A FORENSIC LINGUISTIC STUDY OF CRIME-RELATED IDENTITY (RE) CONSTRUCTION ON *NAIRALAND*

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Abstract

That the Nigerian nation is crime personified is no longer news. What is, however, worrisome is the rate at which the phenomenon of crime in the context of Nigerian society is fast becoming a tribal dispute on social media. As part of the strategies adopted to stigmatise Nigerian ethnic nationalities, Internet users in Nigeria have deployed vulgar-language and derogatory expressions in constructing and reconstructing crime identities. Extant studies on crime discourse have focused mainly on subjective approaches, with little attention paid to the language used in identity (re)construction from a linguistic perspective. This study explores how language on social media reconstructs identities related to crime. Selected readers' comments and thoughts on crime news reports in *Nairaland* are sampled. The theoretical framework of Couthard, Rosa and Leeuwen (2003) was adopted, while the description design was used to analyse the selected online comments with a view to explicating how language is deployed to negotiate crime-related identities in the Nigerian online ethno-cultural context. This investigation promises a clearer understanding of ethnicity and criminality in Nigerian online discussion fora.

Keywords: Social semiotics, crime, identity (re)construction, ethno-cultural, ethnicity, Nairaland

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1   Introduction

Crime is a major social issue that is prevalent across the globe at the moment. It is undoubtedly a conundrum that affects the social, political, and economic growth of several nations today. Patterson (2014) is of the opinion that the high rate of crime has become the most worrisome and pressing issue in the world today. In the Nigerian context, the last decade has witnessed a massive upsurge in crime. Poverty-induced crimes, such as kidnapping, drug trafficking, Yahoo Plus, underwear rituals, ritual killings, and armed robbery, among others, have attained their sordid peak and have continually contributed to creating an alarming state of insecurity in many parts of the country.

As a result of the pervasive nature of crime, I conducted my doctoral research a few years ago on these six consistently prevalent crimes mentioned above. The researcher developed a participatory methodology that identified why crime flourished in the country and why policies put in place to abate this phenomenon were failing. Meanwhile, in the course of my investigation on the language of crime on *Nairaland*, I discovered that Internet users do employ certain striking linguistic strategies to construct and reconstruct crime identities across the three major ethnic tribes of Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa in Nigeria. Some users strongly posit that the Igbo tribes are crime-personified; some users believe that the Yoruba people are more involved in crime than other tribes in the country; and some users strongly opine that the Hausa people have taken criminality to a new astonishing height. Whenever a news report on crime in Nigeria is posted online, these users check out the names of the victims in order to make mockery of the tribes that they feel are putting Nigeria in the spotlight for negative reasons.

In doing this, vulgar-language and derogatory expressions are incessantly deployed in constructing/reconstructing identities. These include: *#Jewish brothers#* (coinage: meaning Nigeria's Jewish Igbo who believe they are descendants of 'lost tribes' of Israel), *#dead vultures#* (coinage: critically endangered vultures killed for rituals in Nigeria/evil/unclean), *#ambassadors#* (coinage: Hausa criminals), *#Biafran robbers#* (Igbo ethnic identity developed in the context of the Nigerian civil war), *#Potor Potor#* (a

nocturnal bird that eats insects, used to describe Hausa criminals), *#gbájúè#* (a Yoruba coinage: literally meaning slap his/her face/a Yoruba fraudster), keyboard warriors (coinage: Igbo yahoo boys), #Arewàdrugdealers# (code-mixed Hausá English expression meaning Hausa drug dealers), *#Ego Mbute#* (an Igbo coinage: meaning criminals). In an attempt to challenge the perceived notion of their tribes, users further use language to engage in very hot debates, which may involve trolling, curses, and abusive slang. It is on this note that the present research investigates the different ways in which hashtags, vulgar language, and derogatory expressions are deployed to negotiate and reconstruct identities on social media.

2   Research Methodology

The study is premised on a corpus of 10 threads along with their comments, purposefully drawn from the online archive of *Nairaland*. Postings/threads selected specifically focused on six prevalent crimes in Nigeria, namely: kidnapping, drug trafficking, ritual killing, money laundering, advanced fee fraud (419), and rape. The website is preferred as a result of its wide coverage across the country. *Nairaland* is a website owned by a Nigerian (Seun Osewa). The website has many discussion sections, which include: politics, entertainment, romance, religion, jokes, culture, fashion, jobs and vacancies, education, crime, and sports. The forum, which started in 2005, has developed to become the most popular online community associated with Nigeria and Nigerians (Chiluwa, 2010). The threads of discussion were selected from this portal between January 2020 and January 2023. This time bracket was chosen not only because it captured the most recent discussions on crime in the portal, but also because there were a large volume of publications covering various aspects of crime. Data are analysed using Caldas-Couthard, Carmen Rosa and Van Leeuwen Theo's principles of social semiotics (2003). This theory is preferred because it is significant to the understanding of anti-language within a specific sociocultural and political context.

3   Literature Review

The phenomenon of identity has been the topic of recent and topical research in every major subfield. Scholars working in a remarkable array of the

humanities and social sciences have taken an intense interest in questions concerning identity (Fearon, 1999). This is because identity itself is a difficult

and blurred concept that plays a significant role in ongoing debates in every subfield of the humanities, such as national, ethnic, gender, race, sexuality, cultural, historical, and language identities. Identity is predisposed to change, and this changing nature is rooted in situational context. As rightly observed by Buckingham (2008:1), 'who I am, or who I think I am, varies according to 'who I am with' and the social situations in which I find myself, and the motivations I may have at the time, although I am by no means entirely free to choose how I am defined.' This means that identities are constructed and reconstructed according to social constraints, social interactions, inter-group interactions, and encounters (Fearon 1999).

Identity is not merely a matter of playful experimentation; it is also about the life-or-death struggles for self-determination that are currently being waged in so many parts of the world (Buckingham, 2008). An explicit concern with questions of identity has undoubtedly taken a new urgency in the contemporary world. As a result of this concern, identity has been viewed from different perspectives. While Jenkins (2004:4) sees identity as "the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities," for Deng (1995:1), "identity is used to describe the ways individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and language." In Mendoza-Denton's (2004) own opinion, identity is the active negotiation of an individual's relationship with larger social constructs, in so far as this negotiation is signalled through language and other semiotic means.

There is no doubt that the place of language within the discourse of identity cannot be overemphasised, since language is a principal means of expressing identity. This position is corroborated by Joseph (2004), who argues that identity can be located in language. Hence, we are all frequently constructing and reconstructing our identity whenever we use language. Meanwhile, while Raheem and Akande (2019) worked on naming as a marker of identity in *Nairaland*, focusing on pseudonyms and diminutives as strategic means of linking up global youth culture, Chiluwa (2010) examined

discursive practice and the Nigerian identity in personal emails. Both studies focus on computer mediated discourse. Taiwo (2014) investigates identity negotiation on blogs and *Nairaland*, concentrating on discursive practices in the handling of identity. However, none of these aforementioned studies has adopted the framework of social semiotics to investigate how crime identities are constructed and reconstructed in *Nairaland*. It is against this backdrop that the present study investigates the linguistic cues employed on social media to construct and reconstruct crime identities.

4   Significance of the Study

The study will be a significant addition to studies in forensic linguistics, particularly in the Nigerian context, where it is just evolving. Also, the rate at which contemporary online discourse on crime in Nigeria is fast becoming a tribal issue is quite alarming. There are frequently-used hashtags such as *#IgboYahooBoys#*, *#Yorubadrugdealers#*, and *#Fulaniherdsmen#*, among others, on the blogsphere, which all have implications for language use. Consequent upon this, the study will contribute to the literature on crime, ethnicity, and identity in Nigeria. It will elucidate perspectives on the issues of crime and explicate the linguistic strategies of crime representations in the online discussion portal. The study will promote interdisciplinary scholarship involving crime, as it connects such fields as linguistics, literary studies, anthropology, peace and conflict studies, international relations, sociology, psychology, history, and biological sciences.

5   Data Presentation and Discussion

Table 1: 10 criminal cases that shook Nigeria in 2019=Crime=*Nairaland* (44019 views) 17/Sep/2020 by Realsman 405 (m)

1	Comment 1: (Manci (m)) 9.49	*#Jews#* are leading the list
2	Comment 2: (Real Adewole) 9:49	Daylight robbery of *#Ikoyi whistle blower#*. Budget padding season 1&2. *#IDP Grasscutters#*.
3	Comment 3: Nwa Amakpe (f)9:51 pm. Dec.22	Incomplete list. What of the *#Aso Rock Grasscutters#* or the *#Ikoyi motherless money#*?
4	Comment 4: Enechiakumo (f) 9:53. Dec 22	Perhaps the kidnapping that happened in Turkish International School, the *#one million boys#*, *#Badoo#* and the rest all happened in the east.
5	Comment 5: Toyo (m) 8:50. Oct. 3	Those leading the list are *#Igbo yahoo boys#*. We know how they make money. Ebanooo.
6	Comment 6: Nobody: 1:44am On Aug 18, 2019	Have you ever travelled out of Nigeria and Africa before? The *#Arewadruddealers#* are people destroying the hopes of legitimate and lawful citizens who travel out of Africa. *86 Likes 6 Shares*

Table 2: FBI Arrests many Nigerian Fraudsters in US-Crime-*Nairaland*.

1	Comment 1: Jojomo (f) 7:20 am	A lot of innocent people may end up suffering because of what this fraudster has done. *#the dead vultures#* are not left out *188 Likes 14 Shares*
2	Comment 2: Senior Sp (m) 6:50 pm	We know them...#*Biafran Robbers#*....Let stop them at all cost. *14 Likes 4 Shares*
3	Comment 3: Nanakimoti (m) 3:00 pm	FBI is unarguably the world's most active agency (in any field). EFCC is also doing

		a lot tackling these yahoo fraudsters, but the courts are not helping matters by giving them 1 year imprisonment! *Our #Gbajue brothers#*
4	Comment 4: Wahili (f) 4:45 p.m.	You should be more concerned about our politicians.... look at Lagos, trillions of naira gone, with no tangible development. See everyone attaching tribalism to the arrest. I strongly condone 419, every Nigerian including Yorubas, binis ND Hausa are into 419. My concern is So much fixation on these Yahoo people, leaving our politicians siphoning money. What is 12 million dollars compared to 600million dollars found in the head of the '*#ambassadors#*' acct, the ex-Zamfara governors account (bear in mind the only reason he is being persecuted is because of his issue with APC, if not no one will go after him)....now imagine how much Rotimi, Amaechi, Fashola, T.A. Orji, Akpabio, Gandollar and northern governors, which no one is even talking about, are all walking free forming elder statesman.
5	Comment 5: Tolup (f) 6:17 p.m.	Shut up Mr man, defender of corruption! Do you know that 3 former governors *#Ego Ebute#* (Mr A, Mr B, and Mr C) are currently serving jail terms, courtesy of EFCC? Are you saying we should leave yahoo boys (who have been responsible for the deaths of some people and others losing their jobs) alone just because all of our corrupt politicians are not in jail? *199 Likes 15 Shares*
6	Comment 6: famouscargo4u (f): 11:05pm On Aug 17, 2019	Let's discourage fraudulent activities. Just yesterday I read a post about someone needing an account to load money into which i strongly believe it's proceeds of fraud. Seun should also do the needful by

instructing his moderators to clamp down on fraudsters.
72 Likes   6 Shares

Note: Nairaland Forum/*Nairaland*/General/Crime/FBI Arrests Nigerian Fraudsters in US (43853 Views).

Table 3: 10 Most Wanted People Hiding from Nigeria's Security Agencies (Photos) - Crime – *Nairaland*.

1	Comment: meezynetwork(m): 5:01am On Sep 01, 2019	*#Tompolo#* is twice *25 Likes 3 Shares*
2	Comment domino4211(m): 6:00am On Sep 01, 2019	I was expecting to see *#NwaAmaikpe#* on the list... The crook. *142 Likes 10 Shares*
3	Comment 3: ruggedtimi(m): 6:28am On Sep 01, 2019	All these people looting Nigeria's money will the money take dem to paradise? Imagine the positive impact the N69bn stolen by Mrs unnamed, N1bn by Mr D and Mr T's N45bn, if it was used for the right thing. *49 Likes 4 Shares*
4	Comment: TOPCRUISE(m): 7:01am On Sep 01, 2019	How will Nigeria move forward as a nation when we award people with questionable character outrageous contracts. I don't know why and how government award people contract without screening them. And besides what is the motive awarding one person billions of naira and making him accessible to such amount without checks. You put billions of naira cash in the care of one person in exchange of service and you expect that person to deliver without appropriate checks *12 Likes 2 Shares*
5	Comment 5: Gulher: 7:55am	Government Ekpemupolo Somebody's

	On Sep 01, 2019	name is Government? Why won't he be a thief shocked *148 Likes 8 Shares*
6	Comment: mansakhalifa(m): 9:31am On Sep 01, 2019	The best 11 or should I say the best 10 of the Nigerian underworlds. And they all have one thing in common. Financial crime. Not one of them is wanted for anything else other than financial crime {except I missed something}. I've seen lists of most wanted criminals in other parts of the world and to be honest this has got to rank tops in terms of monotony. A very predictable list at best. No variety whatsoever. Sad. To think I ran in here just to see this... *9 Likes 2 Shares*

Note: Nairaland Forum / Nairaland / General / Crime / 10 Most Wanted People Hiding from Nigeria's Security Agencies (Photos) (80440 Views)

Tables A–C above demonstrate commenters' responses to three sensitive cases of crime in *Nairaland* between 2017 and 2020. Without mincing words, the comments are representations of ethno-crime identity reconstructions. While the names (though not stated in the data) on the Table B news report were mostly Igbos, those on the Table C list were mostly Yorubas, while the names on the Table A list were basically Hausas. In each of the news reports, six comments are purposefully selected as sign vehicles for establishing ethno-identity crimes on social media in the context of Nigerian socio-political realities. In doing this, the commenters engage in three semiotic practices: representation, signification, and appropriation.

In table 1, comment 1 above, the commenter appropriates the hashtag *'#Jews#'* to represent the Igbos in a demeaning manner. The appellation "#Jews#" or *"#Jewish brothers#"* has become an identity for the Igbo tribe on social media in relation to crime. The commenter represents the socio-cultural belief that the Igbo people of Nigeria have claimed to be one of the lost tribes of the Jewish family. This identity is put on a semiotic rank scale, with intertextuality at the base of the scale. True to the Igbos' claim, it is imperative to note striking similarities in many aspects of life between the

Igbos and the Jews, most especially in terms of socio-religious beliefs. First, the Igbos are adventurous and aggressive, like the Jews. The Igbo and Jewish customs permit a man to raise children from his brother's widow. Both the Igbos and the Jews have a common tradition of lengthy funeral ceremonies (Genesis 50:1–3). The Igbos and the Jews have a common circumcision date, the eighth day following the delivery of every male child. The Igbos and the Jews use intermediaries in marriage negotiations and make a thorough family background check: this is practicable in Igboland up to the present time. Abraham did it while negotiating Rebecca for Isaac (Genesis 24.). So, in the context of crime on social media, once this hashtag is echoed, it is done in reference to the Igbos, and as a result, it generates what Taiwo (2014) sees as 'trolling' where language is usually deployed negatively to curse, abuse, and steer impolite online discursive behaviour, in an attempt to defend the tribe in question.

Similarly, in Table 2, comment 2, the hashtag '*#Biafran Robbers#*' is adopted by the commenter to signify the Igbos as the leading figures in crime. In the expanded semiotic construction, the hashtag *"#Biafran Robbers#"* is named after Biafra. Biafra, officially the Republic of Biafra, was a secessionist state in West Africa that existed from May 1967 to January 1970 during the Nigerian Civil War. Its territory consisted of the states of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. Its inhabitants were mostly Igbo, who led the independence movement due to economic, ethnic, cultural, and religious crises among the various people of Nigeria. Thus, whenever this hashtag, *'#Biafran Robbers#'* is mentioned on social media, it is done in reference to the Igbo tribe. This hashtag always fuels reactions on social media because it appears to mock the identity of the Igbo tribe. This semiotic identity implicitly signifies 'greed' and 'inordinate ambition' with regard to the Igbo tribe.

Equally, in Table 3, comment 5, the hashtag, '*#Ego Ebute#*' is deployed by the commenter as a signification of money-love. This identity marker, "*#Ego Ebute#*", is another index of the Igbo tribe. The nominal phrase has often been used as an Igbo slang to refer to the aspect of the Igbo culture that glorifies money-crime: this is the culture of money grubbing and worship, which sees'money' as the-be-all and end-all of everything. It is a pervasive culture, that seems to celebrate people of unknown fortune, not limited to the

Igbo. In amplifying this semiotic claim, the argument that the Igbos are marginalised and that they are deprived because of the civil war has been on for a while, and has often been seen as a fundamental reason why very few among the Igbos are forced into crime. This provides a semiotic narration of how the identity marker "#*Ego Ebute#*" is appropriated to explicate a humorous way of rationalising a problem that dents the entire group.

Interestingly, the data show that crime or crime-related identity is not limited to a particular tribe on social media in the Nigerian context. This is why the data are balanced and quite objective. For instance, in comment 6, table 1 above, the hashtag '#*Arewadrugdealers#*' is annexed as an idexical representation of the Hausa people, widely involved in drug abuse. The crime-identity marker '#*Arewadrugdealers#*' is a bricolage of the word '*Arewa*', which is a Hausa word, analogous in meaning to the English word "North". The term derives from the Hausa word meaning "North" in general, but is typically used to designate political leadership, since the fall of the Sokoto Caliphate. In the history of Nigeria specifically, it is used to refer to the pre-1967 Northern Region, Nigeria. In the secondary level of semiotic analysis, *Arewadrugdealers* are people of Hausa descent, who are deeply involved in drug trafficking. The identity appellation is a symbolic representation of the Hausa tribe whenever it is used on social media.

In table 2, comment 3, '#*Gbajue brothers#*' is incorporated by the commenter to connote Yoruba fraudsters popularly known as 419. Through inferential semiotic interpretation, the Yorubas are commonly found to be involved in advance-fee fraud. In the Yoruba semiosphere, the axiology of '#Gbajue#' is traced to 'duping', 'trickery', or 'deception'. This is not just an honest signification of evil, but a semiotic construction of slipperiness. At a deeper level of semiotic analysis, advance-fee fraud is a type of scam in which the victim is convinced to advance money to a stranger. In all such scams, the victim is led to expect that a much larger sum of money will be returned to him or her. The victim, of course, never receives any of this money. Those who fall for advance-fee fraud and forward money to the criminal are likely to be targeted for additional payments. That is, the criminal may claim that a second or third advance is necessary before the victim will be entitled to receive the promised money. Whenever this hashtag is echoed on social media, it is often done in reference to the Yoruba tribe.

Also similar to this is the crime-identity marker '#*Badoo*#'. In comment 4, table 1, #*Badoo*# is deployed by the commenter as a demeaning signifier for the Yoruba tribe in respect of crime. The hashtag is a product of code-mixing, as it is derived from the English word 'bad'. The appropriation of the Yoruba vowels '*óò*' to the English word 'bad' is to show the degree of this distressing habit. In the expanded semiosis, #*Badoo*# represents a group of killers who use human body parts for rituals. This is a cultist group headquartered in Ikorodu, an industrially growing part of Lagos State, Nigeria. The activities of the #*Badoo*# group members have threatened the peace of that part of Lagos since they publicly made themselves known. The group is believed to have been kidnapping, and killing people for rituals until they became a nightmare for Ikorodu residents. #*Badoo*# has different faces in other parts of Nigeria. Some devil-personified persons hide under the umbrella of religion to perpetrate their evils. Pathetically, some churches have been caught in the act. Some Islamic clerics have also been caught in the act of killing fellow human beings for ritual purposes. Sometimes ago, a "den" was found in *Sókà*, *Ibadan*, Oyo State, where body parts, not animal body parts, but human body parts were found. Some people were said to have also been found tied down, apparently awaiting death. The deadly *Badoo* group is in *Agbowa*, Ikorodu, Lagos State, where they have shrines and have killed many residents in that part of Lagos.

Another crime-identity marker for the Yoruba tribe is the hashtag '#*One Million Boys*#'. This is a sign of trepidation. In table 1, comment 4, the commenter represents the Yoruba tribe with #*One Million Boys*#, which is a construction of exaggeration. At a deeper level of semiotic analysis, the hashtag #*One Million Boys*# is the code-name of a robbery gang known for its notorious robbery activities around Lagos and its surroundings. Originally formed in Ajegunle by a group of about 20 boys with the objective of "fighting perceived injustice in the city," some members of the group hijacked the group into being involved in robbery activities, rape, and maiming. A movie titled *1 Million Boyz* was released in 2014 based on their thefts and other criminal activities. On October 9, 2012, about 130 suspected members of the group were arrested by the Lagos State Police Command during a raid around *Apapa* and *Ajegunle*.

Equally related is the hashtag *#Yorubayahooboys#.* Yahoo boys rely on their computer dexterity to victimise unsuspecting people in cyberspace. A new phenomenon in cybercrime is mixing spiritual elements with internet surfing to boost cybercrime success rates. Many youths in Nigeria dabble in internet fraud, nicknamed 'yahoo yahoo' after the international web portal and search engine. Some of these fraudsters are Yoruba, and as a result, they are nicknamed *'#Yorubayahooboys#'*.

6   Findings

So far, we have examined the lexical items used in the identity reconstruction of crime in *Nairaland* with a view to examining how the semiotic constructions of identity have become ethnic hashtags and have affected the use of language on social media in recent times. Findings show how the adoption of these crime-identity hashtags has generated unrestrained linguistic demeanour and derogatory use of language such as insulting expressions, verbal attacks, curses, aggressive words, and offensive language, among others, in Nigerian online contexts.

7   Conclusion

The main theoretical conclusion drawn from this research is that crime-identity hashtags are veritable sources of social and ethnic semiotic practices. In other words, these hashtags encode for humans certain meanings and knowledge from which humans create new social or interpersonal meanings. Identity itself is a fluctuating sign, and that is why research of this nature is important for humans to frequently construct and reconstruct disgusting identities for the purpose of a positive change in attitude. Precisely, the analysis has shed light on the semiotic aspects of crime and ethnicity in Nigeria using identity hashtags.

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