

Leaving behind the mask: The stylistics of Nigerian sexual diversity and homophobic discourse in the digital media

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Diverse sexual relationships are masked as nonexistent in Africa and discourse which continues to push such narrative is commonplace. With the internet and social media assuming a veritable platform for the advocacy of the rights of Nigerian LGBTQ persons, it is necessary to examine the language operational in the discourses involving sexual diversity and homophobia. I examine the use of language in the discourse on sexual diversity and homophobic discourse in Nigeria. I focus on 100 manually culled tweets and comments from Twitter using ‘Nigerian homosexuals’, ‘Nigerian homophobia’, and ‘Naija LGBTQ’ as search terms on the subject. I adopt the orientation of discourse stylistics to carry out a qualitative analysis of the data. Linguistic negativity, agentivity and affectivity, and language of silence are the dominant stylistic features identified in the discourse. The study reveals queer sexualities are masked as having no representation in the Nigerian indigenous languages, at least in the sampled tweets. The implication is that homosexuality is objectified in digital media as Western infiltration on African modernity. Therefore, while people with alternative sexualities are represented as objects, they are further subjected to cyber-bullying.

Keywords: silence; agentivity and affectivity; negation; the mask; homophobic discourse; autochthonous knowledge

1. Introduction

The legal clampdown on the practice and expression of queerness in the Nigerian physical space has not deterred the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) persons from the continuous expression of their sexuality in the digital space. The LGBTQ persons took a courageous step by coming out bearing their rainbow flags during the #EndSARS protests in October 2020, championed by Nigerian youths. By coming out, they did not only signal their readiness to combat the denigrating experiences and exploitation that they are subjected to in the hands of Nigerian security agencies; they also marched alongside other Nigerian youths to demand a change in the processes of governance in the country. While there were incidents of overt anti-queer rhetoric from some of the largely heterosexual protesters, the Nigerian queer community also enjoyed significant backing by people who with a united voice sought to put an end to systemic marginalization and police brutality. The event also served as a watershed moment and documented the attempts by sexual minority groups to change the narratives of identity misrepresentation, dismissal of the autochthonous knowledge around their sexuality as Western-based modernity, as well as a fight against attempts to write them out of history. From being regarded as “worse than dogs” (Mugabe, 1995) to being recommended for total extermination from the African society, queer persons have lived in fear, stigmatization, and marginalization through a dominant heterosexual discourse that masks the alternative sexuality as nonexistent.

One of the ways to demonize an act is by making words relating to such an idea conventionally taboo. Sexual colonialist narratives have attempted to write Nigerian sexual

diversities out of history by demonizing and suppressing the public use of words bearing the knowledge of homosexuality; thereby, ‘masking’ knowledge around the practice through homophobic expressions. Therefore, knowledge masking is a form of coloniality that requires refuting.

The use of digital media to counter homophobic narratives is a way of striking a balance in the web of discriminatory narratives on sexual diversities. Besides using digital media to campaign for LGBTQ rights in Nigeria, digital media has also contributed to public engagement towards sexual reorientation. The digital space has also been a refuge from the inhibiting realities of the physical space. A recent move justifying the attitude is the yet to be released controversial film *Ife*. The producer of the film claims to have the film released online if the Nigerian government will not allow it in the Nigerian film markets. A review of the film by VOA (2020) opines that most movies on homosexuality ape the negative attitude of portraying lesbian and gay persons as “people to be feared, people who should be imprisoned, people who should be killed, people who should deserve no rights in the Nigerian society”.

These realities, therefore, make it necessary to interrogate the linguistic framings of queer sexualities on digital media. It is with this in mind that I analyze tweets around the homophobic discourse. I apply discourse stylistics as the theoretical framework to examine sexuality in online homophobic discourse. This contribution analyses the linguistic and discursive elements that contribute to the continuous masking of sexual knowledge in Nigeria.

2. Stylistics of masked and homophobic sexual discourse

Burke (2014: 3) submits that stylistics is “a kind of linguistic-forensic” approach to texts’ analysis supports the stance that stylistics priced the bringing out of linguistic evidence to

scientifically replicate interpretation. Among the different approaches to stylistics, feminist stylistics is influential in probing the implicit ways gender and sexuality are linguistically constructed in everyday and institutional discourses. 'Gender concerns', in its plurality of meaning submerges 'sexual plurality'.

However, we believe that this fails to accrue commensurate importance to sexuality in gender discourse. The argument around sexuality has expanded in recent times and attracted the interests of sociologists, anthropologists, linguists and psychologists. Feminist stylistics has raised concerns about coming up with stylistics tool-kits for a replicable analysis of linguistic construction of gender and sexuality. This initiative supports the calls by Short (2016) to strengthen stylistics to become an academic activity divorced from its diachronic stylometry background. The feminist approach to stylistics and gender discourse raises the consciousness of language users especially the listeners/readers to oppressive or pernicious comments. According to Mills (1995), readers are often not unaware of gender construction in discourse, but they are subconsciously receptive to the linguistic signification of gender deprecating meanings which are sometimes resisted. Concerning sexuality, the minority sexual group is conscious of sexuality and almost quick to challenge homophobic comments or comments that try to mask his/her identity. The digital media, through which this group validates their existence and identity, appropriate interpersonal features of communication such as face-to-face interaction and immediate feedback.

Montoro (2014) identified two aims of feminist stylistics which guides the present study. One, the linguistic features deployed to mask homosexuality, and two, the stylistic means of promoting and countering homophobia in Nigerian online discourse are investigated and

analyzed. This is envisaged to allow this contribution to reveal the different linguistic strategies employed by Nigerian homosexuals and heterosexuals in their online engagements.

2.1. Deconstructing epistemic construction of sexuality

Postcolonial studies until recently have not given serious attention to how discourse around sexuality determines power struggles and identity within nations. The claim that homosexuality is ‘un-African’ is mostly widespread as a dominant belief among Nigerians. Devji (2016: 343) classifies such a view as a sexual colonial narrative which “describes queer sexuality as an un-African colonial legacy”. Ndlovu submits that “in spite of the significance of knowledge in determining peoples’ destinies, the triumph of Western-centred modernity negated the legitimacy of ‘other’ knowledge and ways of knowing – outside the Western purview of seeing, imagining, and knowing the world (2018: 95). The performative effect of colonialism is felt in not only retelling African realities but restructuring the historical arrangement of such realities. For instance, the stock of phrases relating to homosexuals and homosexuality abound in the Nigerian indigenous languages, at least, the three major Nigerian languages. In Hausa, there are *yan daudu*, *liwadu*, *yan madigo*, *dan kishili*. Igbo has *idina udi*, *nwoke idi nwoke* and *umu nwanyi* while Yoruba has *adofuro* (or *adodi*), *fohun*, *okonrin*, *alagbedemeji*. The presence of these lexical stocks proves that “language is no mere signaling system” (Richard, 1936: 131) and homosexuality is not a colonial accident in Nigeria. The words capture the distinctive diverse sexuality existing in Nigerian culture.

As argued earlier, language shares a symbiotic relationship with its speakers’ culture and social reality. The attempt to rewrite Africa reality has not excused sexuality. Described as a “shit-hole continent”, the continuous derogation of Africa and African sexuality still manifest

linguistically. The knowledge of Africa and about Africa is steeped in inferiority. These Eurocentric views have continued to flourish and in Fanon's (2008/1952: 14) words, Africa is perceived as "a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born". This perception around Africa and about Africa ramifies through trade, education, gender, politics, and sexuality. Imprints of colonialism have mixed and in many cases eroded African cultural observances; thereby blurring the understanding of 'pristine' African knowledge. Just as "culture, mores and observances socialize us into believing what may or may not be expressed" (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2010), colonialism has further helped in silencing African knowledge production by fostering dominant Western views on the colonized. The discursive construction of African epistemic alterity is done both from within by Africanists, African kings, and historians on the one hand, and colonialists and imperialists on the other. Therefore, being and becoming African is a complex web of epistemic crisis "mediated through and through by spatial, agential, structural, historical and contingent variables" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 117).

The knowledge about sexuality in Nigeria is bifurcated into basically heterosexuality and homosexuality. However, spatial, agential, structural, and historical manipulations of African identity present homosexuality as modern individual fantasies. Meanwhile, the challenge of traditional beliefs has exposed contemporary Africans to the truth and reality of most fossilized aspects of traditions.

3. Methodological background

This study involves 100 manually culled tweets and comments from Twitter using 'Nigerian homosexuals', 'Nigerian homophobia' and 'Nigerian gay, LGBTQ persons' as search

terms to access Twitter handles and follow tweets relating to the subject. The search is restricted to October and November 2020. Besides limiting the data boundary to Nigeria, the period covers a critical moment when the LGBTQ persons joined other Nigerian youths in protesting against police brutality and other national anomalies, including the clampdown on sexual minorities. This gives the contribution the opportunity of recency of data which guarantees the study to look at the subject from new perspectives. Also, the words used in indexing homosexuals are carefully analyzed through an approach that sees discourse analysis as being ‘concerned not simply with micro-contexts of the effects of words across sentences or conversational turns but also with the macro-contexts of larger social patterns’ (Carter & Simpson, 1989: 16). This approach demonstrates the vivid representation and (re)presentation of homosexuality in ways that countering the normative indexing of minority sexual groups. The availability of tweets and comments from pro- and anti-homosexual following such tweets goes a long way to reveal how linguistics of homosexual discourse plays a role in the advocacy for the recognition of LGBTQ rights. This is in the bid to examine the role language plays in sustaining the perpetuation of homophobia and discrimination against homosexuals in Nigeria. The succeeding section presents the analysis.

4. Masking sexual diversity

In this section, we examine the linguistic features of homosexual discourse to reveal the rejection and acceptance among Nigerian Twitter users. we believe that these users are youths and expectedly more informed about matters relating to sexual diversity than the older generations. We analyze the use of linguistic negation, agentivity and affectivity, and silence in promoting, creating, and advocating acceptance.

4.1. Linguistic negation

Negation is a linguistic feature that produces cognitive images of negative propositions and their opposing positive (Jeffries, 2014). In the data, linguistic negation is deployed to prompt discussion on issues of public interest. Often negation is used to influence participants to imagine the opposing poles of the issues at hand. Letter T is used in the data presentation to represent ‘tweet’.

T1 @thefelakinging

Nigerians are low-key accepting homosexuals now.

T2 @therealdamola

Replying to @thefelakinging

You are too cute to be this stupid.

T3 @thefelakinging

Lmao what did I say wrong actually?

T4 @therealdamilola

Replying to @thefelakinging

What was the purpose of your tweet? When you answer that, you’d know what you said wrong. Or you want to tell me that you are also low-key accepting homosexuals

T5 @thefelakinging

I’m actually happy Nigerians are low-key accepting homosexuals. I have no issues whatsoever with someone’s choice of partner.

The opening tweet in this thread is contextually negative but structurally positive. The background knowledge informing this tweet is the general episteme that homosexuality is not acceptable in Nigeria. This episteme has been argued to be a postcolonial neocolonized knowledge promoted by “the negative processes of Western modernity as it spreads across the world” (Ndlovu-Gasheni, 2013: 1). As other tweets reveal, tweet 1 can be decoded as mischief. It queries the LGBTQ persons’ public appearance on the #EndSars protest ground as Nigerians’ open acceptance and accommodation of homosexuality. Tweet 2 shows an understanding of the

negative intent of tweet 1 and thereby, tweet ‘you are too cute to be this stupid’ avoiding also structural negation but uses lexical negation ‘stupid’. The avoidance of structural negation in tweet 1 makes the Twitter user, who later confesses to be trying to sample views on the level of acceptance, complicit in the masking of homosexuality in Nigeria. Linguistic negation allows Twitter users to imagine the actual positive version of the situation from different standpoints. The use of expletives in tweets 3 and 5 forces the tweet initiator to capitulate and claim to support the recognition of the queer person’s right in Nigeria. This gives a false sense of homogeneity where by implication the acceptance of homosexuality is not totally reliable. This will become clearer presently with the tweets below.

T6 @lanraee

It’s really sad tbh (weeping emoji)

T7 @felakinging:

Replying to @lanraee

What’s your take on the issue

T8 @Rahhkeem:

Replying to @felakinging and @lanraee

Guys na to burn them.

T9 @chrysiie: Cause we look like a pack of Guinea Rats??? ...

Tweet 6 decodes the sarcasm of tweet 1 and this prompted the ‘really sad’ turn which shows the standpoint of a typical homophobic. Tweet 8 goes extreme to propose a capital verdict of ‘burning’ gay people by calling on previous commenters ‘guys’. The negative perceptions become obvious through such words as ‘sad’, and ‘burn’. Tweet 9 reduces homosexuals to ‘pack of Guinea Rats’. The tweet opens up a network of negativity around the subject of the acceptance of homosexuality among Nigerians. The use of negative terms relating to emotion is found majorly among homophobes while negative terms relating to prey species are deployed by the homosexuals. Tweets 8 and 9 confirm a relationship between a prey hunter and the prey that runs

through the data. Therefore, Tweet 8 reinforces the perception that homosexuals are social misfits and worth no compassion. By recommending homosexuals for burning, the commenter reiterates the contention around homosexuality. Since stylistics generally is not merely concerned with ‘effects’ in language and text, discourse stylistics analyses social and political perspectives of texts and how we understand the portrayal of the homosexual as ineffective or inconsequential persons that can be exterminated at will by anyone through the patterns of tweet exchanges. Tweet 9 reflects the powerlessness of this person as the construction of the Nigerian sexual realities. Homosexuality is not perceived as sexuality or sexual idea but an object bearing a specific negative identity. “Sexuality thrives on the separation of the body into independent parts, whereas a sexually repressive morality insists on the wholeness and singleness of body and mind or soul” (Attridge 1988: 167). The succeeding section puts this in perspective.

4.2. Agentivity and affectivity

Agentivity and affectivity constitute strategies the LGBTQ persons employed to draw the lines between heteronormative and homosexual identities. Agentivity refers to the initiator of homophobic actions while affectivity is the one who is directly affected by such an action (Montoro, 2014). Any homophobic event must fulfill the ‘the who does what to who’ relationship. Being homophobic cuts across age and time and unlike the popular belief that homophobia is found only among the old, the illiterate, and the unexposed, it is identifiable that online communication transmits homophobia just as it is often witnessed in the physical space. Performing homophobia is illustrated in the tweets below:

T10 @notpessimistic_

The number of homophobia children Nigerian parents are breeding and hip hop is enabling is scary.

T11 @guavavenezolana

Never dated a homophobic man but the closest I came to that was a Nigerian dude who's* parents were insanely homophobic but if a dude shows signs of ignorance akin to homophobia or anything related - it's a dub.

T12 @chidinmaNnoli

Nigerians need therapy 'is so f*cking laughable because the average Nigerian is either sexist, misogynist, homophobic or a religious bigot. What are the chances of ever getting a sane therapist. I'm gay but can't tell my parents' will turn to there's a spirit following you".

T13 @beejonson

Yeah, this is the Nigerian parent for you. And not just homophobic children, they raise them to be sexist and misogynist too.

Tweets 10-13 show that becoming homophobic involves a process of parental breeding and it is biologically rather than physically transmitted. 'breeding', 'enabling' and 'raise' suggest a continuous transmission of a belief system that has been sustained and emboldened through colonialism. Nigerian parents play agentive roles in repressing the knowledge of homosexuality. They sustain the repression through words such as 'shameful act', 'a disgrace', 'evil', etc. Therefore, homophobia is ever a part of socialization in Nigeria. This, as revealed in the tweets above, implies the construction of homosexuality as a product of civilization and materialism.

Beyond agentivity, homophobic tweets affect the interactional potentials of homosexuals who are mostly affected by cyber-bullying. Underlining these tweets is the 'homosexual equals modernity and a threat' viewpoints.

T14 @mzBellaaa

Who says it's low-key?

T15 @felakinging

Lmao, you mean it's the norm now.

T16 @chrysiie

It's not a norm yet but people no longer see us as a threat.

T17 @mzBellaaa

Uncle said 'us'

Nigeria has always masked the historical basis of alternative sexuality either in silence or by making a taboo of the idea. Agentive categorization of homosexuality creates negative

affectivity which makes the homosexual an interloper, the subdued group that needs to hide their vulnerability in silence. Silence is another strategy that will be looked into in the next section.

4.3. Language of silence

Discourse analysts (see Sachs, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) have posited that silence does not occur at a random nor is it accidental or meaningless in conversational situations. Silence is a deliberate communicative strategy that bears the descriptive weight of being golden and consensual. Nakane argued that silence can be a product of suppression induced by “a dominant force at various levels of social organization”. This socially induced silence is signals vulnerability and acceptance of defeat. This is observed in the tweets from homosexuals.

T18 @the_amarion

A lady brought a rainbow flag and our fellow protesters turned on us at Berger Roundabout, Abuja. They tore our placards and seized the flag. I got it back but they refused that we fly it. I wore it on my neck and they refused. Said we take it off or leave. I'm leaving.

Tweet 18 suggests an on-the-spot report of homophobic bullying on the protest ground. Expectedly, the tweet generated reactions from Twitter users who continued the bullying online as presented below.

T19 @Iam_Olujay

Let it be clearly stated ... we are not in support of homosexuality... Gerra out here *for*.

T20 @Paulbabs4

I swear my brother this lady has been used, I was mad.., we talking life, they talking lesbian.

T21 @Iam_Olujay

I was provoked bruh... Imagine her likes relating the issue with what's on ground not talking about how they can influence the young ones with their nonsense.

Tweets 19-21 generate ‘written bully’ (not verbal bully) as responses. The bullying tweets do not get the reaction of the person who posts the tweet. Silence is a rhetorical nonlinguistic device that shows the LGBTQ persons as vulnerable individuals. Tweeting and recoiling do not interpret as a lack of voice in the online space. Homosexuals use tweeting and recoiling as a performative strategy associated with ‘powerlessness’ or a specific situation of being at the margins (Ferguson, 2003: 52-53). The lack of public power or protest power manifests in cyberspace. The LGBTQ person becomes the object of the power of other tweeter users and her tweet is obviously overwhelmed by homophobic tweets. Devji (2016: 343) supports this position that “resistance to queerness in African is at least partially rooted in the language used to describe non-heteronormative sexualities. Many of the most familiar terms such as the acronym LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer), are sourced in western studies of non-heteronormative sexuality and are, therefore, assumed to express western conceptions of sexuality”. This leads to the understanding of such tweets as “Let it be clearly stated ... we are not in support of homosexuality” and “we talking life, they talking lesbian” as not involving or constituting issues around the right to life, equality, and freedom of association. The patterning of African knowledge in the direction of theories drawn from the West is consistently impeding the accommodation of alternative sexuality in Nigeria. Suppression of autochthonous African knowledge is therefore aided and made effective by silencing indigenous linguistic resources that can speak of sexual diversities in indigenous voices.

5. Conclusion

This contribution has examined the stylistic strategies used in masking the knowledge of homosexuality as un-African. The focus was on the language features used by Twitter users to express their attitudes and perceptions of alternative sexuality in digital media. Three stylistic

strategies - linguistic negativity, agentivity and affectivity, and silence – were identified as predominant in the marginalization of sexual minorities. Linguistic negativity reveals that homosexuals are endangered species in Nigeria as sexual differences are portrayed as European – Western modernity – which “reinvents the sex and gender codes of the West that privilege not only heteronormative social relations” (Spurlin, 2016: 17). Anti-Western sentiment and linguistic negativity towards homosexuality are enacted in physical and digital space. Linguistic negativity is the stylistic feature used to legitimize negative homosexual identity by subverting traditional knowledge of sexuality. Agentivity and affectivity are twin language features employed in masking homosexual knowledge in the studied tweets. These two stylistic strategies foster silence on the affected group; thereby, making them recoil in the face of cyber-bullying. I thereby recommend that silence as a linguistic and psychological feature in online homosexual engagement is further examined.

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