

## THE DISCOURSE OF CONFLICT IN SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

Frolence Rutechura<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Conflict in online discussions has the potential to polarise individuals' perceptions of any online political related post, yet political communication scholarship has paid little attention to systematic study of how verbal attacks play out in online discussions of political related posts. This paper takes a critical look at some samples of online readers' comments to the news post issued by the European Union condemning the rise of political-related violence in Tanzania on the Tanzania based online platform–JamiiForums–in order to see how language is used by individuals to express their view points and opinions on the news event. This study applies van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive approach of positive-self and negative-other polarisation in the readers' comments on the news event.*

**Keywords:** *social media network, conflict discourse, self presentation, other presentation.*

### Introduction

Social media has become a technology that can be accessed from computers and a range of mobile devices. Online social media networks have proved to be effective tools in advocacy and emergency communications (Pillay et al. 2010). Advocacy and communication in these online social media networks come in the forms of main posts and readers' comments. Interestingly, communications done through online social media not only measure public opinion, but they also reflect the situation of the society overall. Language is a means of communication and a structured system of representation. It serves as a tool through which society can be accessed. As stated by Fairclough (1989: 23), “the language activity which goes on in social contexts is merely a reflection or expression of social processes and practices; it is part of those processes and practices.” This submission implies that there is a relationship between text, discourse and society. This paper therefore takes a critical look at some samples of online readers' reactions to the statement by the European Union condemning the rise of political-related violence in Tanzania posted on *JamiiForums*,<sup>2</sup> in order to see how language is used by individuals to express their view points and opinions on the content of the post.

### Background

Ever since the fifth phase government took over in November 2015, there has been mounting concerns over governmental actions that constitute political repression, infringements on the rights of free expression, and serious threats to opposition members and critics of the government, legal professions, and human rights activists,

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam

<sup>2</sup> [An East African online social media network founded in Tanzania in 2006. - Ed.]

closing down newspapers and radio stations, halting live broadcasts of parliamentary sessions, banning political rallies. It is through these concerns that various international bodies have released statements condemning this violence, one of the statements was released by the European Union on February 23rd 2018. This statement was posted on JamiiForums for public consumption.

JamiiForums is a popular Swahili social media networking site that is partly a whistle-blowing platform and partly a citizen journalism outlet. It was founded in 2006 and since then it has been an online social networking platform where members can post contents and other reading members can comment on these posts. Most of the members in this platform have registered by using pseudonyms to hide their identity. Non-members of the site cannot post or comment on any post but can freely access the posts or comments. It has posts organised in different themes, such as politics, love and relationships, sports, technology, economics and business, international affairs, so that a member posts their comments appropriately fitting these themes.

With the advent of online platforms like JamiiForums, readers' comments on sensitive posts related to political issues carry different opinions and viewpoints which result into conflicts, crisis, resistance. Giddens (2006) argues that the internet is such a powerful, democratising and liberating force, which the media have greatly exploited because of its ability to facilitate the spread of ideas, information and slogans across the globe in the fastest possible ways. Online media outlets, unlike print media, give readers capacity to express their viewpoints through comments after reading news posts that have the greatest effect upon their lives.

Studies of online readers' reactions to news have examined the effects of media news on public perception of the newsworthy events themselves (Kim and Sun 2006, Lee and Sung 2007, Lee 2010). These studies also highlight the effects of the opinion and quality of user postings on internet news readers' attitude toward the newsworthy issues underlying the reported events (Na and Rhee 2008, Yang 2008); but this body of research pays little attention to linguistic strategies deployed by readers to represent their views on such news events. In Africa, a few studies chiefly from Nigeria (Chiluwa 2011, Ayoola 2008, Oha 1994) have focused on the stylistic and discursive features of news reports featuring violence; but these focus only on the initial news posts; they do not address the linguistic forms of readers' comments to such news reports. However, available studies on social media in Tanzanian contexts looked at the youth and their use of social media to communicate among themselves. Analysis of readers' text choice demonstrated in comments posted in social media in Tanzania remains an interesting aspect requiring technically disciplined inquiry.

### **Conflict enacted through language**

Verbal conflict is the conflict reflected in language use, especially in interpersonal, inter-ethnic and social communicative settings. It manifests itself in different forms including abuse, curse, evil prayer, negative labelling, and other hostile linguistic practices. All of these have attendant consequences, since words are so powerful. A

word can excite, depress, bring harmony, foment hatred, ratify scorn, incite rioting, and contribute causally to the outbreak of violence. In line with this submission, Kurizaki (2007) observes that language (word use) can either “escalate or de-escalate conflicts.” Words have been known to cause conflict and words have created peace in societies. Nelson (2003: 449) highlights the connection between language and conflict in this way:

Human conflict begins and ends via talk and text. We generate, shape, implement, remember and forget violent behavior between individuals, communities or states through a specific discourse. It is discourse that prepares for sacrifice, justifies inhumanity, absolves from guilt, and demonises the enemy.

The psychological function of language is realised in what people say and how they say it. Thus words reflect human personality. Words reveal what we are and what we believe. It is not an exaggeration to say that language use is never ideologically innocent; it is never bias-free, but carries an underlying set of assumptions, beliefs and values of the user.

Correlatively, responses and reactions of people are motivated by the interpretations they make out of others’ use of language. To a large extent, humans have control over what they say, in relation to what they expect it to mean for their hearers. This means that they can attempt to make friends or breakdown friendship as a function of linguistic manipulation. In other words, people may carefully, or unconsciously, choose linguistic resources to represent their intentions from which several possible interpretations and reactions could follow. Hence, words of conflict carry hidden intentions (Smith 1997), whose follow-up reactions are hardly predictable. Thus, the assumption in this study is that there may be in many situations a direct correlation between language and a mood of violence in the society which disposes the public exposed to such language to incidents of violent behaviour.

### **Theoretical framework: Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive model**

In trying to make sense of the data on verbal conflict in readers’ reactions to online posts, I employ insights from van Dijk’s theoretical contribution to critical discourse analysis (CDA). Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive model is one of the most widely used frameworks in critical studies today, especially in studies of discourse in the media. Van Dijk (1995) essentially perceives discourse analysis as ideology; as ideology is ever present in any communicative text. According to van Dijk (1991), ideologies are frameworks of interpretation which coordinate attitudes of groups in societies comprising the modern world. To him, ideology is a special form of social cognition shared by groups which informs the basis of their social representations and practices.

Van Dijk’s (2006) model consists of three interrelated parts: social, cognitive, and discursive. According to van Dijk, social analysis pertains to examining the overall societal structures (the non-linguistic context of communication and collective activities); and discourse analysis is primarily text-based (focussing on linguistic

forms and strategies). Cognitive analysis then mediates between the social and discursive foci, addressing prejudiced social representations shared by groups. Thus, to interpret language used by online readers, one must engage in cognitive analysis to reveal how societal structures influence the shape of discourse, thereby illuminating how these structures in turn are enacted, legitimised, instituted, and confirmed or otherwise challenged by text (van Dijk 1997). The cognitive or mental representations are important insofar as they obviously influence and perhaps determine how people speak or write. And in some sense social understanding via the analysis mental representations presupposes that these cognitive features of individuals play some role in how people understand the social practices of others (van Dijk 1997). One may suppose that these representations are often the basis for most positive ‘self’ images and negative ‘other’ presentations. The usefulness of van Dijk’s model is evident if we consider the inevitability of shared beliefs among the readers who comment on news items about violence, insofar as the language used in these comments harbours specific ideologies. Thus, my analysis will not only identify these linguistic signifiers but will also disclose features of the underlying ideologies encoded within the language so used.

### **Methodology**

Data for the study is comprised of samples of un-moderated online readers’ comments to news post with the title *Umoja wa Ulaya (EU) waitaka Tanzania kuheshimu utawala wa demokrasia na sheria* [European Union (EU) urges Tanzania to respect democratic governance and law], posted on JamiiForums ([www.jamiiforums.com](http://www.jamiiforums.com)) on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2018. I selected the first 200 comments, from which those submissions with ideological leanings were purposively sampled out, using as the basis for screening the theme of verbal conflict; and these were analysed using insights from van Dijk’s (2006) socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis.

### **Data analysis<sup>3</sup>**

One observes in viewing the data that a variety of linguistic forms are employed in readers’ comments. These include negative labelling, rhetorical questioning, political allusion, metaphor and curse. These linguistic forms were divided into two ideological leanings: first, those supporting the EU statement and condemning the government, second; those downplaying the EU statement and supporting the government.

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<sup>3</sup> [Comments organized in the graphics are all sourced as first order data by the means described in methodology section.- Ed.]

Negative labelling

1. <i>Taarifa dhaifu na hakuna madhara kwa waasi</i>	Weak statements with no effect to dictators!
2. <i>Tusiwasubiri UN na EU tupambane na hawa maharamia sisi wenyewe</i>	We should not wait for UN and EU, we have to fight against these pirates by ourselves.
3. <i>Ujinga ni silaha kuu ya CCM</i>	Foolishness is CCM's weapon
4. <i>Kujitawala siyo kigezo cha kuua raia wenzako kikatili na kidhalimu</i>	To govern oneself should not be the criteria of killing your fellow citizen brutally and oppressively.
5. <i>Chadema ndiyo wauwaji na hawafuati sharia</i>	It is Chadema who are killers and not obeying the law
6. <i>Kwa taarifa yako wazungu ni wanafiki sana ndiyo wanaochochea vita duniani.</i>	For your information, white men are very hypocrite; they are the ones stirring up war in the world.
7. <i>Chadema acheni unafiki</i>	Chadema stop being hypocrites
8. <i>Wamekaa kimya mauaji ya Syria, walikaa kimya mauaji ya Iraq, Libya ...Kwa unafiki Mkubwa wanajifanya wameguswa na Tanzania</i>	They have kept quite about Syria killing, they kept quiet about Iraq killing, Libya...with high level of hypocrisy they pretend to be concerned with Tanzania.

From the data above, words have been deliberately chosen to negatively label the out-group views and characters. Negative labels "dictators," "foolishness," "oppressors," "pirates," "brutal," "killers," have been used by those supporting the EU's statement towards the government and those supporting practices condemned by the EU. These derogatory labels not only condemn the activities of the government; they also present the character of the people represented by that government. The ideology underlying the labelling conveys an overall condemnation.

On the other hand, another set of data presented above reveals that some readers negatively describe both the EU as an institution and those backing up statements issued by the EU. These EU supporters have been labelled "killers," "hypocrites," people "fuelling war in the world," "law breakers." The use of these negative labels not only discredits the statements issued explicitly, but also degrades the ethos of the members and followers of the opposition party, Chadema, who openly support the statement issued by the EU.

*Rhetorical questions*

1. <i>Unaanzaje kuilaani Tanzania wakati Kenya walikufa watu 24?</i>	How do you start condemning Tanzania while 24 people died in Kenya?
2. <i>Kuna mauaji gani tz kuliko Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, DRC nk?</i>	What kind of killings are in Tanzania than Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, DRC etc?
3. <i>Tamko zuri...ila hawa 'watu' wametoa matamko kama haya kwa mauaji yanayoendelea huko America au USA???</i>	Good statement...however have 'people' issued statements of this kind on the killing happening in America or USA?
4. <i>Tumia akili. Chadema ndio walimuua Akwilina? ndio waliomuua Ben Saanane? Ndio waliompiga risasi Lissu? Chadema ndio wanadidimiza elimu ya Tanzania?</i>	Use common sense! Are Chadema the ones who killed Akwilina? are they the ones who killed Ben Saanane? Are they the ones who shot Lissu? Are Chadema the ones undermining Tanzanian education?
5. <i>Kwahiyo wanasubiri wafike 24 ndiyo walaani?</i>	So, they should hold on until 24 [deaths] 24 to condemn?
6. <i>Polisi wa Ulaya lini wameshiriki kuwadhuru wana siasa?</i>	Have you ever heard police officers in Europe engaging in hurting politicians?
7. <i>Kama Libya wanauana kwahiyo na Tanzania tuuane kama wao?</i>	If Libya are killing each other, so Tanzania we should kill each other like them?

A rhetorical question is a question often asked only as a thought-provoking gesture or as a way of stimulating discussions. It is also a means of making tentative statement by phrasing it in the form of questions designed to incite the readers. Questions asked by anti-government foreground lapses of the government but also expose weak the weaknesses of arguments put forward by the readers opposing the EU statement. For example, Question 4, "So, they [EU] should hold on up until it reaches 24 killings for them to condemn?", this question was asked in response to question one which was asked by a reader opposing the EU statement suggesting that there is no way Tanzania can be condemned while there were 24 (more killings) killings in Kenya compared to Tanzania. The reader's comment in question 4 actually exposes a weak argument put forward by the reader's comment in Question 1.

On the other hand, readers opposing the statement seem to question the fairness of the EU who are condemning the violence in Tanzania amid war and killings

happening in US and other countries in Africa. Questions 2 and 3 for instance, "What kind of killing are there compared to those of Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, DRC etc?" and "Good statement! But have these 'people' released similar statements to the killings happening in America and US?" respectively. The two questions by readers aim at questioning the credibility of the EU suggesting that they are being substandard by just questioning what is happening in Tanzania, leaving behind even more pressing killings happening in other countries. This is yet a display of van Dijk's (2006) negative-other presentation between the two polarising readers on the statement.

### Metaphor

1. <i>Nyumba ya CHADEMA yaelekea kuungua</i>	Chadema's house is about to get burned.
2. <i>Yaani wewe ndo kiazzi kweli.....! Kwa hiyo kwa vile Tanzania wamekufa less people than Kenya, ndo watu wasilaani mauaji</i>	You are really a potato...! So, since a few people have died in Tanzania than Kenya, that mean people should not condemn the killings?
3. <i>Ujinga ni silaha kuu ya CCM</i>	Foolishness is the CCM's main weapo
4. <i>Ujinga ni mtaji wa CCM</i>	Foolishness is the CCM's capital

Metaphors are also used in the readers' comments on the EU news post. Here, online readers map the meaning of one aspect of a thing onto another for a vivid affect. In the above list, the first reader, who holds a negative opinion of the EU suggesting that the blog post was fabricated by members of the opposition party (Chadema), further says "Chadema's house is burning" to metaphorically imply Chadema as a political party is collapsing. As for the readers endorsing the EU's statement, they seem to accuse the ruling party, CCM, also by using metaphors: "weapon" and "capital" in sentences *Ujinga ni silaha ya CCM* – "Foolishness is CCM's main weapon" and *Ujinga ni mtaji wa CCM* – "Foolishness is CCM's capital." Metaphors "weapon" and "capital" in the two comments amplify the message behind the text written towards members of the ruling party, CCM.

### Curses

Curses are also deployed in the readers' reactions to news about violence. Here, ill-meaning prayers are offered to God to deal with the evil-doers while curses are directed at them. There are a few instances of such curses, and all of them seemed to be directed to evil-doers.

1. <i>Mwenyezi mungu uliyumba hii dunia uwalaani wote wanaohamasisha vitendo hivi kwa maana mbele yako binadamu wote ni sawa.</i>	Almighty God, the creator of this universe curse all who are motivating these actions as before you all human being are equal.
2. <i>Mungu atawalaani hizo njaa zenu ziwatafune mpaka mwisho wa dunia.</i>	May God curse you that your hunger bites you back until end of the universe.
3. <i>Kuna Mungu.</i>	There is God.

Curses are employed in texts one and two above as weapons for those casting condemnation of those who are organising or otherwise held responsible for the killings. Specifically, in text one, ill-intended exhortation in the form of a prayer is offered, appealing to God to bring harm and calamity to those organising the killings. This is realised in: "God, the creator of the universe, curse all who have organised these [killing/assassination] activities; since before you we are all equal." In text two, curses are released against those supporting the organisers of the killing for personal gain, as the commenting reader explicitly asks God to curse them. The ideology underlying these curses is that the organisers and supporters of the killings are not God-fearing and are therefore evil-doers. In turn, this is a realisation of a *negative-other* representation in the reader's comments.

### Summary of findings

Readers' linguistic forms for representing their views on news of violence include violent negative labelling, rhetorical questions, metaphors, and curses. The rhetorical functions include psychological relief (e.g. use of negative labelling), curses, and establishing social, religious and ethnic identity. Socio-psychological factors motivating the reactions are mainly frustration based on insecurity, uncertainty, lack of jobs while ideologies are religious, negative other presentation, pessimism, nationalism, etc. The basic implication of these is that people's reactions would tend to fuel further reactions from other readers which could sustain the conflict situation. It is worthy of note that my analysis has further demonstrated the effects of the readers' online reactions and opinions on social reality and perception of the event. One clear thing is all these uses of language are latent with angry emotions, which generate a deluge of chain reactions from other readers. Nevertheless, some readers' reactions indicated the need for peaceful solutions to the problem through God's intervention and people's prayer.

From the discussion, we have seen how words are quite important and powerful in our everyday lives and collective activities. A word can excite and a word can depress. A word can bring harmony and words can incite a riot or cause conflict. Words reflect human personality. The psychological function of language is realised in what people say and how they say it. That is, words reveal what we are and what we believe. In addition, words have been known to cause conflict and words have created peace in the human societies.



## **Conclusion**

As we all know, language can depress, incite as well as escalate conflict; and it also brings about peace and harmony in society. Thus the government and the media have important political and social responsibilities in monitoring and, arguably, censoring news transmitted via the internet. There may be a need for government policies on news management and censorship. The data displayed here may indicate that there should be a checking mechanism for the inflow of articles from the online communicators, by creating a software that makes it necessary for online readers' reactions to news to pass through the editors-in-chief before such articles are published.

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