VERBAL HYGIENE IN SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS OF NIGERIA'S 2023 FRONTLINE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES' SPOKESPERSONS

Omonigho Josephine Akporokah
Delta State Polytechnic, Otefe-Oghara
School of General Studies, Department of Arts
omonighojosephine411@gmail.com 08033621160

Abstract
This study investigated the social media posts of the media spokespersons of the three front line presidential candidates in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria with the aim of assessing their use of verbal hygiene, or the lack thereof, in their social media posts. The study examines how these representatives take to mudslinging instead of persuasion which political discourses have been touted to employ. Theoretical framework for the study is Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory. Data for the study comprised twelve (12) social media posts made by the All Progressive Congress, People's Democratic Party and Labour party spokespersons for the 2023 presidential election. They were purposely selected and analysed in line with the theory for the study. Findings reveal that these spokespersons of the presidential candidates of All Progressive Congress, People's Democratic Party and Labour Party employed bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness and negative impoliteness to damage the face of opposition parties' presidential candidates. The LP spokesperson employed negative impoliteness two times, positive impoliteness once and bald on record impoliteness two times in his social media posts. The PDP spokesperson employed negative impoliteness two times, and bald on record impoliteness two times, but did not use positive impoliteness in the social media posts analysed in the current study. The APC spokesperson employed negative impoliteness two times, positive impoliteness two times and bald on record impoliteness two times. None of the spokespersons used

off-record impoliteness or withhold impoliteness. The research concludes that these spokespersons practiced mudslinging as the words they used on the opposition were certainly not verbally hygienic.

Keywords: verbal hygiene, political language, politeness theory, 2023 presidential election, persuasion

Introduction

Nigeria holds its next presidential election in 2023. Ahead of the polls, the incumbent president of Nigeria, General Muhammadu Buhari, has warned presidential candidates against hate speech, incitements, use of expletives and cuss words. He enjoined them to deter from using words that have the power to humiliate or demean political opponents. Suffice it to say that the president wants the candidates to be aware of each other's face and focus on issue-based campaigns.

During a two day media capacity building, the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission, Prof. Mahmood Yakubu, warned registered political parties in the 2023 elections against using any form of abusive language or hate speech that can mar the success of the elections. This warning was issued before the onset of campaign activities. In his words:

> a political campaign or slogan shall not be tainted with abusive language directly or indirectly likely to injure religious, ethnic, tribal or sectional feelings. Abusive, intemperate, slanderous or base language or innuendoes designed or likely to provoke violent reactions or emotions shall not be employed or used in political campaigns (personal communication, 26 September, 2022)

On the other hand, Arewa Consultative Forum warned candidates to desist from using foul language and violence. These warnings are testaments to the realization that words have power. They can be used to perform actions. An adage states that the pen is mightier than the sword. Even the Proverbs 18: 21 states that "life and death

are in the power of the tongue" (The Holy Bible NIV, 1980). These statements are testaments of the power that words wield; whether in the spoken or written form.

The 2023 presidential election has been slated for 25 February 2023. After the party primaries were held between 4 April and 9 June 2022, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi were nominated as presidential candidates of All Progressives Congress, People's Democratic Party and Labour Party respectively. In August 2022, the Presidential candidate for the All Progressive Party, Bola Ahmed Tinubu appointed Festus Keyamo, SAN the official spokesperson of the APC campaign organisation. A former minister of Aviation, Femi Fani-Kayode, was also appointed as Director, New media. In the same vein, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, the presidential candidate of the People's Democratic Party, appointed Dino Melaye and Daniel Bwala as spokespersons for the party's presidential campaign. Mr. Peter Obi, Labour Party's Presidential candidate, also appointed Kenneth Okonkwo a member of its National campaign council and his spokesman. These party spokespersons have taken to social media to promote their candidates and give the voting public reasons to cast their votes for the right candidate. This academic research is set to assess the use of verbal hygiene in social media political discourse of these media spokespersons of Nigeria's frontline 2023 Presidential candidates or its lack thereof.

Statement of the Problem
Verbal hygiene does not suffer a paucity of researches. The concept enjoys a budding scholarly literature: Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017), Nzekwu and Nnuta (2014), Anuonye, Oguamanam and Eneremadu (2021) are some of the researches carried out on verbal hygiene. The research by Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) was carried out on political language. But considering that the 2023 presidential election is novel, it is germane to conduct a research on the use of language by these politicians and their representatives in the bid to garner votes. There is also a dearth of researches on

online political discourse of spokespersons of presidential candidates. Most researches are focused on presidential speeches done during the electioneering process, little or nothing has been done to beam the searchlight on the representatives of these presidential candidates. It is on these grounds that the current research is premised.

Political language has been touted to be persuasive. Politicians are known for their mastery in the use of rhetoric in order to gain voters and supporters. It becomes worrisome when these politicians and their representatives employ hate speech, inciting and insulting language to address both the voting public and the opposition parties and candidates. It is on this premise that this current research is based. It has also become germane to analyse the political discourse of Nigerian politicians and their representatives, for the use of verbal hygienic words or the lack thereof, in the wake of the 2023 presidential elections.

Verbal Hygiene

Verbal Hygiene refers to "discourses and practices through which people attempt to 'clean up' language and make its structure or its use conform more closely to their ideals of beauty, truth, efficiency, logic, correctness and civility" (Cameron 2012, p.vii). The desire to improve or "clean up language is termed verbal hygiene" (Cameron 2005, p.1). Verbal hygiene is the attempt to sanitise language ensuring that it is used in its correct and purest form; devoid of errors and profanity. This can also be seen as linguistic purge or language purism. Cameron (2005, p.9) elaborates:

> A random list of verbal hygiene practices in which present-day speakers of English are engaged might include, for example, campaigning for the use of plain language on official forms; belonging to a spelling reform society, a dialect preservation society or an artificial language society; taking courses in 'communication arts' or 'group discussion', going for elocution lessons,

sending for correspondence courses on 'good English' or reading self-improvement literature on how to be a better conversationalist; editing prose to conform to a house style; producing guidelines on non-sexist language, or opposing such guidelines. And these are only the institutional cases: the group of schoolchildren cruelly mimicking a classmate's 'posh' accent are also practising verbal hygiene, as are the workers who institute a 'swear box' and fine one another for using 'bad language'.

Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017,p.49) say

Verbal hygiene is a concept that denotes the use of politically, socially, religiously, linguistically friendly and polite words to express our opinions, ideas and views in a given situation. The issue of verbal hygiene is borne out of the need to use language more efficiently in the process of communication.

When language users critique language, they are doing verbal hygiene. Whether it is the urge to correct an error, ascertain the meaning of a word or stop a communicator from employing profanity in the course of a discussion.

Cameron (2005,p.9) says:

Verbal hygiene comes into being whenever people reflect on language in a critical (in the sense of 'evaluative') way. The potential for it is latent in every communicative act, and the impulse behind it pervades our habits of thought and behaviour. I have never met anyone who did not subscribe, in one way or another, to the belief that language can be 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'bad', more or less 'elegant' or 'effective' or 'appropriate'. Of course, there is massive disagreement about what values to espouse, and how to define them. Yet however people may pick and choose, it is rare to find anyone rejecting altogether the idea that there is some legitimate authority

in language. We are all of us closet prescriptivists—or, as
I prefer to put it, verbal hygienists.

Cameron brings in different aspects of verbal hygiene like editing,
use of non-sexist language and language purism generally, but this
work is an extension of Deborah Cameron's work that studies
purity of language devoid of profanities and substandard usages,
more especially, the observance of civility in language use.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for the current study is Jonathan
Culpeper's Impoliteness theory. Culpeper (1996, p.38) notes that,
"Impoliteness comes about when: (1) the speaker communicates
face attack intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or
constructs behaviour as intentionally face-attacking, or a
combination of (1) and (2)" (2005, p.38). Igwebuike and Eburuaja
(2020, p.338) posit that "any act (spoken or written) which
displays negative attitude or is considered to be rude is impolite".
Locher and Bousfield also say that "Impoliteness is behaviour that
is face-aggravating in a particular context" (2008, p.3) Culpeper
further elaborates:

> Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific
> behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by
> expectations, desires and/or beliefs about social
> organization, including, in particular, how one person's or a
> group's identities are mediated by others in interaction.
> Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered
> impolite – when they conflict with how one expects them to
> be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they
> ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed
> to have emotional consequences for at least one participant,
> that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence (2011,
> p.254).

Culpeper notably formulated five super strategies of impoliteness
as: bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative
impoliteness, off-record impoliteness and withhold politeness.

These super strategies are unarguably an adoption of the politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987). They comprise:

1) Bald on-record Impoliteness

In Bald on record impoliteness, the addressee's face is threatened in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise manner, especially in situations where the person's face is relevant and cannot be minimised.

2) Positive Impoliteness

Positive impoliteness is manifest in situations where the aim is to damage the addressee's positive face wants. Culpeper (1996) lists certain output strategies for positive impoliteness thus:

- *Ignore, snub the other* - fail to acknowledge the other's presence.
- *Exclude the other from an activity*
- *Disassociate from the other* - for example, deny association or common ground with the other; avoid sitting together.
- *Be disinterested, unconcerned, unsympathetic*
- *Use inappropriate identity markers* - for example, use title and surname when a close relationship pertains, or a nickname when a distant relationship pertains.
- *Use obscure or secretive language* - for example, mystify the other with jargon, or use a code known to others in the group, but not the target.
- *Seek disagreement* - select a sensitive topic (p.357)

3) Negative Impoliteness

Negative impoliteness damages the addressee's negative face wants.

Negative impoliteness output strategies, as listed by Culpeper (1996), are:

- *Frighten* - instill a belief that action detrimental to the other will occur.

- *Condescend, scorn or ridicule -* emphasize your relative power. Be contemptuous. Do not treat the other seriously. Belittle the other (e.g. use diminutives).
- *Invade the other's space -* literally (e.g. position yourself closer to the other than the relationship permits) or metaphorically (e.g. ask for or speak about information which is too intimate given the relationship).
- *Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect -* personalize, use the pronouns 'I' and 'you'.
- *Put the other's indebtedness on record* (p.357).

4) Sarcasm or Mock impoliteness

The FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, and thus remain surface realisations. (Culpeper 1996, p.356) This impoliteness strategy is different from mock impoliteness -banter principle- which is not intended to cause offence, but promote social harmony, because sarcasm/mock impoliteness causes social disharmony.

5) Withhold Politeness

Withhold Politeness is "the absence of politeness work where it would be expected. (Culpeper 1996, p.357) In situations where greetings or expressions of gratitude are expected, yet withheld, withhold impoliteness thrives.

Culpeper summarises thus:

> Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts. It is sustained by expectations, desires and /or beliefs about social organisation, including, in particular, how one person's or a group's identities are mediated by others in interaction. *Situated behaviours are viewed negatively − considered "impolite" − when they conflict with how one expects them to be*, *how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be*. Such behaviours always have or are presumed

to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. (2011,p.254)

Methodology

The current study is a qualitative research. Screenshots of the social media posts that form the data for this research were taken using the UC Browser app on a laptop. Data consisted of twelve social media posts of the spokespersons of the APC, PDP and Labour party presidential candidates. Data was analysed using the theoretical framework for the study.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Femi Fani-Kayode

Data 1

In this post, the APC spokesperson, Femi Fani-Kayode, calls the PDP spokesperson, Senator Dino Melaye, an *agbero*. *Agbero* is a word in Nigerian English that means a thug/lout, an unemployed

young male usually found at motor parks that extort money from motorists for a living. This is positive impoliteness (viii. Use taboo words – swear, or use abusive or profane language), because *agbero* is a derogatory name in Nigeria. In the statement "unlike the agbero called Dino one thing I would never do is spread my buttocks and play rear guard for Sodomy united", Femi Fani-Kayode makes unfounded claims about Dino Melaye's sexuality. He insinuates that he is involved in a same sex relationship which is against the Nigerian constitution. These are face threatening acts. The entire post is insulting, embarrassing and belittling, the poster also dabbles into a taboo topic. In this post, the APC spokesperson employs negative impoliteness (ii condescend, scorn or ridicule), he definitely threatens his desire to have his face unimpeded. Generally, the APC spokesperson employed positive and negative impoliteness in this post.

Data 2
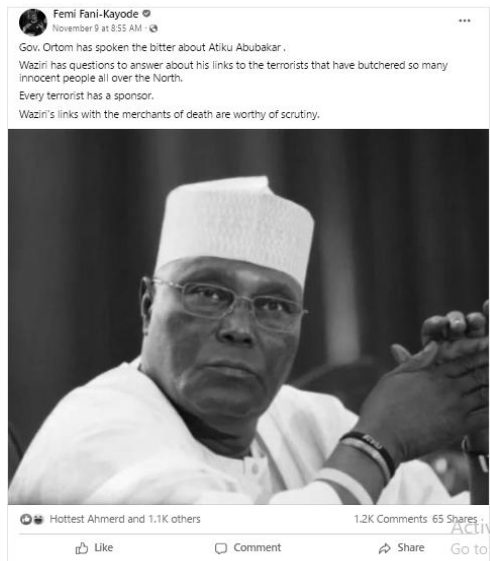
Here, the PDP presidential candidate is accused by the APC spokesperson of sponsoring terrorism in the country. Inasmuch as no evidence was presented to back up the claim, the spokesperson

goes ahead to say that the candidate "has questions to answer about his links to the terrorists that butchered so many innocent people all over the North". Femi Fani-Kayode employs bald on record impoliteness here. Knowing full well that the PDP presidential candidate's public self image is very much at stake, he clearly and unambiguously, without considering his face/public self image, calls him a sponsor of terrorism especially when terrorism thrives in the country, and many presidential candidates promise to eradicate it in Nigeria.

Data 3

In this Facebook post, Femi Fani-Kayode claims that the opponents of the APC presidential candidate are after his life. He employs negative impoliteness (iv. Explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect – personalise (use the pronouns I and You).

Data 4
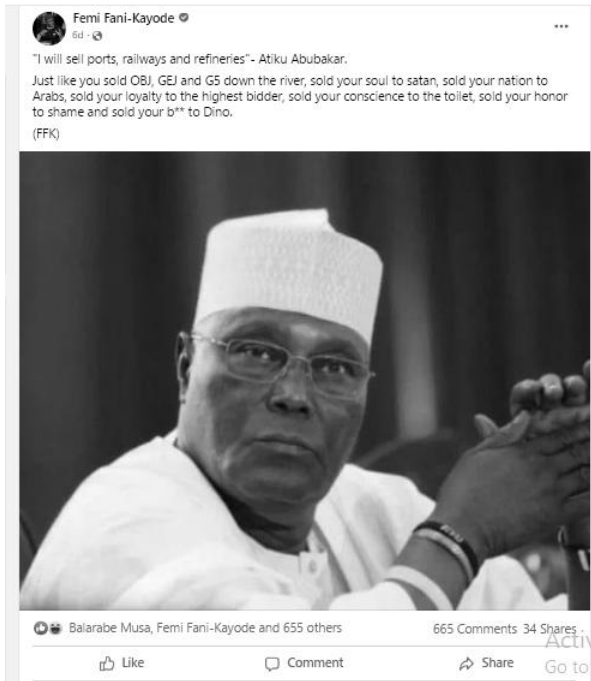
The Facebook post captured above is downright insulting and belittling. It also reeks of hatred. According to the APC spokesperson, Atiku has a questionable character. In his words "you sold OBJ, GEJ and G5 down the river, sold your soul to satan, sold your nation to Arabs, sold your loyalty to the highest bidder, sold your conscience to the toilet, sold your honor to shame and sold your b** to Dino". Considering that no court of competent jurisdiction has found Atiku guilty of these alleged crimes, these are mere accusations which the APC spokesperson uses to threaten the face of the PDP presidential candidate. This APC spokesperson employs bald on record impoliteness considering that the PDP presidential candidate has a lot of face at stake. He equally employs positive impoliteness (viii. use taboo

words – swear, or use abusive or profane language) as he abuses the presidential candidate.

Dino Melaye
Data 5

Senator Dino Melaye, the PDP spokesperson, posts a video of the APC presidential candidate where he showed an unsteady gait and makes reference to the viral rumours about the failing health of the candidate. The poster uses insult, and embarrassment to scorn, ridicule and belittle the candidate and attack his face. The PDP spokesperson employs negative impoliteness (ii. condescend, scorn, or ridicule – emphasise your relative power. Be contemptuous. Do not treat the other seriously. Belittle the other).

Data 6

Here, the PDP spokesperson employs negative impoliteness as he intentionally damages the APC presidential candidate's negative face wants by subtly making insinuations of dementia. Insinuations are clearly made about the candidate's age and health status.

Data 7

Senator Dino Melaye. (SDM) @_dinomelaye · Nov 18

The daughter of Kafaru Tinubu, the elder brother of Abibatu Mogaji, Emilokan's adopted mother.

The young lady died and Bola was smuggled and began impersonating her. This is her result.

An accusation of impersonation, which is a felony in Nigeria, where the culprit is liable to three years imprisonment is being employed by the PDP spokesperson to attack the face of the APC presidential candidate. Dino Melaye, the PDP spokesperson, says "the young lady died and Bola was smuggled and began impersonating her" is a good example of bald on record impoliteness. This utterance is made in a direct, clear and unambiguous manner without taking into cognizance the face of the APC presidential candidate.

Data 8

In this post on Twitter, the PDP spokesperson diagnoses the APC presidential candidate of a health condition called dementia. He further claims that it is at an advanced stage. Considering that the senator is neither a medical personnel nor the APC candidate's private doctor, it is a mere accusation bordering on disapproval of his fitness to run for president due to his age and health status. Suffice it to say that the poster employs bald on record impoliteness to threaten the face of an opposition party candidate.
Kenneth Okonkwo

Data 9

> **Kenneth Okonkwo** @realkenokonkwo · Nov 9
>
> Nobody should read his statement as meaning that PO will not attend if Tinubu and Atiku will not attend. Nigerians already knew that they are sick in the body and brain and cannot stand an hour live interview. They are unfit to be President. PO is the only option.
>
> 💬 23   ↻ 385   ♡ 1,216   ⬆
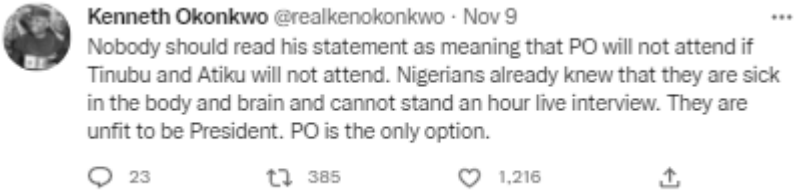
Here, the Labour party spokesperson, Barr. Kenneth Okonkwo, overtly threatens the face of the opposition parties and insults and belittles their candidates by saying that they are "sick in the body and brain". He goes ahead to say that they are unfit to be presidents of the nation. The post is a clear example of bald on record impoliteness. The LP spokesperson clearly states that Tinubu and Atiku … "are sick in the body and brain". The poster attacks and maligns the face of the opposition parties while, in the same vein, he campaigns for the Labour party candidate by saying "PO is the only option".

Data 10

> **Kenneth Okonkwo** @realkenokonkwo · Nov 14
>
> 2023 is not the year for old corrupt drug traffickers or money launderers or terrorists as paraded by APC or old corrupt ethnic and religious disuniters as paraded by PDP. It is the year for character, competence and capacity as paraded by Labour Party. Obi-Datti is the answer.
>
> Kenneth Okonkwo
>
> 💬 185   ↻ 2,140   ♡ 7,526   ⬆

"Old corrupt drug traffickers or money launderers or terrorists"
"Old corrupt ethnic and religious disuniters"

Positive impoliteness (ix. Call the other names – use derogatory nominations)

Also, the LP spokesperson uses bald on record impoliteness considering that the candidates of the opposition parties have much face at stake in the period leading to the attack. The Labour party spokesperson threatens and attacks the face of opposition parties' presidential candidates while he mitigates the face of his party candidate by saying "Obi/Datti is the answer".

Data 11

Kenneth Okonkwo @realkenokonkwo · Nov 16
You can now agree with me when I said that Tinubu lacks the mental capacity to be President. He continues to unravel. He can no longer align his thoughts to make a coherent sense. What is God bless PDAPC? There's no party like that. Tinubu is unfit mentally to be President.

TVC NEWS

APC PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COMMENCES
TINUBU, SHETTIMA RECEIVE ROUSING WELCOME
03:05 PM ER WAY IN INDONESIA*** WORLD POPULATION HITS EIGHT BILLION MA

◯ 64   ⟲ 644   ♡ 1,554   ⬆

"Tinubu lacks the mental capacity to be president"
"He can no longer align his thoughts to make a coherent sense"
"Tinubu is unfit mentally to be president"
The Labour party spokesperson employed negative impoliteness to attack the face of the APC presidential candidate as he goes ahead

to damage his negative face wants through condescension, scorn and ridicule.

Data 12

Kenneth Okonkwo @realkenokonkwo · Nov 16

APC stoned and rejected by Nigerians in Jos, home of the APC Campaign DG. This party has become a liability to Nigeria and should be voted out in 2023. Tinubu should step down immediately to avoid making Nigeria a laughing stock as he can no longer remember his party's name.

Barr. Kenneth Okonkwo, the Labour party spokesperson, makes a post on Twitter asking the APC presidential candidate to drop out of the presidential race with immediate effect. This post shows negative impoliteness as the LP spokesperson ridicules the APC candidate for his inability to remember his party's name.

Result of Findings

Result of findings discovered that these spokespersons of the presidential candidates of APC, PDP and LP employed, to a large extent, bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness and negative impoliteness to damage the face of opposition parties'

presidential candidates. The LP spokesperson employed negative impoliteness two times, positive impoliteness once and bald on record impoliteness two times in his social media posts. None of the spokespersons used off-record impoliteness or withhold impoliteness. The PDP spokesperson employed negative impoliteness two times, and bald on record impoliteness two times, but did not use positive impoliteness in the social media posts analysed in the current study. The APC spokesperson employed negative impoliteness two times, positive impoliteness two times and bald on record impoliteness two times.

It is worthy of note that the spokesperson of the Labour party presidential candidate employed went ahead to mitigate the face of his presidential candidate after damaging the face of the opposition parties. Statements like "PO is the only solution", "Obi/Datti is the answer" -as seen in his social media posts - are testaments to this. These statements are conspicuously put at the end of his posts. But the spokespersons of the APC and PDP candidates did not bother to mitigate the face of their candidates after damaging that of the opposition parties.

Conclusion

Conclusively, these spokespersons of the frontline 2023 presidential candidates were not aware of each other's face. Their words posts are not verbally hygienic. Their actions are against the warnings of the president and INEC chairman against hate speech, incitements, use of expletives and cuss words and abusive language in the electioneering process. The spokespersons failed to observe civility in language use, instead they took to mudslinging.

References

Anuonye, F., Oguamanam, H and Eneremadu, Q. (2021) "Politeness Device for Face Threatening Acts in Language Use". *Ebonyi Journal of English and Literary studies.* 4(2). Pp 112 – 122

Cameron, D. (2005) *Verbal Hygiene: The Politics of Language*. London: Routledge,

Cameron, D. (2012) *Verbal Hygiene.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge

Culpeper, J. (1996) Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics* 25: 349-367

Culpeper, J. (2005). Impoliteness and entertainment in the television quiz show: The Weakest Link. *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture.* 1(1) 35-72

Culpeper, J. (2011) *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Ezeifeka, C. (2018) *Discourse Analysis: Concepts and approaches*. Awka: Patrobas

Locher, M. A., & Bousfield, D. (2008). Introduction: Impoliteness and power in language. In D. Bousfield & M. A. Locher (Eds.), *Impoliteness in Language. Studies on its Interplay with Power in Theory and Practice* (pp. 1–13). Berlin:

Nnuta, M. and Ezeifeka, C (2017). "Verbal Hygiene and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria: A Study of Selected Newspaper Print and Online Publications". *Ogirisi: a New Journal of African Studies.* Vol. 13. PP 46-69

Nzekwu, I and Nnuta, M. (2014) Verbal Hygiene in the Use of the English Language: A Tool for Unity, Conflict Resolution and Sustainable Development in Nigeria. *IJAH* 3(4). Pp 70- 79

Yule, G. (2005) *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.