

**A Critical Discourse Study of Linguistic Choices of Select Nigerian *Nairaland* Online Readers' Comments and Media Influence on 2023 Fuel Subsidy Removal**

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**Abstract**

Despite efforts of hypothesizing, formulating and instigating of various types of economic policies and programmes, the African economy has remained underdeveloped. The present status of the Nigerian economy, particularly, how policies are initiated and removed calls for a worry and serves as one of the major reasons this research is conducted. As generally known, every identified problem comes with possible identified solutions. It is reaffirmed that media and language are fundamental and crucial for economic development in any economy. Therefore, this study seeks to emphasize the role of mass media and language use in online users' comments on 2023 fuel subsidy removal and its sustainability. The study is anchored on critical stylistics, the theory of functionalism and systemic functional grammar. This is based on the importance of context in language analysis and the role that the mass media play in national development. The paper, therefore, argues that for development to be witnessed in Nigeria, corruption, political instability, illiteracy, poor implementation of policies, poor infrastructures must be addressed and language and media are pivotal in economic sustainability.

**KEYWORDS:** Mass media, Linguistics, Comments, Subsidy, Critical Discourse



## Introduction

For years, mass media in Nigeria has been a very useful and strong weapon for information dissemination, and promoting government developmental agenda. In the past, different Nigerian governments have used the media to project their programmes to the public. Some of the programmes successive governments projected in the past through the media include: Operation Feed the Nation, Structural Adjustment Programme and fuel subsidy removal which is the main focus of this study. This is because the mass media can reach a wider audience at a time in different geographical locations. This is the main reason government rely heavily on the mass media to project their policies and programmes to the public. The aim of this paper is to discuss the linguistic choices of online readers' comments and media influence on 2023 fuel subsidy removal and its economic sustainability.

The removal of fuel subsidy by president Bola Ahmed Tinubu on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2023 came with divergent views among Nigerians within the country and in the diaspora. It also changed the economic and political directions of Nigeria. At the moment, the nation's economy has become unstable in terms of increase in the prices of goods and services occasioned by subsidy removal. Large number of the citizens is groaning in pains and sufferings as a result of the government decision to remove fuel subsidy. This also led many online commenters on different media platforms to air their opinions on the subsidy removal by the president. It is on this background that this study sets out to critically analyse online commenters' perspectives or views on subsidy removal, particularly, the effect it has on the economy, as well as media influence and representation of this removal to the general public.

The proliferation of online media platforms have given room and enabled many users to express themselves, air their perspectives on salient national and international issues without any form of restriction. Different studies have been carried out on online readers' comments and subsidy removal focusing on multimodal discourse, semiotics and critical discourse analysis. However, little or nothing has been done on the linguistic choices of online readers' comments on fuel subsidy removal and media influence on the people. This study, therefore, investigates and fills the above gap of online readers' comments on fuel subsidy removal and media influence on the people.

## Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis emanates from a theory of language based on the use of language as a form of social practice. That is, CDA focuses on social analysis of discourse (Umar, 2018). The discipline according to Rahimi and Riasati (2011) has attracted scholars such as Norman Fairclough.

Fairclough (1995, p. 135) defines CDA thus:

By critical discourse analysis I mean discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social



and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony

The definition above explains the importance of CDA in texts above denotative level. In addition, Richardson (2007, p.15) describes CDA as that which allows for textual analysis and interpretation of meanings instead of grouping textual features. Fairclough (2010, p.8) further explains that CDA is also interested with “consequence of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs” with the intention of analysing beyond the level of textual interpretation and canvassing for social change. Similar to the definition above is van Dijk (1998) who describes CDA as the way social power abuse dominance and inequality are established, reproduced and resisted through text and talk in the socio-political contexts. This means it pays close attention to social and political issues in the society. In addition, Wodak and Meyer (2003) maintain that CDA is concerned with power as a major condition in social life. It is not just struggles for power and control but also the intertextuality and re-contextualisation of competing discourses.

The discussions above show clearly that CDA is mainly concerned with “effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs” (Fairclough, 2010, p.8). Apart from this, CDA also focuses on ideologies in texts and conversations. In critical discourse analysis, language is a cardinal tool in processes and in constructing meanings. CDA considers language as a social practice. This means that the social and cultural environments a text is produced are important in its meaning generation.

### **News Discourse**

News is any piece of information passed across or transmitted through electronic or print media to a given audience. This news can be categorised into soft news, hard news and comments (Itule and Anderson, 1987; Bell, 1991; Vilarnovo and Sanchez, 1994). Barko (2008) describes hard news as having two types of actors: the actors with power to issue discursive instructions and the actors with lesser power who are to transform the instructions into news reports. Comments are also form of news which includes editorials, commentaries on political, football and religious issues (Akpati, 2018). This further implies that comments are about individuals’ opinions about the happenings in the society. News has participants who are journalists, media users who are members of any news discourse. They help to produce and interpret news and the context in which news is produced.

### **Relevant Linguistic Studies on Fuel Subsidy Removal/Protests in Nigeria**

Majekodunmi (2014) identifies and analyses major linguistic patterns in the discourse of January 12 fuel subsidy removal protest in Nigeria. It explains both verbal and non-verbal features used in the discourse and thereafter related them to their different socio-cultural contexts. The study used both primary and secondary sources of data in which recorded discourse of protesters (both



verbal and non-verbal resources) were generated and used while secondary source of data were books, journal articles and substantial materials from the internet. The study revealed linguistic features across different levels of language such as semiotic, lexical and syntactic levels. The study further revealed that structural and linguistic patterns and non-verbal semiotic tokens were mainly used to express anger, disappointments at government's actions as well as demand a reversal of the subsidy removal. Also, through the use of non-verbal features, protesters were able to profound solutions and how corrupt individuals can be dealt with.

Akinwotu (2014) compared different discursive strategies in the media interviews of some participants of fuel subsidy protest of January, 2012. The study adopted critical discourse analysis framework and examines ten media interviews of government spokespersons and ten protesters. The study revealed that government spokespersons employed opinionation, blackmails and defensive rhetoric while that of fuel subsidy protesters were characterised by combat and condemnatory rhetorics and threat to government. Both government spokespersons and fuel subsidy protesters made use of manipulative persuasion strategies of solidarity and framing to drive home their points.

Igwebuike, Abioye and Chimuanya (2014) examined online posts on the fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria. The study focused on the use of verbal and visual modes in representing people and events. In explaining people and events through the use of multiple modes, it adopted May's pragmatic act and semiotic theory. The study discovered that pragmatic strategies like negative labelling, prayer, mockery, humour, abuse, passionate and fierce appeal were mainly used by protesters.

Egbunike (2015) discussed framing in the occupy Nigeria protests in both print and electronic media platforms. Attention was focused on newspapers, facebook, Blogpost and Twitter. The study focused on three framing buildings such as motivation, diagnosis and prognosis. Findings of the study revealed that motivation, diagnosis and prognosis were fully utilised and framed in newspapers than facebook, Blogpost and Twitter. Largely, the study, however, could not account for the language use in the discourse (print and electronic media platforms). A critical discourse analysis of the linguistic features would have helped to show the use of formal and well-constructed expressions in newspapers than social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter blogs etc.

## Methodology

This present study made use of primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data were sourced from the internet (*Nairaland* Forum). The choice of *Nairaland* Forum was based on its visibility to netizens and large number of comments by online commenters on the forum. The forum houses commenters from different cultural backgrounds. A total of twenty (20) comments were selected from *Nairaland* Forum. The selected comments were grouped into pro subsidy removal and anti-subsidy removal. The reason for this restriction is to carry out an in-depth analysis of linguistic features used by commenters and discuss their implications. It also relied on textbooks, magazines and journal articles for more information. The data for the study were analysed using critical stylistics framework, systemic functional grammar approach and functionalist theory.



## Theoretical Frameworks

### Critical Stylistics

Critical stylistics was propounded by Jefferies (2007) who designed it to operate within the realm of ideologies. CS is a combination of critical discourse analysis and stylistics. Critical discourse analysis is an analytical approach used in describing, interpreting and explaining how discourse are constructed and maintained in a given context (Akpati *et al*, 2024). This means that meanings of language use can be interpreted depending on the context where they occur. Stylistics on the other hand is the study of style that is used to analyse or describe not just linguistic features in texts but across texts.

Critical stylistics according to Jefferies (2010) is that which helps to bridge the central functions that a particular text has in representing the world we experience. He also grouped critical stylistics interpretation of a text meaning into two; (a) textual method which focuses on how meanings are generated from the structure of a text. (b) Contextual method places emphasis on how meanings are generated from a given context based on how a text producer makes use of his linguistic choices. Jefferies (2010) also identifies the following analytical tools in critical stylistics; (a) Naming and Describing (b) Equating and Contrasting (c) Prioritising (d) Assuming and Implying (e) Negating (f) Representing Actions/Events/States (g) Exemplifying and Enumerating. For the purpose of this study, two analytical tools were used: Naming and Describing and Assuming and Implying.

#### Naming and Describing

This analytical tool involves the use of nouns, pre-modifiers and post-modifiers. This simply means that in this context, you have a case of a noun phrase whose head is a noun with pre-modifying and post-modifying elements.

#### Assuming and Implying

These two analytical tools reveal whether a particular knowledge in a discourse is background information or an implied one. The tools give readers the opportunity to generate or create their own meaning from the given information in a text or discourse.

### Functionalist Theory

Functionalist theory was developed in the field of sociology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prominent scholars associated with the theory include: Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. The functionalist theory explains that a society is made up of different parts and each part has a crucial role to play in maintaining and sustaining the entire social system. The mass media is an important part of the social system and plays a significant role in national development and poverty reduction. The media has an important role of giving information on sustainable development in Nigeria to the people. In order to achieve or effectively play this role, the media can collaborate with law enforcement agencies, school system, family, government etc.



## Data Presentation and Analysis

Two critical stylistics analytical tools (Naming and Describing, and Assuming and Implying) were deployed in this section for the analysis of the data selected in this study.

### Naming and Describing

These two concepts are basically used to describe situations or happenings using noun phrases or nominal groups. Examples 1 to 5 are nominal groups with MH nominal structure.

Examples 1:	<b>M</b>		<b>H</b>
	Good		decision
Example 2:	<b>M</b>		<b>H</b>
	Great		decision
Example 3:	<b>M</b>		<b>H</b>
	Nice		one
Example 4:	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>H</b>
	A	good	girl
Example 5:	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>H</b>
	Fragile	Nigerian	Economy

In examples 1-5, the modifying elements ‘good’, ‘great’, ‘nice’, ‘a good’ and ‘fragile Nigerian’ are all adjectives that modify the headwords “decision”, “decision”, “one”, “start” and “economy”. Comments 1-4 applauded the president’s decision on subsidy removal, hence, the use of the positive adjectives in describing the decision. The commenter in example 5, “fragile Nigerian economy”, though the expression is a nominal group with MH nominal structure does not support subsidy removal. The commenter describes Nigerian economy as a fragile or weak economy that needs subsidy for its sustainability.

### Assuming and Implying

Example 6: Subsidy regime was a cankerworm

Example 7: If Bola Tinubu totally removes the pms subsidy, that move will worsen the hardship of Nigerians

Example 8: Enough of few people milking our common wealth to the detriment of all well-meaning Nigerians...

Example 9: Make I quickly go buy fuel now

The example 6 above, ‘subsidy is a cankerworm’, is an independent clause with “subsidy regime” as subject “was” as the predicator element and “cankerworm” as the complement. This



implies that subsidy has been a corruption tool used by few individuals to steal the nation's common wealth in the past. Another form of assuming and implying similar to example 6 is the expression in example 8 which reveals the level of corruption in Nigeria since subsidy was introduced. Example 7 “if Bola Tinubu totally removes the pms subsidy, that move will worsen the hardship of Nigerians” is a complex sentence with two unequal clauses (“If Bola Tinubu totally removes the pms subsidy” as subordinate clause and “that move will worsen the hardship of Nigerians” as independent clause). The expression explains high level of dependency on subsidy for survival. It further implies that fuel is an essential commodity and if not subsidised will result to untold hardships. By extension, the commenter also revealed that Nigerians have been going through a lot of pains and sufferings even with pms being subsidised. Example 9 as can be seen from the data presented implies that the price of pms increases as soon as subsidy is removed.

### Systemic Functional Grammar

Further insights were drawn from systemic functional grammar, particularly, on interpersonal meta-function of language. This is obviously represented by “mood” and “modality” which show the role a speaker in a given speech event or discourse plays or performs and the role given to the listener as well. Mood system which is the focus of this study is basically realised at the subject level within a sentence. The system is subdivided into: imperative and indicative moods (indicative declarative and indicative interrogative moods). The interrogative is further subdivided into: WH interrogative which makes use of WH elements such as “who”, “why”, “when” etc. another subdivision of interrogative is the tag interrogative and the last of the interrogative is the polarity interrogative.

The prominent and significant moods found in the data for this study are discussed below;

#### (a) Indicative Declarative Clause

In this form of clause, the subject usually comes before the predicate and the speaker is always the one giving information while the listener is being informed.

Examples:

- (i) This is a risky political calculation (Instinctg)
- (ii) Subsidy regime was a cankerworm (Ogunleti 01)
- (iii) If Bola Tinubu totally removes the pms subsidy, that move will worsen the hardship of Nigerians (Sonature)
- (iv) “This is a nice step if the necessary conditions and checks are put in place to prevent backlash on citizens”

The examples above are declarative sentences made by the commenters to air their dissent views and let the public know about their perspectives on the subsidy removal by president Bola Tinubu. Examples 1 and 3 are against subsidy removal. The two examples place emphasis on the wrong move or step taken by the new administration which may make them unpopular politically among Nigerians and the hardship the decision would result to.



Example 2 firmly supports subsidy removal. The commenter likened subsidy regime to a cankerworm which is a destructive force. This deeply means that subsidy has destroyed or ruined Nigeria's economy.

Example 4 "This is a nice step if the necessary conditions and checks are put in place to prevent backlash on citizens" is a declarative clause. The statement is in support of subsidy removal provided all necessary measures are in place to reduce the sufferings of Nigerians.

### **Indicative Interrogative Clause**

Examples:

- (i) Mr Tinubu, what condition have you put to prevent heavy backlash on citizens?
- (ii) How much per litre now?
- (iii) You quickly want to remove fuel subsidy for what now?

In example 1 above, the commenter's concern is not on the subsidy that was removed but measures that can reduce people's sufferings and reduce verbal attack on the government. Example 2 "How much per litre now" explains the fact that when subsidy is removed, the price of pms increases, hence the question being asked "How much per litre now" by the commenter. Lastly, in example 3, the commenter asks to know the reason behind the sudden removal of fuel subsidy. The expression "for what now" means there is no need for the action taken by the government to remove fuel subsidy.

### **Influence of Media and Economic Sustainability of Fuel Subsidy Removal in Nigeria**

For any programme to be successful and sustained, people's participation in the planning and implementation is crucial. To ensure people participate fully, they must be properly informed through the media about the objectives of the programme, their roles, responsibilities and what they stand to gain. In this case, media is effective in strengthening the process of democratisation, and function as a watchdog over the abuse of power and also function as a civic forum for political debate and as an agenda setter, and strengthening government responsiveness to social problems (Pippa Norris, 2006).

Online media has web users as its target audience. Audience comments can be seen as civic forums where netizens (online users) make contributions to issues of national interest and cross fertilise ideas (Umar, 2018). Therefore, online users' comments are engaging and important for investigation from a critical discourse analysis perspective. Different categories of persons have taken advantage of the opportunity of the audience comments platform section provided to deliberately share ideas and mobilise citizens to protest against government's ill policies. For instance, the January 12 fuel subsidy protest in Nigeria was a protest movement against the Nigerian government.

The media coverage of the protest also showed the concern of the citizens both within the country and in diaspora. Under the present administration, president Bola Ahmed Tinubu announced the sudden removal of fuel subsidy on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2023. The president tagged it "Subsidy is Gone". The announcement resulted to scarcity of premium motor spirit (PMS),





increase in the prices of goods and services across the country and difficulties in meeting basic family needs.

Media also perform other useful functions in the society. For instance, the media promote government transparency, accountability and public scrutiny of decision makers. They can identify policy failures, maladministration by public officials, and corruption in the judiciary and scandals in the corporate sector. The media can also give information or ideas about social problems to the people which in turn can help them to be more concerned about government's decisions or policies. The media help to see if government policies actually attain their goals or not and they also assist the population in assessing and judging public policies and services.

Television and radio can be used as sources of new information and medium of information dissemination to the public. This is because information and other communication technologies are mainly used in overcoming barriers of distance and time thereby increasing awareness and people's access to information and knowledge. Educative programmes can be designed and presented on television and radio for public awareness on what they don't know. Programmes on skill acquisition can be presented for people to learn and put them to practice so as to be self-employed thereby reducing the rate of unemployment and poverty in the country. Again programmes such as drama sketches on negative effect(s) of hard drugs can be presented on the television or be uploaded on different online media platforms such as *YouTube*, *Facebook* etc.in order to educate the public most especially the youths on its danger.

On the other hand, sustainable economic development is the process in which national resources are exploited or used in the direction of investment and how institutional change or reforms are coordinated and harmonised to boost meeting human basic needs. This simply means that sustainable development demands that new methods to economic growth must be identified and utilised. It also explains that new efficient and effective ways must be adopted to produce more with less waste and resources.

It is very important to note that savings from fuel subsidy removal can be used to foster sustainable economic development and how climate change can be addressed. According to Ozili (2023), fuel subsidy removal would free up financial resources or other sectors of the economy, reduce Nigeria's dependence on imported fuel, increase employment, channel funds for the development of critical public infrastructure, reduce the budget deficit and generate a budget surplus in the near future, reduce government borrowing, curb corruption with fuel subsidy payments, increase competition in the open market and reduce pressure on the exchange rate.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study has explicitly shown the significant use of some critical stylistic tools, particularly, tools such as naming and describing and assuming and implying in explaining online commenters' views on presidential Bola Ahmed Tinubu's subsidy removal on the 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2023. Findings showed that naming and describing were mainly used to appraise the decision of the government on subsidy removal. They were also used by commenters to express their support and approval of the president's decision to remove fuel subsidy except the last commenter who disagreed with other commenters on the ground that Nigeria's economy is too fragile for subsidy to be removed. It was also noticed from the analysis in this study that



assuming and implying showed hidden messages expressed by online commenters in their comments. Some of the comments left readers to infer meanings from the available comments.

In addition, indicative declarative clauses and indicative interrogative clauses were also used by online commenters to inform the general public about their perspectives and take on the subsidy removal and indicative interrogative clause was used to interrogate or question the rationale behind May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023 subsidy removal in Nigeria.

Also, media coverage on the subsidy removal to the general public was encouraging in terms of enlightenment. The media greatly helped in educating the public on why subsidy was removed and reported government's intention to the global world.

### Conclusion/Recommendations

This present study analysed and discussed online comments drawn from *Nairaland* forum in 2023 on fuel subsidy removal. The linguistic features identified from the selected comments used in this study revealed commenters' perspectives, views on fuel subsidy removal. Some of the features were used to express support, approval, disapproval and satisfaction on the decision taken by the government to discontinue with fuel subsidy in Nigeria. Also, media play a very crucial role in enlightenment and general coverage. The study, therefore, concluded that for development to be witnessed in Nigeria, corruption, political instability, illiteracy, poor implementation of policies, poor infrastructures must be addressed and language and media are pivotal in sustaining the economy of a nation.

The study, therefore, recommends that the Nigerian government should always consider the advantages and disadvantages of a given policy before making it public. Also, measures should first be put in place before any decision that will affect the masses be taken in order to reduce pains, sufferings, hunger and even death of innocent citizens. In addition, the Nigerian government should endeavour to provide infrastructures that will boost the economy. It should also make available basic amenities that will reduce hardship and mortality rate with money saved or generated from subsidy removal.

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