



Language, Violence, and the Media: Newspaper Framing of Boko Haram

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Abstract

Violence is almost always accompanied by language. When violence occurs it appears to rely on a discursive accompaniment that assigns meaning to it. This paper seeks out the connections between language and violence by examining how the media characterizes violent actions and in so doing influence perceptions and reactions to the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. Language is seen here as an essential instrument by which societal awareness and morale can be constructed against acts of violence. As purveyors of words, the media in particular, has a social responsibility to contribute to national security through what it disseminates to the general public. The concept of violence, the metaphorical language that describes it as well as the potential embedded in language to bring about peace is the main focus here.

Keywords: *Language, Violence, Media, Framing, Metaphor*

Introduction

The following discussion aims to answer important two questions: What role do the print media play in carrying the message of Boko Haram? And could the media through its use of language be part of efforts to bring about peace and security? These are pertinent concerns because the print media is a major source of information

for the general public. It is central in constructing the concept of terrorism as its linguistic content, in particular, the metaphors employed by it structures the way people define the phenomenon. The media is therefore an important channel for framing and consequently, for influencing mass public opinion. Significantly, it provides the means of

not only attracting attention to the violent activities of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram, but in many ways, it is also vital to their very survival.

To a large degree, two closely linked theories, agenda setting and framing, as adopted by media studies, provide useful analytical tools for interrogating the impact print media on public perceptions and views on terrorist violence. To elaborate, agenda setting theory, first named by Cohen (1963) cited in McLeod, Becker and Byrnes (1974) refers to the power of the media to draw attention to certain issues by making them prominent through placement on the front pages of newspapers. It provides a means of understanding how the print media cover issues, the prominence they allocate to them and the importance (salience) audiences subsequently attach to the same. This theory is based on the assumption that “readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972:176). Explaining this media effect in an often cited statement on the agenda-setting effect of the media, Cohen (1963:13) wrote:

The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. And it follows from this that the world looks different to different people, depending not only on their personal interests, but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read.

Of specific concern here, is the theory of framing which has its roots in sociology and psychology. In Sociology, it is assumed that individuals cannot understand the world fully instead, they constantly struggle to interpret their life experiences and to make sense of the world around them. Individuals therefore process new information by applying an interpretive schema or what Goffman (1974) calls “primary frameworks” to classify information and to interpret it meaningfully. On the other hand, the psychological origins of framing is based on the experimental work done by Kahneman and Tversky (1984), cited by Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007:11), in which they “examined how different presentations of essentially identical decision-making scenarios influence people’s choices and their evaluation of the various options presented to them”. Frames are thus a means of

structuring, organizing and linking experiences in order to make meaning out of them.

Applied to the media, framing is the manner in which issues are presented by journalists to their audience. They build contexts to help provide a particular interpretation of an issue by highlighting and characterizing particular aspects of an issue while ignoring others. Hence, Gamson (1992) likens media frames to photo frames because just like picture frames, the media place borders around happenings in society, distinguishing and highlighting certain events from others. Stressing the same, Entman (1993:52) states, to "frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text in such a way so as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation". That being so, the theory of media framing holds that the way the public understands an issue it reads about and the importance it attaches to the news item depends largely on how it is represented in the newspapers.

This means that in examining public reactions to news items, we need to necessarily take into account the linguistic frames provided by the print media. Here, the focus is on the use of metaphors in manifest texts that contextualize the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. Metaphors are useful in building and adapting knowledge and beliefs especially about difficult subjects. As Kennedy (2000: 209) points out, the "metaphor is an essential part of the way we deal with novel and current events" because they have the ability to provoke the mind into making conceptual and cognitive associations between abstract, unfamiliar events or things (the tenor) and concrete, familiar ones (the vehicle). Thus the violence of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram can be mitigated if the media employs appropriate metaphors in their reporting to counter their activities (Hulsse and Spencer, 2008).

On Metaphors and Violence

For scholars in the field of cognitive linguistics, the human conceptual system is fundamentally a metaphorical one. While metaphors are often seen as mere rhetorical devices that are used to illustrate factual statements, scholars such as Chilton and Lakoff (1999) and Charteris-Black (2004) stress their importance for the human cognitive (conscious intellectual thinking, reasoning, remembering) system. According to them, the metaphorical use of language serves to link perception with understanding, memory, and reasoning. In other words, they posit that the way we think, what we experience and do is very much a matter of metaphor.

The importance of metaphors therefore lies in their ability to structure the way people think because they enable humans to understand one conceptual domain of experience in terms of another by projecting knowledge about a familiar domain onto the second more abstract one. Consequently, Charteris-Black defines the metaphor as a linguistic representation that results from a 'shift in the use of a word or phrase from the context in which it is expected to occur to another context where it is not expected occur, thereby causing semantic tension' (2004:9, 21). But Bates (2004) claims that metaphors do not simply substitute one term for another, but in fact create a strong perceptual link between two things. For example, metaphorical expressions such as 'the story smells fishy', 'that is food for thought', 'that idea has been fermenting for weeks' and so on do not in fact refer to food but are used to describe the more abstract complex aspect of the ideas they contain. In a similar manner, eminent scholars such as Schmid (1989) maintain that metaphors play a crucial role in the discursive construction of terrorism. In understanding the use of the metaphor not only as figurative expression but rather in the conceptual sense mentioned above, the idea established is that metaphors can map a source domain, such as 'war', onto a target domain, such as 'terrorism' and thereby make the target domain appear in a new light (Lakoff 1993:208). In this way, the conceptual metaphor allows us to apply what we know about one area of our experience 'source domain' to another area 'the target domain' (Dulak 2005:3). For example, the choice of the word 'victims' to describe those impacted by acts of terrorism rather than alternatives such as 'targets' or even 'survivors' constructs a certain perception of the power of the insurgents in the minds of the reading public.

Although much research has been carried out into how the print media and violence interact with each other, how the same media can act to contain terrorist violence is a more recent line of inquiry. In the light of increasing terrorist incidents around the world, it has become necessary to examine how the media departs itself with regards to the heinous acts committed by insurgents such as the Boko Haram, and indeed, to question whether or not the print media could act to curb or counter terrorist activities by employing the strongest tool at its disposal, that is, language. In the following, after a brief background on the emergence of Boko Haram, how newspapers disseminate information on the activities of the group is examined by scrutinizing the metaphoric structure of the language used frame the insurgency in a bid to highlight the potential the print media has to help turn the tide against a group that has wreaked so much havoc in Nigeria.

The Violence of Boko Haram

Simply defined, violence is behavior that can be understood as the threat or use of force both material as well as psychological that results in deprivation, injury, or

even death. Some definitions focus on the physical acts of violence while others stress the centrality of innocent or civilian targets especially when examining the effects of terrorist violence. In such instances, attention is usually focused on the political nature or the sub-state status of the terrorist actors. Whatever the case, one thing is certain and it is that terrorism is very much associated with acts of violence and the spread of fear. Thus, in order to highlight the necessity of combating it on all fronts, it is important to dwell in some detail on the emergence of Boko Haram and on the impact the violence perpetrated by it has had on Nigerian society. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), globally in 2013, violence resulted in the deaths of almost 1.28 million people which is an increase from the 1.13 million recorded in 1990. By 2018, the number of victims from various forms of violence including self-harm (suicide), interpersonal violence, and collective violence (war) rose to about 1.6 million. On closer examination, this significant increase appears to be mainly due to conflicts between state authorities and sub-state actors in the form of insurgents. In recent times, the violence perpetrated by terrorists has become more prevalent in certain parts of the world where insurgent groups have risen up to confront established government authorities. Such confrontations have resulted in the large scale displacement of people, a heightening sense of insecurity, as well as a high death rate which have adversely affected both social functioning as well as the development of society. Over the past three decades, these effects have become increasingly evident in Nigeria. The violence committed by various groups such as MASSOB, MEND, and Boko Haram has led the Australian based Institute for Economics and Peace (2015-2018) to rank Nigeria as the third most terrorized country after Iraq and Afghanistan. In its global terrorism index report, Boko Haram is documented as the most deadly terrorist group that was directly responsible for the deaths of 6,644 people in 2014. Similarly, in 2016, the influential Washington-based *Foreign Policy* magazine ranked the crisis caused by Boko Haram as number five out of ten most critical conflicts in the world. According to it, the sect wreaked havoc in the three of the countries that make up the Lake Chad Basin Cameroon, Niger and the epicenter of the crisis, Nigeria (*Foreign Policy*, 2016). By 2017, *Premium Times, Nigeria* revealed that the figure had risen to one hundred thousand deaths. Since 2016, it has taken the combined efforts of the Nigerian military, the Civilian Task Force as well as international coalitions to wrest some control over the situation. The land area of Boko Haram operations has shrank in size in recent times but the sect is still considered more deadly than the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) because of the methods it employs in carrying out its terrorist activities. The

International Criminal Court (ICC) on its part describes Boko Haram activities as crimes against humanity, especially in the light of its attacks against female school children such as the February 19, 2018 incident in which 133 girls were abducted from Government Girls' Science College in Dapchi, Yobe State. 107 of the girls were later released but five died while one, Leah Sharibu, remains in captivity. This was the second of such incidents after its infamous attack on a boarding school in Chibok when it kidnapped 276 girls in 14 April 2014 (*Daily Trust* newspaper, 14/4/15).

Writing on the origins of Boko Haram, Cook (2011) and Guitta and Simcox (2014:6) agree that Boko Haram "was created in 2002 by the Islamic cleric Mohammed Yusuf, though forms of it had existed under a variety of names since the late 1990s." The term "Boko Haram" literally means "western education is forbidden" in the Hausa language that is spoken by the majority of the people in the northern part of the country. The sect condemns those elements of Western education and culture that it perceives to be anti-Islamic. It is particularly opposed to secularism and democracy as well as any institutions of state that perpetuate these ideas. Yusuf's central thesis was that Muslims owed obedience only to Allah. He therefore insisted on describing any form of executive, legislative or judicial function derived from the constitution and not from Islamic Sharia legal system as unbelief. This claim ultimately resulted in "protracted and often acrimonious debate with the Izala in the run-up to the 2009 violence" (Muhammad, 2014:16). The first attempt to crush the group happened in July 2009 when security forces destroyed its headquarters and the leader, Yusuf, was killed while in police custody. But thereafter, the group resurfaced with a vengeance, beginning with targeted killings of traditional ward and village heads, security officials, prominent politicians and Islamic scholars that were opposed to the sect.

Initially organized under the name "Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah wal Lidda' awati wal Jihad" which is Arabic for "People Committed to the Removal of Innovation and to Jihad", the emergence of the Boko Haram group as a sect can be traced to 2002 when it was first known as the Taliban in the border village of Kanama in Yobe State, Nigeria. In order to demonstrate its allegiance with the Taliban, Kanama was then renamed Kandahar after a city in Afghanistan. In the same year, the sect came into violent conflict with state security forces. Then in 2004, they clashed with security forces in Bama and Gwoza local government areas of Borno State. And by 2007 "they appeared in Kano around Panshekara, attacking police stations. Again, soldiers were deployed and some were killed while the rest fled" (Shettima 2015: 43). Over the years, as Boko Haram evolved, its principal aim became the

establishment of Islamic rule in all its ramifications even though its views went against the grain for most Muslims. In spite of repeated attempts by government security forces to suppress it, the group continued intense recruitment, and indoctrination of more members.

In wave after wave, Boko Haram has wreaked indiscriminate violence upon the Nigerian populace. By unleashing suicide bombers, destroying property, and instilling a general deep sense of insecurity, the group has inflicted incalculable devastation on whole communities. Right from the onset of the threat posed by this group has been palpable everywhere, in homes, churches, mosques, schools, markets and at places of work. A researcher provided this panoramic view of Boko Haram activities:

As the charred ruins of the June 16, 2011 Police Headquarters bombing and the August 26, 2011 bombing of the United Nations (UN House) in Nigeria, the bombing of St. Theresa's Catholic Church Madalla, Niger state and the emerging 'child' and female suicide bombers as well as multiple explosions in Adamawa, Borno, Kaduna and Yobe states claimed the lives of many.... one cardinal but salient message is reiterated by these ruins—no individual, edifice nor (sic) nation is free from terrorist attack. (Neiji, 2015).

Undoubtedly, the violence of Boko Haram has now become a disturbing part of the Nigerian landscape. According to Feyyaz (2015), even the two states of emergency that were declared by the government appeared to worsen the situation as more attacks, rapes, killings and abductions were carried out perhaps because members of the group dispersed into the rural areas where security presence was less evident. Indeed, there were instances when the Nigerian government seemed helpless in tackling the insurgency. However in 2017, the army finally laid siege to the Boko Haram stronghold in Sambisa forest and went on to rescue twenty one of the Chibok school girls. From time to time, more of the girls as well hundreds of other people forcefully conscripted into the ranks of the insurgents have been freed by the Nigerian army. From the continued attacks launched by the group against military bases as well as repeated raids on towns and villages, it seems that to all intents and purposes, the country is at war with Boko Haram.

It is therefore not surprising that this extended exposure to the threat and violence of Boko Haram has created an atmosphere of fear. The general unease in the country is exacerbated by the fact that in adopting guerilla-like tactics, Boko Haram appears able to elude the Nigerian army indefinitely. Certainly, the terror tactics deployed by the group which include vicious assaults on villages and towns, bombings of public places of worship and of commerce, abductions and rape have

succeeded in creating a feeling of insecurity that is unprecedented. Consequently, because of the resultant sense in the country of being under siege by an unyielding force, Boko Haram terrorist activities have to be seen not only as a threat to national security but also as an attack on the mental state of Nigerian society. What has become increasingly evident is that Boko Haram acts of terrorism appear to be psychological in design, that is, a deliberate strategy executed to induce perpetual fear in public. It is with this in mind that it has become necessary to examine the role of the print media in breeding that fear.

Media Framing of Terrorism

As a major source of information, the print media is in a position to frame what the general public sees, knows, and understands about the violence perpetrated by insurgent groups like the Boko Haram (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2008). Indeed, some scholars assert that terrorism relies on the media transmission of that threat to the general public. According to Schmid (1989), often the aim of terrorism is not so much the act of violence or the killing of a target, but rather, the dissemination of terror and uncertainty among a population through the newsworthiness of the violent act. Without what Thatcher (cited in Wilkinson, 2000:175) terms the 'oxygen of publicity' that is provided by the media, it is possible that the terrorism of a group such as Boko Haram would have no outlet, and therefore, it could be argued, no utility. In many ways, this view is justified because the print media is central to the public's understanding of what makes certain acts of violence terrorism. Print media framing operates to influence public views and perceptions. How incidents of terrorist violence are projected directly informs the public's perception of a phenomenon that is often difficult to grasp. Furthermore, according to Ganor (2005:231), a "symbiotic" relationship develops that mutually benefits both the terrorists as well as the media. He claims that terrorism provides the print media with highly emotional and gory news items of exploding bombs, daring raids, and mass abductions. The more violent the act of terrorism, the more it is reported in language that is often lurid and horrific but which helps the print media to sell its products. This relationship has led some researchers to adopt the view that acts of terrorism do in fact carry a strong communicational element. In some instances, the media could even be accused of acting like 'accomplices' (Schmid, 1989:540), or in the words of Hoffman (2006:183), even as their "best friend."

While the print media appears to serve the purposes of the insurgents by thus providing them with the means of attracting attention to their activities, it leaves

itself open to accusations of complicity in the perpetuation of terror by helping to spread fear to a far larger audience than the initial small group of immediate victims. Hoffman puts it succinctly:

The modern news media, as the principal conduit of information about such acts, thus play a vital part in the terrorists' calculus. Indeed, without the media's coverage the act's impact is arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate victims of the attack rather reaching the wider "target audience" at whom the terrorist's violence is actually aimed. Only by spreading the terror and outrage to a much larger audience can the terrorists gain the minimum potential leverage that they need to effect fundamental political change. (2006:174)

This is why Schmid (1989) and others are of the view that terrorist violence is rarely random but rather planned with specific outcomes in mind, the most critical one for the insurgents being the desire to impose a psychological siege on the public in an effort to push the government into yielding to their demands.

Metaphors in Newspaper

When the print media focuses attention on certain events and places them within a particular linguistic frame, it inevitably influences perceptions and interpretation of issues. Furthermore, how the media characterize the violence of terrorism and how these representations are adopted by their audience results in the transference of "salience" from news media agenda to the public (Kious and Wu, 2008). The implication here is that the way the Nigerian public reacts or responds to the terror of Boko Haram is largely dependent on the way it is depicted in the language of media report (Okoro and Odoemelam, 2013; Ita and Ita 2016). Of particular importance are the metaphors the print media chooses to employ, and sometimes, the very absence of them is significant in the framing of terrorism.

The inferential construction of meaning that is the metaphor is therefore an important linguistic device that influences the public's perception of terrorism but could also serve as potent tool for countering the violence of Boko Haram. Two popular newspapers in the United Kingdom, *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, provide useful examples of how this can be accomplished. For instance, where *The Sun* is concerned, terrorism is seen as the attempt to subvert established authority and in writing about it appears to have chosen the side it wants to support. We find that in its reporting of terrorism, *The Sun*, adopts four basic conceptual metaphors that constitute terrorism as a war against the whole British people, as a crime that is uncouth, as an uncivilized evil that is 'vile and monstrous', and finally as a disease that should be isolated and quarantined.

However, of these four metaphors that *The Sun* employs in its reporting, the metaphor of terrorism as war clearly supersedes and exerts the strongest influence on perception of the British public of terrorism. *The Sun* views terrorism as a declaration of war against the people and emphasizes this stance by the use of metaphors that describe the confrontation between sub-state actors and constituted government authority as 'battles' or 'sieges'. Terrorists are referred to as 'terror warlords' who have 'suicide units' which operate in a 'terror army' complete with 'lieutenants' and 'commanders', who are involved 'training', 'operations', and 'campaigns' from 'bases' within or outside the United Kingdom. These metaphorical frames ultimately guide the public's understanding and attitudes which result in widespread acceptance of government policies and decisions to combat acts of terrorism.

The violence of a terrorist group such as Boko Haram can be better understood in all its horrific guises if the media employs appropriate metaphors in reporting their activities (Hulsse and Spencer, 2008). But the point of view of some widely read Nigerian newspapers such as *The Nation*, *Daily Trust*, *The Guardian*, *This Day*, and *Punch* is not so clearly delineated. While the Nigerian army approach the fight against Boko Haram as a war, proclaiming it "must-win fight," the language of news reports in the print media does not evince such assurance. Instead, it demonstrates hesitancy in identifying or labeling terrorist activities of Boko Haram for what they are even while diligently reporting incidents of its violence. Rather than emphasize messages that could curb the violence, print media often chooses to dwell in an inflammatory manner on the impact of attacks by the group. The main focus appears to be on the physical acts of violence, the fear they engender, and on the gains made by Boko Haram rather than highlighting the effects of their activities on innocent civilian targets as illustrated by the following examples found in Nigerian newspapers:

Boko Haram's deadliest massacre: 2000 feared dead in Nigeria

Hundreds of bodies –too many to count –remain strewn in the bush in Nigeria from an Islamic extremist attack that Amnesty International describe as the *deadliest massacre* in the *history* of Boko Haram (*Guardian*, 9/1/2015).

In yet another newspaper, we find a lurid description of Boko Haram gaining the upper hand:

Maiduguri-No fewer than six persons were killed, Tuesday evening, as Boko Haram insurgents opened fire on the convoy of Governor Kashim Shettima of Borno State, who was on his way to a political rally at Gamboru-Ngala. The attack was said to

have occurred as some armed Boko Haram insurgents in three gun trucks vehicles mounted with anti-aircraft guns and motor cycles laid ambush on the convoy at about 6pm, and divided the governor's long convoy into two, raining bullets on vehicles at the back of the convoy. Scores of people, mainly women, were also said to have been abducted by the insurgents during the attack (Vanguard News 13/2/2019).

Initially, in the early days of Boko Haram, print media regularly referred to members of the group as "jihadists" as in following:

In the most audacious attack on November 18, IS-allied Boko Haram jihadists killed at least 43 soldiers when they overran a military base in Metele village near the border with Niger.... (Punch, 29/11/2018).

At other times the term "Islamists" are employed:

The Islamists have stepped up suicide bombings carried out by children in recent years. (The Nation, 4/10/2016)

Female Boko Haram members are fighters. While men in the Islamist group dominate the leadership and training roles, women may outnumber them in other roles.... (The Nation 4/10/2016)

Here, the word "Islamist" has become a metaphor for barbaric extremists. Used as a source domain that conjures up images and attributes based on the acts of terror, the word is fraught with negative connotations but which at the same time hints at the reporter's bias. However, the use of such terms also establishes a direct link between the activities of terrorists with Islam in spite of the fact majority of Muslims in Nigeria do not support their cause and in most cases appear to be the very targets of the insurgents. It is hardly surprising that the use of this pejorative label does not win the widespread support that is needed to combat Boko Haram because many Muslims feel beset upon. Interestingly and tellingly, the terrorist group does not refer to itself as "Islamists" but rather as Boko Haram a title that according to Momoh ((Vanguard, 30/3/2015) acts as metaphor in itself. As Momoh explained, Islam is not the political enemy it has been painted by the media. In support of his view, Momoh argued that Boko Haram could be seen by some as a revolutionary movement for justice by a group that feels alienated by the western