
Research

Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Language, Migration and Identity in Peter Obi’s “Japa Meme in Nigeria’s 2023 Presidential Election

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Abstract: This study examined the “Japa” meme statement by Peter Obi during Nigeria’s 2023 presidential election campaign, exploring how language, migration, and identity are constructed and communicated through multimodal discourse analysis. Drawing on Critical Multimodal theory (CMT), the research analyzes the linguistic, visual, and semiotic features of the meme. It investigated how these elements interact to convey meanings about youth aspirations, migration intentions, and socio-political attitudes towards national development. The study further explored public reception or perception by examining citizens’ responses, highlighting how Nigerian youth interpret and negotiate the meme’s message. Findings reveal that “Japa” functioned not merely as slang but as a symbolic expression of collective frustration, resistance and imagined futures among Nigerian youths. The term indexes social realities such as unemployment, governance failure and global mobility. The study concludes that ‘japa’ has evolved into a powerful socio-political lexeme that reflects shifting identities and the dynamic relationship between language, migration and power in Nigeria. The study contributes to sociolinguistics by demonstrating how memes function as both linguistic and cultural artefacts that mediate political engagement and identity construction in contemporary Nigeria.

Keywords: Peter Obi, Meme, Multimodal Discourse, Japa, Migration, Identity

1.0. Introduction

Language serves as a crucial medium through which social realities, collective experiences, and ideological positions are constructed and negotiated. Halliday (1978) is of the views that language functions as a vital social practice through which individuals

construct meaning, negotiates identity, and reflect socio-economic realities. In recent time, one of the ways people negotiate meanings is through memes, which is usually displayed on social media platforms. The term meme was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in his influential book *The Selfish Gene* in (1976). Dawkins describes meme as a unit of cultural transmissions that replicate and spread within a society, much like genes do in biology. In his view, a meme is anything that spreads from mind to mind such as ideas, text, pictures, catchphrases, etc replicating and evolving through variation, mutation, and selection. Memes are replicators just like genes; they propagate themselves by leaping from brain to brain.

From a Darwinian perspective, meme began to grow in different ontological directions as Blackmore (1999) expanded Dawkins ideas by proposing that memes are the building block of human culture. She defined memes as information that are imitated by humans and spread from person to person. She noted that memes are a key driver of cultural evolution, and understanding how they work is essential for understanding human culture. Shifman (2014) further advanced the definition of memes as “groups of digital items that share common characteristics of content, form, or stance, are created with awareness of each other, and are circulated, imitated, and transformed by many users.” Aunger (2000) is also of the view that memes are cultural artefacts that are created, disseminated and transformed through online communities, often for humorous or satirical purposes. Memes are employed to address societal conflicts and send valuable messages to the audience especially during national and international events such as sports, political, elections and other matters. This was the case during the Nigeria’s 2023 presidential election, where meme became one of the predominant tools for political communication. In multilingual societies such as Nigeria, linguistic expressions often emerge as responses to shared experiences and collective challenges. One of such expression is “japa”, a slang term that originated from Yoruba, meaning “to flee” or “to escape,” this slang gained prominence in Nigerian public discourse, particularly among youths during the election period as a way to show their frustration if the right candidate does not emerge to fix the declining Nigeria economy. In contemporary usage, “japa” is a lexical symbol for migration aspirations, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with economic conditions, governance, unemployment, and insecurity. Blommaert (2010) noted that the widespread use of “japa” among Nigerian youths aligns with this view, as the term encapsulates collective frustration and shared understanding of migration as a survival strategy. Migration, in this context, is

not merely a physical movement but a socially constructed aspiration shaped through language and discourse.

Slang according to Eckert (2000) is a dynamic linguistic resource through which speakers index group membership, social identity, and ideological stance. The rise of digital media has significantly expanded the circulation and interpretive potential of youth slang. Social media platforms and memes serve as sites where language is compressed into symbolic forms capable of conveying complex social meanings. Dijk (2008) explained that from a discourse perspective, the deployment of “japa” in political communication reveals underlying ideological struggles between nationalism and transnational mobility. While youths employ the term to express disenchantment and escape, political actors recontextualized it to signal responsiveness, reform, and imagined national renewal. This process of recontextualization demonstrates how meanings are not fixed but are continually negotiated within specific social and political contexts.

Furthermore, “japa” operates as an indexical marker of generational identity, signaling youth consciousness shaped by globalization and uneven development. As Blommaert (2010) argued, mobility and inequality are central to understanding contemporary linguistic practices, particularly in postcolonial contexts. The term therefore reflects broader tensions between local belonging and global aspiration, as Nigerian youths navigate identities across national and transnational spaces.

1.1 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this paper is to examine how the term “japa” functions as a multimodal discursive resource in Nigerian public discourse, focusing on how language, images, and design elements jointly construct youth identity, migration aspirations, and ideological meaning. The objectives are to:

- i. analyze the multimodal representation of “japa” in Nigerian memes and political communication.
- ii. investigate the sociolinguistic meanings and identity markers indexed by “japa” in digital and political contexts.
- iii. Examine the ideological functions of “japa” as recontextualized by political actors.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Youth migration has become a prominent social phenomenon in Nigeria, with increasing numbers of young people expressing the desire to leave the country in search of

better economic and social opportunities. The slang “japa” has emerged as a linguistic marker of this migration aspiration, widely used in social media posts, memes, and political discourse. Despite growing research on migration and youth experiences in Nigeria, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the linguistic forms through which migration desires are articulated and circulated in public discourse. This study addresses this gap by examining “japa” as a sociolinguistic that encodes youth identity, migration ideology, and political meaning through multimodal discourse analysis. By analyzing its usage in political memes and public narratives, the study will contribute to sociolinguistic and discourse studies by demonstrating how language both reflects and shapes contemporary Nigerian social realities.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study demonstrates how “japa” operates as a linguistic and visual marker of youth identity and migration aspirations. It highlights how multimodal elements (text, image, design) shape meaning and engage audiences in Nigerian online discourse.

The study also reveals how political actors strategically appropriate youth slang to convey authority, hope, and legitimacy.

2. Literature Review

Memes have emerged as a significant form of digital communication in the 21st century, blending humour, satire, and cultural commentary. The use of internet memes in political contexts has drawn significant scholarly attention, showcasing their potentials as tool for activism and commentary. Milner (2016) examined the intersection of internet memes, public discourse, and participatory media which serve as a form of public discourse, enabling individuals to engage with complex issues, such as politics, social justice, and popular culture, in a more approachable and humorous manner. His work challenged traditional notions of public discourse, highlighting the significance of internet memes in facilitating participatory, humorous, and often irreverent forms of public engagement. Memes have gone beyond academic definition; this is due to the expansion of the computer usage and the exponential growth of the Internet, particularly social media. An internet meme can be a snapshot of a picture that has a caption on it, usually centered on a specific trend and spread rapidly by Internet users for humour, amusement and for other specific purposes. The image below is a typical example of internet meme

Figure 1: A typical example of an internet meme



Juza (2013) explained further that the notion of “internet memes” is most commonly used to describe certain kinds of information that is disseminated among the Internet users by themselves. This information may include pictures, films (usually short), and video clips, graphics, texts, quotes, etc. Morina and Bernstein (2022) also examined the role of internet memes in shaping political discourse and cultural narratives in the digital age. The study provided a detailed exploration of how memes have evolved into powerful tools for communication, persuasion, and social influence, particularly in the context of contemporary political landscapes. The primary aim of their study was to analyse the phenomenon of memes as instruments of political warfare and cultural expression. The study shows how memes function within the broader landscape of digital communication and how they can be utilized to influence public opinion, mobilize social movements, and shape political outcomes.

Adegoju (2022) studied semiotics of humour in Nigerian politics. He examined how memes peculiar to Nigerians on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram employ language to convey humour and irony to criticize the governance period of the All Progressive Congress (APC) under President Muhammadu Buhari. This study adopted a qualitative eclectic approach in its analysis of conversational memes which served as data gathered from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Guided by Algirdas J. Greimas semiotic theory, thirty (30) conversational memes were purposively selected. Findings from the study showed that these memes functioned as devices of subversive humour, expressing public frustration with economic hardship, poverty, hunger, broken campaign promises and political cynicism. The study concluded that political memes in Nigeria function as vernacular tools of political critique, enabling the public to express dissatisfaction through culturally rich, humorous forms. The article presents a compelling analysis,

especially in its discussion of sarcasm as one of the prominent tools of meme which is useful for this study.

Kulkami (2017) researched on Internet Memes and Political Discourse: A Study on the Impact of Internet memes as a tool in Communicating Political Satire. He examined how memes serve as a form of political commentary and social critique in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Using agenda setting theory and elaboration likelihood model, Kulkami through quantitative analyses, analysed a structured questionnaire survey among respondents in India: 25 digital natives (young, internet-savvy) and 25 digital migrants (older less digitally immersed). Findings revealed that memes do increase political engagement, particularly among digital natives. They served as propaganda tools, used both organically by users and strategically by political actors. By using satire and parody, memes can challenge authority and promote collective action among users, often bypassing traditional media channels.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, using Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) introduced by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen in (2001) to analyse how meaning is constructed and communicated through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes such as language, image, gesture, etc within a communicative text. MDA examined how the term “japa” was represented and interpreted in Nigerian public discourse. The theoretical framework adopted for this study was critical multimodal theory also introduced by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen in (1996). Critical Multimodal Theory (CMT) is a framework that examined how meaning is created and communicated through multiple modes of representation, such as text, images, colours etc. The theory further explored how these meanings affect power dynamics, ideologies, and social influences in the society. This approach was suitable for this study because the primary data consist of meme which combine linguistic and visual modes to convey complex socio-political messages about youth migration and identity.

The data for this study was collected from twitter a social media platform through hashtags link ‘Nigeriadecides2023’ the study employed purposive sampling techniques, this is to ensure that the collected data is a representative of the socio-political and linguistic phenomena under investigation. Multimodal discourse analysis was applied to examine how text, imagery, layout, and symbolic features interact to construct meaning.

4. Data Presentation

The data used in this study was the meme of Peter Obi purposively selected through twitter on social media platform during the Nigeria’s 2023 presidential election. Guided by critical multimodal theory, the data was analyzed through multimodal discourse analysis which was subdivided into content analysis, discourse analysis and semiotic analysis. This tripartite structure facilitates a holistic understanding of how meanings are constructed and communicated through the interaction of visual, textual, and symbolic elements

4.1 Data Analysis



Meme	Content
14	No need to Japa when I become president—Peter Obi

The meme above presents Peter Obi as a hopeful and reform-minded leader, promising a better Nigeria where citizens won’t ‘japa’(emigrate).

This meme through visual and language, challenges government inadequacies that has instilled into an average Nigerian an ideology that japa is the best alternative to escape the biting economy and promotes Peter Obi’s image as a reformist and solution to Nigeria’s leadership and societal problems.

Content Analysis of the Meme

The meme above presents Peter Obi dressed in a Labour Party campaign shirt, smiling modestly. The overlaid text, attributed to him, reads: “No need to Japa when I become president” The composition is minimal and clean, focusing attention on Obi’s image and the bold, legible text below it.

Discourse Analysis of the Meme

The sentence, “No need to japa when I become president,” carries a declarative, confident tone. It constructs an optimistic future contingent on Obi’s leadership, linking his presidency with national transformation.

The word "japa" is a Nigerian slang term meaning "to escape" or "runaway", typically referencing youth migration in search of better opportunities abroad.

Implicit in the statement is a critique of the status quo suggesting that present governance compels people to flee the country. Thus, Obi’s words function not only as campaign rhetoric but also as an indictment of political failure under previous administrations.

The term “*japa*”, acts as a metaphor for emigration. It figuratively represents the plight of Nigerians (especially youths) from their country in search of better opportunities.

The use of “japa” embodies the broader frustrations of insecurity, unemployment, poor governance and lack of prospects. The phrase “*no need to japa*” is an understatement of a serious problem. It trivializes the severity of mass emigration by simplifying it into a casual phrase, which ironically draws more attention to the depth of the issue.

The simplicity of the phrase contrasts with the complexity of what “japa” entails, creating a rhetorical irony that sharpens the meme’s emotional and political appeal.

“when I become president” functions as an implied epithet or metonymic reference to leadership, suggesting that his identity is synonymous with national transformation. His future presidency stands in for hope, safety, and solutions.

The use of “japa” is a deliberate attempt to align Peter Obi with ordinary Nigerians, particularly the youth. It creates the image of a candidate who understands the daily language, struggles, and aspirations of the common people. This "plain folks" technique presents Obi as a man of the people, rather than an elitist politician.

This meme offers a highly appealing promise that under Obi’s leadership, there will be no need to emigrate. While it does not detail how this will be achieved, it associates Obi with positive, desirable outcomes such as stability, safety, and opportunity.

The statement is emotionally powerful but substantively broad, a hallmark of glittering generalities. The meme focuses solely on the positive impact of Obi’s presidency that Nigerians will no longer feel the need to “japa.” It omits any challenges or limitations,

thereby presenting a one-sided narrative designed to convince viewers that he is the only viable solution. This aligns with card stacking.

The statement “No need to japa when I become president” functions as a political slogan. It is catchy, easy to remember, and contextually powerful. Slogans are a classic propaganda tool used to simplify complex issues into emotionally charged phrases that can quickly circulate on social media.

Those who resonate with the anti-“japa” sentiment may feel a part of a reformist, patriotic in-group, while those who have “japa’d” or support the status quo are positioned as out-group or less hopeful actors.

This meme therefore functions as both an identity-affirming and identity-offering message: affirming those who have stayed and resisted japa, while offering hope to those who dream of staying but feel forced to leave.

The meme frames Obi as an alternative to the despair associated with youth emigration. It suggests that under his leadership, the push factors for migration will be eradicated. This ideological construction challenges narratives of political hopelessness. This meme frames migration not as a dream or success story, but as a necessity born of failure. It then offers Peter Obi’s leadership as a frame of hope and solution.

The problem is externalized (current governance), and the solution is internalized (electing Obi). The frame aligns Obi’s campaign with national dignity, while positioning current leadership as morally and structurally inadequate.

Semiotic Analysis of the Meme

Signifiers

Image: The meme shows Peter Obi, a Nigerian presidential candidate of the Labour Party, standing confidently and smiling, dressed in branded campaign attire.

Text: “*NO NEED TO JAPA WHEN I BECOME PRESIDENT – PETER OBI*”

Signified

The meme draws on the cultural myth of national salvation through leadership, the belief that a competent and ethical leader can restore order, opportunities, and pride in Nigeria.

It also interacts with the Diaspora myth, wherein migration is often seen as the only escape from systemic dysfunction.

The meme challenges that narrative by proposing hope in staying, the idea that change is possible from within, without resorting to escape or abandonment of the homeland.

Psychological Implications of the Meme on the Electorates

The term “japa” evokes strong emotional associations with fear, frustration, and hopelessness. Many young Nigerians view migration as a last resort due to insecurity, unemployment, and poor leadership.

By referencing “japa,” the meme activates these anxieties while simultaneously providing psychological relief and reassurance through Obi’s promise which offers voters a reason to emotionally re-invest in the nation rather than abandon it.

For supporters of Obi, the meme reinforces confirmation bias. It validates their belief that his leadership can solve systemic problems.

For undecided or frustrated voters, the promise of no longer needing to migrate creates a cognitive shortcut of either trust or distrust.

Some electorates, especially those skeptical of political promises, may view the statement as oversimplification, leading to cynicism.

This could provoke debate or resistance among voters who see the "japa" phenomenon as a deeper, global issue not easily solved by one administration.

4.2 Discussion of findings

The analysis of the japa meme by Peter Obi in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election revealed a highly charged digital discourse that reflects the sentiments, frustrations, and aspirations of Nigerians. Using multimodal discourse analysis as methodological tools, and situating the interpretations within the frameworks of critical multimodal theory, the analysis revealed that the meme convey messages of hope, change, and the potential for a better future.

The findings from the analyzed meme revealed that visual political discourse on social media platforms does not only critique existing political structures but also constructs and communicates aspirational narratives of hope and transformation. Memes endorsing candidates like Peter Obi during Nigeria’s 2023 presidential election, for instance, were saturated with symbolic cues and textual affirmations that projected a vision of renewal, competence, and national redemption. The analyzed meme positioned him not just as a political figure, but as a solution-bearer. It activated hope in the electorate by implying the possibility of national repair through competent leadership.

5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that “japa” functions as a multimodal linguistic and visual resource that indexes youth identity, migration aspirations, and ideological meaning. Critical multimodal theory revealed how text, imagery, and design interact in memes to communicate political, social, and generational messages. Findings underscore how language and multimodality together mediate identity, ideology, and social meaning in contemporary Nigerian society.

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