped soldiers, invasion, surrender, fighting equipment, the military, complete destruction and deteriorating economic situation are registers of war which the writer deployed in constructing the text in the second excerpt. The text was also situated in its right context; the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Though the second excerpt is a short piece of text, the writer was quite intentional in writing the Facebook post. The commitment to communicate a relevant text to the readers is not in question considering that the text is enriched with appropriate registers that are associated with war. The readers also show a certain level of conviction about the relevance of the post by agreeing with the writer in the comment section and splashing reactions that show agreement in the post. Four Facebook users equally shared the post on their timelines. Ostension and inference are exemplified here. The reactions, comments and shares show a rich level of acceptability. Though the writer is not as informative as is required, he was just making an update/follow up of news about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The war just entered its fifth month as at the time of the post, so situationality is very well considered in the text. The text is relevant to a situation of occurrence. There is no evidence of intertextuality in the text.

Excerpt 3

Daily Times Nigeria March 3 · 🌐

Ukraine Releases Number Of Deaths In Battle With Russia

Ukraine has stated that not less than 2000 civilians have lost their lives since the invasion by Russia on Feb. 24.

The Ukrainian state emergency service announced the numbers in a Facebook post also revealing that ten emergency responders were among the dead.

The UN had previously stated that 142 civilians had lost their lives due to the unrest.

Since then, more than 400 fires caused by enemy fire have been extinguished, according to the statement.

The emergency service also said that 500 people have been brought to safety.

In related news, a group of youth volunteers have responded to a recent call by Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, urging people around the world to join the fight against Russia.

This is coming at a time Nigerians in Ukraine are struggling to return home due to the devastation from the war.

According to the Guardian, over 115 young men, on the 1st of March offered to join Ukraine in its fight against Russia.

The Second Secretary, Ukraine Embassy, Bohdan Soltys, confirmed that over a hundred men besieged the Ukraine Embassy in Abuja to register their intention.



👍👎 261 131 Comments 27 Shares

Analysis

Text	Grammatical cohesion	Lexical cohesion
<p><u>Ukraine</u> Releases Number of Deaths in Battle With Russia. <u>Ukraine</u> has stated that not less than 2000 civilians have lost their lives since the invasion by Russia on Feb. 24.</p> <p>Text</p>		Reiteration (Repetition)
<p>The UN had previously stated that 142 civilians had lost their lives due to the unrest.</p> <p>¹Since then, more than 400 fires caused by ²enemy fire have been extinguished, according to the statement.</p>	¹ Causal conjunction	² Collocation
<p>The <u>emergency service</u> also said that 500 people have been brought to safety.</p>		Collocation
<p><u>In related news</u>, a group of youth volunteers have responded to a recent call by Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, urging people around the world to join the fight against Russia.</p>	Additive conjunction	

Coherence

The third excerpt is written in its correct context of use, and is rich in registers of war: deaths, battle, invasion, emergency responders, state emergency service, the unrest, enemy fire, safety, the fight and the war. The Daily Times Nigeria is the Facebook page of a print media whose general aim is to make news/trends easily accessible to their legion of readers all over the globe. So, whoever that manages the social media page will make sure that whatever s/he churns out does not fall short of the aim. Therefore, the writer's commitment to communicate a relevant cum meaningful text to the readers is undeniable. The 261 positive reactions on the post (likes and haha) show that the readers are convinced that the writer communicated a relevant piece to them; hence the acceptability is not in question. The text is as informative as is required as it gives information bordering on deaths, emergency services, number of lives lost, number of people brought to safety, volunteers and number of volunteers. On situationality, the text is very relevant to a situation of occurrence: the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Reliance on previous texts made by The Guardian, the UN and the second secretary are evidence of intertextuality in the Facebook post.

Excerpt 4

Daily Times Nigeria June 26 · 🌐

Russia to deliver nuclear-capable missiles to Belarus, upgrade fighter jets

Russia has pledged to deliver nuclear-capable Iskander-M missiles to its ally Belarus.

Russia's 24 February invasion of Ukraine included Russian armoured columns sent in from Belarus.

Iskander missiles have been deployed previously in Kaliningrad, a small Russian Baltic territory between NATO members, Lithuania and Poland. They have a range of up to 500km (300 miles).

Russian President Vladimir Putin made the promise when he met his Belarusian ally Alexander Lukashenko in St Petersburg on Saturday.

Putin told President Lukashenko "in the next few months we'll give Belarus tactical Iskander-M missile complexes, which can fire ballistic and cruise missiles, both conventional and nuclear types", Russian RBC news reports.

The Belarusian President also asked Russia to make his country's warplanes nuclear-capable, and the Russian leader further promised that Belarusian Su-25 fighter jets would be upgraded.

Russian cruise missiles were also fired from ships in the Black Sea on Saturday, Ukraine's military said.

Ukraine also reported a heavy rocket strike on Desna, a village near Chernihiv in the north.



338 66 Comments 31 Shares

Like Comment Share

Analysis

Text	Grammatical cohesion	Lexical cohesion
¹ <u>Russia</u> to deliver nuclear-capable missiles to Belarus, upgrade ² <u>fighter jets</u>		¹ Reiteration (repetition)

<p><u>Russia</u> has pledged to deliver nuclear-capable Iskander-M missiles to its ally Belarus.</p> <p><u>Russia's</u> 24 February invasion of Ukraine included <u>Russian</u>armoured columns sent in from Belarus.</p>		² Collocation
<p><u>Iskander missiles</u> have been deployed previously in Kaliningrad, a small Russian Baltic territory between NATO members, Lithuania and Poland. <u>They</u> have a range of up to 500km (300 miles).</p>	Anaphoric reference	
<p><u>Russian President Vladimir Putin</u> made the promise when <u>he</u> met his Belarusian ally Alexander Lukashenko in St Petersburg on Saturday</p>	Anaphoric reference	
<p>¹<u>The Belarusian President</u> also asked Russia to make <u>his</u> country's warplanes nuclear-capable, ²<u>and</u> the Russian leader further promised that Belarusian Su-25 fighter jets would be upgraded.</p>	¹ Anaphoric reference ² additive conjunction	

Coherence

Nuclear capable missiles, fighter jets, ally, iskander – M missiles, ballistic and cruise missiles, warplanes, military and rocket strike are registers of war employed in constructing excerpt four, and these words situate the text in its correct context of use. The writer's intention to construct a relevant linguistic code to the readers is evident (ostension). Considering that the text garnered 338 likes, the readers are convinced on the relevance of the text (inference), and this shows acceptability in conjunction with the 66 supporting comments and 31 shares. Sufficient information -as concerns the subject matter –(delivery of nuclear-capable missiles to Belarus and upgrading fighter jets) is given in the text. The writer is not more informative than is required. The Russia-Ukraine war was in its fourth month when this post was made on Facebook, therefore the text is situated in real time. It is, hence, relevant to a situation of occurrence. No evidence of intertextuality is seen in the text.

Conclusion

The writers of the Facebook posts employed different grammatical and lexical cohesive devices - additive conjunctions, repetition, adversative conjunction, ellipsis, collocation, reiteration, causal conjunction, additive conjunction and anaphoric reference – in constructing the texts and making them hang together. The posts were equally deemed coherent using DeBeaugrande and Dressler

(1981)'s yardstick for measuring coherence which they call seven standards of textuality. The writers employed intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, but only two of the excerpts had evidence of intertextuality. The other two Facebook posts were bereft of intertextuality. Suffice it to say that the texts (Facebook posts) are cohesive and coherent considering the writers' are intentional in churning out posts that are communicatively relevant using linguistic codes. The readers' conviction on the relevance of the post is palpable as is evidenced in their positive reactions to the Facebook posts.

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