

Engagement Markers as Identity Construction Mechanisms in Boko Haram Response Texts

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Abstract

The social violence associated with the Boko Haram (BH) sect in sub-Saharan Africa, is mainly sustained by the construction of symbolic identities through the rhetorical use of words and performative acts. The BH discourse has attracted humanistic attention from both linguistic and non-linguistic angles. The linguistic category, being more related to this study, has utilised stylistic, pragmatic, and discourse analytical tools in exploring (social) media representations of the radical group and its activities. Regrettably, this linguistic effort has not fully accommodated the actual speeches of the group, much less exploring the rhetorical strategies utilised for identity construction. The present study identifies the engagement markers deployed in BH response texts and explores ways they are utilised to construct identities that are capable of inducing acts of violence in the target audience. To achieve this, five translated full-transcript speeches of the BH leader, Abubakar Shekau, were purposively sampled (from Pulse.ng, a Nigerian online magazine), subjected to descriptive and quantitative discourse analysis, with insights from a combination of interpersonal metadiscourse and sociocultural linguistics. Four engagement markers (viz. pronominals, rhetorical questions, modals, and imperatives) manifest in data. These are observably connected to eight rhetorical goals associated with the response texts: allusion to divine authority/support, appeal to emotion, blunt condemnation, disassociation from attribute, issue of warning/threat, unshielded exposition, fake politeness, and (in)direct refutation. The findings have provided a linguistic understanding of the violence-inducing potency of the response texts, which had hitherto been neglected in linguistic research on religious extremism.

Keywords: *Engagement markers; identity construction; Boko Haram; religious extremism; Nigerian security discourse.*

Introduction

Religious extremism has become one of the predominant models for political violence in modern societies, and this has become a central concern for the global community (Fisher & Wicker, 2010; Glücklich, 2009). To understand the nature of religious terrorism, three lines of arguments

have been advanced in the literature with respect to the kinds of goals, violence, and strategies that distinguish the new wave of religious terrorism witnessed in the new millennium from the traditional ones (Agbiboa, 2013, etc.). First, it is argued that religious terrorists nowadays engage in anti-democratic/progressive Jihadist-Salafism, the goal of which is to return society to an idealised version of the past. Juergensmeyer (2017), for example, contends that religious terrorists project “an anti-modern political agenda” (p. 230), tilted to rectifying perceived humiliation with a “poisoned worldview that glorifies jihad as a solution” (Tabarani, 2011, p. 150). A second line of argument suggests that religious extremism utilises a different kind of violence from the previous terrorists. It is argued that violence, for the religious terrorist, is “a sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand” (Hoffman, 2006), as opposed to a tactical means to a political end. Third, it is argued that religious terrorists utilise different rhetorical strategies not only to evoke total commitment and fanaticism in their members but also to trigger compliance from the larger body of youth. These strategies, for Gunning and Jackson (2011), are characterised by the suspension of doubt and a Manichean view of the world (p. 272), which are “accompanied by strong claims of moral justification and an enduring absolutism, characterised by the intensity of the religious activists’ commitment” (Juergensmeyer, 2017, p. 270). In some cases, in fact, “the certainties of the religious viewpoint and the promises of the next world are primary motivating factors in driving insecure, alienated, and marginalized youths to join religious terrorist groups as a means of psychological empowerment” (Agbiboa, 2013, p. 158). Juergensmeyer (2017) argues that,

The idea of cosmic war is compelling to religious activists because it ennobles and exalts those who consider themselves a part of it [...] it provides escape from humiliation and impossible predicaments. They become involved in terrorism [...] to provide themselves with a sense of power. (2017, p. 227)

This, therefore, becomes a potent logic of indoctrination utilised by terrorist recruiters and extremist preachers to exert undue influence on the impressionable, alienated, and disempowered young people.

The activities of the Boko Haram (BH) group in Western Africa perfectly fit into the three characteristics identified of the new religious terrorism. The term, BH, originally meaning

'Western education is forbidden', is a Nigerian-based Islamic terror organisation formally named *Jama'atul Alhul Sunnah Lidda'wat, wal Jihad*, translating to "People committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad" (Uzodike & Maiangwa, 2012, p. 93). According to analysts, some combined factors gave birth to BH in Nigeria, namely, economic, political, and religious factors. The actual date of the group's emergence and its founder is still uncertain. Formed by Lawan Abubakar around 1995 in Northeast Nigeria, Ustadh Muhammad Yusuf later led the group, fostering radical Islamist ideologies and physical opposition. BH, believed to have started around 2002 in Borno State, Northeast Nigeria, was initially known as the Yusufiyya Islamic Movement (YIM). Residents of Maiduguri, Borno State, coined the term 'Boko Haram', amalgamating Hausa (Boko) and Arabic (Haram), denoting 'Western education is forbidden'.

BH's ideology is anchored on the deep tradition of Islamic Salafism, and its devotees are reportedly influenced by the Koranic phrase "Anyone who is not governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors" (Friedmann, 2003, p. 150). As its operations suggest, BH is strongly opposed to "Western-based incursion that threatens traditional values, beliefs, and customs among Muslim communities in northern Nigeria" (Agbibo, 2013, p. 160). Mohammed Yusuf himself in 2009 told the BBC that "Western-style education is mixed with issues that run contrary to our beliefs in Islam" (Rogers, 2012). He further argued elsewhere that "Our land was an Islamic state before the colonial masters turned it to a kafir land. The current system is contrary to true Islamic beliefs" (Salkida, 2009). This negative attitude towards westernisation, coupled with the "poverty, deteriorating social services and infrastructure, educational backwardness, rising numbers of unemployed graduates, massive numbers of unemployed youths, dwindling fortunes in agriculture [...] and the weak and dwindling productive base of the northern economy" (Isa, 2010, p. 329), has kept BH members at odds with the secular authorities, who are perceived as "representatives of a corrupt, illegitimate, Christian dominated federal government" (Agbibo, 2013, p. 161). However, the group became more confrontational after the extrajudicial killing of its leader, Muhammad Yusuf, by the Nigerian security forces in 2009. It has meted out deadly insurgency in Nigeria under the leadership of Yusuf's deputy and successor (Abubakar Shakau) and other factional leaders such as Abu Musab al-Barnawi of the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). In fact, BH has claimed responsibility for several deadly attacks in Nigeria and other neighbouring West African countries, resulting in the loss of many

lives and properties. According to the Council of Foreign Relations, for example, the group is responsible for the deaths of 15,525 civilians between May 2011 and May 2016. As of December 2022, Nigeria still stands with a Red Mark, according to data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, which interprets that over 1.8 million people are still being internally displaced as a result of such religious violence.

Clearly, these facts make the group not only one of the deadliest but also fastest growing terror organisations in the world today, capable of weaving religious identities that draw (prospective) members to the group (Uzodike & Maiangwa, 2012). Hence, one of the basic assumptions made in this study is that a radical group like BH has a rhetorical approach, packaged in a *mélange* of salient identities, which engages individuals into accomplishing specific personal and group goals. However, the link between rhetorical devices in language use and identity construction, as existing literature on BH suggests, is still extensively understudied. This research situation has led to the necessity of answering the following research questions raised in this paper: what are the rhetorical markers used by BH in engaging individuals? What identities are constructed to facilitate this engagement? What are the linguistic forms that the engagement markers and identities constructed are indexed by? Answering these crucial questions is expected to advance the understanding of terrorist propaganda in the Western Africa sub-region, as well as reveal how rhetorical and identity construction strategies can both aid the drawing of emotion from citizens, especially to identify with terrorist groups.

So far in this section, the BH group in Western Africa has been introduced (as a demonstration of the new wave of religious terrorism), with some research questions bordering on the kinds of rhetorical and identity construction strategies it employs in engaging its audience. In the sections that follow, the existing linguistic studies on BH are reviewed, with the objectives of the paper marshalled; the theoretical basis and methodology are presented. This is followed by a discussion of the analytical findings, and finally the conclusion of the paper.

Situating the research

There has been quite extensive research (from virtually all disciplines) relating to the issue of terrorism. However, emphasis is laid on scholarly humanistic efforts, which bifurcate into linguistic and non-linguistic studies. The latter category spans the history and manifestations, sociological and political implications, and curbing measures to BH activities. For this study, the

linguistic category is, however, more relevant, in the sense that a considerable amount of discourse analytic (Aghedo, 2012; Chiluya, 2016; Chiluya & Chiluya, 2022; Ononye, Wakili & Chukwuike, 2024) and pragmatic (Chiluya & Adegoke, 2013; Odebunmi & Oloyede, 2016, etc) attention has been paid to BH discourse. First, Aghedo (2012) looks at the link between linguistic cues and the militancy and terrorism associated with MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta) and Boko Haram in selected statements from each of these groups. The difference between Aghedo's work and this one is in the former's emphasis on bringing out linguistic differences between militancy and terrorism, which falls apart from the latter's focus on rhetoric and identity construction. Chiluya (2016), drawing insights from critical discourse analysis (CDA), examines the discourse-pragmatic contents of terror threats in the online publications of two Nigerian terrorist groups, BH and Ansaru. The study reveals that online terror threats are "intertextually and ideologically related to threats associated with Al Qaeda and global Jihad [...]" (2016, p. 1), but are however structurally different from conventional verbal threats. In a related study, Chiluya and Chiluya (2022) focus on the representation of BH and herder-farmer conflict actors in Western and Nigerian media, relying on a corpus-based discourse analysis. Specifically, they examine the keywords that reflect negative attitudes towards BH and herdsmen in the conflict. The study, like Aghedo (2012) and Chiluya (2016), focuses on media reports and their representation of news actors. Ononye, Wakili and Chukwuike (2024), on the contrary, focus on pre-violence sermons delivered by the group, as against the conventional media text that typifies most studies in this category. They explore the metaphorisation strategies utilised by the group in rationalising their use or support of violence in religious propagation. The present paper, on the contrary, relies purely on the actual response texts rendered by the terrorist group.

Chiluya and Adegoke (2013) and Odebunmi and Oloyede (2016) take a pragmatic perspective. While the former investigate the features of Nigerian tweets and online feedback comments on BH activities, the latter examine the strategies deployed by Nigerian newspaper reporters in framing BH actors. Both works differ from this study not only theoretically, but also in terms of their focus on media representations and not on the direct use of language by the terrorist group. Generally, the linguistic studies reviewed above all differ in data and analytical focus. While they all analyse media reports on BH from single linguistic approaches, the present paper combines theories with linguistic and sociological orientation in approaching real textual manuscripts produced by BH. Specifically, the study identifies the metadiscourse elements and linguistic

forms used in BH propaganda to engage individuals and reveals the rhetorical goals of invoking identities capable of drawing potential members into violence. First, a brief description of the theory and methods employed to achieve these objectives.

Theoretical underpinnings

This study, as earlier highlighted, is anchored on two theoretical approaches: a rhetorical theory drawn largely from the work of Hyland's interpersonal metadiscourse, and a sociocultural linguistics perspective to identity-based on Bucholtz and Hall's work. The synergy of these concepts is a workable analytical tool to understand the rhetorical strategies deployed in constructing specific identities, the principal aim of which is to breed social violence. These are discussed in turn to, not only develop a means of showing analytical connections between rhetorical strategies and social identities constructed to engage the audience but also provide a theoretical background for the analysis of data.

Hyland, in line with Halliday, states that the message people pass across when they communicate is an expression of three different, but integrated kinds of meaning: 'ideational', 'interpersonal', and 'textual' (Hyland, 2005a, p. 26). While the *propositional* material performs ideational functions, *metadiscourse* performs both textual and interpersonal functions in all texts. Thus, "the meaning of a text is the result of these two elements working together: an integration of talk about the experiential world and how this is made coherent, intelligible and persuasive to a particular audience" (Hyland, 2017, p. 18). From this view, it becomes clear that metadiscourse is useful in understanding how different parts of a discourse are linked together not just at the textual level, but even at the deeper transactional level where the text is connected to the values and conventions of the discourse community. Based on this, he sees metadiscourse as a set of elements that together helps explain the workings of interaction between text producers and their texts and between text producers and their audience. Metadiscourse is, therefore, the linguistic resource used to organise discourse and to also show the text producer's stance towards its content or the audience (Hyland, 2000, p. 109).

Building on previous frameworks by earlier scholars, Hyland (2004, 2005b) proposed a broader framework known as the Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse, which is anchored on the view of communication as social engagement and interactive (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 156). He

classifies metadiscourse into two broad categories, *viz.* ‘interactive’ and ‘interactional’ elements. The interactive metadiscourse includes the linguistic features that allow text producers to logically link the propositional contents of text together. These embrace such elements as transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses. The interactional category signals the presence of the speaker or writer in the discourse as well as their attitudes towards their message and audience. This category also signals in discourse the processes of meaning negotiation between the text producer and the audience. For the present study, the interactional elements—which enable the speaker or writer to rhetorically organise a text in a manner that may influence the audience’s perception and interpretation of the text, are relevant. Thus, Hyland (2014) has five sub-classifications of interactional metadiscourse; namely, *hedges* (mark the speaker/writer’s reluctance to present propositional information categorically, while opening up the space for dialogic alternatives), *boosters* (express certainty and emphasise the force of propositions, closing down the space for such alternation), *attitude markers* (express the speaker/writer’s appraisal of propositional information, conveying surprise, obligation, agreement, importance, etc.), *engagement markers* (explicitly address hearers/readers, either by selectively drawing their attention or by including them as participants in the text through second-person pronouns, imperatives, question forms, and asides), and *self-mentions* (suggest the extent of author presence in terms of first-person pronouns and possessives, representing the speaker/writer’s decision to stand behind assertions or to avoid such commitments) (pp. 125-126).

Although metadiscourse has been used mostly in studying academic texts, it is equally useful in violence-inducing texts, especially in exploring the underlying ideological representations invoked in terrorist response texts. In this way, metadiscourse becomes an integral and indispensable tool for understanding the rhetorical strategies utilised for constructing specific in/out-group identities in violence discourse. Like all other ideological discourses, Boko Haram speeches rely on persuasion to achieve the group’s desired threat or attraction in the minds of the audience. Interactional metadiscourse, therefore, embraces diverse linguistic, non-figurative elements that enable the speaker to achieve this rhetorical end. This corresponds to Hyland’s (2005b) submission that “metadiscourse embodies the idea that communication is more than just the exchange of information ... but also involves the personalities, attitudes, and assumptions of those who are communicating” (p. 3).

One seamless way of handling the underlying ideological representations, which influence the use of specific metadiscourse markers in Boko Haram texts, is by merging the sociocultural linguistics theory of identity with Hyland's concept of metadiscourse. By synthesising such disciplinary areas as sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, socially oriented discourse analysis, and linguistically oriented social psychology, Bucholtz and Hall developed a framework on identity "that focuses on both the details of language and the workings of culture and society" (2005, p. 586). For them, identity does not emerge at a single linguistic level, but at multiple interactional levels in which all analytical resources gain social meaning in discursive construction in communication. To demonstrate this, five principles have been proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) as fundamental to the understanding of the way identities are constructed in discourse: the emergence, positionality, indexicality, rationality, and partialness principles.

The emergence principle conceives identity not merely as a mental representation of social categories or self-classification that is reflected in people's social behaviour, but "in cases where speakers' language use does not conform with the social category to which they are normally assigned" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 588). This shows that identity may not be found in the usual social categories associated with people, but rather is realised as a socio-cultural phenomenon that is constantly negotiated and constructed through social action and language use. For the positionality principle, identity comes from the usual relation between Self and Other in discourse. This includes "macro-level demographic categories" ... "ethnographically specific cultural positions; and" ... "temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles" (p. 592), which may deviate from conventional identities, but "contribute to the formation of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in discourse" (p. 591). These transitory interactional positions may, with time, "accumulate ideological associations ... [with] local categories of identity" (p. 591), which may in turn shape participant roles in interaction. The indexicality principle involves specific linguistic representations like words, accents, and expressions in texts that index or point to elements of the social context as they evoke specific traits, ideas, activities, and properties that may be seen as typical social identities. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) specifically believe that identity relations emerge in interaction through such indexical processes as "overt mention of identity categories and labels; ... implicatures and presuppositions regarding one's own or other's identity position; ... displayed evaluative and epistemic orientation to ongoing talk, as well as

interactional footings and participant roles”; and the use of linguistic forms that are ideologically linked to specific persons and group (p. 594). The relationality principle questions two general notions of identity. First, against the view that identities are never autonomous nor independent, relationality rather proposes that they “acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 598) in discourse. Second, contrary to the layman’s understanding of identity relations as revolving along the axes of sameness and difference, a much broader range of relations is proposed, where “Identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy” (p. 598). Finally, the partialness principle focuses on “habitual actions [“contextually situated and ideologically informed configurations of self and other”] accomplished below the level of conscious awareness act” (p. 606). This acknowledges agency as one way in which identity could be accomplished in discourse. However, its idea of the working of agency is that it may be intersubjectively distributed among several social actors “through the perceptions and representations of others or assigned through ideologies and social structures” (p. 607). Generally, the combination of the theories is such that while the former explores the metadiscourse and linguistic forms, the latter observes how these forms are used for identity construction.

Methodology

The primary data for this research comprises five full-transcript speeches by Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau between 2014 and 2017, capturing the group’s responses to political activities and directions on its activities. This was the period when the group’s engagement with potential members and the Nigerian government was most intense. Boko Haram's communication is broadly divided into two categories: pre-violence texts, primarily sermons delivered before engaging in violent activities, and post-violence texts, which follow their involvement in violent actions (Ononye, Wakili & Chukwuike, 2024). This study focuses on the post-violence texts to understand how Boko Haram weaves certain identities as radicalisation tactics, which ultimately leads to violent activities. The speeches were purposively taken from *Pulse.ng* considering its consistency in reporting Boko Haram activities and human resources in translating the original Hausa/Arabic content into English for wider consumption. They were subsequently transposed to an MS Word document, line-numbered, and subjected to discourse analysis with theoretical

insights from a combination of Hyland’s interactional metadiscourse and Bucholtz and Hall’s sociocultural linguistics. The study employs a top-bottom approach, which descriptively incorporates the two objectives into one, but rather anchors the analysis on the first objective, which is sub-titled based on the metadiscourse/linguistic forms that mark the engagement markers and rhetorical goals achieved.

Analysis and discussion

The BH response speeches are observably made on different occasions and different issues, the ultimate purposes of which are to threaten, instill fear in, or endear the target audience to the group and/or its mission. Table (1) below summarises the findings on the metadiscourse elements and their linguistic forms in the data.

Table 1: Interactional metadiscourse features and linguistic forms in BH response texts

s/n	Interactional Metadiscourse	Linguistic Index	Mirco-distribution	Marco-distribution
1	Hedges	Adverbs/verbs/adjectives	46 (83.6%)	55 (11.7%)
		Phrase/sentence frames	9 (16.4%)	
			55 (100%)	
2	Boosters	Adverbs/verbs/adjectives	33 (82.5%)	40 (8.5%)
		Phrase/sentence frames	7 (17.5%)	
			40 (100%)	
3	Attitude markers	Adverbs/verbs/adjectives	24 (50%)	48 (10.2%)
			4 (8.3%)	
			20 (41.7%)	
			48 (100%)	
4	Engagement markers	You	110 (71.0%)	155 (32.9%)
		Rhetorical questions directed to the audience	32 (20.6%)	
		Imperatives directed to the	5 (3.2%)	

		audience		
		Modal auxiliary verbs of necessity	8 (5.2)	
			155 (100%)	
5	Self-mentions	We	97 (56.1%)	173 (36.7%)
		I	63 (36.4%)	
		Nouns/noun phrases referring to the speaker	13 (7.5%)	
			173 (100%)	

From the analysis of the response texts, four linguistic forms have been identified as representing the use of engagement markers, *viz.* pronominal items, rhetorical questions, modality, and imperative sentences. The use of pronominals takes the highest percentage. This is followed by rhetorical questions, while imperatives take the least proportion of the data. These features are discussed in succession, together with how they are utilised for identity construction by the sect. These metadiscourse markers of engagement used by the BH, as will be demonstrated in the discussion that follows, are observably connected to eight rhetorical goals associated with the response texts. These include: allusion to divine authority/support (which focuses on creating an impression the Almighty Allah is in support of the group’s mission), appeal to emotion (stimulating some sentiments aimed at drawing the audience to believe in or accept its purpose), blunt condemnation (reproving the position, decision, (in)action taken by the Federal Government of Nigerian—henceforth FGN, its agencies or supporters), disassociation from attribute (distancing or disassociating the group or its mission from the position, decision, (in)action taken by the FGN, its agencies or supporters), issue of warning/threat (delivering a stern caution), unshielded exposition (revealing and evaluating the position, decision, (in)action taken by the FGN, its agencies or supporters as disreputable or not in line with Islamic standard), fake politeness (mocking the status, position, decision, (in)action taken by the FGN, its agencies or supporters), and (in)direct refutation (countering and/or defending accusations or established negative impression about the group). The discourse engagement markers will be discussed in succession with their attendant rhetorical goals.

Use of pronominal:

The pronominal form most principally utilised for the engagement of the audience is ‘you(r)’. Two patterns of this have been identified; namely, those with specific reference and others with non-specific reference. The specific ‘you’ is often used to pick out some entities like Nigerian Presidents, the FGN itself, or countries and leaders that support the FGN’s war against Boko Haram. The non-specific ‘you’, on the other hand, refers to a range of entities including Nigerian agencies and government officials, the Nigerian public, and international communities. These can be exemplified in the extract below:

EXTRACT 1

*Oh **you** followers of constitution, have **you** forgotten your laws? Since the time we were preaching in Maiduguri, in **your** constitution in Section 8, verse [paragraph] 2 to 3, in **your** accursed book called Constitution, which became law for those who are not fair to themselves on earth. **You** shamelessly declared in your radio and newspapers that **you** were fighting those determined to establish an Islamic state. (Lines 7-11)*

In the text above, the “you(r)” in the first two lines, by not pointing to any explicit participant in the discourse, are of the non-specific reference category, while the ones in the fourth line belong to the specific reference category because they are used to point to specific participants “who declared...that [they] were fighting those determined to establish an Islamic state”. While the former refers loosely to the public or possibly Christians, the latter is obviously addressed to the President of the FGN, who—as the extract suggests—is supposedly able to command the Nigerian armed forces to fight. Three rhetorical motives have been identified with the use of “you(r)” in the texts; namely, fake politeness, unshielded exposition, and blunt condemnation. Let us examine the extracts that follow:

EXTRACT 2

*We follow the Koran. We will not be teased by any infidel. Now **you don’t know what to do**, you want to convince **your leaders that are tired of you**, that **have realised your lies**, including your Solomon Dalong, your Abdullahi Wase, your Senator Ndume. They are **tired of you**, they **have realised you are deceiving them**, **you are playing with their intelligence**, you just want to protect **your own interests**. It is **bad for you**.*

(Lines 51-55)

EXTRACT 3

*It is said Shekau is a position. Bravo to **you Orator**. ‘Well done’ to **you who studied in Israel**. ‘Well done’ to **you the experts** in Psychology, ‘well done’ **you the experts** in Biology, ‘well done’ **you believers in ‘I pledge to Nigeria my country’**. This is what you said. You pledge to Nigeria your country, Right? Me, me Shekau I pledge to Allah my God. If you don’t know, today you will know. I pledge to Allah my God, to be faithful. This is Shekau. Idiot like you! (Lines 62-67)*

In the texts above, there is so much information provided on the (non)specific “you(r)”; and these—as will be demonstrated below—border on the three rhetorical motives earlier pointed out. For example, such utterances as “you don’t know what to do”, “your leaders ... are tired of you”, “... have realised your lies”, “... have realised you are deceiving them”, “... you are playing with their intelligence”, and “... you just want to protect your own interest” (in EXTRACT 2) are instances of unshielded exposition. Notice the choice of some features as repetition (“...are tired”, “have realised”, etc), and parallelism (“... the leaders that are tired of you, that have realised your lies”, “They are tired of you, they have realised you are deceiving them”, etc). These are powerful rhetorical features utilised to clearly expose the degree of disenchantment experienced by the majority of Nigerian citizens with respect to the FGN’s poor delivery of its political promises. Specifically, by alleging that such leaders as Solomon Dalong (current Minister of Youth and Sports), Dr Abdullahi Wase (current Nigerian Ambassador to the State of Qatar), and Ali Ndume (current Nigerian Senator representing Borno South), who were staunch supporters of the Buhari-led FGN, are tired of the government underscores a mental representation of the division in the FGN even among people of the same political party. This corroborates the emergence principle of identity formation which further lends credence to the disillusionment narrative being exposed.

This emergence identity principle is also observed in the fake politeness rhetorical strategy, which is easily noticed with the recurrent praise element utilised (in EXTRACT 3). For example, the lexical (“Bravo...” and “Well done...”—a Nigerian-English way of saying ‘good job!’), phrasal (“...the expert in Psychology”, “...the expert in Biology”, “...believers in ‘I pledge to Nigeria my country’”), and clausal (“...who studied in Israel”) items in the extract are not only used to praise but also to recount the preparatory achievements made by “you” in waging the war against terrorism. Although the “you” here refers to the FGN by extension, it specifically points to a range of FGN functionaries in this context. Evidently, the ‘you’ in “you Orator” points to the Minister of Information and Culture (who has been presenting FGN’s views on combating Boko

Haram), while those in “you who studied in Israel”, “you the experts in Psychology” and “you the experts in Biology” refer to the members of the Nigerian security officials (who have been equipped with knowledge in diverse fields to better wage the war against terrorism). However, the ‘you’ in “you believers in ‘I pledge to Nigeria my country’”, just like the “you followers of constitution” in EXTRACT (1) above, do not include government functionaries alone, but also extend to law-abiding Nigerian citizens, who are supposedly not Boko Haram loyalists. The indexicality identity principle equally comes in here, especially in the way different discourse participants have been identified to evoke specific traits with the use of “you”. To show, therefore, that the positive face given to these discourse participants is fake, the third rhetorical strategy, blunt condemnation, comes in handy. For this purpose, some parts of EXTRACT (3) above are reproduced below:

You pledge to Nigeria your country, Right? Me, me Shekau I pledge to Allah my God. If you don't know, today you will know. I pledge to Allah my God, to be faithful. This is Shekau. Idiot like you!

(EXTRACT 3)

The rhetorical question, “You pledge to Nigeria your country, Right?” (notice the initial capitalisation in “Right”, the pragmatics of which is linked to unconventional voicing), marks the point of departure between praising and mocking the participants. The contrasting utterance that follows, “Me, me Shekau I pledge to Allah my God”, establishes the position of the speaker and thus the BH group; namely, ‘that the group does not pay allegiance to the Nigerian constitution or National Pledge, and that those who do (with all their expertise and exposure) are infidels’. The group’s negative evaluation of this category of participants is climaxed with the blunt condemnation, “Idiot like you”, which invalidates all the praises and achievements at the beginning of the text. This rhetorical pattern of condemnation is equally manifest (in EXTRACT 2) with the use of “It is bad for you” as a powerful way of summing up the group’s exposition of Nigerian citizens’ disillusionment. In the next section, we turn to other discourse engagement markers.

Use of rhetorical questions

The rhetorical questions deployed in the data as engagement markers have one principal pattern, viz. the question-word (or WH) question. The questions are largely associated with two rhetorical strategies, namely, direct refutation and the issue of warning. While the former is realised in using WH-questions to disprove certain claims or accusations put forward by the FGN, the latter

is observed when the questions are deployed indirectly to caution or threaten the audience. Let us examine the rhetorical value of the WH questions in the extracts that follow:

EXTRACT 4

*“Have you forgotten that? And it is you today claiming we made truce with you? **In what way did we make truce? Which kind of negotiation, with whom?** That your Danladi, the infidel like you, who we will not spare and will decapitate if he falls into our hands today? **Where do we know him, not to talk of him representing us? Who is Danladi on this earth?** Allah knows everything. Allah is witness [quotes from the Koran]. Therefore I tell you (that) we have not made ceasefire with anyone. (Lines 14-19)*

EXTRACT 5

*To the Americans: **who is America in the sight of Allah? Who is America in the sight of Allah? Who is Israel in the sight of Allah? Who is France in the sight of Allah?** It is only when we don't have firm belief. We don't fear you at all. We are the ones who carried out all these attacks. Not just Gwoza but all the attacks you see in Borno [state] or any part of the country. We are the ones carrying them out. (Lines 102-106)*

The text in EXTRACT (4) is taken from a response speech by the Boko Haram sect, released on the heels of one of FGN's controversial claims that it had made a truce with the sect through one “Danladi” Ahmadu, who—in October 2014—claimed to be representing the sect in its negotiation with the FGN to free the abducted Chibok girls and achieve a final ceasefire with the Nigerian military. One of the major aims of the Boko Haram response here, therefore, was to refute the claim and re-establish the sect's stance on the issue of Chibok Girls' Abduction. Notice therefore the successive use of rhetorical questions in the text to counterfactualise all sides to FGN's claim. For example, the interrogative, “In what way did we make truce?”, is used to convince the audience that ‘there was no way the two sides made a truce’; “Which kind of negotiation, with whom?” shows that ‘there was no kind/form of negotiation between the sect and any government official or group’; “Where do we know him, not to talk of him representing us?” proves that ‘the sect does not know anyone with the name “Danladi” nor recognise his representing it’; while “Who is Danladi on this earth?” reinforces the denial that ‘there was no member of the sect anywhere in the world by such identity’. One identity construction principle easily observed here is the positionality principle, which thrives on the Self (Boko Haram) and Other (the FGN and its officials) established in the discourse. These WH-questions and their

clustered stylistic pattern are thus powerful rhetorical tools used in the response texts to directly refute FGN's claim of having a deal with the sect and hence re-echo its position on the issues at stake.

Comparing the rhetorical questions in EXTRACT (4) with those in EXTRACT (5), a different rhetorical focus can easily be observed in the latter, i.e. issue of warning/threat. Such structural features of foregrounded regularity as repetition and parallelism can hardly go unnoticed in the text. For example, the parallel form, "Who is ... in the sigh of Allah", is repeated severally to consciously include some notable world powers, viz. the United States of America and France, and then Israel (brought in because of its continued conflicts with its surrounding Arab nations).

Use of modality:

The linguistic system of modality is also used in the response texts. Two broad types of modal meaning have been identified; namely, epistemic modality and boulomaic modality. The former is characterised in the data by modal adverbs, auxiliaries, and lexical verbs, which mainly show likelihood or low certainty, while the latter is typified by conditional structures, lexical verbs, and modal auxiliaries, which express desire. The epistemic modality however dominates. Let us consider the following examples:

EXTRACT 6

*The wish of Obama, United States President **will not** kill me, the wish of Francois Hollande of France **will not** kill me, the wish of Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel **will not** kill me, the wish of Ban-ki Moon of the United Nations **will not** kill me, the wish of Queen Elizabeth **will not** kill me, the wish of the infidels of the world **will not** kill me, much less of President Goodluck Jonathan, much less of Kashim Shettima of Borno State, much less of Bra-Bra Yobe State Governor, Ibrahim Geidam. Nothing **will** kill me until my days are over. Do whatever you want to do. If you think what I'm doing is not the truth, **even if** you don't fight me **I will** crumble. Nothing **will** kill me until my days are over... I'm still alive. Some people asked if Shekau has two souls. No, I **have** one soul, by Allah. (Lines 114-122)*

EXTRACT 7

***After we have** killed ... and get fatigued, wondering on what to do with their smelling corpses, smelling of Obama, Bush, Putin and Jonathan, **then we will** open prison and imprison the rest. It*

is Jonathan's daughter that I will imprison. Nothing will stop this until you convert. If you turn to Islam, then you will be saved. We will kill and imprison and never get tired. Bring your trillion, there is nothing we can do with your money, if you know us you will not think that of us. What I will want you to know is, there is slavery in Islam, don't be deceived about the United Nations, it is a useless thing and I call them United Nations of absurdity led by Ban Ki-moon. Prophet Muhammed took slaves himself during Badr War. He killed many and because of this I will also kill Obama if I catch him. I will kill Jonathan if I catch him. Just like you want to catch me and kill me. (Lines 153-161)

Virtually all the lexical items indicating the modal meanings in the sampled texts above belong to the category of what Jefferies (2010) refers to as “personalised modality” (p. 54) in the sense that they are largely grammatically governed by personal pronouns (e.g. ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘you’). The preponderant modal element in the response texts, as manifest in the extracts, is the auxiliary verb “will”. While the modal auxiliary “will” variously used in EXCERPT (6) belongs to epistemic meaning expressing unlikelihood or uncertainty; the ones in EXCERPT (7) are of boulomaic meaning showing desire. For example, by saying repeatedly that “the wish of Obama [the then US President, and those of other mentioned world leaders, who are obviously against such activities as those carried out by the Boko Haram] will not kill me” (in the first line of EXCERPT 6), the speaker expresses his group’s belief that no plan of the FGN or the international community is *likely* to stop him or his group’s activities. In a similar vein, by saying “...we will open prison and imprison the rest” (in the second line of EXCERPT 7), another modal meaning is articulated, namely, the sect’s *desire* to silence any FGN’s government officials (or their relations) and non-converts who do not support the Boko Haram cause. The conditional structures “if..., I/you will...” (in the seventh line of EXCERPT 6; and in the fourth, fifth, ninth, and tenth lines of EXCERPT 7) are of epistemic meaning expressing strong desire and certainty. This modal meaning can be illustrated with the conditional “if you turn to Islam, then you will be saved” (in the middle of EXCERPT 7), which reveals not only the sect’s *desire* for every Nigerian to be converted to Islam but also the speaker’s (sect leader) *certainty* that anyone who converts to Islam is safe from the sect’s attack.

These linguistic manifestations of modality in the data are widely found to have two rhetorical foci, namely, allusion to divine authority/support, and issue of threat. The former relates to the speaker’s need to convince the audience that his sect’s mission and activities not only follow

specific authoritative practices from recognised past religious leaders but also enjoy divine backing from Allah. This rhetorical force is largely expressed with epistemic conditional structures with strong certainty. Issue of threat, as observed above in the use of rhetorical questions, is realised when modal elements are employed to caution or instill fear in the audience. This is marked by both epistemic and boulomaic modal auxiliaries and lexical verbs. To demonstrate these, relevant portions of EXTRACTS (6 and 7) above have been reproduced below:

*Do whatever you want to do. If you think what I'm doing is not **the truth**, even if you don't fight me **I will crumble**. **Nothing will kill** me until my days are over... I'm still alive. Some people asked if Shekau has two souls. No, I **have one soul**, **by Allah**. (EXTRACT 6)*

***Prophet Muhammed took slaves himself during Badr war. He killed many and because of this I will also kill Obama if I catch him. I will kill Jonathan if I catch him.** Just like you want to catch me and kill me. (EXTRACT 7)*

From the texts, the conditional structures "...even if you don't fight me I will crumble" (in EXCERPT 6) and "...because of this [i.e. that Prophet Muhammed succeeded in taking and killing many slaves] I will also kill Obama if I catch him. I will kill Jonathan if I catch him" (in EXCERPT 7) have two parts. The first is the modal part, which holds the certainty of the speaker's statement (e.g. "...I will crumble. Nothing will kill me...") or his desire (e.g. "...I will kill..."), respectively. The second part makes references to two motivations, viz. divine support that the sect's quest is anchored on (i.e. propagating "the truth" that Allah expects from it), the authoritative precedent that the sect wishes to achieve (i.e. to kill former Presidents Obama, Jonathan, and others that may stand in the sect's way because Prophet Muhammed had done similar things in the past and succeeded). Therefore, saying "I have one soul, by Allah" (in EXCERPT 6) corroborates the speaker's earlier statement, "Nothing will kill me until my days are over". These utterances are intended to communicate the sect's stern belief that— notwithstanding the plots of the Nigerian army and other international communities to combat Boko Haram and capture its leader—Allah will always protect and give it victory because it is doing Allah's will. In the same vein, there is an implicit threat issued in the desire of the speaker to kill Obama, Jonathan, and even all the world leaders mentioned earlier in EXCERPT (6), the illocution of which should make these leaders more security conscious. Generally, the rhetorical

goals of deferring of divine protection here key into the partialness principle, the identity of which is intersubjectively draws members and sympathisers to believe that they are doing the will of Allah.

Use of imperatives

Another discourse marker that has prominently been utilised in engaging the audience in Boko Haram response texts is use of imperatives. An imperative clause, being a directive to an addressee to act, syntactically includes a (un)marked verb in the base form (Downing & Locke, 2002, p.194). Two forms of the imperative clause have been identified in the texts; namely, imperative predicators with the mood element and those without the mood element. The inclusion or exclusion of the mood element in the imperative clause pattern here underscores the explicit or implicit nature of the predicators involved. For example, the predicators with the mood element are generally targeted at such specific audiences as Nigerian leaders and functionaries or the FGN itself, while the latter are largely aimed at a non-specific set of audiences—which may include sensitive Muslim loyalists or potential lone terrorists. Some instances from the data can be examined:

EXTRACT 8

Harvest [President Goodluck] Jonathan's neck, *harvest* Kashim's [Borno State Governor] neck, Allah said ..., even in Ka'aba, if someone is doing salat [prayer], for so long as he is deviating from what Allah said, he is infidel. (Lines 150-152)

EXTRACT 9

Buhari, all your actions are fake. You are lying to the people, collecting their money and saying you will free their children and you know you are lying ... I am talking to you Buhari, sit back and think carefully. It is not this small Shekau that is disturbing you. No. It is Allah that is doing everything for us, *continue and see*. You deceived the people and you think you are doing the right thing. *Continue and see*, one day you will not even be able to go to the toilet and stool. But if you repent, then you are a brother. *Repent and follow the Quran*. Buhari let me advise you now, *fear Allah*. People of Chibok, let me tell you today, you still have to prepare for a longer *Bring Back Our Girls Campaign*. If you want your girls, *bring back* our brothers. (Lines 261-270)

Such predicators as “Harvest” (in EXTRACT 8), “reject” and “challenge” (in other portions of the text) are of the ‘moodless’ predictor category, while others like “sit back and think”, “continue and see”, “Repent and follow”, and “bring back” (in EXTRACT 9) belong to the imperative predictor with mood element. These variables are better appreciated in the table below:

Table 2: Mood system in imperative clauses

TEXT	MOOD	RESIDUE		
		Subject	Predictor	Complement
EXTRACT 8		Harvest	Jonathan’s/Kashim’s neck	
Line 200		Reject	the stupid services of the Nigeria state	
Line 203		Challenge	the administration and laws of infidels	
EXTRACT 9	Buhari / You	sit back and think		carefully
		continue and see		
		repent and follow	the Quran	
		fear	Allah	
	People of Chibok / you	bring back	our brothers	

From the syntactic breakdown of the extracts in the table above, it becomes clear that the clauses in EXTRACT (9) carry the mood element, because they have been used to address the specific audience (such as “Buhari”, “You”, and “People of Chibok”) mentioned in the text. The clauses in EXTRACT (8), on the other hand, do not include any mood element. Although they do not have any specific audience grammatically stated, they are however very rhetorically significant in that such clauses with an unstated ‘inclusive’ ‘you-Subject’, according to Chiluya (2016) are a popular choice for speakers who strive to engage as many audiences as possible (p. 7). This way, as many people as identify with Boko Haram (or its leaders, positions, or propagations) become a possible focus of the command that the predictors bear.

Four rhetorical foci have been observed as constraining the use of imperative clauses in the texts; namely, issue of warning/threat, unshielded exposition, appeal to emotion, and allusion to divine authority. While issue of warning/threat and unshielded exposition relate to clauses with the mood element (with a specific audience), appeal to emotion, and allusion to divine authority are associated with clauses without the mood element (with a non-specific audience). In EXTRACT (9), for example, imperative clauses such as “sit back and think...”, “repent and follow...” and “fear...” are warnings, while others like “...continue and see”—repeated twice—are intended as a threat to the same person included as the mood element, “Buhari” (the established antecedent) and “you” (referring back to him) in the text. Aside from warning and threatening, the use of such predicators as “repent and follow” and “fear” falls within unshielded exposition. This sort of rhetoric questions the notion of identity, the social meaning of which is acquired in relation to other available identity positions already created in other discourse participants (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 598). Here, there is an essential motivation by the sect to expose to the world that President Buhari is not a faithful Muslim; that he has gone/is going contrary to (Boko Haram’s) Islamic expectation; thus, he needs to not only *fear Allah* but ultimately also to *repent and follow the Holy Quran*. In EXTRACT (8), the clauses—unlike those in EXTRACT (9)—are conventionally characterised by such command/order-giving predicators as “Harvest”, “Reject” and “Challenge”. These kinds of verbs, when exploited by public speakers, are often motivated by the speaker’s expertise and/or experience on the discourse at issue (Ononye, 2017, p. 11). However, their preponderant use in the data is observable because of the appeal they easily make to the target audience’s emotion, the success of which is also not unconnected to the allusion made to the divine authority of the speaker/sect. This kind of rhetoric is capable of drawing sensitive (probably Muslim loyalists) citizens into carrying out the command. These are rhetorically significant with respect to radicalising loyal members of the audience and hence inducing terrorists or non-conformist acts that may threaten the peace of society.

Conclusion

Understanding the rhetorical enchantment behind terrorist propaganda has never been more pressing. The major findings from the analysis of BH’s response texts provide several significant contributions to knowledge in the fields of linguistics, terrorism studies, and discourse analysis. The study offers insights into the linguistic strategies employed by the terrorist group to engage

with their audience, disseminate their messages, and further their ideological goals. By identifying and analysing engagement markers such as pronominal items, rhetorical questions, modality, and imperative sentences, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how language is used to manipulate perceptions, evoke emotions, and exert influence. The study also delineates the rhetorical goals embedded within BH's discourse, including appeals to divine authority, emotional manipulation, condemnation of adversaries, and dissemination of threats. Understanding these goals enhances our comprehension of the underlying motives and objectives of terrorist communication. The examination of pronominal forms and their patterns of use, being the most preponderant metadiscourse feature, sheds light on how terrorist groups address and engage with different segments of their audience, including government officials, the general public, and international actors.

Generally, the findings have implications for counter-terrorism efforts, highlighting the importance of linguistic analysis in understanding extremist discourse, identifying radicalisation processes, and developing targeted counter-narratives to combat terrorist propaganda effectively. By dissecting the linguistic techniques employed by BH, the research provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of terrorist recruitment, radicalisation, and mobilisation, thereby informing efforts to prevent the spread of extremist ideologies. From another angle, the work contributes to the methodological advancement of discourse analysis by demonstrating how linguistic features can be systematically analysed to uncover underlying rhetorical strategies, ideological frameworks, and communicative intentions within terrorist discourse. Overall, the research expands our understanding of the complex interplay between language, ideology, and terrorism, offering valuable insights into the communicative dynamics of extremist groups and their impact on society.

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