

Lexical Innovation and Semantic Change in COVID-19 Reportage: A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis of Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract: *Language variation in COVID-19 reportage is a source of concern among linguistic scholars as nascent registers and N-grams stimulate negative cognition among the citizenry due to the choice of lexicons employed in reportage processes. While Osisanwo (2022) investigated representational strategy, discourse structure and discourse strategies in COVID-19 media discourse using The New York Times, The Guardian, China Daily and The Punch to represent the global media genre, this study examines lexical innovation and semantic change in COVID-19 reportage in Nigerian newspapers through a corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis. The study identifies evolving COVID-19 registers, N-gram words relevant to computational linguistics, semantic extension, meaning reallocation and expansion, and negative semantic prosody resulting from lexical choices and their consequences for meaning interpretation among users of English as a second language. Corpora were purposively selected from the e-versions of The Guardian and The Punch newspapers from April 2020 to December 2021, representing the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria and the peak of its reportage. Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis provided the theoretical frameworks, while qualitative and quantitative analyses were employed. Findings showed that new lexemes and lexical clusters enhanced intelligibility and the development of COVID-19-word registers. Semantic extension accommodated new concepts and popularised palliative as a noun meaning material goods given to citizens to cushion COVID-19 hardship. Language variation was evident through new concepts and lexical items, while meaning reallocation and expansion were depicted in Delta, Alpha and Omicron. Overall, COVID-19 reportage was communicated with negative semantic prosody, demonstrating the relationship between lexical innovation, semantic change and critical media discourse.*

Keywords: Corpus Linguistics, COVID-19 reportage, lexical innovation, semantic change, media discourse, socio-semantics, Nigerian Newspapers

INTRODUCTION

Human communication plays a striking role in human relationships. Communication has existed since the evolution of man and reflects in every human activity. According to Yule (1996), the effectiveness,

completeness, and essence of human communication and interaction are closely related to the semantic functions language performs. Consequently, the connection between meaning and communication is sturdy. Communication, as stated here, is the exchange or spread of information, messages, attitudes, moods, or ideals between interlocutors. Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2008) opine that semantic function in human communication is significant to the overall essence of linguistic composition. These authors see language as dynamic, just as culture is. Language is conveyed from one peer group to another; it helps society to have a feature of continuity, and language is greatly acquired through exposure to the cultural and social environment rather than by any genetical co-occurrence (Ehuwa, 2005). This, in essence, gives rise to language modification and innovation.

The conventional meaning of words, phrases, and sentences focuses on literal or denotative meaning; however, socio-semantic investigation looks at the associative or stylistic meaning of words, phrases, and sentences as they relate to culture, society, age, gender, and class. Language variation is in the continual process of cultural transmission because language innovation is a continuous process. Yule (1996) further elucidated that a new generation of language users uses the language of the previous generation by recreating words, phrases, and expressions to suit intended meanings. In this process, some words and expressions are broadened, some narrowed, while some linguistic elements are lost. The desire of language users to sound different and to respond to new communicative situations also gives room for innovation and variation.

Major works have focused on variation in the language used in advertising, media relations, politics, social media, and news reporting, from the perspectives of pragmatics, lexico-grammar, socio-pragmatics, syntax, denotation, connotation, morphology, phonology, lexical and textual analysis. Little attention has been given to the socio-semantic investigation of news media discourse, particularly the way emergent lexical forms are socially situated in Nigerian newspaper reportage. Nigerian news media discourse is a genre with peculiar features. The COVID-19 period created a notable context for lexical innovation and semantic variation in Nigerian news reportage; hence, it is pertinent to examine the social influence of these linguistic phenomena on Nigerian news media discourse, their consequences for meaning interpretation among users of English as a second language, and the patterns of emerging usage and ambiguity that the discourse generates.

COVID-19 is a new lexical inventory associated with the English language since 2019; it was coined to denote Coronavirus Disease that emerged in 2019. The focus of this research is to examine the development of new concepts, the reallocation of meanings to lexical items, and new concepts as they relate to Coronavirus Disease. COVID-19 reportage is considered novel, with new words and expressions springing up to communicate its impact on people's lives (Kreuz, 2020). Hence, there is a need to analyse the reportage in news media discourse as a new medium for learning and meaning negotiation. Specifically, this work examines Nigerian news media discourse at the level of Critical Discourse Analysis, with attention to orthography, linguistic innovations, connotation, metaphor, beliefs, norms, culture, and their influence on meaning interpretation and intelligibility.

The study therefore addresses the following questions: (1) What lexical innovations and emerging lexical clusters occur in Nigerian COVID-19 newspaper reportage? (2) What forms of semantic extension and meaning reallocation are evident in the corpus? (3) What N-gram and collocational patterns contribute to the emerging COVID-19 register? and (4) What socio-semantic meanings and semantic prosodies are constructed through these lexical choices?

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The study employed a descriptive-analytical method and deductive reasoning for the analysis of the collected data. The data were retrieved from the official e-versions of *The Guardian* and *The Punch* newspapers for inference on COVID-19 reportage in Nigeria. The study purposively selected reportage published from April 2020 to December 2021, a period representing the outbreak and peak of COVID-19 reportage in Nigeria. The corpus was electronically extracted using Sketch Engine digital humanities tools, while relevant examples were manually collated from the extracted newspaper texts and subjected to corpus-based and Critical Discourse Analysis.

The corpus procedures involved word-list generation, frequency analysis, keyword identification, N-gram extraction, collocation analysis and concordance examination. The manual analysis focused on lexical innovation, word blending, acronymisation, lexical clustering, semantic extension, meaning reallocation, semantic prosody and selected grammatical choices. The use of both quantitative and qualitative procedures made it possible to identify recurrent patterns and subsequently interpret their socio-semantic significance.

For reproducibility, the analytical sequence was organised as follows: first, the newspaper texts were compiled and cleaned; second, wordlists and frequency profiles were generated; third, keywords and N-grams were extracted; fourth, salient lexical items were examined through collocation and concordance; and fifth, representative examples were interpreted through Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. The quantitative outputs were therefore treated as evidence of recurrent usage, while the qualitative analysis established the contextual and socio-semantic meanings of the salient forms.

Theory

Semantic change, lexical innovation and language variation

The dynamic nature of language has resulted in variation in various linguistic components such as phonetics, syntax, morphology and lexis. Language is about notions sturdily associated with experience and oscillates according to many pieces of evidence in time and space; words denoting

such ideas vary too. Although language variation is indisputable and commonplace, it may be unnoticeable and synchronically tough to explain (Hudson, 2000). Semantic change is strongly connected to subjective cultural and social changes, making it strenuous to forecast the route and profundity of such changes.

Traugott and Pratt (1980) show that regularities of semantic change have partly thrived, with subjectification providing an important account of how human reasoning and communicative needs may influence semantic development. Semantic variation may occur at the level of denotation and connotation. Change in denotation may involve broadening, extension, widening or generalisation, in which an attribute of a word is used beyond its original context to denote a more general notion or item. Change in connotation may involve the development of positive or negative evaluative associations. Pejoration, for instance, occurs when a word acquires damaging or derogatory values not intrinsic in its initial meaning (Kleparski, 1986; Grygiel, 2005).

Adepoju (2019) analysed meaning change at the levels of linguistics and semantics using diachronic historical evidence from Nigerian Breweries advertisements. His study demonstrates the value of examining meaning shift or extension across time. Frockman and Rodman (1983), as cited in the original study, describe semantic change as a process in which lexical items undergo additional senses or modification of original lexical meaning. The present study, however, is primarily concerned with language innovation and synchronic language variety in a specialised COVID-19 register. The findings are therefore interpreted as evidence of emergent usage, semantic extension and meaning reallocation rather than as proof of long-term historical language change.

The focus on innovation is also appropriate because technology and changing social circumstances are important factors in contemporary language variation. Language variation is hinged on culture and beliefs, while technology has become part of people's culture and must be factored into consideration of the field. The COVID-19 pandemic created an unusual communicative environment in which new concepts required new lexical resources and familiar words acquired specialised meanings.

Corpus Linguistics

Corpus linguistics denotes the study of language through the empirical examination of a large collection of naturally occurring language called a corpus. Corpus linguistic analysis provides empirical evidence for the study of frequency, collocation, lexical patterning and co-occurrence. According to Gries (2010), corpus tools provide opportunities for cross-fertilization between linguistic theory and empirical data because large collections of texts can reveal recurrent patterns that require theoretical interpretation. Gries (2009) explains that corpus linguistic analysis is based on the appraisal of frequencies of linguistic elements such as morphemes, words and grammatical patterns, often represented in occurrence lists. Another important use of corpus analysis is the investigation of semantic similarity through word co-occurrence.

In this study, corpus linguistics is treated primarily as a methodological approach rather than as the sole theoretical explanation of semantic change. Frequency and distribution establish the recurrent linguistic patterns, while socio-semantic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis explain the meanings and social implications of those patterns.

Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis

The study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by Norman Fairclough, who is prominent for his works on language, society and discourse. Fairclough's approach provides a framework for examining the relationship between textual choices, discourse practices and wider socio-cultural, socio-economic and political practices (Fairclough, 1998; 1999). The present study applies CDA at three interconnected levels: textual description, interpretation of discourse processes, and explanation of discourse in relation to social practice.

At the textual level, attention is given to lexical choice, collocation, grammatical mood, modality and semantic prosody. At the interpretation level, the analysis considers why particular expressions are selected and how discourse producers and consumers are positioned. At the explanatory level, the study examines the socio-cultural, socio-economic and political meanings constructed through COVID-19 reportage. CDA therefore complements corpus analysis by moving from recurrent linguistic patterns to questions of representation, authority, responsibility and social control.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lexical and grammatical patterning in COVID-19 reportage

The manually collated corpus contains examples in which government directives, public-health measures and pandemic information are expressed through declarative clauses, modal expressions and directive constructions. The analysis below does not treat every declarative clause as a mood category requiring ideological interpretation; rather, grammatical form is considered together with lexical choice and discourse function.

Example 1: "Buhari had, on March 29, ordered the lockdown for an initial period of 14 days." *The Punch newspaper*, April 14th, 2020.

Example 2: "With effect from Sunday, 12th April 2020, all religious worshippers shall be allowed to have their normal service every Sunday for Christians and Friday for Muslims." *The Punch newspaper*, April 10th, 2020

Example 3: "From 8 am to 12 noon only, provided that every worshipper must wear a face mask, including a handkerchief or head tie." *The Punch newspaper*, April 10th, 2020

Example 4: "The service center must be provided with hand sanitisers and running water for washing of hands." *The Punch newspaper*, April 10th, 2020

Example 5: “Residents are advised to observe the curfew as security agents have been mandated to arrest anyone who flouts the order.” *The Guardian*, 24th, October 2020

The expressions enforce, declare, impose lockdown, extend, strict, ease, total and stay-at-home order occur in a discourse environment of regulation and restriction. These lexical choices contribute to a predominantly negative semantic prosody around lockdown because they repeatedly associate the concept with compulsion, restriction and enforcement. However, the interpretation is based on the collocational environment rather than on the word lockdown in isolation.

Declarative constructions, information and institutional authority

Declarative clauses provide information by stating facts, opinions or observations. Examples from the corpus include:

1. “No fewer than 4,000 United Kingdom citizens residing in Nigeria have shown interest in being evacuated to their country” *The Punch*, April 3rd 2020
2. “Nigerian Breweries Plc. has donated essential supplies, including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the University College Hospital, Ibadan, Oyo State” *The Guardian*, 27th September 2020
3. “The NCDC, however, said that 183 patients were discharged after testing negative for the virus across the country.” *The Guardian*, 22nd, October

These examples demonstrate that COVID-19 reportage combines information provision with institutional representation. Government agencies, corporations and public-health institutions are represented as sources of information or intervention, while citizens and patients are represented as recipients, beneficiaries or subjects of public-health action. The choice of words such as donated, discharged, evacuated and negative contributes to a comparatively positive semantic environment in these particular concordance lines.

Modality, authority and social regulation

Modal expressions such as could, shall and must occur in the reportage and contribute to the construction of obligation, possibility and authority. The imperative has several communicative functions, including command, request, suggestion, invitation, advice and direction (Hun, 2000; Nurhayati, 2018). In the COVID-19 corpus, however, directive force is frequently expressed through reporting verbs and modal constructions rather than through grammatical imperatives alone.

For example, “Buhari had, on March 29, ordered the lockdown for an initial period of 14 days” is grammatically declarative, although the verb ordered reports a directive act. This distinction is important because the earlier analysis conflated declarative form with imperative mood. Socio-semantically, the expression nevertheless constructs government as the controlling participant and citizens as those expected to comply. The discourse therefore represents public-health intervention as both protection and social regulation.

Similarly, “every worshipper must wear a face mask” expresses strong obligation through the modal must. The construction foregrounds institutional authority and compulsory compliance. In CDA terms, such modal choices contribute to the representation of government and its agencies as controllers of public-health behaviour, while citizens are positioned as responsible for adherence to directives.

Wordlist and frequency in the corpus

Using Sketch Engine, the query for the word list returned 2,068-word types in the corpus. The top ten forms in the supplied corpus output are presented below. These high-frequency forms should be interpreted cautiously: frequency alone does not establish semantic significance, and general lexical items such as new, other and more are not necessarily COVID-19 innovations.

Item	Frequency	Relative frequency
new	1,396	1,732.414
other	1,306	1,620.725
public	979	1,214.924
more	961	1,192.586
first	853	1,058.560
social	808	1,002.715
medical	711	882.3398
such	596	739.6266
international	534	662.6856
positive	530	657.7217

The list provides an initial indication of recurrent vocabulary, but domain-specific interpretation requires keyword and collocation analysis. The prominence of public, social and medical is more directly relevant to the socio-semantic profile of the corpus because these items point to public-health, social and medical dimensions of the pandemic.

Keywords and the emerging COVID-19 register

Keyword	Focus frequency	Reference frequency	Score
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COVID-19	3980	0	4940.12
Coronavirus	1078	3892	1068.86
Covid	489	6	607.61
Lockdown	849	11857	596.04
Omicron	565	3570	570.10
NCDC	524	3262	537.51
Pandemic	1506	57902	393.09
Distancing	343	2743	362.19
macro-financial	191	573	229.50
quarantine	803	531.996	224.066
Lagos	852	575.36	223.591
FCT	208	7828.258	171.842
Ogun	175	4689.217	167.278
Abuja	324	270.60	146.265
Buhari	252	185.32	142.444

The keyword profile identifies lexical items strongly associated with the COVID-19 corpus. COVID-19, coronavirus, lockdown, pandemic, distancing, quarantine and NCDC constitute a recognisable lexical field around disease, containment and institutional response. The geographical items Lagos, FCT, Ogun and Abuja also indicate that Nigerian COVID-19 reportage was locally situated rather than merely reproducing global pandemic terminology.

The keywords also contribute to an emerging COVID-19 register. Register development here refers to the clustering and recurrent use of lexical items associated with a particular social activity and communicative situation. It does not imply that all the words are newly created. Some are established lexical items that acquire increased frequency or specialised contextual meanings during the pandemic.

N-grams and lexical clustering

N-gram	Frequency
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percent of GDP	503
the spread of	444
in the country	386
as well as	366
the number of	308
spread of the	306
of the virus	289
of the pandemic	265
the spread of the	263
the end of	235

The top N-grams reveal recurrent patterns in the corpus, particularly around the spread of the virus, the pandemic and national reporting. However, generic sequences such as as well as and in the country should not be interpreted as COVID-19-specific semantic constructions merely because they occur frequently. Their presence demonstrates recurrent phraseological patterning, whereas the COVID-19-specific N-grams provide stronger evidence for the emerging register.

Lexical clusters provide more direct information on collocation and semantic prosody. The corpus includes social distancing, confirmed case, Omicron variant, key policy response, containment measure, relief material, spread of the virus, policy response, balance of payments, policy rate, face mask, new case, active case and travel restriction. The meaning of these clusters is derived from the category represented by the cluster and not from the individual words alone.

Lexical cluster	Focus frequency	Reference frequency	Score
social distancing	294	305	358.75
confirmed case	409	6838	352.26
Omicron variant	224	0	278.98
key policy response	190	31	236.31
containment measure	169	550	203.465
relief material	149	2215	162.545
spread of the virus	144	1836	160.573

policy response	205	9185	160.029
balance of payments	195	9260	151.79
key policy	199	10465	147.678
policy rate	139	2775	147.024
face mask	167	7660	139.105
new case	266	23148	132.336
active case	116	1549	131.716
travel restriction	127	3638	128.316

Lexical innovation: blending and acronymisation

COVID-19 reportage produced several forms of lexical innovation. One example is *covidiot*, formed through the blending of Covid and idiot. In the corpus, the term refers to a person considered foolish or reckless for ignoring COVID-19 health advice. Its socio-semantic significance lies in the social categorisation it creates: the lexical item does not merely name a person; it evaluates behaviour and constructs non-compliance as foolishness.

Another relevant form is *infodemic*. The corpus example defines it as excessive information about a problem that makes it difficult to identify a solution. The term is a blend of info from information and demic from epidemic. The earlier expression “infomedics” in the raw manuscript has therefore been standardised to *infodemic* because the latter is the form represented in the subsequent corpus example.

Acronymisation is also evident in Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), NCDC and COVID-19. The use of acronyms contributes to lexical economy and the development of specialised pandemic discourse. In particular, NCDC functions not only as an abbreviation but also as an institutional lexical item associated with public-health authority in Nigeria.

Semantic extension and meaning reallocation

There is semantic extension and meaning reallocation to accommodate new concepts in COVID-19 reportage. Examples include *palliative*, *Omicron*, *Alpha* and *Delta*. These items demonstrate different processes and should not be treated as identical types of semantic change.

The expressions *Alpha*, *Delta* and *Omicron* are names of letters in the Greek alphabet that acquired specialised epidemiological meanings as labels for COVID-19 variants. Their use in the corpus therefore demonstrates semantic specialisation and contextual reallocation rather than simple borrowing. Their recurrent collocates, including strain, variant and mutation, reinforce the epidemiological meaning.

Example 1: “The DEPOWA COVID-19 palliative, the third in its series, was a gesture by the association to cushion the economic hardship encountered by vulnerable groups and persons, particularly, widows, orphans, and the physically challenged.”

Example 2. “They are what has been derisively referred to as covidiot! You see them everywhere in Nigeria, especially in the country’s rural areas.” *The Punch*, July 9th, 2021: Covidiot and Nigeria’s COVID-19 challenge

Example 3. “Some of the mutations have been detected in previous variants, such as Alpha and Delta, and have been associated with increased transmissibility and immune evasion”

The Guardian, 26th, November 2021

Example 4.” Yet, to these Doubting Thomases, these rapidly unfolding scary realities are at best distant fairy tales, what some dismissively refer to as big man wahala” *The Punch*, July 9, 2021.

Palliative is particularly significant because it is used substantively as a noun to mean commodities given to less privileged citizens to alleviate hardship brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This represents a socio-semantic reallocation from a medical sense associated with alleviating symptoms to a socio-economic sense associated with material relief. The pandemic therefore created a communicative environment in which the term became associated with government and institutional welfare.

The expression “big man wahala” provides another example of context-dependent semantic extension. In the corpus, the expression is used to suggest that COVID-19 was a disease associated with the rich. This illustrates how existing Nigerian English expressions may be recontextualised to represent new social interpretations of the pandemic.

Morphological and orthographic innovation

Form	Frequency	Observed process
self-isolation	99	Compounding/derivational formation
end-June	65	Compound formation
non-essential	87	Prefixation
PPE	107	Acronymisation
SARS-Nov-2	52	Specialised scientific naming
self-isolate	47	Compound/derivational formation
self-quarantine	43	Compound formation

COVID-related	32	Compound/derivational formation
stay-at-home	49	Compound formation
covidiot	26	Blending

The forms in Table 4.6 demonstrate different mechanisms of lexical innovation. They should not all be classified as suffixation. Self-isolation, self-quarantine and stay-at-home involve compound or compound-like formations; non-essential involves prefixation; COVID-related combines COVID with related; PPE is an acronym; and covidiot is a blend. The corrected classification strengthens the linguistic interpretation of the emerging COVID-19 register.

Semantic prosody and socio-semantic representation

The corpus indicates that COVID-19 reportage frequently constructs negative semantic prosody around lexical items associated with infection, restriction, death, danger and uncertainty. For example, lockdown occurs with expressions such as enforce, declare, impose, extend and strict. Social distancing occurs in contexts of physical separation, while vaccine reportage includes references to variants, mutation and transmissibility. These recurrent associations contribute to an evaluative discourse in which the pandemic is represented as a threat requiring intervention.

The expression social distancing illustrates the importance of contextual interpretation. The word social conventionally relates to society or companionship, while distancing relates to physical or social separation. In COVID-19 reportage, social distancing was recontextualised primarily to denote physical remoteness for public-health purposes. The negative semantic prosody should, however, be established from its recurrent collocates rather than assumed from dictionary definitions alone.

The socio-semantic analysis also shows that government, health agencies, corporations and citizens occupy different discourse positions. Government and health agencies are frequently represented as providers of directives and information, while citizens are represented as recipients of directives, beneficiaries of relief or participants in public-health compliance. This distribution of agency supports Fairclough's (1998; 1999) concern with the relationship between language, power and social practice.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrate that COVID-19 reportage provided a productive environment for lexical innovation and language variety in Nigerian media discourse. The corpus contains newly formed lexical items, specialised clusters and familiar words used in new or expanded contexts. These patterns confirm Yule's (1996) view of language as dynamic and responsive to communicative needs, while the socio-semantic dimension demonstrates that lexical meaning is connected to cultural and social experience.

The findings also extend the relevance of Adepoju's (2019) discussion of semantic change by showing that semantic reallocation may occur rapidly within a specialised social context. Unlike a conventional diachronic study that traces a form across generations, the present study examines synchronic variation during an exceptional period. The use of palliative as a noun is especially important because it shows how Nigerian media discourse adapted an existing medical lexical item to a new socioeconomic reality.

Corpus evidence also demonstrates the value of combining frequency with contextual interpretation. Gries (2009; 2010) emphasises the importance of frequency and co-occurrence in corpus analysis, but frequency alone cannot establish ideological significance. The present analysis therefore moves from word frequency and N-grams to collocation, concordance and socio-semantic interpretation.

From the perspective of CDA, the discourse does more than communicate information about a disease. It constructs relationships between institutions and citizens, foregrounds authority and obligation, and represents citizens through categories such as vulnerable groups, worshippers, patients and members of the public. Modal expressions such as must and shall reinforce institutional authority, while lexical items associated with relief, donation, evacuation and recovery contribute positive evaluations in selected contexts.

Overall, the paper argues that COVID-19 reportage contributed to an emerging Nigerian media variety of pandemic discourse rather than constituting evidence of wholesale change in the English language. The innovation occurred through the creation of new forms, the increased salience of specialised vocabulary, the clustering of existing words, and the reallocation or extension of meaning in response to a new social reality

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

First, the corpus demonstrates lexical innovation through blending, compounding, acronymisation, prefixation and specialised naming. Examples include covidiot, infodemic, self-isolation, self-quarantine, stay-at-home, PPE and NCDC.

Second, the corpus reveals an emerging COVID-19 lexical register comprising recurrent forms such as COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, lockdown, distancing, quarantine, NCDC, face mask, confirmed case, active case and travel restriction.

Third, semantic extension and meaning reallocation occurred as familiar lexical items were adapted to new pandemic concepts. Palliative is the clearest example, functioning as a noun for material relief supplied to citizens to cushion COVID-19 hardship.

Fourth, Alpha, Delta and Omicron acquired specialised epidemiological meanings as COVID-19 variant labels. Their use demonstrates contextual semantic specialisation rather than simply borrowing from the Greek alphabet.

Fifth, recurrent collocations around lockdown, infection, restriction, death, danger and uncertainty contributed to predominantly negative semantic prosody in COVID-19 reportage, while lexical choices

such as donation, evacuation, discharge and relief produced positive semantic environments in particular contexts.

Sixth, modal and directive expressions contributed to the representation of institutional authority. Government and public-health agencies were frequently represented as controlling or information-providing participants, while citizens were represented as recipients of directives, beneficiaries and participants in compliance.

Finally, the study shows that COVID-19 reportage constituted a productive context for language innovation and synchronic language variety in Nigerian media discourse. The evidence is strongest for lexical innovation, semantic extension, meaning reallocation and register formation rather than for long-term historical language change.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that COVID-19 reportage created a productive communicative environment for lexical innovation and socio-semantic variation in Nigerian newspaper discourse. New concepts and new lexical items were created and recreated to represent the social, medical, political and economic realities of the pandemic. The findings therefore support the view that language is dynamic and that language users adapt existing linguistic resources to emerging communicative needs.

The development of an emerging COVID-19 register was evident in the recurrent use of specialised lexical items, N-grams and lexical clusters. Semantic reallocation and extension were also evident in forms such as palliative, Delta, Alpha and Omicron, although these forms represent different linguistic processes. The case of palliative demonstrates particularly clearly how an established lexical item can acquire a new socio-economic meaning within a specific historical and cultural context.

The study further concludes that Critical Discourse Analysis is useful for explaining the relationship between lexical choices and social practice. Modal expressions and directive constructions contributed to the representation of institutional authority, while semantic prosody reflected the evaluative dimensions of pandemic reporting. The corpus evidence therefore indicates that COVID-19 media discourse was not linguistically neutral: it represented risk, restriction, vulnerability, relief, responsibility and institutional intervention through recurrent lexical choices.

The principal contribution of the study is its demonstration that Nigerian newspaper reportage during COVID-19 provides evidence of lexical innovation and synchronic language variety shaped by an exceptional social context. The study recommends further comparative research using pre-COVID and post-COVID corpora to establish whether selected innovations, particularly the noun use of palliative and other pandemic expressions, have persisted beyond the pandemic period. Such diachronic comparison would provide stronger evidence for longer-term semantic change.

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