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Research

## **Metaphoric Language and Meaning-Making in Nigerian Political Meme: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of “Glory”**

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**Abstract:** This paper explored metaphoric language and meaning-making in Nigerian political memes through a multimodal discourse analysis of the metaphor “glory” in the context of the meme circulated during the Nigeria’s 2023 presidential election. Anchored on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Social Identity Theory, the research treated political memes as multimodal texts in which linguistic, visual, and religious semiotic resources interact to construct ideological meanings and exercise symbolic power. The analysis of the selected meme shows how “glory” traditionally associated with Christian notions of divine favour and destiny is recontextualized to frame electoral choice as a moral and spiritual risk. The meme illustrated how religious discourse is appropriated to legitimize political claims, regulate voter behaviour, and naturalize ideological authority within Nigeria’s highly religious sociopolitical space. The study revealed that Nigerian political memes function as powerful multimodal instruments that fuse religion and politics, transforming political participation into a site of moral accountability and ideological control. This paper contributes to sociolinguistics and discourse studies by demonstrating how digital political memes function as powerful tools of persuasion in Nigerian political discourse.

**Keywords:** Metaphor, semiotics, political memes, presidential election, multimodal discourse analysis

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### **1. Introduction**

The complex and multifaceted relationship between language and politics has been the subject of extensive research, with researchers drawing insights from linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and political science to explore the ways in which language shapes and is shaped by political contexts. Bollinger (1980) is of the view that there is a link

between language and politics in the sense that language is a powerful weapon for communicating information and politicians relies on language to influence voters' decision to win election. The language of politics is often deliberately crafted to persuade, manipulate, and mobilize. Politicians, policymakers, and interest groups all seek to harness the power of language to advance their agendas.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the fields of multimodal discourse analysis by extending the application to Nigerian political memes. By integrating conceptual metaphor theory, and social identity theory, the research deepens understanding of how metaphors function across multiple semiotic modes in digital political texts. Empirically, the study provides context-specific evidence on Nigerian political memes; it documents how metaphoric representations of "*glory*" are used to frame political actors, and ideologies, thereby enriching scholarship on African digital political discourse. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the usefulness of multimodal discourse analysis for examining internet-based political texts. It offers an analytical model that future researchers can adapt for studying memes, and other multimodal artifacts in political communication. The findings will enhance understanding of how religion, culture, and popular narratives are mobilized metaphorically in Nigerian political communication. This is particularly relevant in a society where religious and cultural symbolism plays a central role in political meaning-making. Practically, the study will benefit: Scholars and students of linguistics, media studies, and political communication, Political communicators and campaign strategists, by highlighting how metaphors influence audience perception and subtly shape political attitudes and ideologies.

Kreiss (2012) noted that the expansion of digital media significantly reshaped political communication, positioning social media platforms as central spaces for political engagement, persuasion, and ideological contestation. In Nigeria, political discourse has increasingly expanded to online spaces, where political memes circulate widely, especially during election periods. These memes according to Shifman (2014) are not merely humorous or satirical artefacts; rather, they are complex multimodal texts that condense political arguments through the strategic combination of language, images, typography, and culturally salient symbols. As such, political memes function as powerful tools for shaping public opinion and negotiating political meanings within digitally mediated environments.

Calfano (2021) revealed that political communication in Nigeria is deeply embedded within a religious sociocultural context. Religion particularly Christianity plays a

significant role in shaping public morality, social identity, and political perception. Elhady (2018) explained further that religious language and symbolism frequently permeate political discourse, with concepts such as destiny, blessing, curse, and glory functioning as evaluative metaphors that moralize political actions. These metaphors blur the boundary between civic responsibility and spiritual obligation, thereby amplifying the persuasive force of political messages framed within religious discourse.

Salahu (2023) noted that the 2023 Nigerian presidential election witnessed an intensified circulation of religiously inflected political memes, many of which framed electoral participation as a moral and spiritual choice. Religious deployment in a political meme therefore represents a process of metaphorical repositioning, whereby a sacred religious concept is repurposed to convey a political warning and regulate voter behaviour.

## **2. Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this study is to examine how metaphoric language is constructed and deployed in Nigerian political memes to produce meaning, negotiate social identity, and advance ideological positions, using the meme theme “*glory*” as a focal case.

The objectives are to:

1. Analyze how verbal and visual modes (language, images, symbols, layout, and colour) interact to construct metaphorical meanings in meme.
2. Examine the ideological meanings and power relations embedded in the metaphoric representations of “*glory*” in Nigerian political discourse.
3. Explore the role of socio-cultural and religious references in shaping the metaphorical understanding of “*glory*” in Nigerian political memes.

## **3. Statement of the Problem**

In recent years, political communication in Nigeria has increasingly shifted to digital spaces, where memes have become powerful tools for political commentary, persuasion, and ideological contestation. These memes often rely heavily on metaphoric language, combining text, images, symbols, and humour to convey complex political meanings in compressed and highly circulated forms. research often emphasizes humour or political satire without sufficiently interrogating the metaphorical structures and meaning-making processes through which ideology and power are communicated. Moreover, studies of metaphor in political discourse tend to adopt purely linguistic approaches, neglecting the crucial role of visual and other semiotic resources in metaphor construction. This limitation is particularly significant in the Nigerian context, where

political memes frequently draw on religious imagery, cultural symbols, popular culture, and shared socio-historical knowledge to produce meaning. As a result, there is a significant gap in understanding on how metaphoric language operates in multimodal to shape political identities, reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies, and frame political actors and events. There is a need for a systematic multimodal discourse analysis that examines how metaphoric language is constructed and interpreted in Nigerian political memes. Addressing this gap will contribute to a deeper understanding of digital political communication and the semiotic strategies through which meaning is negotiated in contemporary Nigerian politics.

## **2 Literature Review**

The concept of memes originated from Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). He described memes as cultural units that spread from person to person through imitation, similar to how genes spread biologically through reproduction. Milner (2016) further explained that memes are multimodal texts that are remixed and recirculated by many different participants, used to comment on public life and negotiate cultural political meanings.

Memes are inherently multimodal texts, meaning they combine visual and verbal elements to construct meaning interactively. Within digital communication studies, memes have been conceptualized as multimodal metaphors where the visual and textual elements collaboratively enact source-to-target mappings typical of metaphorical mapping processes. Scott (2021) analytical account demonstrated that memes can function as multimodal metaphors, where labeled visual images prompt viewers to draw pragmatic inference in ways akin to conceptual metaphor interpretation. This conceptualization is critical for understanding political memes because metaphor does not merely adorn political communication; it structures how audiences make sense of political actors, events, and power relations.

### **2.1. Memes as Political Protest and Commentary**

Unuabonah and Oyebode (2021) conducted a multimodal critical discourse analysis of Nigerian COVID-419 political memes, revealing that meme producers deploy a blend of visual and textual cues to protest government mismanagement, corruption, and socio-economic hardship, making use of metaphoric imagery and satirical juxtapositions to reinforce ideological stances.

Similarly, Adebomi (2024) multimodal analysis of pre-2023 election internet memes showed that memes frame political crises and candidates through semiotic devices such as labels, salience, and metaphorical visuals, with particular images used to represent broader socio-political disillusionment and aspirations for alternative leadership. These studies underscore the meaning-making potential of memes, positioning them as socio-political artefacts that do not simply entertain but actively mediate public sentiment and political agency.

## **2.2. Memes as Humour, Irony, and Semiotics**

Humour and irony are inseparable from political memes. Fubara (2020) discourse analysis demonstrated how sarcasm, pun, and witticism hallmarks of figurative language operate in Nigerian online memes to express political critique, often amplifying metaphorical resonance by co-opting everyday cultural knowledge and political context. Also Adegaju (2022) semiotic study on humour and politics also foregrounded how incongruity (a core mechanism of humour) functions semantically in memes to signify political disaffection and critique through metaphorical play.

These works highlight that figurative language (such as metaphor, irony, and humour) is not decorative but central to the semiotic strategy through which meaning is constructed and political cognition activated among meme audiences.

## **3. Metaphor in Nigerian Political Discourse**

Akintayo and Olatokunbo (2024) analyzed metaphors in national political discourse and found that themes of war and journey pervade political rhetoric, illustrating how metaphors structure reality, action, and political morality in the public imagination. This cognitive linguistic perspective complements multimodal work by showing how metaphor plays a strategic persuasive role in politics overall mapping abstract political struggles onto more concrete, culturally familiar domains.

Makinde's (2024) study of multimodal metaphor in Nigerian political cartoons highlighted how metaphorical visuals can embody socio-cultural critiques of governance, corruption, and national identity, reinforcing the argument that images serve as powerful metaphoric agents in political communication.

## **3. Methodology**

This study adopted qualitative research design. This approach was suitable for this research because it allowed for an in-depth, flexible and context-sensitive analysis of the selected meme. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the meme under study.

The meme was sourced from Facebook, a social media platform through hashtag link #nigeriadecides2023#. The theoretical framework adopted for the study was conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in (1980) and social identity theory introduced by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in (1979). Conceptual metaphor theory states that metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament but a cognitive mechanism through which humans conceptualize abstract experiences in terms of more concrete domains. The theory challenged the traditional view that metaphor is merely a decorative linguistic device used in poetry or rhetoric. Conceptual metaphor theory argues that metaphor is fundamental to human thought and cognition. CMT was useful to this study because it allowed the researcher to move beyond surface humour to uncover deep ideological structures embedded in memes. Social Identity is a framework that examines how people categorize themselves into two opposing groups, due to ideological, beliefs and value differences, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination.

SIT was useful for this study as it helped to understand how individuals or groups show their loyalty to their candidate or party by producing and circulating political memes that either promote or favour their candidate or discriminate their opponents during the Nigeria's 2023 presidential election.

To ensure a comprehensive and systematic examination of the study, multimodal discourse analysis was adopted for the analysis. Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) introduced by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen in (2001) recognizes that communication in contemporary contexts, especially in digital media often involved a combination of modes. MDA thus investigates how these modes work together to produce deeper meanings.

#### **4. Data Presentation**

This section presents a detailed analysis and discussions of the selected meme during the Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. This meme was examined through multimodal discourse analysis, sub-divided into content, discourse 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. The analyses are guided by conceptual metaphor theory and social identity theory.

#### 4.1 Discussion of Analysis



Meme	Content
	<b>Any person that vote for this man as a president of Nigeria in 2023 will be giving away their glory.</b>

#### Content Analysis

Ahmed Bola Tinubu now the current President of Nigeria was then the presidential candidate of the All Progress Congress (APC) during the Nigeria’s 2023 presidential election. The statement in the meme above was made by the popular preacher Evangelist Funmilayo Adebayo popularly known as mummy G.O. A Nigerian pastor known for her outspoken and often controversial sermons, particularly those focused on themes of sin, judgment, and the end times.

The Image in the meme above showed president Tinubu dressed in a loose, light-white gown and brown cap, appearing frail and aged with mouth opened like someone lost within his environment, which contrasts sharply with his public persona as a powerful politician. The inserted image of mummy G.O a religious figure wearing colourful, traditional attire, speaking into a microphone ‘Any person that vote for this man as a president of Nigeria in 2023 will be giving away their glory’ acts as a counterbalance

The visual framing that pictures the stark contrast between the two images (a frail looking Tinubu versus a vibrant, assertive mummy G.O) evokes emotions and reactions, creating a more profound impact than language alone could convey.

### Discourse Analysis

*“Any person that vote for this man as a president of Nigeria in 2023 will be giving away their glory”* The phrase “giving away their glory”, is a metaphorical statement. This does not mean physically handing over something tangible. Instead, it suggests that by voting for the candidate (Bola Ahmed Tinubu), voters would be surrendering the nation’s progress, success, development, or wellbeing their "glory". This metaphor draws on religious and moral rhetoric, implying a spiritual or existential consequence for a political choice, thereby intensifying the emotional impact of the message.

The idea that one’s entire glory would be lost from voting for a political candidate is metaphoric exaggeration meant to provoke fear or guilt. Using a figure associated with religious or spiritual speech (as implied by mummy G.O in traditional attire with a microphone), the meme uses ethos trust in religious figures to validate the claim. These figurative languages are central to the meme’s persuasive power, reinforcing its underlying political and moral warning. The phrase ‘giving away their glory’ is a form of intertextuality, where meaning is borrowed from religious or cultural texts. Framing Tinubu in a negative light, the meme serves to position those in opposition to him as empowered and enlightened, while supporters are seen as misguided. The meme positions Tinubu as a potential drain on Nigeria’s collective progress suggesting that his leadership would lead to the nation’s decline. This meme implies that supporting Tinubu would result in a kind of negative consequences for the country or citizens. ‘This man’ metaphorically represents more than Tinubu, it is a set of ideas such as incompetence, old age, danger etc.

The emotive language is designed to resonate with voters’ feelings of self-preservation and identity. Discourse around ‘glory’ connects to a national identity or collective pride among Nigerians. The text implies that voting for Tinubu compromises one’s allegiance to the nation, thus framing the act of voting as a crucial civic duty imbued with a moral dimension. It appeals to a collective identity, implicitly urging the audience to reject the candidate as a matter of shared values and survival. By warning against voting for Tinubu, the meme casts those who would support him as potentially alienating themselves from what might be considered the ‘right’ group, the informed and patriotic voters. The implication is that not voting for Tinubu is a step towards reclaiming personal and collective national glory.

*“Any person that vote for this man as a president of Nigeria in 2023 will be giving away their glory”* employs name-calling through imagery, to metaphorically portray

Tinubu as weak which questions his physical and cognitive fitness to govern. This visual discrediting is a form of personal attack aimed at undermining the candidate's public image by reducing him to a figure of ridicule and pity.

Equating a vote for Tinubu with the forfeiture of one's "glory," the meme engages in demonization, depicting the candidate as a spiritually corrupt or harmful figure. Rather than engaging with policies or qualifications, the discourse frames Tinubu as a threat to the voter's destiny or divine purpose. This reduces the candidate to a symbolic antagonist, fuelling political polarization through moral panic.

### **Semiotic Analysis**

Frailty, old age, physical weakness, lack of vigor, implies incapacity or unfitness for leadership. The phrase "giving away their glory" carries religious and metaphysical connotation, implying spiritual consequence or destiny theft. Mummy G.O represents a prophetic or spiritual authority; her inclusion lends moral or divine weight to the warning in the text.

The text is bold, black, and authoritative, enhancing its seriousness and conveys urgency, warning, and gravity. In Nigerian Pentecostal and prophetic contexts, "glory" refers to one's divine purpose or spiritual essence. The warning uses culturally familiar spiritual language to intensify the meme's emotional and ideological impact which calls for a reconsideration of voting for the political figure.

### **Implications**

The statement "*Any person that vote for this man as a president of Nigeria in 2023 will be giving away their glory*" invokes existential fear, implying not just a poor political outcome but personal spiritual loss. This creates a threat perception in voters, especially those with strong religious convictions, who may internalize the act of voting for the candidate as an act of self-harm or divine betrayal.

The meme activates confirmation bias in individuals already skeptical of the candidate's competence or health by visually reinforcing frailty. It also triggers authority bias, as it quotes a perceived religious figure, lending credibility to the warning and making voters more psychologically receptive to the message. Voters considering Tinubu may feel shamed or morally guilty, particularly if they identify with communities that value religious counsel.

The implication that voting a certain way is sinful or spiritually dangerous may generate cognitive dissonance, pushing voters to either reject the candidate or rationalize

their choice defensively. The statement threatens personal and communal religious identity. It suggests that aligning with the candidate means aligning against *God's* will, which can produce psychological discomfort in highly religious groups. More so portraying Tinubu as spiritually dangerous, the meme may affect voter turnout among his potential supporters. Supporters who are uncertain or undecided may avoid voting altogether due to fear of spiritual consequence, effectively lowering support.

By casting the act of voting for Tinubu as a betrayal of one's personal or collective "glory," it implicitly divides the audience into in-groups and out-groups: those who are spiritually enlightened and protective of their identity versus those who would give away their glory by aligning with the wrong candidate. This may foster in-group/out-group ideological polarization, where one side sees itself as spiritually enlightened and the other as misguided or doomed. A divided population will definitely find it difficult to unite behind shared national goals such as economic reforms, electoral integrity, or peace building.

The meme contributes to the delegitimization of the candidate, not through policy critique, but via moral and spiritual indictment. It shifts discourse away from issues (economy, security, governance) to personal and supernatural grounds, undermining rational policy-based debate. It blurs the boundary between religion and politics, reinforcing a trend where electoral decisions are shaped not just by political platforms, but by prophecies and spiritual endorsements. This reinforces a culture of religious gate keeping in politics, where clerics or spiritual authorities serve as political validators or disqualifiers.

#### **4.2 Discussion of Findings**

The analysis of the meme above 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 conceptual metaphor theory and social identity theory, the analysis revealed that memes are used to discredit opponents and highlight their perceived flaws in order to discourage electorate from voting for the candidate. A prominent trend observed in the analyzed meme is the strategic use of ridicule, satire, and symbolic framing to discredit political opponents in contemporary digital political communication; meme were strategic instruments for political persuasion, satire, and delegitimization. The assertion that memes are used to discredit opponents and highlight their perceived flaws to discourage electorates

from voting for certain candidates is strongly supported by the analysis done. Memes often function as visual and textual frames that focus audience attention on specific traits or behaviours of political actors' frequently negative ones. Memes, with their concise and often exaggerated format, tend to simplify complex political realities by highlighting perceived weaknesses such as corruption, physical frailty, incompetence, or hypocrisy in metaphoric ways. In doing so, these memes are used to construct cognitive shortcuts through which voters form impressions of candidates.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the sample meme revealed that memes as visual-verbal artifacts are not merely passive reflections of political sentiment but active discursive tools with significant rhetorical power. They operated across multiple communicative layers: as visual satire, as symbolic representations of political ideologies, and as emotionally charged texts capable of influencing public opinion, especially among younger demographics who are digitally active. The findings demonstrated that memes can capitalize on existing sociopolitical tensions, ethnic or generational sentiments, and even religious undertones to frame electoral issues in emotionally resonant ways.

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