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A Social Semiotic Analysis of Political Cartoons on the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election

Juliana Chinwe Njoku
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
juliananjoku3@gmail.com

&

Chinwe RoseAnn Ezeifeka
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
cr.ezeifeka@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Political cartoons, as part of visual communication, are powerful tools for critiquing Nigeria's political culture. This paper analyses some political cartoons on the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria. The purpose is to expose how some socio-political issues eroded the democratic process during the election period. Political cartoonists used different semiotic resources to capture these issues. Six political cartoons from online sources are purposively selected as the data for this study. The Visual Social Semiotic theory of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) is the theoretical framework adopted for this study. The selected cartoons are analysed on the three metafunction levels of meaning, namely: representational, interactive and compositional. This enabled an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the cartoons, bringing to the fore societal ills and the shortcomings of the political class. The analysis revealed such themes as the naira redesign policy and its harsh effect on the populace. The cartoons also captured visually, electoral violence, vote buying, and erosion of confidence in the electoral process depicted as 'the sleeping electorate'. Through the analysis, the cartoons visually exposed the pre-election societal hardships suffered by the average Nigerians right before the

presidential election. The cartoons provide a platform for the citizens to reflect and engage in active civic discourse.

Keywords: Social Semiotics, Political Cartoons, 2023 Presidential Election, Semiotic Resources, Visual Communication.

Introduction

The study of visual communication and media satire have received growing attention from scholars all over the world. Media satire uses humour, irony, and exaggeration to critique or mock societal issues, political figures, and institutional flaws. The primary goal of a satire is to highlight absurdities, challenge dominant narratives, and provoke critical thinking about real-life events. Political cartoons, also known as editorial cartoons, constitute a form of media satire.

Political cartoons are powerful multimodal texts that use a combination of visual and verbal elements to satirize or comment on socio-political issues in the society. Political cartoonists employ different semiotic resources to depict political ideologies, criticize the electoral process and to capture public sentiments. Political cartoons on the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, were intended to do more than just entertain the viewers. They were meant to educate the electorate and promote their consciousness on the political and social realities of the nation. Unfortunately, many readers stop at the entertainment level and do not probe into the deep and serious messages that these cartoons convey. This may not be unconnected with the fact that cartoons are multimodal and uses laughable caricatures and exaggeration to present serious issues.

Social semiotics is a social theory of meaning and communication which focuses on how semiotic resources are used to construct and communicate meaning, within specific cultural and social contexts. Gualberto and Kress (2018) posit that social semiotics is a social theory about meaning and meaning-making in (inter-) action. It examines the varieties of ways texts can be made. They further

aver that in social semiotics, texts are seen as multimodal complexes; in other words, they are constituted by more than one mode. Mode here refers to the material resources for making meaning evident, such as language, gesture, symbols, images, layouts and so on. Cartoons are examples of texts that combine multiple modes or different semiotic resources to construct meaning. Hence the relevance of analysing the selected political cartoons via the social semiotic approach.

Elections in Nigeria have been fraught with so many problems, ranging from electoral violence, intimidation, disenfranchisement of voters, multiple and under-age voting, vote buying, snatching of ballot boxes, destruction of electoral materials, to deliberate miscomputation and falsification of results (Suleiman *et al* 2021; CDD-EAC Analyst 2023). This has become a trend in Nigeria, and the 2023 presidential election suffered the same mishaps. Cartoonists have captured most of these problems apparently to sensitize the reading public on the state of the nation. This study therefore attempts to unpack the layers of meaning embedded within the political cartoons that heralded the 2023 presidential election m Nigeria. The paper is hinged on the Visual Social Semiotic theory of Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). The paper explores the representational, interactive, and compositional levels of meaning in the selected political cartoons.

Statement of the Problem

Cartoonists use humour and exaggeration to depict trending socio-political issues in the society. Unfortunately, many readers seem to enjoy only the humour the cartoons evoke and overlook the deep and serious messages embedded in them. As a result, they lack adequate information on the socio-political realities of the country. Onwuka and Udoye (2023) stated that many viewers lack the visual literacy required to negotiate meaning in visual texts. In other words, they do not know how to decode the multimodal semiotic resources used to convey messages in political cartoons.

Many scholars have approached cartoon analysis through various lenses; some through the lens of critical discourse study, some through the pragmatic lens and some through the Peircean triadic model. Others used the multimodal and social semiotic approaches. This paper is a contribution to this area of study. The objective is to analyse some political cartoons and as such help readers to decode the multilayered messages embedded in them. The theoretical standpoint for this study is the visual social semiotic theory of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). Hence, the paper explores how semiotic resources were used to convey meaning at the representational, interactive and compositional metafunction levels.

Research Questions

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

1. How were semiotic resources used to convey meaning at the representational metafunction level in the political cartoons of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?
2. How were semiotic resources used to convey meaning at the interactive metafunction level?
3. How did the political cartoons of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria achieve meaning portrayal at the compositional metafunction level?

Conceptual Review

Social Semiotics

Social semiotics is a branch of the field of Semiotics which explores how people use language and other semiotic resources to make meaning in social contexts. Long (2021) defines social semiotics as the study of the social dimension of meaning and the power of human processes of signification and interpretation in shaping individuals and societies. It examines how these meaning-making processes shape our understanding of the world and influence social relationships and power dynamics. Basically,

semiotics is the study of signs and symbols. The social aspect adds a twist to it, narrowing it down to context. It asks the questions: Who made the sign? Who is reading it? Where? For what purpose? In fact, history, culture, power and location all contribute to shape meaning in social semiotics.

According to Elhamy (2022), the social semiotic approach examines the meaning-making process in order to demonstrate how meaning is constructed in social actions and contexts. Social semiotics sees meaning-making as a social process. It emphasizes that meaning is not inherent in signs themselves, rather, it is created and negotiated through social interaction and cultural contexts. What a sign means in one society, may not be the same in another society.

Visual Communication

Visual communication is the act of conveying information and ideas through visual elements like images, graphics, videos and symbols, rather than relying only on text or audio (Kapoor, 2024). Visual communication is a form of non-verbal communication. This communication can range from simple signs and icons to complex graphics and interactive designs.

Team English (2025) avers that the power of visual communication lies in its ability to present information quickly and effectively, often transcending language barriers and making complex ideas more accessible and engaging. Ntara and White (2023) also see visual communication as the use of graphics to represent information for the purpose of communication.

There are key elements required to make visual communication effective, engaging and appealing. These key elements have been listed and explained by some scholars (Kapoor 2024, Team English 2025, Editorial Team 2025, and others). These elements include the following:

Icons: These involve the use of symbols, logos, photographs, maps, illustrations and images. They are used to represent complex information in a more digestible and engaging manner. In fact, the use of relevant and high quality images or universally recognised icons, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of the visual message.

Colours: Colours evoke emotions, attract attention, and can significantly impact the viewer's perception. For example, the red colour can represent danger or urgency, blue can represent royalty or trust, while green can represent growth, hope or inexperience. Colour is a powerful tool used to set the tone and enhance story telling. Contrasting colours are also used to highlight key areas.

Info graphics: These include graphs and charts. They are valuable tools used to represent data visually. For instance, bar charts are used for category comparison, line graphs for time based trends, pie charts for proportions, and scatter plots for correlation. All of these help the audience or viewer to quickly understand data relationships.

Typography: Kapoor (2024) defines typography as the art of arranging texts visually. The style, arrangement and appearance of text greatly influence how information is received. Choosing appropriate fonts, style and text structures can evoke emotion and enhance reliability. Text visuals are commonly used in advertising, web design and product.

Layout and Composition: Arranging visual elements to ensure clarity, flow and balance is important in visual communication. Other design principles such as alignment, repetition and proximity also contribute to make the visual message aesthetically pleasing and easy to comprehend.

Political Cartoons

According to Oamen and Fajuyigbe (2022:136) cartoons are "pictorial parody or imitation, which, by the devices of caricature, analogy as well as a combination of humour serve to inform the public about contemporary or topical issues, events, political or social developments". Political cartoons are a powerful form of

visual communication that convey ideologies, critique socio-political realities and shape public opinion.

Agu (2017:108) defines cartoons as "visual communication images that contain pragmatic meanings, most often satirical in nature while entertaining the reader". According to her, only serious minds probe into the pragmatic content of a cartoon. Some readers may simply end at the entertainment level, thus losing the pragmatics of the text. Yule (2010:128) defined Pragmatics as the study of "invisible meaning, or how we recognise what is meant even when it is not actually said or written". He further avers that in other to access this kind of meaning, there must be some shared assumptions and expectations.

Oamen and Fajuyigbe (2022) further aver that cartoons are vital instruments used by the press to discuss grave social issues and at the same time avoid the censorship from governmental controlling bodies. Hence, Mohammed (2014:39) describes cartoons as "safety canopies under which a newspaper on magazine can hide to say what cannot be stated in plain editorials". From time immemorial cartoons have served as a tool for social resistance in the world. They are used to satirize and lampoon the socio-political abuses of a given period. In the context of the 2023 Nigerian Presidential election, political cartoons were used as social commentary on political and social issues intended to keep in check the excesses of the political class. They function as watchdogs meant to keep public officials on their toes.

An Overview of the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

The political climate leading up to the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria was characterised by intense competition among various political parties (Higa 2023). Two dominant parties, the All Progressive Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) had traditionally held sway over the Nigerian political landscape. However, 2023 witnessed the emergence of a third

party, the Labour Party (LP) which tried to disrupt this binary power structure. The Labour Party was overwhelmingly supported by the youth who were dissatisfied with APC and PDP and what they stood for. This caused a wave of political awakening among the electorate. The flag bearers for the three political parties mentioned above were Bola Ahmed Tinubu for APC, Atiku Abubakar of PDP and Peter Obi of Labour Party. The presidential election was held on the 25th of February, 2023.

This overview will not be complete without mentioning the role of technology in the 2023 presidential election. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is responsible for overseeing the electoral process in Nigeria. In preparation for the 2023 elections, INEC introduced more sophisticated technologies such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing portal (IREV) for result transmission. These were in addition to the previous Finger Prints Identification System (FIS) and Electronic Voters Registrar for voters' registration. According to Aderemi (2019), these were significant steps towards enhancing the effectiveness of the electoral process. Unfortunately, these technologies failed and could not serve the purposes for which they were procured. The IREV could not transmit the presidential election results to the central INEC viewing portal at the time they were declared at the polling unit level. This inability to provide real-time transmission of the presidential election results, cast aspersions upon the integrity of the electoral process as well as the presidential election results as declared.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical standpoint for this study is the visual social semiotics of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). Their seminal work: *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design,* provided a framework for analyzing visual communication. This framework stems from Halliday's theories of metafunctions of language. These metafunctions were extended to the analysis of visuals and

were renamed representational, interactive and compositional metatfunction levels of meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that images, like language, have grammatical structures that can be analysed for meaning; that visual images can be read as 'texts'. They did not treat satire as entertainment, rather, they used their framework as a highly structured ideological resource to dismantle authority, express institutional critique and shape public opinion. Many scholars have applied the theory of visual social semiotics in their analysis of visuals (Harrison 2003, Chapman *et al* 2016, Stoian 2015, Seevinck 2016, Jewit and Oyama 2004). The representational, interactive, and compositional levels of meaning in the theoretical framework are explained below.

Representational Meaning

Representational meaning is conveyed through the participants (people, places or things) depicted in the image. This layer of meaning consists of the narrative and conceptual structures. The narrative structure allows the viewer to create a story through vectors, unfolding actions, events or processes of change. Narrative representations are depicted as actions or reactions and can be transactional or non-transactional. *Action* image includes movement lines or vectors. *Vectors* emerge from actors and are often directional lines that connect participants. *Reaction* is opposite to action and has no directional lines or vectors.

The narrative is created through eye lines which act as vectors between the represented participants (RPs). For example, if a leader is drawn in a cartoon pointing heroically forward, while the body or feet creates a vector moving backward, it automatically highlights political hypocrisy. Again, if a politician is drawn holding an oversized money bag, or wearing a crown made of trash, at a glance, the politician's true nature or identity would be revealed.For transactional actions, contact or movement is within the image, such as the RPs vision of sight (what they are looking at). For non-transactional, the action or activity is outside the

image or screen. The *conceptual* structure do not contain vectors, rather, they visually define, analyse and classify the RPs in a general sense, showing who they are or what they symbolize.

Interactive Meaning

Interactive meaning creates a relationship between the viewer and the world inside the image. This interaction suggests how the viewer should interpret what is being represented. Three factors inform this: contact, distance and point of view.

Contact: This refers to the direction of the gaze of the RPs in the image, which can be describe as *demand* or *offer*. When the RPs are looking directly at the viewer, it is called 'demand', the people in the image symbolically demand something from the viewer. This is making imaginary contact with the viewer. When the gaze is directed at someone or something within an image, it is called an 'offer'. When there is no 'gaze' contact between the viewer and the RPs, the images represented become items of information or objects of contemplation and cause a feeling of detachment.

Distance: Images create opportunities to allow viewers see people, places and things up close or to keep them afar. The norms of social interaction determine the distance we keep from each other. This is translated into sizes of frame. Close-up (head and shoulders) create an intimate interaction. Medium shot is cut off at the waist or knee suggesting a social relationship. Long shot is a full body either far away or sitting that suggests distance or an impersonal relationship.

Point of View: This refers to how the audience identifies and perceives the point of the viewers in relation to the actors. According to Stoian (2015), participants can be depicted from various angles each indicating a different relation. The first is the vertical angle which assigns power to represented participants. For instance, looking down is symbolic power. It makes the RPs more powerful. Looking up is to have less power, while looking straight on (at eye level) makes the RPs at equal level with the viewer. The second point of view is the horizontal angle and its involvement

with or detachment from what is represented in the image. Here, when the RP is presented frontally to the viewer, it creates maximum involvement, but when the presentation is side view, it creates detachment.

Compositional Meaning

This concerns with how the elements of an image are arranged and how this arrangement contributes to the overall meaning. In compositional metafunction, meaning is built by three interrelated systems: information value, salience and framing. Some scholars have added a fourth dimension to it - modality.

Information Value

Stoian (2015) states that information value is associated to three main visual areas: left and right, top and bottom, and center and margin. In the case of left and right, the composition is structured along the horizontal axis. The left contains the given and familiar information, while the right side is reserved for new information. From the top and bottom visual areas, composition is structured along the vertical axis. Information placed at the top is presented as essential or ideal, illustrating *a promise*, while information placed at the bottom depicts the real or more specific and practical information. For center-margin visual areas, the center as reserved for nucleus or core information whereas the margins are subservient to the center.

Salience: The visual clues indicating salience are size, sharpness of focus, tone, colour contrast, and placement in the visual field. The larger the size of the RP, the greater the salience. Out of focus RPs have less salience, and areas of high tonal contrast have greater salience. An RP placed in the foreground has greater salience than an RP in the background.

Framing: This is about connecting and disconnecting certain elements by frame lines or pictorial framing devices. Connection can also be emphasised by vectors.

Modality: This is based on how realistic or non-realistic an image is to the naked eye in real life. There are two types of modality:

natural and scientific. Natural modality is basically what you would see in real life. There are no filters or alteration made to the images and an example of this is when you take a photograph of something in its natural form. Scientific modality on the other hand is an abstraction of the truth in an image. When the details in an image (colour, background etc.) are extracted or simplified (Chapman *et al* 2016).

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive research design which is suitable for the qualitative nature of this work. The data was sourced from the internet, from www.nairaland.com and from online base of our national newspapers (such as *Vanguard, Daily Trust, Punch* and *Tribune online* A total of six (6) political cartoons were selected for this study through the purposive sampling technique. The purposive sampling technique made it easy to select the specific cartoons relevant to the objectives of the study. The cartoons were created between December 2021 and April 2023. This period is significant because it captured the build-up, the climax and the resolution of the Nigerian Presidential election held on the 25th of February, 2023.

The cartoons were analysed using the lens of Visual Social Semiotic theory of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). In other words, the cartoons were interpreted on the three metafunction levels of meaning, namely: representational, interactive, and compositional.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Cartoon 1:



Representational Meaning

The Figures sitting at the table labelled CBN/FG DECISION on the left, can be identified as Emefiele the former CBN governor and Buhari the former Nigeria President. They are recognised by their features and manner of dressing, and are depicted as detached and emotionally distant. They symbolically represent the institutional actors responsible for economic policies.

The central male figure, dressed in office attire and holding some documents, represents the average Nigerian citizen or civil servant, gesturing helplessly to indicate confusion and powerlessness. The other figures are depicted as distressed, seating on the ground, and one is clutching a bundle of cash. They symbolise the masses experiencing hardship and uncertainty.

The Judge holding a gavel, sitting on the table on the right labelled "SUPREME COURT JUDGEMENT" represents the highest court of the land, issuing binding judgements. The gavel signifies judicial authority and finality.

The multiple question marks surrounding the citizens act as visual vectors of confusion, emphasizing unresolved tension between state institutions.

Interactive Meaning

Most characters avoid direct eye contact with the viewer, creating an offer image. The viewer is invited to observe and interpret rather than interact; reinforcing a reflective, critical stance.

The mid-to-long shots position the viewer at a social distance, suggesting collective social relevance rather than personal intimacy. This presentation universalises the experience of confusion and hardship as a shared national condition. The citizens are shown as weak and uncertain, implying powerlessness and subordination.

Compositional Meaning

Left (Given): CBN/FG Decision, represents already known executive policies.

Right (New): Supreme Court Judgement, signifies judicial intervention or contradiction.
Centre: Confused citizens, this is the core message of the cartoon. It shows how ordinary Nigerians bear the consequences of institutional conflict.

The oversized gavel, symbolizes the weight of judicial authority. The question marks are visually amplified to foreground uncertainty. Contrast is shown between calm, well dressed elites and distressed, poorly positioned citizens. Although all elements share a single visual space, ideological separation is achieved through symbolic framing - that is institutional actors are spatially and psychologically distant from the masses. Ultimately, the cartoon critiques the lack of policy coherence and highlights how power struggles at the elite level translate into confusion, hardship and suffering for ordinary citizens.

Cartoon 2:



Representational Meaning
The hands of two faceless people are shown in a clear exchange process. One hand offers a bundle of money while another hand holds a ballot card labelled “Vote”. The anonymity of the participants suggest that vote-buying is a systemic practice, not

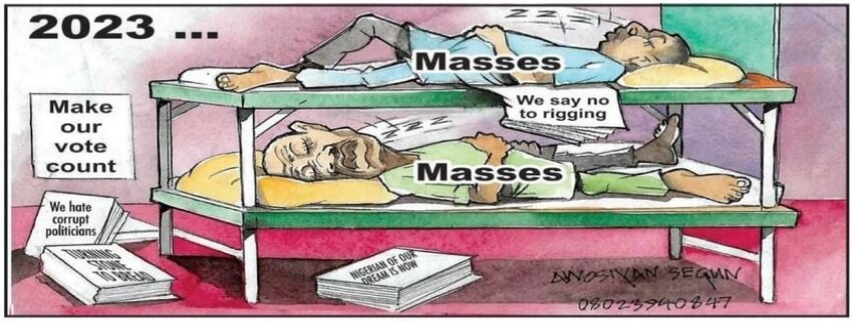
limited to identifiable individuals. The image portrays voting as a market transaction and not as a civic duty.
The money stack symbolizes economic inducement, while the isolated ballot card represents the reduction of democratic participation to a tradeable commodity.

Interactive Meaning
Since no faces are shown, there is no direct gaze; rather, it is an offer image. The viewer is invited to judge rather than empathize, reinforcing moral evaluation over emotional alignment.
The close up framing of hands creates intimacy, drawing viewers into transaction, positioning them as witnesses. The eye level perspective establishes equality between the viewer and participants, subtly implicating the society at large as involved in the practice.

Compositional Meaning: The money and ballot card are centrally placed and visually prominent, highlighting the core message - democracy is being exchanged for cash. The green background echoes Nigeria's national colour, anchoring the cartoon within Nigerian socio-political context. The ballot card placed above the money can be read ironically, while the vote appears symbolically superior, it is practically subordinated to cash.

The cartoon represents elections as commoditized exchanges rather than expressions of popular sovereignty. Within the framework of visual social semiotics, the cartoon exposes how economic vulnerability and political opportunism intersect to undermine electoral integrity. Ultimately, the cartoon functions as a moral and political warning about the long term consequences of monetized democracy.

Cartoon 3



The dreamers!

Representational Meaning

Two figures labelled masses are depicted sleeping on a bunk bed. This symbolizes political inertia, complacency and disengagement. Protest placards such as make our vote count", "we say no to rigging", "we hate corrupt politicians", etc. are present in the cartoon, but they are lying on the floor detached from active human agency. This suggests that these demands exist more as rhetoric than practice. Sleeping, as a semiotic resource, metaphorically encodes political unconsciousness or a refusal to translate awareness into action. The label "Masses" generalizes responsibility, implying collective rather than individual failure. Thus, the cartoon presents the Nigerian populace as ideologically awake but politically dormant.

Interactive Meaning

The sleeping figures avert their gaze entirely, producing no eye contact with the viewer. This constitutes an offer image, viewers are invited to observe and judge rather than engage in dialogue. This absence of gaze reinforces the idea that the masses are disconnected not only form political action, but also from civic responsibility. The figures are shown in a "long shot", thus establishing a high level of social distance. Viewers are invited to identify themselves as part of the collective "masses".

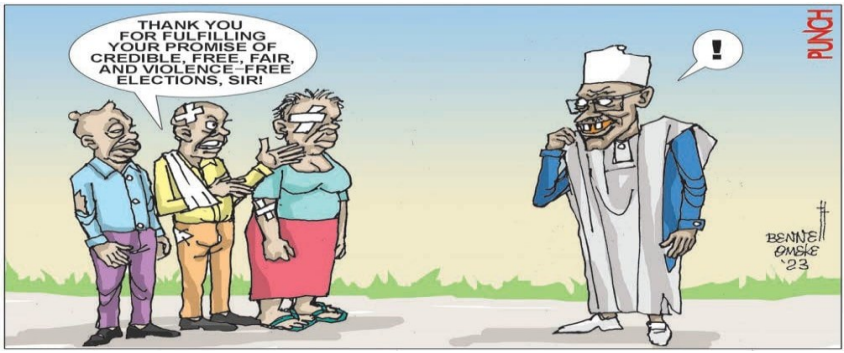
The horizontal angle positions the viewer on equal footing with the figures. There is no power hierarchy imposed visually, instead, moral responsibility is evenly distributed between the represented participants and the viewers.

Compositional Meaning

The sleeping figures and the repeated label "masses" are placed in the center, thus making them the subject of the core message.
The protest placards on the floor are marginalized spatially, placed at the bottom and edges of the frame, indicating that civic ideals have been relegated to the periphery of political practice.

The caption "The dreamers" at the bottom center delivers ironic closure, reframing democratic hopes as naive fantasies rather than achievable goals. The muted color palette and domestic setting (bedroom-like space) further normalize political passivity, suggesting that disengagement has become routine. The bunk bed structure creates a vertical arrangement that visually suggest layers of society, yet both levels are equally inactive, implying that apathy cuts across social strata.

Cartoon 4:



Representational Meaning

The three injured citizens represent the Nigeria citizens who fell victim of electoral violence during the election. The injuries on the

citizens symbolize electoral violence, voter suppression and systemic neglect. The speech bubble "thank you for fulfilling your promise of credible, free, fair and violence-free elections, sir", serves as a verbal anchor contrasting with the physical evidence of injuries sustained by the citizen (bandages, eye patch and bruises).

This underscores the cartoon's sarcasm (a visual interaction of irony and contradiction). The politician, from his features and dressing represents Buhari the former president. His demeanour and reaction denoted by a big exclamation mark '!" connote surprise and being caught off guard.

Interactive Meaning

The citizens focus their attention on the politician which reinforces their subordinate role in the interaction. The gaze of the RPs are not directed to the viewers, hence the viewers are positioned as observers to evaluate the irony. The citizens exhibit signs of physical pain but maintain composed postures. One of them speaks with exaggerated gratitude reinforcing the ironic tone. The speech bubble "thank you for making the election …" is what makes the irony overt. The visual modality of the injuries contrast with the low truth value of the statement and underscores the cartoon's sarcasm.

Compositional Meaning

The citizens are placed on the left side (Given) while the political leader is on the right (New). This layout suggests that the citizens' suffering is a known reality, while the politician represents new expectations signaling ideological continuity of electoral corruption. The visual focus centers on the citizens' injuries and the politician's expression. These draw the viewer's eyes and reinforce the cartoons critical message.

Ideologically, the cartoon exposes the dissonance between political promises and the citizens' actual experiences during elections. The

cartoon highlights social injustice and critiques political deception and electoral integrity in Nigeria.

Cartoon 5



Representational meaning

The thug is central, muscular and wears a pink singlet labelled **"THUG".** He is armed and is seen carrying two ballot boxes, symbolizing ballot theft. The voters are shown reacting with fear, one being kicked and shouting, one is already on the ground, possibly injured or dead.

A police man is present but passive and looking the other way, suggesting negligence or complicity. An overturned ballot box symbolizes a disrupted voting. The sign "polling booth" symbolizes a space for democratic voting

Interactive meaning

The thug wears dark sunglasses, which conceals his eyes, distancing him from the viewer obscuring emotion and accountability. The voters are afraid, shocked and helpless, thus inviting sympathy and outrage. The thug's clenched teeth and firm grip on the ballot boxes, project menace and aggression.

The thug is made larger and central. His dominant figure projects threat and power. The cartoon uses exaggeration to increase emotional impact, portraying the situation as absurd but real.

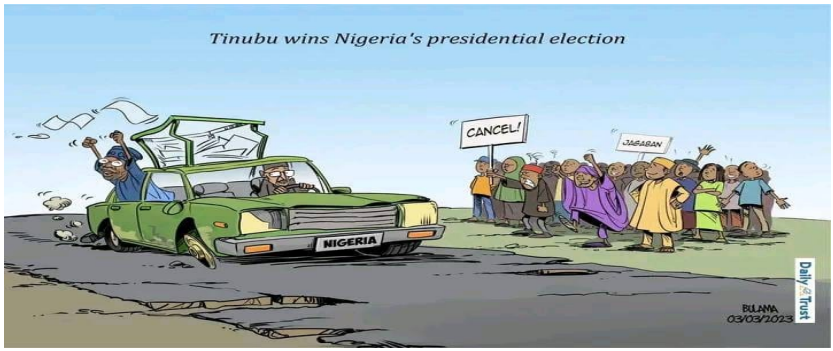
Compositional Meaning

The size and centrality of the thug makes him dominant, his bold colours (pink shirt, dark glasses), and action make him draw immediate attention from the viewer.

The polling booth acts as a symbolic space for democracy. It is shown violated by electoral violence and criminality. The cartoon criticizes the erosion of the democratic process in Nigeria.

The helpless voters and passive officer contrast sharply with the active and aggressive thugs highlighting power imbalance and systemic failure in protecting the democratic process.

Cartoon 6:



Representational Meaning

The caption of the cartoon itself “Tinubu wins Nigeria’s presidential election” anchors it in real-world context and sets the tone for interpretation. A green, battered car labelled "Nigeria" is central. It symbolizes the nation itself. The driver of the car is believed to be Bola Ahmed Dinuba (the declared winner). He appears passive or unaware of the raging protest. A figure in the car Tinubu’s supporter celebrates with his hands up. On the roof of the car, ballot papers are flying out of a box.

A group of protesting citizens standing outside the car, holding placards reading “CANCEL" and “JAGABAN” (a nickname for Tinubu), indicating rejection or demand for reversal of the

presidential election result. The car is driven into a damaged road with potholes symbolizing a rough or illegitimate electoral journey. It also metaphorically represents Nigeria's political condition and the flawed political process.

Interactive Meaning

None of the characters are looking directly at the viewer, suggesting that the viewer is positioned as an observer rather than a participant. This indirect gaze implies detachment or call for criticism. The car dominates the left foreground, indicating it as the focal point of the narrative. The protesting crowd is pushed to the right and smaller in scale suggesting marginalization of dissenting voices in the post-election discourse. Tinubu's apparent calm contrasts with the agitated gestures of the protester. This points to possibly institutional power versus public frustration.

Compositional Meaning

Left to right reading: the left side (Given) features the car symbolizing electoral chaos – which is assumed to be known or established. The right side (New) shows the protesting citizens, representing new, emerging reactions and resistance. The car labeled Nigeria is centrally positioned and visually dominant. The damaged road and protest signs also stand out, drawing attention to the flawed election. The position of the bad road and car on the left and the clustered protesting figures on the right creates a visual contrast between authority and resistance.

Ideologically, the cartoon critiques the legitimacy of the election, suggesting that it is marred by structural problems (represented as broken road) and public dissatisfaction (represented by the protesters). Overall, the image presents a visual argument that the 2023 Nigeria presidential election was deeply flawed, with the outcome driving the country into further political instability.

Conclusion

This paper analysed some political cartoons on the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Cartoons are indeed powerful tools for representing real life events in the society. Cartoonists combine different semiotic resources to convey critical messages that are meant to educate the populace about the current state of the nation. Unfortunately, many readers stop at the entertainment level, without decoding the layers of meaning embedded in these cartoons. As a result, they lack adequate information on the socio-political situation in the country. Through the lens of visual social semiotics theory of Kress, and van Leeuwen, the analysis of the selected cartoons exposed the socio-political issues that eroded the democratic process during the 2023 presidential election. There was the bad financial policy of currency redesign and fuel scarcity that brought hardship on the people. There was also visual representation of electoral violence and vote buying. The cartoon analysis succeeded in highlighting these foibles amongst others, inspiring the populace to drive for a reform.

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