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Meaning-Making in Political Cartoons on the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria: A Social Semiotic Interpretation

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Abstract

The paper analyses some selected political cartoons on the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria. The objective is to unpack the multilayered meaning embedded in the political cartoons and to bring to the fore the societal ills and the short comings of our politicians. The data for the study comprises six (6) political cartoons selected purposively from the Nairaland Online Community, an internet forum for Nigerian political cartoons. The Visual Social Semiotics theory of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) is adopted as the theoretical standpoint for this study. Meaning - Making in the selected political cartoons are analysed in three layers namely: representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions. This in-depth analysis revealed among other things such recurring themes as corruption, insecurity, political rivalry and electoral fraud. The cartoons stand as powerful critiques of these societal foibles; they raise the awareness of the populace and help them to make informed choices and to intelligently participate actively in Nigeria's political discourse

Keywords: Meaning-Making, Political cartoons, Social semiotics, 2023 Presidential election, Non-verbal resources

Introduction

Meaning-Making does not always rely on the linguistic aspect of human communication, Non-verbal resources (such as images, colours, symbols, icons, layouts and composition) also contribute immensely in conveying meaning. These non-verbal resources appear as visual modes through which meanings are conveyed. In other words, they are used in visual communication. Cartoons are considered as part of visual communication.

Political cartoons are inherently semiotic as they employ images, signs and symbols to convey layered messages about the current events in the country (Onwuka and Udoye, 2022). Political cartoons have become powerful tools for representing real-life events in the society. Cartoonists use humour and caricature to depict serious socio-political issues in the society. These cartoons are meant to educate the populace and raise their consciousness on the political and social realities of the nation. Unfortunately, many viewers lack the visual literacy required to negotiate meaning in visual communication.

Political cartoons serve as sharp instruments for criticism and social commentary. They are used to sensitize the public on the current state of the nation. Onakpa (2014) avers that political cartoons are used to expose the ills of the society, the foibles of the political class, as well as current issues in governance. There are many societal ills in the country ranging from bad governance, intense political rivalry, corruption to insecurity and so on. All these are captured in political cartoons, but many people cannot decode the messages they convey.

Social semiotics is defined by Longe (2021) as the study of the social dimension of meaning. It examines how semiotic resources are used to create and disseminate meaning, within specific social and cultural contexts. Cartoons are good examples of a visual communication mode where different semiotic resources are

combined to communicate meaning. In a single cartoon, we can see texts, images, symbols, and many more; and they all simultaneously contribute to the overall meaning of the message conveyed.

Elections are important in a democratic society. The 2023 presidential election was a significant event in the country. Since gaining independence from the British colonial rule in 1960, the country has gone through a tumultuous political history, characterized by military coups, civil strife, and democratic transitions. Suleiman *et al* (2021) aver that election is key to the stability of democracy in any country. This study looks at the political landscape of Nigeria, particularly the 2023 presidential election, and how the issues and the political discourse surrounding it were captured in political cartoons.

Therefore, this paper attempts to unpack the layers of meaning embedded within the political cartoons related to the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. This work is hinged on the theory of Visual Social Semiotics of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006). In their seminal work: Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), provided a framework for understanding the intricacies of visual communication. Based on this backdrop, this paper explores the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunction levels of meaning in the selected political cartoons. It also shows how these levels of meaning are used to convey complex political messages, as well as contribute to the Nigerian political discourse.

Statement of the Problem

It has been observed that many readers enjoy political cartoons on the surface value of the humour they evoke, without bothering about the deep and serious messages they tend to convey. In support of this assertion, Onakpa (2014) avers that some people

have the tendency to see cartoons as something trivial, meant to create fun and laughter for the reader. This is a serious problem that needs to be corrected. Though cartoons evoke humour, the serious messages they convey should not be overlooked. Onwuka and Udoye (2022) also stated that many viewers lack visual literacy required to negotiate meaning in visual texts. In other words, they do not know how to interpret the meaning-making resources in political cartoons. As a result, they lack adequate information on the current political situation in the country. These issues informed the decision for this study.

Research questions

To guide the study, the following research questions are put forward:

1. How is the representational meaning of the cartoons on the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria portrayed?
2. How is the interactive meaning of the cartoons on the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria conveyed?
3. How did the political cartoons on the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria achieve meaning portrayal at the compositional metafunction level?

Conceptual Review

Meaning-Making

Meaning-Making is a fundamental human process that allows individuals to make sense of their world and their place within it. According to Wolsey (2019) a central purpose of human lives is to exercise the capacity to make useful meaning from encounters with texts, spoken discourse, events in the world and so on.

Zittoun and Brinkman (2012) posit that meaning-making is a process by which people interpret situations, events, objects or discourses in the light of their previous knowledge and experience. In fact, meaning-making is the basis of human functioning in everyday life. Meaning-making highlights the active role people

play in constructing meaning rather than passively receiving it. This suggests that people's beliefs, values, prior experiences influence their understanding of the world.

Sidor and Dublin (2023) aver that the search for meaning is a fundamental aspect of human existence influencing how people perceive their lives and navigate the challenges they encounter. According to them, meaning-making is the process of interpreting and finding significance of our experiences.

Political Cartoons

Dictionary. Com (1995) defines cartoon as a sketch or drawing, usually humorous, as in a newspaper or periodical; symbolizing, satirizing, or caricaturing some action, subject, or person of popular interest. Essien-Eyo and Otto (2011) also define cartoons as amusing drawings or caricature of people, things and places often depicting current events. Cartoons are unique forms of journalism that use humour and satire to present serious issues in the society.

Cartoons come in various forms. Onakpa (2014) lists them as follows:

- Comic Strips
- Animated cartoons for the electronic media such as Tom and Jerry. Superman etc.
- Editorial cartoons for newspapers and magazines also called political cartoons.

It is important to note at this juncture that the focus of this study is political cartoons.

Political cartoons are an integral part of political journalism. They provide a light relief from the ever increasingly gloomy political discourse. Onakpa (2014) claims that political cartoons are often satirical in nature and castigates the social misdeeds, sayings, views or events that have to do with the political class. Political cartoons constitute a specific category of political reporting. They

are pictorial representations which depict political and social issues and events, in a simple, short and condensed manner.

Political cartoons in Nigeria often tackle themes such as corruption, governance, human rights violation and socio-economic challenges. These themes resonate deeply in a nation where political power has often been juxtaposed with systemic corruption and mismanagement (Ezeamalu 2023).

Social Semiotics

This is a branch of the field of semiotics which investigates human signifying practices in specific social and cultural circumstances. Social Semiotics sees meaning - making as a social practice. The idea is that communities are different; a sign used in one community may mean a different thing in another community.
The meanings of signs are created by people and do not exist separately from them and the life of their social/cultural community. Therefore, signs have different meanings in different social and cultural contexts.

In social semiotics, the key term is 'semiotic resources', van Leeuwen (2005:3) explains why the term semiotic resources is preferred to semiotic sign. He said that "it avoids the impression that what a sign stands for is somehow pre-given, and not affected by its use". Semiotic resources are therefore those actions and artefacts that are used to communicate meaning in a given social context. Long (2021) defines social semiotics as that which studies the social dimension of meaning and the power of human processes of signification and interpretation in shaping individuals and societies.

2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

The 2023, presidential election was a significant event in Nigeria's political landscape. The election was held on the 25th of February 2023 amidst severe economic hardship and the prevailing state of

insecurity across the country. Centre for Democracy and Development Electoral Analysis Centre (CDD-EAC) (2023) aver that there was fuel scarcity and shortage of cash due to central Bank of Nigeria's decision to redesign naira.

Several candidates vied for the presidency in 2023, each representing distinct interest and ideologies, The APC candidate, Bola Amed Tinubu, was a former Lagos State Governor and a prominent political figure in the South West region. The PDP candidate, Atiku Abubakar was a former vice president under Obasanjo regime. The Labour Party Candidate, Peter Gregory Obi, was a former governor of Anambra State. Another contender who made impact was Rabiu Kwankwanso, the presidential flag bearer of NNPP. Ezeamalu (2023) posits that eighteen (18) candidates (17 men and one woman) contested to replace former president Muhammadu Buhari. Out of these several candidates, this study chose to focus on the top three front runners namely: Tinubu, Atiku and Obi.

The policy documents of these presidential candidates were released during the campaign period. According to Audu (2023), the campaign of Bola Tinubu leaned heavily on his economic management experience as a former governor of Lagos State, Atiku's campaign was on economic reform, job creation and unity, Obi's reform message was seen as a potential departure from traditional politics and a step toward addressing the socio-economic challenges facing the nation.

The role of technology was also seen in the 2023 election. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BVAS) and (IRev) INEC Result Viewing Portal for result transmission. The electorate believed that these technologies would be the game changer that will entrench credibility, transparency and accountability in Nigeria's elections, unfortunately this was not so. Both the BVAS and IRev failed. As a result many Nigerians were disappointed at

the way these technologies were manipulated especially during the result transmission stage of the presidential election. This has put a big question mark on the integrity of the voting process and the election results of the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria (CDD-EAC 2023).

Non-Verbal Resources

Research has shown that every interaction is made by more than just words. Ohio Open Ed Collaborative (2025: 2) confirm this by stating that scholars and practitioners all over the world agree that 50-65 percent of the information we communicate with others is done through nonverbal channels – that is, all the ways that we communicate without using words.

Non-verbal resources are those wide range of tools and elements used in non-verbal communication. They include images, artefacts, symbols, body language, colours, facial expressions and so on. They appear as visual modes to communicate meaning, often without the use of words. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) describe non-verbal resources as 'semiotic modes', that is systems of signs like images, gestures, colours, layout and typography – that work alongside language to construct meaning. In fact, non-verbal resources are those cues and methods used in non-verbal or visual communication to convey messages.

Martins (2025) describes non-verbal communication as the transmission of messages or signals through a variety of nonverbal behaviours, without the use words. According to her, these non-verbal behaviours form a complex system of cues that complement and sometimes even override our verbal messages. Many scholars (such as Martins (2025), Cherry (2025), Dsouza (2025), Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), Jewitt (2014) etc.) have listed and explained the different types of non-verbal resources as follows:

1. Kinesics: Another name for kinesics is body language. This refers to the movement of any part of the body that communicates meaning. Under kinesics are the following:

Facial Expression: The face is highly expressive and can show a wide range of emotions without words. A smile can communicate happiness, while a frown may express sadness or disapproval. The look on a person's face is often the first thing that people see, ever before hearing what they say. Sometimes, a raised eye brow, a slight smirk or a wink can say more than a whole conversation. As Cherry (2025) put it, non-verbal communication can vary dramatically across cultures, but facial expressions for happiness, sadness, anger and fear are similar worldwide. Widening your eyes in surprise, rolling your eyes can also send deep messages.

Gestures: This refers to movement of the hands, head or body to emphasize a point. Common gestures include waving, pointing and giving thumbs up to show approval, or shrugging of one's shoulder to indicate unawareness. A clenched fist can communicate anger or frustration, while a raised fist may represent resistance or solidarity. Nodding or shaking of head can imply agreement or refusal and fidgeting can indicate nervousness

Posture: The way you position your body can indicate confidence, comfort or distress. For instance, crossed arm can signal defensiveness, slouching posture can communicate distress, standing tall indicates confidence and competence.

Eye Contact: Maintaining direct eye contact can signal engagement, attentiveness, honesty and interest, whereas avoiding eye contact can suggest shyness or deception. Eye contact builds trust or conversely. In some cultures, lack of eye contact signals disinterest, in others, too much direct eye contact might be seen as disrespectful. People's eyes can indicate a range of emotions including hostility, interest and attraction. People also often utilize eyes gaze to gauge a person's honesty, for instance, normal steady eye contact is often taken as sign that a person is telling the truth and is trustworthy. On the other hand, Shifty eyes and inability to maintain eye contact is frequently seen as an indicator that someone is lying or being deceptive.

2. **Images:** These are also referred to as icons, and they include pictures, drawings, maps, illustrations, posters and so on. They are

visual images used to represent people, objects or ideas. For example, a dilapidated vehicle in a Nigerian political cartoon, can be a metaphorical image representing a failed nation.

3. Artefacts: These refer to objects that you have that communicate information about you. Artefacts such as uniforms, stethoscope, car, backpack, items on your desk and so on. For example a soldier, a police officer, and a doctor wear uniforms that show at a glance what they do for a living.

4. Appearance: How you dress and your overall appearance including your hairstyles, communicate information about you. They can showcase your status, identity or mood. Appearance can alter physiological reaction, judgment and interpretation. According to Cherry (2025), culture is an important influence on how appearances are judged. For example, thinness tends to be valued in western culture, while some African cultures relate full-figured bodies to better health, wealth and social status. A traditional attire say much about a person's locality**.**

5. **Symbols:** These are culturally or universally recognized images that stand for broader concepts. Examples are the traffic signs, skull and bones representing death or danger, naira and dollar signs and so on.

6. Colour: Different colours evoke emotional and cultural meanings. For instance, red colour may symbolize violence, danger or passion, while green may represent hope or growth.

7. Spatial: These include layout and composition. The placement and size of elements create meaningful relations such as power, focus or hierarchy. For example, placing person or an object at the centre of a cartoon, signals the central focus or dominance.

8. Vectors (direction of gaze or movement): These are lines or implied directions in an image that guides the viewers' attention. For example, a soldier pointing a gun in a cartoon creates a vector of aggression or threat.

9. Hepatics (Touch): Communicating through touch is another form of nonverbal behaviour. Touch can be used to communicate affection, familiarity, sympathy and other emotions. For instance, a

pat on the back can be comforting, while a handshake can seal a relationship. Women can use touch to convey care, concern and nurture. Men, on the other hand are more likely to use their touch to assert power and control over others (Cherry 2025).

Other non-verbal resources include: Paralinguistic (Voice tone, pitch, inflection and loudness). Proxemics – use of personal space and distance. Chronemics (Use of time, such as being punctual or late). These may not really be captured in cartoons and for this reason, they are just mentioned briefly. Dsouza (2025) avers that non-verbal resources used in non-verbal communication are silent partners. They help to convey emotions and intent, often filling the gaps that language alone cannot. According to him, there's need for cultural awareness when interpreting nonverbal cues, because some gestures might be positive in one culture and offensive in another culture
Martins (2025) also gave other importance of nonverbal communication as follows:

- It reinforces or contradicts verbal communication.
- It expresses emotions and attitude
- It defines relationships and power dynamics

Cherry (2025) added that nonverbal communication helps to provide clarity to spoken words and as well emphasize important points. It saves time and allows for immediate feedback. In fact, these nonverbal behaviours often work together to get a message across. They form an integral part of human communication.

Empirical Review

The study of political cartoons and visual communication have received growing attention all over the world. They are said to carry more messages than spoken and written language. Stoian, (2015), carried out a study entitled: "Analysing Images: A social semiotic perspective". The data used for the study was an online image showing a newly wedded couple on honeymoon, sourced

from Costa Rican trails (2009). Stoian used the theory of social semiotics by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) for the analysis. This theory postulates that an image can simultaneously perform three metafunctions in creating meaning: representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions. The result of her findings show that these meaning-making visual resources can, not only be described and observed, but can also be interpreted. The researcher established the fact that visual social semiotic analysis can be applied in various areas such as: paintings, promotions, advertisings, cartoons, buildings, websites and so on.

Onwuka and Udoye (2022) carried out a study entitled "Meaning-making in online Nigerian Political Cartoons: A Social Semiotic Interpretation". Six political cartoons were purposively selected as the data for the study from the Instagram account of Business Day Media (business day ng). The theoretical model used for the Study was the Visual Social Semiotic theory of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). Meaning-Making in the political cartoons were analysed in three layers: representational, interactive and compositional. The application of this theory helped the researchers to unveil the socio-political realities in Nigeria. The flaws of the political class were subtly dissected in the political cartoons using diverse semiotic resources. The researchers therefore concluded that the ability to interpret the message in these cartoons enables the viewers to make intelligent and balanced decisions that would pave ways for economic, social and political development in Nigeria.

Akpati (2019) carried out a study entitled "A multimodal Discourse Study of some Online Campaign Cartoons of Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election". The data for the study were six campaign cartoons on the two major political parties in Nigeria (APC and PDP) and their chieftains, generated during the 2015 presidential election period. The cartoons were purposively selected from the Nairaland online community, an internet forum created by a Nigerian internet entrepreneur. The theoretical

framework used in analysing the data was Machin and Mayr's (2012) Multi- modal Critical Discourse Analysis. The careful scrutiny with the lens of this theory, revealed that the cartoons employed exaggeration, satire and mockery to expose politicians' weaknesses and flaws. They also presented Nigeria in its deplorable state - a failed nation yearning for sincere and pragmatic leadership.

Alyebo and Zayol (2023) carried out a study entitled "Pragmatic Analysis of Online cartoons of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria". The objective of the study was to analyze the different functions of the selected cartoons in relation to context, cartoon characters, intentions, world knowledge, implicatures, and mutual contextual beliefs. The researchers purposively selected fifteen online cartoons of the 2023 presidential election as the data for the study. They used the pragma-crafting theory of Jacob Mey (1993) as the theoretical stand point to analyze their data. The findings showed that cartoons are embodiments of serious messages meant to entertain, mock, satirize and most importantly educate the reading population. The latent meanings in the cartoons which transcend sentence meanings and sketched images, reveal the serious message of the collapse of the country's leadership, security networks, economic, educational and social frameworks. This present study is a contribution towards the rising trend of political discourse via visual communication.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on the theory of Visual Social Semiotics by Kress and van Leeuwen, (1996, and 2006). This is an expansion of Halliday's theory of Metafunctions of language. They extended it to cover the analyses of visuals. These metafunctions were renamed: representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions.

At the **representational** level we look at what is shown and symbolized, such as people, places and objects within an image, which are referred to as the Represented Participants (RPs). The representational layer of meaning consists of narrative and conceptual structures. There are different kinds of narrative processes such as action, reaction, speech, mental and conversion processes depending on the types of vectors and participants included. Narrative images allow viewers to create stories about the RPs because they include vectors of motion.
In the reaction process, the narrative is created through eye lines which act as vectors between the RPs. In conceptual structure Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) posit that the three main processes captured are classificatory, analytical and symbolic.

The **interactive** level of meaning concerns with viewer engagement and social relations. Here, we look at contact (demand and offer), social distance, and point of view and so on. The **compositional** level of meaning concerns with visual organization and focus. Here we consider the following: information value (given, new, ideal or real); salience (relative size, sharpness of focus, colour contrast, placement in foreground or background) and framing (frame lines and pictorial framing devices.

Methodology
The research design adopted is the descriptive qualitative approach which is suitable for this kind of study. The data for the study consist of six (6) Nigerian political cartoons. These Cartoons were created between December 2021 and April 2023. This period falls within the build-up to the 2023 presidential election.
The cartoons were sourced from Naira land community which is an official website for Nigeria political cartoons. The cartoons were analysed on three levels of meaning: representational, interactive and compositional.

Data Presentation and Analysis
Cartoon 1



Overview of the Cartoon

The cartoon presents a ballot box labelled 2023 election in the centre, placed on a tripod stand, as if it is being cooked. Three figures are also depicted as putting fire wood under the tripod stand holding the ballot box. One is seen kneeling down and blowing the fire with his mouth. The three figures are recognized by their dressing: Godwin Emefiele (the CBN governor of that period), Buhari (the former president), and an oil marketer. The wooden sticks all have labels, indicating the unpopular policies that threatened to undermine the 2023 election.

Representational Meaning: (This has to do with what is shown and what they symbolize).

a. A large ballot box labelled "2023 Election" stands at the centre. It represents democracy and electoral integrity.
b. Several wooden sticks labelled "NAIRA REDESIGN", "NAIRA SCARCITY", "and FUEL SCARCITY" and "CASH WITHDRAWAL LIMIT" are jammed under the ballot box like obstacles. The sticks represent policy induced crises, suggesting that these challenges are being intentionally introduced.
c. There are three prominent figures seen in the set up.

i. Godwin Emefiele (the then CBN Governor) pushing one of the sticks
ii. President Buhari Smiling and assisting (fanning the fire by kneeling and blowing it)
iii. An oil marketer

Interactive Meaning: (concerns with viewer engagement and social relations).
Here, Emefiele is seen actively inserting a destabilizing stick, a deliberate action suggesting complicity. Buhari smiling, appears to support the interference, implying executive backing of these disruptions.
The ballot box (representing the electoral process) is shown on a precarious stand, shaky and in trouble. The viewer is placed as a witness to sabotage, invited to question the legitimacy of the system and motives behind pre-election policies.

Compositional Meaning: (Visual Organization and Focus)
The 2023 Election box is central, making it the heart of the narrative.

- All characters are interacting with the box or the destabilizing elements, indicating shared involvement in its potential collapse.
- The labels on the sticks are crucial. They clarify the metaphor by naming the policy issues that are undermining the electoral process.

In conclusion, the cartoon/critiques how government policies created chaos that threatened Nigeria's 2023 election process. It suggests intentional destabilization, with elite complicity, possibly to influence or discredit the elections. It also illustrates the strain on the democratic process.

Cartoon 2



Overview of the cartoon
The cartoon depicts an INEC officer being forced at gunpoint to register children as eligible voters. The man threatening the INEC

officer with a gun, said that he was doing it because he promised the president 5 million votes. This is a clear case of corruption and intimidation.

Representational meaning: (what is shown and what they symbolize)

a) The INEC official: represents the Nigerian electoral body. His anxious expression and hand gesture suggest reluctance, hesitation or fear. He is positioned as a powerless bureaucrat under pressure.
b) The armed man: symbolizes a corrupt political figure or regional power broker. His traditional northern attire and dominance in the frame suggest political influence and control. The gun represents violence, intimidation and undue influence on electoral process.
c) The children: represent underage voters. Their being in line for voter registration symbolizes electoral fraud. Their small size and innocence contrasts sharply with the adult world of politics and corruption.
d) The speech bubble: "Register them! I promised the president 5 million votes" links local manipulation with national political ambitions. This reflects the motion of power dynamics where regional actors secure votes by any means to please political superiors.

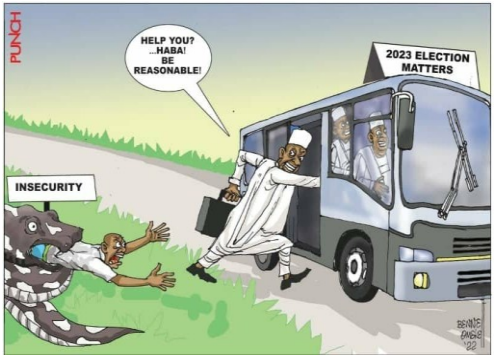
Interactive Meaning: (this explores how participants relate to each other and the viewer)

- There is a clear power imbalance. The man with the gun dominates the interaction, enforcing his will on the INEC official.
- The INEC official is looking at the armed man with visible fear, while the armed man looks ahead assertively.
- The children are passive and voiceless, emphasizing their exploitation.
- The viewer is placed in a critical stance, outside the scene, invited to judge the obvious injustice and illegality.

Compositional Meaning: (this refers to how visual elements are arranged to guide interpretation)

- The INEC official is on the left (often associated with the "given") while the armed man and the children are on the right (associated with "new").
- The central focus is on the registration table, suggesting that the heart of the problems is on the voter registration process.
- The INEC vest in bright green signals "legitimacy" in contrast with the darker tones of the gun and the dull clothing of the children-symbolizing manipulation of innocence.

Cartoon 3



Overview of the Cartoon

The cartoon presents on the left a man being swallowed by a massive snake labelled insecurity. His facial expression and outstretched hands indicate that he was shouting for help. In the middle is a speech bubble which reads HELP YOU? HABA! BE REASONABLE! On the right is a politician (to whom the speech bubble was attributed) running into a bus labeled 2023 ELECTORAL MATTERS in which other politicians were already seated, smiling and looking forward.

Representational Level: (key elements and their symbolism)

a) The man being attacked by the snake labelled "insecurity" represents ordinary Nigerian citizens, victims of increasing insecurity (terrorism, kidnapping, banditry etc.) struggling and calling for help.

b) The snake is a metaphorical sign of a dangerous ever-present threat, involving fear and helplessness.
c) The politician dressed in traditional attire and carrying a brief case, symbolizes the Nigerian political class or leadership. His disinterest in helping reflects neglect and detachment.
d) The bus labelled "2023 Election Matters" stands for political agenda or 2023 election preparation. It also stands for focus on electoral ambitions over public welfare.
e) Speech bubble saying, "Help you? ... Haba! Be reasonable!" shows the politician dismissively refusing to help, implying that the pleas for help with insecurity are seen as a distraction from the electoral focus. The politician actively moving away from the danger, emphasizes his escape from responsibility.

Interactive Meaning: (This relates to how the image engages viewers and position them in relation to participants).

- The speech bubble saying: Help you?... Haba! Be reasonable!" uses Nigerian Pidgin, increasing authenticity and cultural reliability. The tone is dismissive and sarcastic indicating a power imbalance.
- The neutral observer position, invites viewers to witness the injustice and form their own judgments. However, the emotional appeal of the man in distress naturally calls for sympathy.
- The smiling politicians on the bus suggest complicity or indifference.

Compositional Meaning

- The foregrounding of the man and the snake dramatizes the danger of insecurity placing it as the most immediate concerns.
- The action of the politician stepping onto the bus shows the deliberate shift of attention away from the problem

- The bus and its direction represent forward momentum but not in a progressive sense. It critiques the prioritization of election preparation over governance.
- The signs "insecurity" and "2023 Election Matters" act as anchoring texts, explicitly guiding interpretation.

Cartoon 4



Overview of the Cartoon

The political cartoon depicts a man standing next to a ballot box labeled "2023 ELECTION -KANO POLLING UNIT XX". He is holding out lollipops and saying, "HURRY KIDS, CAST YOUR VOTES AND GET YOUR GIFTS"…. In front of him, a line of children are eagerly moving towards him holding their PVCs (permanent voter's cards). Even a rooster carries a PVC!

Representational Meaning: (key elements and their symbolism)

a) The man in traditional attire represents a political figure or an agent of electoral manipulation.
b) The children symbolize underage voters highlighting electoral fraud.
c) The act of exchanging votes for candy illustrates vote-buying, especially targeting the vulnerable.
d) The rooster with PVC exaggerates the absurdity and legitimacy of the voter base, suggesting the complete breakdown of credibility in voters' registration.

Interactive Meaning

- The characters do not address the viewer directly, indicating role-witnessing corruption without direct involvement.

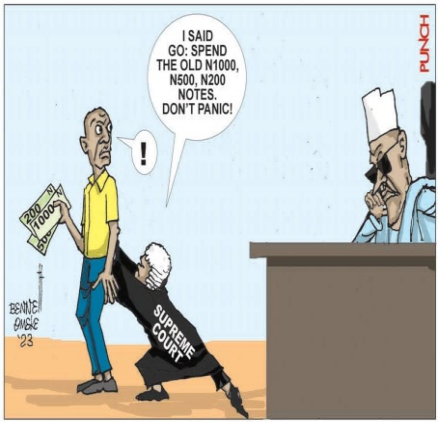
- The adult male stands above the children visually reinforcing his dominance and the hierarchical nature of electoral manipulation.
- The children's gaze is towards the gifts, showing their focus on rewards rather than civic duty.

Compositional Meaning

The adult figure is placed on the left (the given), while the children occupy the right ('the new'), signalling the ideological continuity of electoral corruption and its evolving forms. The ballot box, PVCs, the colour of the lollipops are prominent visual cues that draw the viewer's attention. They signify the moral decay and absurdity of vote trading.

The ideological implication of this cartoon is that it critiques electoral malpractice in Nigeria, especially in Kano State (a region often in the news for alleged underage voting), it critiques the use of gifts/incentives to exploit vulnerable groups. It is a mockery of democratic values, where even non-human (rooster) is portrayed as voters.

Cartoon 5



Overview of the cartoon

The cartoon depicts a confused man with old naira notes in his hands being pushed by the Supreme Court to go and spend the notes without panic. The man was still looking behind him, scared, with a big exclamation mark pointing to his face. On the right is a figure identified as Buhari from his dressing, sitting behind his desk unperturbed or oblivious of what is going on around him.

Representational Meaning: (key elements and their symbolism)

a. The man in yellow represents the Nigerian citizens, confused and uncertain, caught in institutional conflicts.
b. The robed figure labelled "Supreme court" symbolizes the judiciary, specifically Nigeria's highest court.
c. The figure at the desk in traditional attire and dark glasses represents the former president, Muhammandu Buhari (although not mentioned but visually implied).
d. Old naira notes (200, 500, and 1000) signify the controversial currency redesign policy in Nigeria.
e. The speech bubble; "I SAID GO; SPEND THE OLD ₦1000, ₦500, ₦200, NOTES. DON'T PANIC" is bold, direct and authoritative, yet, the citizen's expression of confusion and uncertainty contradicts it. This implies that legal rulings carry less weight without executive backing.

Interactive Meaning (Engagement with viewers and other characters in the image)

- The citizen looks confused, with a speechless exclamation mark, showing disempowerment and anxiety.
- The Supreme Court is pushing the citizen forward, trying to convince or enforce compliance with its directive to spend the old notes.
- The president figure is silent and distant, ignoring the situation. Possibly representing executive indifference or resistance to judicial ruling. This implies a power tussle between the judiciary and the executive.

Compositional Meaning

Left to right reading: the flow moves from the action of holding money, to the court order, to inaction or apathy from the president figure. The bright yellow shirt of the citizen makes him central and sympathetic.

The Supreme Court figure show's desperation to implement its authority.

The cartoon highlights the tension between the judiciary and the executive. The supreme court (visually active and vocal) tries to assert its decision to use the old notes, while the president (visually disengaged and silent) appears dismissive or defiant. This discordant stance makes the ordinary citizens suffer the consequence.

Cartoon 6



An overview of the Cartoon

The cartoon presents a metaphorical race (electoral competition), with Peter Obi triumphantly crossing the finish line while holding a cut out map of Lagos state. Tinubu is shown behind him in clear frustration, while other political actors from PDP and NNPP trail further behind. The headline reads: "Earthquake in Lagos: Obi Trounces Jagaban, others", suggesting an electoral shockwave.

The image visually interprets the dramatic nature of Obi's win in Lagos during the 2023 presidential elections, a moment widely viewed as a political upset and symbolic shift in Nigerian politics.

Representational Meaning: (what is shown and what they symbolize)

a. Peter Obi (identified through his glasses and Labour party logo). His forward motion and possession of Lagos state map symbolizes not just victory, but territorial and symbolic capture.

b. Tinubu's open-mouthed expression and backward stance portray shock and defeat, suggesting the undermining of his political dominance.
c. Map of Lagos State being held aloft by obi turns him into a conqueror figure, signifying ownership or control over the region.

Interactive Meaning (viewer engagement in relation to other participants)

- Obi is made central in the cartoon, He occupies the central foreground, suggesting the new political force, while others are visually diminished. Obi is smiling and looking directly ahead, signifying confidence and direction.
- Tinubu's facial expression is exaggerated in a way that ridicules and dramatizes his loss. The image creates a sense of dramatic irony; while Obi's position is celebratory, the humour stems from the reversal of expected roles - Tinubu losing in his home state.

Compositional Meaning: (how visual elements are arranged to guide interpretation)

Obi's figure is positioned centrally, making him the thematic focal point. The bright colours and the finish tape on Obi's figure (and the Lagos State map) lead to increased Salience, emphasizing the symbolic weight of his victory.

The use of race track as a compositional metaphor connects with common sporting imagery, making the political contest feel visceral and accessible. The yellow finish tape wraps around Obi and trails backward, linking him visually to both success and the displacement of others.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

This will follow the order in which the data was presented and analysed:

Cartoon 1: The cartoon depicts the then Central Bank governor (Emefiele), and the then president (Buhari), as actively destabilizing the electoral process through policy tools such as:

cash withdrawal limits, naira redesign, fuel scarcity, and so on. This shows a misuse of institutional power, where economic policies become political weapons. The oil marketer is also depicted as one of the clogs in the wheel of delivering a free and fair election.

The ballot box which represents democracy is seen undermined by several policies. This suggests a crisis of institutional independence and the threat of executive interference in the electoral process. The cartoon exposes an ideological conflict between democratic ideals (represented by the ballot box), and authoritarian control (represented by state officials) who use bad policies to destabilize the electoral process.

Cartoon 2: This cartoon is a critique on electoral fraud in Nigeria. It reflects the recurring allegations of underage voting in certain regions of the country, and the manipulation of voter registers. The cartoon criticizes power abuse and the subversion of the democratic process through violence and coercion. The use of children speaks volume, it portrays the extent of moral corruption in the Nigerian electoral process.

Cartoon 3: This cartoon is a powerful critique of the Nigerian political culture. It highlights the disconnect between state priorities and the citizens' welfare. The cartoon depicts a man clearly distressed, being attacked by a massive snake labelled insecurity. The snake metaphorically represents the widespread violence, kidnapping, terrorism and general insecurity plaguing the country. The man struggling under the weight of this threat, represents the average Nigerian citizen. The cartoon constructs a narrative of abandonment; while the citizens cry out under the burden of insecurity, political leaders prioritize personal or party interests over governance and citizens' welfare. The cartoon criticizes Nigerian leaders for prioritizing their political ambitions and election preparations over the immediate and critical issue of national security. It suggests a lack of empathy and misplaced priority.

Cartoon 4: This cartoon satirizes the 2023 election in Kano state. It depicts a cheerful adult male, presumably a political agent, offering lollipops to children in return for their votes. It is a criticism against electoral malpractice in Nigeria, especially in Kano state (a region often in the news for underage voting). This resonates with cartoon 2 where children were also depicted. The difference is that the INEC officer was being forced at gun point to register the children, but in cartoon 4, gifts are used as incentives to solicit for votes from vulnerable groups. By representing minors and even a rooster as eligible voters, the cartoonist underscores the absurdity of the electoral process in Nigeria. It is a clear case of corruption and indeed a mockery of democratic values.

Cartoon 5: This cartoon criticizes the confusing implementation of Nigeria's currency redesign policy, and the lack of coordination among the three arms of government. It illustrates power struggle between the judiciary and the executive, with the citizens suffering the consequences. The Supreme Court tries to assert its decision to allow the use of old currency notes, but the executive (visually represented by the president), appears silent and defiant. The citizen is placed in the middle confused and uncertain (captured by the sign (!) in the empty speech bubble). This reflects how ordinary citizens are caught in institutional conflicts, voiceless and powerless. The Supreme Court's desperate posture to assert its authority, implies that legal ruling carries less weight without the backing of the executive. This underscores the fragility of democratic institutions.

Cartoon 6: This cartoon is a critique on political dynasties and assumptions of regional control. Tinubu, a former governor of Lagos state, is associated with Lagos state politics and has political dominance there. Obi's win in Lagos state during the 2023 presidential election came as a rude shock to him. Obi's win is widely viewed as a symbolic shift in Nigerian politics. The cartoon not only supports democratic surprises, it criticizes the idea of territorial ownership and regional control.

Conclusion

This paper has focused mainly on the analysis of some political cartoons of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The application of Kress and van Leeuwen's theoretical framework to this analysis has proven that visual images are loaded with layers of meaning. Political cartoons offer a robust alternative to formal news reporting as they critique the foibles of the society and bring to the fore the shortcomings of the political class. It would be beneficial if viewers learn to analyse the layers of meaning embedded in these political cartoons. They will become more informed about the socio-political realities of their time.

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