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**SOCIOLINGUISTIC EXPLORATION OF NIGERIANS' POLITICAL WHATSAPP COMMUNITIES: A  
CASE STUDY OF PRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI SUPPORTERS' GROUPS**

**ZUBAIRU MALAH<sup>1</sup>, ADAMU IDRIS<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Yobe State University (YSU), Damaturu, Nigeria

<sup>1</sup>[zubayrmalah@yahoo.com](mailto:zubayrmalah@yahoo.com)

<sup>2</sup>Department of English and Literary Studies, Bayero University Kano (BUK), Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>[lamidooadamuidris@gmail.com](mailto:lamidooadamuidris@gmail.com)



**ZUBAIRU MALAH**



**ADAMU IDRIS**

**ABSTRACT**

WhatsApp group interactions have attracted academic attention from different disciplines and research fields. However, the literature suggests that most studies so far have only examined how WhatsApp platforms could be blended to support the traditional face-to-face teaching, or how they could be utilized as sole avenues for teaching. Agreeably, how social factors affect linguistic variabilities in WhatsApp groups has been under-researched. Therefore, in an endeavor to further the current knowledge, this study drew on sociolinguistic framework and investigated the relationship between Nigerians' political WhatsApp groups and language variability. Specifically, the study explored President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups. The objectives of the study were (1) to identify the distinguishing linguistic features of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups, and (2) to examine how the shared values and identities among the members of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups are reflected in their linguistic choices. To pursue these objectives, the study adopted qualitative approach and analyzed *lexical* and *discursive variables* in a database comprising 502 texts of 11, 470 words collected live online from three Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups: *Buhari Vendors Malaysia*, *Unity is Necessary*, and *I'm a Buharist*, for a period of 18 months, where the researchers served as observers and participants. The findings revealed that Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups have gradually developed distinguishing linguistic features as *coinages*, *slangs*, *borrowings*, *abbreviations*, and the *style of comparison and contrast*. In addition, the shared values and identities of the members of these WhatsApp groups that are reflected in their linguistic choices include *ardent political support*, *firm solidarity to President Muhammadu Buhari*, and *fierce attack or mockery* on the opposition PDP. In conclusion, the researchers have suggested that this study has also furthered the current knowledge on the relationship between computer-mediated contexts and sociolinguistic variability.

**Key Words:** Computer-Mediated Discourse, Muhammadu Buhari, Nigerians' political Communities, sociolinguistic variable, Speech Communities, WhatsApp Groups

**KY PUBLICATIONS**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Communities of language users have often been crucial in linguistic, sociolinguistic, and anthropological linguistic investigations. But while the formal linguists, such as de Saussure and Chomsky, merely 'refer in passing' (Ahearn, 2012:104) to groups of language users and focus their analyses on abstract, intuitively-invented, and decontextualized linguistic data, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists such as Hymes, Gumperz, Labov, Malinowski, Sapir, and Firth pay heed to the inevitable relationship between groups of language users and the naturally-occurring authentic language forms and practices produced – facts that make discourse analysts draw on the sociolinguistic framework and avoid Chomskyan framework (Kaplan and Grabe, 2002; Widdowson, 2004; Tagliamonte, 2006; Ahearn, 2012). Therefore, among the notions proposed by sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists, in attempts to demonstrate this relationship, is *speech communities* (Morgan, 2004; Ahearn, 2012) – groups of language users whose shared norms, values, local knowledge, beliefs, and identities are reflected in their language practices (see 1.1).

The tide of politics has been high in Nigeria. The circumstance has led to the emergence of numerous groups of supporters both online and offline, especially among youth. These groups are good case studies where political actors interact in political contexts. Specifically, there are Nigerians' political communities and platforms on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, blogs e.t.c. More interestingly, in addition to the overlapping forms of online language such as *textese* (lol, bfn, dts), *rebus writing* (5n, 10s, gr8!), *emoticons* (^\_^), and *written-out laughter* (hahaha!) (See, for example, Crystal, 2011; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2012; Sanchez-Moya and Cruz-Moya, 2015), these communities have developed typical ways of using language. As suggested by Wilson (2001), the discourse enacted in these communities is mostly framed to manipulate thought and also to reflect the shared norms, values, and identities of the members. This online linguistic variability conditioned by social factors and contexts of use often attracts the attention of computer-mediated discourse analysts,

especially those operating within the framework of sociolinguistics (Herring, 2001; Thurlow and Tomic, 2004).

Moreover, studies have discovered that the WhatsApp Instant Mobile Messaging (IMM) application supports group-based interactions, where members communicate more intimately with sense of community, more than the Facebook and traditional SMS (see Church and Oliveira, 2013; Karapanos, Teixeira, and Gouveia, 2016). This is because the WhatsApp application allows users to receive and send real-time videos, audio, location information, images, and text messages to individuals and groups of friends. This rich communicative versatility of WhatsApp has drawn the attention of researchers from different disciplines and research fields. The literature suggests that most studies so far have only explored how WhatsApp platforms could be utilized as teaching-learning contexts. Some of such studies reported that the use of WhatsApp could be blended to supplement the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning (see Ahad and Lim, 2014; Malecela, 2016; Mwakapani, Mhadeni, and Nyinondi, 2016; Nitza and Roman, 2016; Sayan, 2016; So, 2016) and others observed that it could even be used as the sole avenue of instruction (see Amry, 2014; Maniar and Modi, 2014; Mann, 2014; Heng and Ling, 2015; Andujar, 2016).

Therefore, as sociolinguistic principles apply also to the language use on the internet (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004), it could be seen how a gap in research exists because previous studies have not focused on the relationship between social factors and the language practices of political WhatsApp communities. Thus, the current study sought to take care of this research niche by drawing on the sociolinguistic framework to investigate the WhatsApp groups of Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari supporters. The purpose of the study is to further the current knowledge on the relationship between computer-networked social contexts and language variability.

In Nigeria, WhatsApp groups are being used as political tools. Many WhatsApp groups were created especially from December, 2014, when Muhammadu Buhari emerged as the presidential

candidate of the then opposition party *All Progressive Congress (APC)*. Buhari's emergence was a turning point in Nigerian politics. He is a retired Major General who also served as Nigeria's Head of State from 31<sup>st</sup> December 1983 to 27<sup>th</sup> August 1985. Since then, Mr Buhari has been a charismatic and highly respected figure in Nigeria. He has made his mark globally for honesty and fierce fight against corrupt practices and indiscipline. His victory at the APC primaries resulted in political renaissance that revolutionized Nigerians' approach to politics. It triggered a boom that signaled the peak of electioneering for Nigeria's 2015 general elections. Consequently, most of the WhatsApp groups started as forums for the propagation of the need for CHANGE in Nigeria's presidency, and the promotion and support for the anti-graft opposition candidate Muhammad Buhari. Mr Buhari eventually succeeded in defeating the then incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan who ran under the *People's Democratic Party (PDP)*. This is the first time in Nigeria's history that an incumbent president lost to an opposition candidate.

President Muhammadu Buhari was sworn in on Friday, the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, 2015; but these WhatsApp groups are still lively and most of the posts and discussions in the groups focus on Nigerian politics and issues relating to government policies. Most of the groups mainly use English as the medium of communication, though there has been occasional use of Nigerian languages such as Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. Members post videos, audio, images, location information, and text messages.

### 1.1 The Concept of Speech Communities

Although the term *speech community* has been a key concept in sociolinguistics, its definition has always been a source of debate and controversy among the scholars (Mullany, 2007). Different scholars have proposed different criteria as to how the concept should be viewed. As cited in Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015), Mesthrie (2009), Mullany (2007), and Saviile-Troike (2003), some of the criteria proposed for the existence of speech communities include: shared language (or dialect) use (Lyon, 1970), shared rules of speaking and interpretation of speech performance (Hymes,

1972), shared attitudes and values regarding language forms and use (Labov, 1972), and shared sociocultural understandings and presuppositions regarding speech (Sherzer, 1975/1977).

However, it should also be highlighted that most sociolinguists today believe that shared language or dialect should not be a criterion for the existence of speech communities (see Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2015; Mesthrie, 2009; Mullany, 2007; Meyerhoff, 2006). These scholars argue that individuals might share a common language or dialect but differ in certain sociolinguistic conventions such as the appropriate rules of speaking and interpreting linguistic behaviors, shared set of norms, beliefs, and values which are linguistically reflected.

Moreover, the scholars also draw attention to the fact that individuals might not share a common language or dialect, but might share the repertoire of these sociolinguistic conventions and competence. For instance, Mesthrie (2009) describes India, despite its multilingual nature, as a single speech community (one sociolinguistic unit) because the people share sociolinguistic conventions and norms; while Saviile-Troike (2003) contends that speakers of Spanish in Texas and Argentina, despite the fact that they share the same code, belong to different speech communities because they do not share sociolinguistic conventions and norms.

Therefore, it is apparent that in defining a speech community, it is not the shared language/dialect, linguistic repertoire, code repertoire, or verbal repertoire (in Kachru's 2001 terms) among the members that is given precedence. Rather, it is the shared set of norms, local knowledge and experiences, beliefs, and values (Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2015), or the shared ways in which members of the group use, value, or interpret language (Mesthrie, 2009) that are considered more important. However, this does not suggest that language is not any important for the existence of speech communities. It should be understood that unless for ostensive-inferential communications, where communicators simply give (relevant) ostensions for inference (Wilson & Sperber, 2006),

most of the shared sociolinguistic conventions, norms, and values are enacted in the language.

In addition, Saville-Troike (2003) has classed speech communities into two types: *soft-shelled* speech communities and *hard-shelled* speech communities based on how linguistically soft or hard the boundaries of the communities are. She expatiates that communities are soft-shelled when they use one of the world languages, such as English, that allows outsiders to maximally interact with members of the group; and that other communities are hard-shelled for their use of languages whose limited distributions allow only minimal interactionability between the group members and outsiders, hence strictly maintains the group's language and culture, such as the Armenians in the United States. In sum, speech communities could be viewed as groups of people who share and adhere to certain conventional values, norms, or competence represented in their interactions.

### 1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- I. to identify the distinguishing linguistic features of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups,
- II. to examine how the shared values and identities among the members of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups are reflected in their linguistic choices.

## 2. Review of Related Studies

### 2.1 Context and Language Use

Researchers operating within the sociolinguistic framework, as an approach to discourse analysis, always give emphasis to contexts of language use. This category of researchers believes that language exists only in contexts – such as the *President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups* in the present study. Certainly, the notion of *context* is a very fundamental one in any attempt to investigate language in use. Part of why this is so, is that context contributes immensely to understanding *language-in-use*, while discourse analysis is the study of language-in-use (Paul Gee, 2011). If we may begin by drawing an analogy based on our understanding of the relation between

*context* and *language-in-use*, imagine a stray bird just hovering aimlessly in the air without perching! It will be hard to identify which type of bird it is, or to understand what it intends. In a similar manner, any unit of language without contextual connection is *inert* (of no significance). Neither its shape nor size yields any meaning (Widdowson, 2014).

For its importance in discourse studies, many scholars have focused special attention on context (see; Halliday & Hassan 1985; Fetzer, 2004; Widdowson, 2004; Blommaert, 2005; van Dijk, 2008; Jones, 2012; Paul Gee, 2011; for example). This is because for *discourse analysts* to have (near-) accurate *interpretations* of utterances or texts, the texts must be related to their contexts of production. Different discourse analysts have proposed explanations of the term *context* and we understand that contexts include: *the physical settings or times, facial expressions and gestures, actions and previous utterances, shared knowledge between discourse users, shared cultural knowledge and histories of interactions*. To understand or interpret an utterance or text, we must relate it to the *relevant part of the context*. And, while in face-to-face interactions we employ some contexts (like gestures, settings, time, previous utterances, e.t.c.), in written texts we employ others (like shared (cultural) knowledge, shared histories of interactions e.t.c.). (Widdowson, 2004; Paul Gee, 2011; Jones, 2012).

Like Harris (1952) on relations between different parts of texts, Malinowski (1923) initiated the idea of *context* in linguistic studies. He argues that mere utterances or translations without recourse to the context of situation will not allow accurate interpretation. Malinowski invoked the idea of context to explain how language was used among the *Trobriand islanders in the Western Pacific*. In such primitive communities, meanings of utterances were *contextually dependent*. On this background, it has been concluded that even in the modern civilized world, meanings of texts and utterances have to be *activated and keyed by contexts* for us to have *discourse* (Widdowson, 2004; Paul Gee, 2011; Jones, 2012;).

Drawing from Malinowski, scholars like Firth, Halliday, Gumperz, Auer, and Goffman continue to

contribute in this direction. Halliday and Firth both developed models of context, proposing what aspects and features are relevant to be constituted in contexts. The sociolinguist Gumperz (1992) developed the notion of *contextualization* to explain how interlocutors employ *clues* or *cues* in offering and generating contexts. He discusses how discourse producers and receivers simultaneously offer and form appropriate contextualization so that *uptake* is facilitated, and how *unexpected uptake* results when receivers form wrong contextualization. Goffman (1974) developed the concept of *frames* (knowledge structures shared and evoked by triggers) which is closest to Gumperz's contextualization. Goffman's frames are also interpretive universes constructed, and from which interlocutors can choose when need arises (Blommaert, 2005; Widdowson, 2004; Jones, 2012).

Furthermore, it is well to add that some linguists also divide context into three: *linguistic context*, *cognitive context*, and *social context*. While *linguistic context*, also called *co-text*, refers to the language material around the item (text or utterance) being focused: how preceding utterances constrain what follows; *cognitive context* refers to the cognitive factors: representations, assumptions, and efforts; and *social context*, which is the broadest, refers to the communicative situation, channels, discourse users and their roles. In fact, the relation between text and context is highly *reflexive and reciprocal* (Fetzer, 2004; Tanskanen, 2006; van Dijk, 2008).

To support our argument further on how fundamental context is to discourse analysis, we cite Widdowson's (2004) claim that the formal properties of texts like cohesion do not give textuality to texts as much as contexts do. The scholar maintains that a piece of language is recognized as text only when we realize the context it is intended to be related to, that interpreting a text in relation to its context, establishing relationship between *code* and *context*, is what gives us *discourse*. He goes on to demonstrate how linguistic items: single *letters*, *words*, *phrases*, and (*isolated*) *sentences* assume the status of texts simply because they appropriately *fit the contexts*. Among the examples given include public notices

like *P* (for 'Parking' or 'Parking is permitted here'), *Closed* (for 'This shop is closed'), *Children crossing*, *Dogs must be carried etc.* It is obvious, as Paul Gee (2011), Jones, (2012) and Widdowson (2004) observe that listeners and readers often use contexts in which things are said or written to retrieve meanings that are left unsaid but which are *inferable* from the contexts.

It is also obvious to see how the different approaches to discourse analysis necessarily make reference to context. In *lexical cohesion analysis* (see Malah, 2015; Malah, Tan and Rashid, 2016; Malah, 2016) for example, reference is always made not only to the genre but also to the contexts of texts production. For grammatical cohesion analysis too, certain elements are interpreted only when reference is made outside the text (to context). These are *exophoric references* like 'here', 'there', 'this', 'that', and also (sometimes) the definite article 'the' preceding a nominal that is interpreted from *cultural context* or *shared knowledge* (see Taboada, 2004; Tanskanen, 2006; Flowerdew, 2013 among others). In *conversation analysis*, the *adjacency pairs*, for example, are analyzed as being *intertextually* related. The *preferred response* or *unexpected response* is defined based on its contextual relation to preceding utterance(s). The *Genre analysts* must begin by stating explicitly the context of the genre under study. The *pragmatic analyst* must give heed to the intentions, relations, actions and conditions of discourse producers and receivers. This happens because while the focus of DA is language in use, context determines how people use language, and the language also reflects the context (Paul Gee, 2011; Tanskanen, 2006).

Because some contexts are cognitive, they do not exist in the material world and unless the discourse receiver also shares the context, an utterance cannot be interpreted. It is argued that interlocutors can *re-contextualise contexts* for smooth interaction to avoid misunderstanding, strengthen their contributions or ensure the validity of their (propositions) arguments (Fetzer, 2004). Therefore, while interacting (also argued by van Dijk, 2008), people invoke different *interpretive universes shared*. Let us take the following examples:

(1) **John:** Do you think Susan is a racist?



**Mary:** Well, she's a Southerner, isn't she? (J.P. Gee, 2011)

- (2) The river had been dry for a long time. Everyone attended the funeral. (Blakemore, 1992)

In example 1 above, Mary's answer cues John, who also shares the context of the past racial problems of the South in the US, to take this as the relevant part of the context and interpret her answer. So Mary is operating with the *figured world* that still assumes the Southerners as racists. If John does not share this *interpretive context* he cannot interpret Mary's answer. Example 2 *context* is part of a text from the Sissala people of Niger-congo who traditionally observe funerals when rivers run dry! So for one to see coherence in the text and to be able to interpret it, one must share this interpretive context.

In a nut shell, the significance of context in any language-in-use analysis, such as sociolinguistics research, cannot be over emphasized. We have attempted to put *context* in its proper perspective by citing different examples of ways how *text*, *context*, and discourse are related. A text in isolation does not result in discourse unless it is related to its context of occurrence. We have understood how texts are *activated* by the *contextual connections*, how the contexts *act on the code to invoke interpretations*. The WhatsApp groups of President Buhari supporters are typical contexts for sociolinguistic study. Sociolinguists believe that language exists only in contexts, and that unless context is taken into consideration, interpretations of linguistic practices would not be accurate.

## 2.2 Past Studies of WhatsApp Group Interactions

WhatsApp group interactions have been the focus of academic attention from researchers of different disciplines and research fields. Most of the studies so far have focused on how WhatsApp platforms could be utilized as avenues for teaching and learning, either as means of supporting the conventional face-to-face teacher-students' interactions, or as autonomous mobile classes which could be solely used for imparting knowledge. For instance, Ahad and Lim (2014) reported that WhatsApp group interactions provided positive support in the academic achievement of the

undergraduates of University Brunei Darussalam. In a similar study, Malecela (2016) also reported findings that are consistent with Ahad and Lim's. Malecela observed that WhatsApp group interactions are beneficial among the postgraduate students of International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

Moreover, Mwakapina, Mhandeni, and Nyinondi (2016) also investigated how WhatsApp group interactions could facilitate ESL learning in Tanzanian higher institutions. The researchers discovered that blending WhatsApp group interactions in ESL teaching impacts positively on the learners' achievement. This finding is in agreement with Ahad and Lim's (2014) and also Malecela (2016). Similarly, other studies that reported consistent findings with those of Mwakapina, Mhandeni, and Nyinondi (2016) include Nitza and Roman (2016), Sayan (2016), and So (2016). All of these studies discovered that integrating WhatsApp group interactions into teaching programs yields positive results by facilitating the learners' success.

On the other hand, other studies of WhatsApp group interactions argue that when employed as the only medium of interaction, WhatsApp platforms could be utilized for instructional purposes. For instance, Heng and Ling (2015) investigated how WhatsApp group interactions could be utilized in teaching Chinese characters to Malay L3 learners. The experiment discovered that employing WhatsApp group interactions was effective in teaching because the Malay L3 learners gave faster responses in recognizing the Chinese characters and also in making sentences. In a similar study, Mann (2014) explored how WhatsApp group interactions could be used to raise the consciousness of ESL learners on academic vocabulary. The study observed that after a period of WhatsApp-based instruction, there was significant success in the learners' achievement on the use of academic words. Therefore, both Heng and Ling (2015) and Mann (2014) have reported consistent findings that WhatsApp-based instructions are successful in improving learners' achievement. Other studies that reported similar

findings include Maniar and Modi (2014), Amry (2014), and Andujar (2016).

From the foregoing review of related studies, it could be seen that investigations into WhatsApp group interactions have not yet focused on the relations between political WhatsApp group interactions and sociolinguistic variability. There is need to fill in this literature gap. Therefore the present study sought to investigate the relationship between President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp group and their linguistic practices.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Approach

This is a qualitative case study research. Following Merriam (2009) and Dornyei (2007), the study is a language-based analysis of the phenomenon of shared values and identities enacted in linguistic practices of the members of Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups as typical *speech communities*.

#### 3.2 Sampling

The sampling of the study was purposive. Three WhatsApp groups of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters were sampled for the study. These groups include *Buhari Vendors Malaysia*, a WhatsApp group created among Nigerian students in Malaysia; *Unity is Necessary*, and *I'm a Buharist*, which are both based in Nigeria. Each of these WhatsApp groups was purposely created, during the electioneering for Nigeria's 2015 general elections, to serve as a platform for political interaction among typical supporters of Muhammadu Buhari.

Moreover, the sampling was also homogeneous (see Creswell, 2012; Tavakoli, 2013) because the study focused only on *text messages* not videos, images, audio, or location information as shared by the members. The sample size comprised 502 texts of 11, 470 words.

#### 3.3 Data Collection

The data of the study were collected live online by the researchers. Following Tagliamonte (2006), the researchers were added in these WhatsApp groups since January, 2015. They acted in the groups as observers and also participants, so that they were able to discern variation in language practices and record data from January, 2015 to June, 2016 (18 months of study). Texts were

carefully collected based on their perceived reflection of the groups' members' shared values and identities.

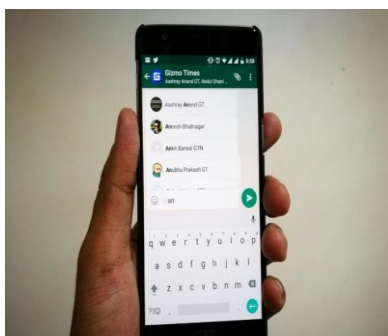
#### 3.4 Framework of Analysis

The study applied the framework of variationist sociolinguistics based on Tagliamonte (2006) and Tagliamonte (2012). In this framework, the focus of analysis is sociolinguistic variables, which could be either lexical or discursive. Therefore, the units of analysis were lexical items (simple or complex) and discursive strategies employed in the discourse of these WhatsApp speech communities.

#### 3.5 Analysis Procedure

Following Creswell (2012), the analysis began by preparing and organizing the texts into genres. This is because while some of the texts were conversational where members took turns, others were simple posts that conveyed different messages. After the organization of the texts, *pre-coding reflections* followed. This was in accordance with Dornyei (2007) and Creswell (2012). The aim here was to make sense of the data by reading and re-reading each text. When each text was explored exhaustively, *coding* and *memoing* followed. At the coding stage, each text – or part of it – was assigned a code based on the token identified. At the memoing stage, each text was read carefully and codes were used to grow ideas and build descriptions and themes.





#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 The Distinguishing Linguistic Features of President Muhammadu Buhari Supporters' WhatsApp Groups

The analysis of the data revealed that the participants in President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups have gradually

Table 4.1 Typical lexical items of President Muhammadu Buhari Supporters' WhatsApp groups

	Lexical item	Usual meaning	Group meaning
1	Wailers/wailing wailers	People who shout	Opposition parties supporters
2	Baba (from Hausa)	Father (male parent)	President Muh'd Buhari
3	PDP	People's Democratic Party	People Deceiving People
4	PMB	Coined/abbreviation	President Muh'd Buhari
5	PDPigs	Coined	Supporters of PDP
6	Ehe! (from Hausa)	Exclamation for emphasis	Exclamation for emphasis
7	#Dasukigate	Coined	Arms-purchase fund scandal involving members of the ousted opposition party
8	#Ekitigate	Coined	Election-rigging scandal involving some military men and some members of the opposition politicians in Ekiti State
9	Uhuru (from Swahili)	Freedom	Freedom

These features are illustrated in the following examples:

##### Example 1

The *wailing wailers* ... need to wake up from their slumber and put to their damn brains that the level of destruction cause [sic] by their so called party PDP ... wouldn't be contain [sic] or solve [sic] within one year of this administration of *PMB*. *Ehe!*

In example 1 above, the phrase *wailing wailers* refers to PDP supporters, and the abbreviation *PMB* means President Muhammad Buhari. The antagonism enacted in this text towards the opposition PDP supporters could be felt through the negative connotation of 'wailing wailers'. They are depicted as absolutely insincere people, good at nothing other than making empty noises. On the

developed certain distinguishing linguistic features in their interactions. These linguistic features include slangs, coinages, borrowings, abbreviations, and the style of comparison and contrast. Some lexical items used in these groups are quite unintelligible to outsiders because they are either newly coined by the members, borrowed from other languages such as Hausa, or they are usual words assuming different meanings. Observed carefully, these linguistic devices would hardly be understood by other Nigerians who do not belong to the groups. Some of these linguistic features, at the lexical level, are shown in the table 4.1 below:

other hand, *PMB* may encode different meanings in other contexts.

Example 2 below illustrates the use of *Baba* in a conversation episode to mean President Muhammad Buhari:

##### Example 2

- A. Good news! My dear brothers and sisters, PMB has signed the 2016 budget of change into law ... Do everything to stop corruption from [sic] our country. Well done *Baba!*
- B. Well done *baba* for life!
- C. Long live *baba!*

In example 2 above, all the instances of the word *baba* refer to President Muhammad Buhari. This word is borrowed from Hausa language and it



means male parent (father). The use of this word to refer to President Buhari signals the group members' firm loyalty and strong affinity with the honest old man.

Moreover, the following example 3 below illustrates the use of *#Dasukigate* to mock the arm-purchase scandal:

**Example 3**

Dial \*440\*0\*1# to confirm if you are not on *#Dasukigate's* list

From example 3 above, it can be seen how the members of President Buhari WhatsApp groups enact humor in their discourse in order to ridicule and satirize the inordinate greed, corruption, and heartlessness of the opposition party (PDP). The coinage *#Dasukigate* is used here to allude to the arm-purchase scandal as a result of which the Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) had prepared a list of names, and had been arraigning people connected with the looting of huge funds meant for purchasing arms.

Nevertheless, example 4 below illustrates the use of the coined item *PDPigs* to refer to the supporters of the opposition party (PDP):

**Example 4**

- A. The NLC [Nigeria Labour Congress] is trying to assist *PDPigs* to bring Baba Buhari's government down. We are saying NO to NLC rally and strike.
- B. Yes! We are with baba.
- C. Yes brothers! Let's unite and make Nigeria great.

In example 4 above, it can be seen how the participants of these WhatsApp groups express their strong rivalry and hostility towards the PDP party supports by employing the ugly coinage *PDPigs* to refer to them. *PDPigs* is a blended term that begins with the initial letters of PD- (as in PDP) and ends in *Pigs*. This suggests that PDP supporters are kinds of *pigs* in the eyes of these WhatsApp groups' members.

On the other hand, another distinguishing linguistic feature characteristic of these WhatsApp groups is the *style of comparison and contrast*. In many of their posts and discussion episodes, the members try to compare and sharply contrast President Muhammad Buhari's administration and

that of the former Goodluck Jonathan. At the end, it is always shown how far better the PMB's government is performing than the former Goodluck's government. The following excerpts illustrate this point:

**Example 5**

Nigerian customs generated N162 billion in 2014, Dikko [the former comptroller general] remitted only N2 billion. While in seven months of PMB, Nigerian customs generated N903 billion, and Hamid Ali [the current comptroller general] remitted N903 billion. If you never see change, consult your doctor!

In this comparison, it has been obviously implied that the level of trustworthiness and honesty during the PMB's administration had tremendously improved compared to the past Jonathan's administration, because the custom boss did not remove a single penny from the revenue generated. Another instance of this style is illustrated in example 6 below:

**Example 6**

The more they hate him, the more we love him. The more they fear, the more we feel secured. I can't choose a rusted iron and leave gold. Buhari has chosen Nigeria, and I have chosen him.

In this excerpt, the writer begins by comparing himself with the exophorically retrieved individuals (they) who, for their selfish interest, greed, and dishonesty, hate and fear the honest Buhari; when he (the writer) loves PMB and also feels secured. The metaphor of rusted iron and gold is used to depict how President Muhammadu Buhari is far better than Jonathan. Finally, PMB, who has chosen Nigeria and not his selfish interest, is compared and preferred to those who have chosen their selfish interest instead of Nigeria. Another example of this style is given next:

**Example 7**

... Change is when Friday goes by and no one is dying in mosque due to bomb blast. Change is when Sunday goes by and no one hears of another bomb blast in church... change is when mansions built with stolen money are sealed up and confiscated ... change is when the [previous] untouchables are brought [to courts] with [sic] handcuffs ... Long live PMB!

In this excerpt, PMB and Jonathan's administrations are compared and contrasted by implying that unlike during Jonathan's administration, there are no more bomb blasts in mosques and churches, and corrupt government officials and treasury looters, who previously had field days, are being brought to book now during PMB's administration.

#### 4.2 How the Shared Values and Identities among the Members of President Muhammadu Buhari Supporters' WhatsApp Groups are Reflected in their Linguistic Choices

The analysis of the data discovered that the shared values among the members of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups are the *ardent political support* and *firm solidarity* to President Muhammad Buhari. These shared values are reflected through the optimistic and tolerant tones usually signaled by the members of the group in their linguistic choices. In this regard, many expressions are enacted to convey optimism, tolerance, and glorification for President Buhari. The following examples illustrate these points:

##### Example 9

#Budget2016 *reaffirms* my conviction that Nigerians are in *safe hands*. I'm very proud of President Buhari's *exemplary style of leadership*.

In example 9 above, some of the key expressions that signal optimistic tone include the synecdoche of *safe hands* that implies the writer's confidence and support for President Muhammadu Buhari. The use of the complex lexical item *exemplary style of leadership* also signals the writer's support and confidence in Buhari's leadership style. Another example is given below:

##### Example 10

It is not yet *uhuru* because the system was badly bastardized, but there is hope for a better tomorrow as PMB is *paddling the canoe* slowly and steadily to the Promised Land

In an attempt to express optimism and tolerance, example 10 above presents another dimension where the writer employs a loaned word from Swahili –*Uhuru*. *Uhuru* means freedom, and the use of this word in this context implies that PMB will gradually bring freedom to Nigerians by ameliorating the situation. There is also the

metaphor of *paddling the canoe* to mean that PMB is at the helm of Nigeria's leadership. Therefore, this member seeks to imbue the other members with some feelings of hope, confidence, optimism, and tolerance towards the Buhari administration. Example 11 below also presents another instance:

##### Example 11

- A. I campaigned for change. I voted for change. I believe in change. I so much believe that one day I will be counting the much benefits of change.  
#Istandfirmlywithbuhari#
- B. The meaning of BUHARI: Bring Us Happiness And Remove Injustice
- C. Thank you ... for telling the truth, d whole and nothing bt the truth
- D. Remember, PDP = People Deceiving People
- E. Buhari 2019
- F. Yes! We are solidly behind him at all times!

The conversational exchanges in example 11 also reflect the participants' optimism and solidarity with President Muhammadu Buhari. In these exchanges, participant A expresses confidence and ardent optimism that with PMB in power, they would reap the reward of the hard-earned change. The same optimism and confidence also echo in participant B's turn, where each letter in Buhari's name is given positive meaning. In sum, the definition portrays Buhari as characteristic remover of injustice, and someone who brings happiness. Participant C expresses gratitude to A and B, and also affirms that they have spoken only the truth. Participant D reminds the group members that there is nothing in the opposition party PDP other than deceit; while participant E suggests that President Buhari should be the unopposed presidential candidate for the forthcoming 2019 general elections. Finally, participant F strongly affirms participant E's suggestion about PMB's 2019 candidature. These exchanges have therefore shown how the members of these WhatsApp groups utilize discursive strategies in attacking PDP and glorifying President Muhammadu Buhari.

#### 4.3 Discussion

This study was a sociolinguistic exploration of Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups. Drawing on the notion of *speech*

communities and consequently focusing on *sociolinguistic variables*, the study pursued two main research objectives. The first objective of the study was to identify the distinguishing linguistic features of these WhatsApp groups. In this regard, analysis of the data revealed that participants of these groups have gradually developed typical linguistic practices that set them apart socially from other groups of language users. The linguistic practices typical of these WhatsApp groups include use of *coinages*, *borrowings*, *slangs*, *abbreviations*, and the *style of comparison and contrast*. These linguistic practices have set them apart because other Nigerians who do not belong to these groups would hardly comprehend especially some newly created lexical items, abbreviations, or the usual words/expressions that are given new meanings. Moreover, the style of comparison and contrast employed by the members also mark them different because it is always used as a persuasive and discursive strategy meant to amplify their ardent support for President Muhammadu Buhari.

On the other hand, the second research objective pursued in the study was to examine how the shared values and identities among the members of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups are reflected in their linguistic choices. The results showed that the shared values and identities among the members of these WhatsApp groups are the *ardent political support*, *firm solidarity to President Muhammadu Buhari*, and *fierce attack and mocking of the opposition party PDP*. These are signaled in their expressions of strong optimism, tolerance, glorification for President Muhammadu Buhari, and ridiculing the opposition PDP. The data demonstrated that most of their discourse is persuasively framed to promote President Muhammadu Buhari, or to attack and satirize PDP. Therefore, the shared values and identities are reflected in their linguistic choices, and this phenomenon set them apart from other groups of language users.

However, observed carefully, the findings of the present study are to some extent consistent with some previous findings and arguments advanced by scholars. Ahearn (2012), for instance,

argues that online speech communities also exhibit typical linguistic practices, and that their investigation would further our understanding of the relationship between social groups and linguistic practices. Findings of the current study have also been corroborated by Wilson's (2001) assertion that in the contexts of political discourse, linguistic practices are utilized to manipulate thought. It has been seen how the members of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups mostly frame their messages to influence others. Nevertheless, Herring (2001) also reports consistent findings to those of current study. The scholar argues that computer-mediated language use is also highly variable, and it is sensitive to social factors even within a single mode. The current study has reported how the linguistic practices of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups set the members apart from other groups of language users. Finally, Thurlow, Lengel, and Tomic (2004) also contend that members of online speech communities also have shared ways of using language that create a greater sense of being in a community. The current study has discovered certain shared ways of using language to persuade and also to show solidarity among the members of President Muhammadu Buhari supporters' WhatsApp groups.

## 5. Conclusion

While most previous studies of WhatsApp group interactions mainly focused on how the platforms could be utilized for teaching and learning, the current study has unraveled the sociolinguistic features of Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari Supporters' WhatsApp groups. This study has therefore extended the current knowledge on the relationship between computer-mediated social contexts and sociolinguistic variability. Because this study was only concerned with text-based interactions, further studies in this area could be multimodal, to accommodate the analysis of images, videos, and audio files.

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