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Directives and references in selected coronavirus-motivated internet memes

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Abstract: The use of directives in communicating the nature of the pandemic and reference to social experiences were promoted using images on social media platforms. The images or memes are used to create awareness and reinforce the criteria for safety during the pandemic. Previous studies on internet memes have concentrated on humor generation, speaker-hearer shared knowledge, neologism, and multimodality among others, with insufficient attention paid to the use of directives and references in such coronavirus-motivated memes. This paper, therefore, examines how directives and references are employed in conveying expected social responsibilities through coronavirus-motivated internet memes in Nigeria and other socio-cultural contexts. For data, one hundred coronavirus-motivated memes were purposively selected from Facebook, and eight representative memes were subjected to pragmatic analysis using aspects of Jacob Mey's (2001. *Pragmatics: An introduction*, 2nd edn. USA: Blackwell Publishing) pragmatic acts theory to unearth insights from them. The paper observes that the various spheres of life that are relatable to an online audience help to express what the pandemic is about and enhance the meaning of the pandemic with the context of the use of the memes, giving clearer perspectives on the pandemic. Directives and references are useful tools for conveying social responsibilities to online audience.

Keywords: directives; references; coronavirus; internet memes; social responsibilities

1 Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic ravaged the world in 2020 and beyond, affecting almost all aspects of human life. This made great waves in all forms of traditional and social media. With large participation on social media platforms,

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health advice was on the rise to salvage the situation to the possible minimum. The representation of opinions and relevant information on coronavirus for public use was widely distributed with short message services (SMS), sensitization adverts, and graphic illustrations on social media. Memes are part of the graphical illustrations on social media. This is what Dynel (2021) refers to as digital humor, providing insights into varying recent, social and political issues, being vessels for the public sharing of serious information and opinion. The interactive and participatory nature of social media (Huntington 2017; Manning 2014), most especially Social Networking Sites (SNSs), allows unconstrained sharing of knowledge about contents created and shared, and further triggers frequent online participation, that is, the viewing and sharing of contents.

The term “meme” is a coinage that was first used by Dawkins (1976) in his book *The Selfish Gene*. He explains that memes, like genes, are produced, repopulated, and survive in the (social) environment. They are cultural units that spread from one person to another and have become a culture of the internet (Diedrichsen 2019; Huntington 2017). Internet memes express a representation or view toward a phenomenon that is familiar and shared among a community of linguistic-related individuals. Shifman (2014: 14) posits that they are “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users.” They are also capable of revealing ideas, intentions, attitudes, situations, or minds of users on topical issues such as health, marriage, education, sport, career, religion, and different cultures (Falade 2022). Features that characterize memes include text, text accompanied by image, video, and dialogue (Börzsei 2013). This channel of communication may be age-specific, considering the coinages, neologisms, and slang, but the phenomenon remained constant. Shared knowledge is accessed through what we view and share and meme generators spice the creation of memes to make references, give directives, or just for humorous purposes (Harshavardhan et al. 2019; Miller and Cupchik 2014). Coronavirus-motivated memes are not limited to a particular age because of the peculiarity of the pandemic. As a global outbreak, coronavirus (otherwise known as COVID-19) became a familiar language used by all social classes, religious settings, political classes, and so on. According to Osisanwo (2022: 61), the “media constitute one of the main means through which text consumers get to know more about coronavirus and its escapades.” Social media, alongside the mass media, was greatly employed to sensitize the public about the pandemic, give preventive measures, create a forum for interactions during the lockdown, and communicate individual social responsibilities in order to curb its spread. Communicating social responsibilities on social media, especially in the context of COVID-19, requires efforts of individuals and communities to take actions to

lessen the spread of the virus and protect humans from its harm (Galal and Auter 2023; Stewart et al. 2022). These responsibilities include adherence to public health guidelines such as wearing face masks, practicing physical distancing and getting vaccinated. It also involves supporting vulnerable population, promoting accurate information, and adhering to regulations to prevent further transmission. The forum for interaction includes the use of memes to explore different aspects of the pandemic, including references to the phenomenon and structured instructions to curb its expansion.

Directives generally refer to commands or instructions given in order to perform a particular action. Linguistically, a directive involves the understanding of communicative events to bring out commands or instructions that require inference through shared knowledge (Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan 1977). This may be done through direct or indirect speech acts with the hope of eliciting prompt and appropriate response(s). In utterance analysis, Austin (1962) recognizes three constituent elements, which are otherwise regarded as three types of force. The three types of force of the speech acts theory are locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Searle (1976) further discusses illocutionary acts to include commissives, directives, expressives, representatives, and declarations. These illocutionary acts are the actions in a speaker's utterance. Directives, in relation to speech acts, represent a significant dimension of human communication where speakers employ language (direct or indirect acts) to prompt, persuade, or instruct listeners to undertake specific actions or behaviors. These communicative acts constitute a foundational element of language and interpersonal interactions, wielding substantial influence over the dynamics of human discourse. Directive does not give consideration to the hearer's ability to engage in a specific action. The absence of consideration contributes to what makes them recognizable as directives (Craven and Potter 2010). Contemporary research and scholarly contributions within linguistics and pragmatics studies have enriched the comprehension of directives, giving an array of insights into their classification, functions, and the intricacies that give basis for their deployment. Directive, as one of the classifications of illocutionary speech act, encompasses a set of fundamental principles that elucidate how speakers use language to convey their intentions and influence the actions or behaviors of their interlocutors. These tenets are germane to understanding the nature and functions of directives in communication. Directives have specific illocutionary force, which is the speaker's intention or communicative purpose behind the utterance. This force typically entails the speaker's desire to have the listener perform a particular action or respond in a certain way. The illocutionary force can range from requests and commands to suggestions and invitations. A command, request, suggestion, or invitation is effective if the speaker possesses a higher level of control over the listener/receiver. This level of control can, however, be

communicated directly or indirectly. Mey describes directives as expressing efforts to make the hearer perform an action.

Reference, on the other hand, involves the use of language to identify, point to, or describe objects, entities, events, or concepts in the world. Reference, as explained by Mey (2010), is a specific human, user-oriented activity, which is not subject to a universal, abstract, computational, linguistic, or other logic. Korta and Perry (2011: 12) further corroborate this by stating that “reference occurs when a speaker intends to impart to the hearer a belief about a particular object, that it has a certain property (broadly speaking), or of several objects, that they stand in a certain relation (broadly speaking), and does so by referring to that object and predicating something of it, or referring to those objects, and predicating something of them.” It is a fundamental aspect of communication and serves the purpose of enabling speakers to convey information, share thoughts, and establish a common understanding with their listeners. Effective reference requires shared knowledge (Allan 2010) and the ability to make inferences based on linguistic and contextual cues. Inferences may involve accommodating new information or resolving ambiguities in reference to arrive at the intended meaning. Hence, reference serves to identify and specify the entities or actions that are the targets of directives, ensuring that the communication is clear, contextually relevant, and conducive to successful action or compliance. The effective use of references and directives is vital for conveying the speaker’s intentions and achieving the desired response from the listener. These two elements, when combined, aid the understanding of the messages being passed by internet memes.

2 Coronavirus and memes: existing scholarship

Studies on coronavirus keep increasing. Existing scholarly endeavors in this area have been carried out in nonlinguistic and linguistic fields. Expectedly, nonlinguistic studies (Ayodele et al. 2021; Shereen et al. 2020; Wiersinga et al. 2020) on coronavirus are more than existing linguistic studies. There are numerous nonlinguistic studies on coronavirus. The studies have explored the emergence, pathophysiology, diagnosis, transmission, and treatment of coronavirus. Linguistic studies on coronavirus have considered other data (newspaper editorials, articles, books, WhatsApp stickers, etc.). Such linguistic studies were guided by different theories and methodological engagements. Despite the various studies, much work is needed to examine the references made and directives used in the production of coronavirus-motivated internet memes.

Examining neologism during the outbreak of COVID-19, Asif et al. (2021) observed that word formation was in the form of verbs, nouns, and adjectives, alongside abbreviations and acronyms, which were frequently used on social media to portray

lexical deviation used in societies and various cultural practices. Similar to this is Asiru and Bello's (2021) study on the linguistic and literary analyses of cartoonists' depiction of COVID-19, where text and images show shared socio-cultural knowledge. The study reveals that humorous images, which are important ways by which the pandemic was discussed, show the beliefs of Nigerians about COVID-19. Osisanwo (2022), which was guided by van Dijk socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis, examined media representation of COVID-19, identifying the discourse representations, structures, and strategies deployed by selected newspapers. The study argues that the negative portrayal of COVID-19 and other constructs creates "a cognitive awareness in the minds of the citizenry, bringing consciousness to the readers on the negative capability and destructive strength of the life-threatening disease" (pp. 76–77). A study which is most related to the current research endeavor is Al Zidjaly's (2022). Al Zidjaly's (2022) examined a graphic illustration of WhatsApp stickers on COVID-19 memes. The paper particularly examined the functions performed by COVID-19 WhatsApp stickers in Oman. The analysis suggests that the creation and usage of the stickers positioned citizens in Oman as "agentive participants." The paper, however, differs from the present study in that it considers WhatsApp stickers as used in Oman but has not given consideration to internet memes, which express digital culture capable of revealing ideas, intentions, attitudes, situations, or minds of users on topical issues.

Other studies on internet memes have focused on other subjects outside of coronavirus. Such studies have considered mostly politics (Denisova 2016), humor (Onanuga 2019; Tella 2018), multimodality (Dyrel 2021), common ground (Falade 2022), and tertiary education (Osisanwo and Falade 2023), with insufficient attention paid to the use of directives and references especially in coronavirus-motivated memes in communicating social responsibility to an online audience.

The reviewed studies have shown the creation of awareness about the pandemic, especially on discourse representation, neologism, and humorous images, which overall gives room for more study on communicating social responsibilities. Despite the thought-provoking nature of the different scholarly engagements on COVID-19, a gap that is identified in this study is the consideration of coronavirus-induced communication via the deployment of internet memes. This study, therefore, fills this gap by examining how meme creators deploy directives and references to communicate different opinions and social responsibilities through coronavirus-induced internet memes. Specifically, the study considers the following questions:

- i. In what ways are directives and references used by internet meme creators in the data?
- ii. How are texts and images used to convey communicative intentions oriented toward social responsibilities through creating public awareness in the memes?

3 Theory and method

The study adopts aspects of Jacob Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts theory. The choice of this theory is informed on the basis that it sufficiently accounts for meanings derived from language used in context. The pragmatic acts theory is a socio-cultural theory, which eases the interpretation of meaning construction. The required components of the theory are suitable for unearthing features of directives and references in the data. The theory has two parts as shown in Figure 1, comprising the activity part and the textual part. The activity part involves options such as speech acts, indirect speech acts, conversational ("dialogue") acts, psychological acts (emotions), prosody (intonation, stress), and physical acts, which are available to language users to perform the various functions they desire. However, if they choose not to make any of the choices, then "NULL" is obtained. The textual part of the model comprises the contextual features that influence communication: Inference (INF), Reference (REF), Relevance (REL), Voice (VCE), Shared Situation Knowledge (SSK), Metaphor (MPH), and Metapragmatics ("M"). PAT believes that language use, including those extra-linguistic aspects of communication such as gestures, intonation, facial expressions, body posture, head movements, laughter, and so on, is a pragmatic act. Jacob Mey's (2001) PAT is favored in this study as a socio-cultural interactional model, which interprets the language use of individuals concerning (Osisanwo and Akintaro 2024)

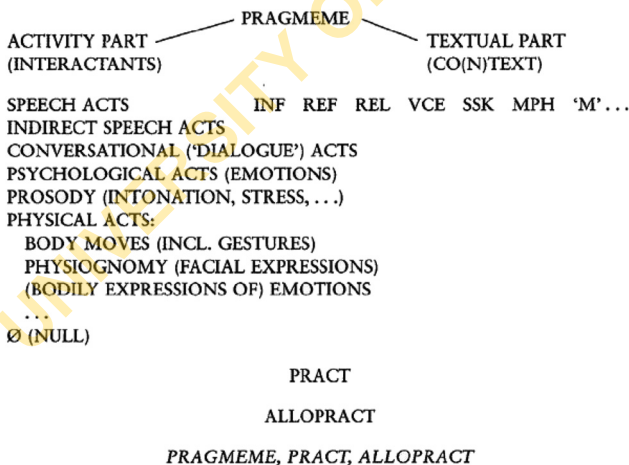


Figure 1: Mey's pragmatic acts model. Source: Mey (2001: 222).

the selected memes. In the opinion of Kecskes (2010: 2890), “the emphasis is not on conditions and rules for an individual speech act, but on characterizing a general situational prototype (...) that can be executed in the situation.” In other words, pragmatic acts theory was necessitated by the need to situate utterances in their particular environment and not just attribute meaning simply by the speech acts (Mey 2001:218). Aspects of the textual part (reference) and the activity part (indirect speech acts) were used to establish these insights from the selected memes. The activity part shows what is available to language users in communication, while the textual part reveals features that influence communication. Both are essential to the understanding of communicative events because words are used to perform certain actions. This work focuses on internet memes that express directives (the level of interaction in the memes) and references (items that influence the directives made in the memes).

Directives can be either direct or indirect in their formulation. Direct directives explicitly state the desired action, such as “Please turn off the AC.” Indirect directives, on the other hand, employ more subtle or polite language to convey the same request, like “Would you mind turning off the AC?” The choice between directness and indirectness depends on factors like social norms, politeness, and the power dynamic between the speaker and listener. Some of its fundamental principles include politeness strategy, pragmatic competence, context, social roles, and power dynamics.

- i. Politeness theory plays a significant role in directives. Speakers often employ politeness strategies, such as mitigating devices (e.g., “Could you possibly ...”) or deferential language (e.g., “I would appreciate it if you could ...”), to make their directives less imposing and to preserve face – both theirs and the listeners’.
- ii. The effectiveness and appropriateness of directives are influenced by the social roles and power dynamics between the speaker and the listener.
- iii. The interpretation and effectiveness of directives can vary significantly across cultures and contexts. Different cultures have distinct norms regarding politeness, assertiveness, and the use of indirect language.
- iv. Both speakers and listeners need pragmatic competence to navigate the nuances of directives effectively. Pragmatic competence involves the ability to infer implied meanings, recognize indirectness, and understand the social and cultural context in which directives are exchanged, which is understood by references used in the utterance.

From the activity part, speech acts help to examine functions performed by an utterance rather than the structure of the utterance. Indirectness in speech acts is what the environment of the utterance makes it to be. Indirectness may not be expressed simply by the utterance. In most cases, speech acts create the appropriate context for understanding. “The contexts responsible for producing memes are

always different in various circumstances” such that “leveraging on the affordances of the online spaces will shape the types of memes that are created and shared within those contexts” (Osisanwo and Falade 2023: 70). Direct speech acts are occasioned by the environment of the communicative event. Indirect speech act is the speaker’s act of communicating more than what is said. The knowledge or background information about an utterance that is shared helps to enhance direct or indirect speech acts. The key components of references, from the textual part, include identifying entities (concrete objects), deictic expressions, definite and indefinite articles (specific/nonspecific), proper nouns, anaphora and cataphora (backward or forward reference), pronouns, common ground, ambiguity, and vagueness. These components serve as bedrock for conveying meaning and establishing clarity in communication. In other words, reference serves as a vital communicative tool.

For data, eight representative coronavirus-motivated memes out of hundreds available were purposively selected from Facebook – one of the most popular social media platforms and largest social networking site – and subjected to pragmatic analysis. The selected data are believed to have been generated, viewed, and shared from February 2020 – December 2020. This period was marked by the intense atmosphere of the spread of the virus. The memes were shared especially by Nigerians to depict the experiences within the Nigerian socio-cultural contexts. The meme producers announce and give information about behaviors and actions, which are inimical to combating the virus headlong. The study employs a descriptive research method that highlights the directive and reference tools as evident in the selected data.

4 Data analysis

The selected memes are coronavirus-motivated, indicating implicit and explicit reference to the virus. Directives and references, as earlier mentioned, are ways of communicating social responsibilities, especially on social media. Items that are available to language users promote the identification and influences they communicate. The actions performed by the memes as well as the functions performed by the utterances beyond the structure are used to encode the directives, especially as found in the memes.

Most typical strategies used to encode directives include the use of imperatives and interrogation. References are indicated through verbs (tenses), action voices and persons, deictic expressions, definite and indefinite articles (specific/nonspecific), proper nouns, anaphora and cataphora (backward or forward reference), pronouns, common ground, ambiguity, and vagueness. These directives and references are used to perform the pragmatic function of promoting clarity as exemplified in Memes 1–8 below.

When you get home on 4th of May and you remember how 50 people were separating you and conductor over #30 change.



"Lord is this how I normally breathe?"

Meme 1

Meme 1 is an instance of text and image meme – it uses the image and facial expression of the individual to illustrate the kind of gesture associated with what is written. The text, “when you ... #30 change” is accompanied by an individual who is depicted in a remorseful act. The interpretation of the facial expression is conveyed in the accompanying text. The character in the meme reflects on an event that must have occurred during the coronavirus outbreak, which, from the description, is a fight over transport fare balance. The socio-cultural context of the production of the meme is Nigeria. The depiction is similar to what obtains in some other African countries, but rarely in the West. A conductor within this context is an assistant to a bus driver, whose duty is to coordinate passengers and receive transport fares from them. Within Nigerian parlance, conductors attached to commercial buses often exhibit unruly and touchy traits, which usually put them at loggerheads with passengers. They do not retrain themselves from engaging in physical combat when the need arises. The event also characterizes the attitude of some people, especially when the public was warned to stay away from large gatherings as this may cause the virus to spread faster. This meme communicated the need to abide by the preventive measures of social distancing that were emphasized during the pandemic.

The meme creator strategically used the meme to perform the directive act of warning against regret, indirectly suggesting actions to be avoided. The directive tool employed in Meme 1 includes background knowledge of the pandemic, the instructions channeled through the media, and the knowledge of interrogation with which this meme expresses an indirect way of telling the public that they may regret their defiance to instruction as represented in the image. More specifically, the question influenced the directive employed in the meme.

“Lord is this how I normally breathe?”

The action performed here is with rhetorical questions where answers are not necessarily provided but can elicit detailed responses. Rather than instruct the audience on the need to stay off the public, the meme employed politeness, a facesaving strategy where there is a shift of focus from a situation; in this case, fighting for “change” during the period of lockdown. This strategy is further reinforced by pragmatic competence of interrogation (rhetorical question), which has an indirect act of invoking shared knowledge that helps to communicate the expected social responsibility of adhering to guidelines for a healthy society, first from individuals, communicating more than what has been said. The nouns and pronouns used in the two expressions serve as reference tools in the meme. In Meme 1, “your” and “you” were vaguely used to refer to no one in particular because they are pronouns that can refer to an individual or a group of persons, while “conductor” and “Lord” are definite and direct references. While the pronouns promote clarity and precision of the referent as referring to viewers of the meme, the nouns directly address personalities. To maintain cohesion and guide inference, anaphora was employed to encourage active engagement with the meme. “4th of May” was used to guide the pragmatic competence of viewers and sharers to the period of the pandemic.



Meme 2

Meme 2 shows a text and image meme. This meme shows a dirty pillow, which is induced by a nonhygienic environment: sweat and dirt. It also reveals that the pillow has been denied laundry care; a well-taken care-of pillow would be clean and without overwhelming dirt. The text reinforces the nature and state of the pillow by stating indirectly the danger of using this kind of pillow. Nigeria, being the socio-cultural context of the meme production, is fraught with dirt which the meme producer announces and cautions against as a context that is inimical to sustaining, encouraging,

or spreading the deadly virus. This meme indirectly condemns the use of this type of pillow and calls on his audience to be socially responsible for their health by ensuring a hygienic environment. Reference is made to coronavirus with the mention of Omicron, which is a variant of the virus.

The sentence in the meme “If one of your pillows looks like this, you can survive Omicron” contains a directive speech act that can be understood through the background knowledge of a dirty pillow and the foregrounding of *Omicron*. This knowledge is shared by the meme generator and viewers. The required information was succinctly given and relevant to the period. Indirectness was employed as no question was explicitly asked, and the request to avoid infection and stay hygienic was not (ordered) explicitly given, but it can be inferred. The utterance subtly and indirectly suggests or advises a hygienic environment. The directive has been framed in a metaphorical and humorous context, rather than offering a serious survival strategy for dealing with the Omicron variant of coronavirus. The use of indirect recommendation was appropriate to pass the idea of each individual’s responsibility for his/her health. The pronouns “your” and “you” were vaguely used to refer to no one in particular. On the other hand, “one of your pillows” is a more specific (anaphoric) reference to the type of pillow that exists in some people’s houses, since they are accommodated in people’s houses, hostels, or in some cases, when spread outside. “Looks like this” refers to a particular appearance or condition of the pillow, which is explicitly described in the sentence but is implied. “Omicron” – a variant of COVID-19 – has been used as a proper noun and is another reference tool that refers to the subject of discussion in the sentence. These reference tools help convey the message that there is a connection or condition related to the appearance of a pillow and one’s ability to survive the pandemic. Rather than provide actual medical advice, the references used metaphorically communicated the intention.

This is the only man that can give us the
cure(antidote) for COVID-19.
If you know this man please indicate so we
can look for him together.
👤👤👤👤👤👤
What's that his name sef? 😞



Meme 3

Meme 3 is another instance of text and image meme, which combines both picture and text to illustrate the kind of gesture associated with what is written. While the text reads “This is the only man that can give us the cure (antidote) for COVID-19 ...,” the pictured image is that of the face of Gaius – a supposed magician. Language users are made to see the man in the picture as the solution (cure/antidote) to the ravaging pandemic. This influences the communication of COVID-19, its dangers and “cure.” The man in the meme acted as Gaius in a movie series titled “Merlin.” In the movie, he was the court physician and advisor to King Uther Pendragon, who ruled the kingdom of Camelot. Gaius is a wise and knowledgeable figure who plays a crucial role, both as **a healer** and as a mentor to the young wizard Merlin. Gaius is known for his extensive knowledge of magic and the supernatural, which he often imparts to Merlin as the young wizard learns to harness his magical abilities. The utterance contains a request for the identification of the man, who may figuratively possess the healing power of the pandemic. The initial part of the statement made in the meme provides context and background information, explaining why the speaker is making the request. The direct speech act is employed which requires a desired action. The speaker asks for help in identifying the man who is believed to hold the cure or antidote for COVID-19. The use of “please” has relieved the utterance of the directive of request, employing politeness to know how the pandemic can be curbed, especially as the audience of the meme is assumed to be familiar with the role played by the man in the movie. As common ground is employed, “What’s the man’s name sef?” is another request for information about the man’s name; “sef” adds an informal tone to the question, possibly indicating a sense of curiosity or urgency. Identifying the man is metaphorically constructed, who is potentially crucial in the fight against COVID-19.

The demonstrative pronoun “this” is used to refer to a specific person, indicating that the utterance is assumably made to a known person. “The only man,” at the phrasal level, is an indefinite pronoun used to refer to a specific and singular person; the one believed to possess the antidote for COVID-19. It narrows down the reference to a unique person. “What” on the other hand is an interrogative pronoun, asking for the name of the specific man in the meme. If this man is not identified, the implicit meaning in the meme is that everyone should comply with the preventive antidote to reduce the spread, until “the man” is identified. These reference tools and directive acts components help to clarify who and what the speaker is referring to and facilitate effective communication.

They come home like this, do you think they will come back with a mask on

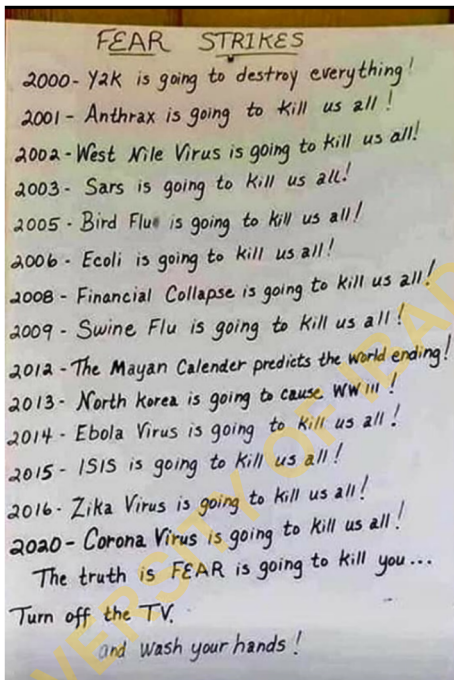


Meme 4

Meme 4 also uses pictorial evidence – a school pupil in uniform – to illustrate text. The meme creator reinforces the picture with the text “They come home like this (dirty), do you think they will come back with a mask on?” The represented active participant in the meme is a schoolboy pictured within the school premises because the other nonactive participants are pictured in the background. The facial expression and posture of the boy show that he had had a swell time playing in school. The meme identifies with the Nigerian socio-cultural context where pupils compulsorily wear uniform outfits to school.

The text attached to the image refers to COVID-19 through the use of the word “mask.” “Mask” became an essential item, associated with social responsibility and used as a preventive measure to curb the spread of coronavirus and this influences the communication of COVID-19. The text and the image enhance the advice of social distance during the outbreak. The phrases “come home,” “you think” are what performed the actions in the text. These create a level of interaction for meme viewers that the lockdown should be sustained, a kind of instruction given to the audience about the benefit of the lockdown. This indirect way of reinforcement of benefit gives the structure of the utterance the needed backup, which was promoted by the graphic illustration. The warning to prevent the spread of the virus expresses indirectness in the mode of communication of social responsibility to the meme audience, which is best applied as there were suggestions on the end to the lockdown.

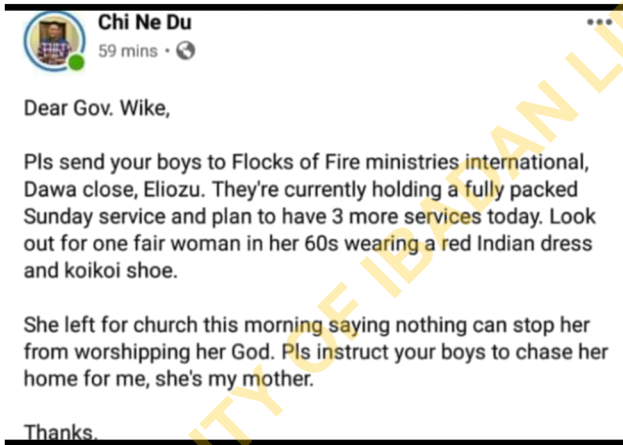
The speaker's act communicated more than what was said in that the pronoun "they" makes reference to children who return home dirty, which is complemented by the deictic element "this." "Mask" is, however, a definite reference and a common ground tool for COVID-19. Dirtiness in the context of the meme is associated with the pupil's age group, though the other backgrounded pupils in the meme appear neat. The meme informs and draws attention to the view that such children do not have a thorough understanding of social responsibility yet. The meme producer, therefore, harps consciousness in the parents and minders in school about the need to reinforce the social responsibility required of children during the pandemic.



Meme 5

Meme 5 is an instance of text-only meme, which chronicles endemic/pandemic since 2000. The meme may not be associated with a single but a myriad of socio-cultural contexts. It shows 14 life-threatening challenges, which included viruses and other causes of fear. The meme employs repetition as a stylistic device, with the phrase "kill us all" being reiterated. This repetition serves as a rhetorical tool, signifying emphasis, irony, and the particular message within the meme. Understanding the purpose and effect of this repetition aids in deciphering the directives, which is revealed through emphasizing the responsibility to "wash your hands." It is through the interplay of the specified years, the content of utterances, the associated fear, and the use of repetition that the meme conveys its underlying message. The

meme also underscores the situational nature of shared knowledge. Reference tools employed include the pronoun “us,” which is used to refer to no one in particular, nouns (specific names of diseases), anaphora (the previous years), and common ground of the message being passed. Background knowledge of the years, the utterances made in the course of those years, the fear associated with the different utterances, and the repetition at the end of each sentence point to the interpretation of the meme. These years serve as anchors that ground the utterances in a particular historical or situational context. The meme mentions fear associated with the various utterances and years. This fear could arise from a multitude of sources, such as societal norms, political climate, or personal consequences. It is important to delve into the specific reasons behind this fear and how it relates to the utterances made during those years.



Meme 6

Meme 6 is also an instance of a text-only meme, which is produced to depict the response of Nigerians to the social responsibility of distancing as advised. The referent (Gov. Wike) was one of the governors across the thirty-six states in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. The meme creator issues a directive in the form of a marching order to the Governor of Rivers State on the need to arrest a situation, and thus redirect social responsiveness among Nigerians. The meme employed direct speech acts of requesting for the enforcement of the lockdown, irrespective of religious beliefs, and reference tools through pronouns, nouns, and common ground to aid the effective interpretation of expected social responsibility. The meme serves as a representation of a proactive and direct measure taken to combat the spread of the virus during the pandemic. It shows a pivotal moment in the collective response to the global health crisis, reflecting the implementation of lockdowns as a preventive strategy. However, within this broader narrative, it also hints at the complexity of

human behavior and motivations during such challenging times, particularly when it intersects with deeply held religious beliefs. The central imagery of the meme depicts a scene where a child is shown actively ensuring lockdown measures for their mother who had jettisoned all social distancing warnings, left the child at home, and had gone to embrace a religious program in church. The child believes the mother should stay back at home since the government under the watch of Gov. Wike had prohibited all public spaces from functioning. The emphasis on these measures underscores their significance in limiting the transmission of the virus and safeguarding public health. The meme alludes to a contrasting response among some individuals who resisted or opposed these preventive actions. Some population were unwilling to comply with lockdowns due to their religious beliefs or convictions. This aspect introduces a layer of complexity, as it highlights the interplay between public health imperatives and deeply ingrained cultural or religious practices. The meme was generated to question the response, responsiveness, and social responsibility of some Nigerians in the face of their religious affinity.



Meme 7

Meme 7 combines text and image to indicate the need to use a facemask during outings. The represented image in the meme is the former President of the United States of America, Barrack Obama. The meme creator uses the picture of the international and influential figure to depict a potent visual symbol that underscores the need and importance of using a mask irrespective of your age, social standing, or political status during the pandemic. By featuring Barack Obama, a prominent and universally recognized figure, the meme sends a powerful signal that wearing a face mask is a responsibility shared by individuals from all walks of life. Regardless of one's age, social background, or political beliefs, the need to protect oneself and others from the transmission of infectious diseases, including COVID-19, is a shared

obligation. Barack Obama's inclusion in the meme as a mask-wearer conveys the idea of leading by example. As a former president and influential public figure, his choice to wear a mask underscores the seriousness of the pandemic and sets a positive example for the broader community. This aligns with public health recommendations and guidelines that encourage influential figures to demonstrate responsible behavior to inspire others. Here, a direct speech act of persuading the audience is employed. The meme uses a visual medium to drive home the point that in the face of a global health crisis, individual actions matter significantly. It serves as a reminder that responsible behavior is beyond social and political divisions and emphasizing that safeguarding public health is a collective endeavor that requires cooperation from everyone. Furthermore, the meme implicitly challenges any misconceptions or resistance to mask-wearing that may have arisen during the pandemic. By highlighting a respected and admired public figure practicing this preventive measure, the meme producer promotes a sense of unity and shared responsibility in the battle against infectious diseases, promoting the broader adoption of mask usage as a simple yet effective means of mitigating the virus's spread. Proper nouns as well as common ground were used to drive home the point. Thus, it behooves on individuals the need to be socially responsible so that the world can converge to co-combat the pandemic.



Meme 8

Meme 8 instantiates a text and image meme. It presents the image of an aged woman. The represented text "I'm not adding this year 2020 to my age I did not use it" is a referring expression that reinforces the understanding of the reflected thought of a 2020 not put to use since there was a global lockdown. Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, a prevailing sentiment among many was a poignant desire to metaphorically "delete" the year from existence due to the extraordinary and unprecedented

circumstances that unfolded. During this tumultuous period, a substantial portion of the population found themselves grappling with the stark reality that a significant portion of the year had been marred by the pervasive impact of the pandemic. This sentiment emerged as a reflection of the profound disruptions to daily life and the broader societal landscape that occurred throughout the year. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, business closures, and the tragic loss of lives cast a shadow over the year, leaving people with a sense of stagnation and uncertainty. For many, the absence of typical social activities, travel experiences, and celebratory events rendered the year devoid of the usual markers of progress and achievement. The sentiment of wanting to “delete” the year signifies the collective emotional response to the unprecedented challenges faced. It underscores the human inclination to seek a reset or a fresh start in the face of adversity. This sentiment is not solely an expression of frustration or resignation but also a testament to resilience and the yearning for a return to normalcy. On the one hand, the directive act is employed through pragmatic competence of the situation, satirically calling on others to share the same concern and indirectly communicating the preventive measures applied throughout the year. Reference tools, on the other hand, include pronoun (I) and cataphora (I did not use it).

5 Discussion of findings and conclusion

The analyzed memes have shown the capacity of meme creators to deploy directives and references in their online capacity to get involved in the social responsibility of informing and warning others. In line with Mey's (2010) expectation of directives as involving the speaker's intention or communicative purpose behind the utterance accompanied by specific illocutionary force, the meme creators typically perform different actions, ranging from requesting to commanding, suggesting, and inviting. Similarly, the meme producers align with Mey's (2010) stance on reference by using language to identify, point to, or describe objects, entities, events, or concepts in the world. Thus, the findings from the COVID-19 memes provide a better understanding of the use of texts and images to identify, point to, or describe objects and concepts, thereby projecting the semiotic value of the creative text-image ensemble in the memes. Following the argument of Korta and Perry (2011: 12), the meme creators “impart to the hearer a belief about a particular object,” warning and cautioning individuals on the need to be socially responsible with the pandemic. The extent to which each meme was related to coronavirus was consistently revealed through components of directives and references in lexical indicators. Some words/expressions in the selected memes clearly made recourse to the coronavirus pandemic, while others were implicitly identified. Comparison strengthens the effect of the message passed across by the memes. The directives were seen through the

background knowledge of references and the speech acts of the utterances. These are used to communicate social responsibility. Social responsibility is the expected behavior of individuals as a member of a society.

Fortified with directives and references as linguistic tools, the meme creators deploy their access to social media to communicate social responsibilities. This aligns with the calls by Stewart et al. (2022) and Galal and Auter (2023) that communicating social responsibilities on social media, especially in the context of COVID-19, requires efforts of individuals and communities to take actions to lessen the spread of the virus and protect humans from its harm. The different actions required and identified by the meme creators align with the issues identified and discursively engaged by Osisanwo 2022. With respect to coronavirus-motivated memes, the social responsibilities communicated are good hygiene while the virus lasts, obedience to preventive mechanisms to avoid the spread, and modest behavior in public places. References were made to COVID-19 without the mention of it in the selected memes and directives were seen in the way the memes are used to convey social responsibilities. This study corroborates Osisanwo's (2022) submission that there is an awakening in the mind of the citizenry, especially meme viewers of coronavirus-motivated memes, on the destructive strength associated with the pandemic, if proper attention is not paid to the subtle yet noticeable directives woven into the creation of the memes. Also, pronouns and nouns are predominant word classes used as reference tools to portray social media use of deviation in society and various cultural practices as pointed out by Asif et al.'s (2021) study on neologism during the outbreak of COVID-19. The images that accompany each meme show shared social and cultural knowledge of what is communicated through the memes, an idea that is evident in Asiru and Bello's (2021) work on the linguistic and literary analyses of cartoonists' depiction of COVID-19. The current study that is largely set in the Nigerian socio-cultural context shares affinity with Al Zidjaly's (2022), which has Oman as its socio-cultural context. Whereas Al Zidjaly's (2022) posits that the analysis of the functions performed by COVID-19 WhatsApp stickers in Oman suggests that the creation and usage of the stickers positioned citizens in Oman as "agentive participants," the analysis in the current study also discovers that the internet memes created by meme producers position the meme creators as co-combatants in fighting and stopping the spread of the virus, especially with the Nigerian setting.

This study sets out to examine how meme creators deploy directives and references to communicate different opinions on coronavirus-induced internet memes. It observes that the various spheres of life that are relatable to an online audience help to express what the pandemic is about, through direct acts. These acts include invoking shared knowledge, warning viewers, suggesting ways to prevent the spread of the virus, recommending ways to reduce the spread, requesting enforcement of preventive mechanisms, and persuading the meme audience on the need to follow

guidelines regarding the curbing of the virus. Similarly, there are more indirect references in the selected memes. The meaning of the memes is enhanced through the context of use, giving clearer perspectives on the pandemic. Directives and references are useful tools in conveying the expected social responsibilities to the online audience. Besides creating humorous effects, memes serve as a conveyor belt for social responsibilities by social media users.

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