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## Pragmatic Analysis of Invective Language on Social Media

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### **Abstract:**

*The use of language on the new media is not different from the normal life usage except for the identity of the user that may not be known on the social media. As people use invective language in normal life so also on the social media. This has not really attract scholar's attention in this part of the world. This is the thrust of this work. We examined the use of invective language on social media using Facebook as our case study. Politeness was adopted as the theoretical framework for this analysis. Our data was gathered from the comments of people on Facebook. We discovered two politeness strategies in the use of invective language on facebook, Face Threaten Act and Off-Record. We realized that people used invective language to express their feelings and emotions. We however recommend that people should be conscious of other's face in their communication in order to have a peaceful society.*

**Keywords:** pragmatics, invective, social media, language

### **1. Introduction**

Language is a unique characteristic of human being. It is a means of communication. The use of language can either create friendliness or enmity. The use of invective language brings about enmity. It does not create a friendly environment. Although it is used to express emotions and feelings about happenings, it can however, be seen as an abuse of language. This can be treat under the sub theory of pragmatics known as politeness. Politeness deals with the public self-image of a person. To respect the public self-image of an individual is to be polite while to do otherwise is to be impolite. For man to be in harmony in any society, it is expected to respect individual's public self-image. The use of invective language betray this. It is therefore not encouraged in any society.

Pragmatics is the study of language use in context. It takes the study of language beyond the semantic level. This work study the use of invective language on social media contextually, adopting politeness as a theoretical framework.

Since the growth of social media, the use of language on it has taken several form. Social media has been an avenue for discourse of several issues. It has been an avenue for political discourse, sport, entertainment, economic, religion and so on. It has brought about heat and dynamic debates. Just as it is common in any human society to manipulate language to suit ones opinion to the detriment of others, it is also common in the use of language on social media. Arguments and counter arguments mostly results in the use on unfriendly language to attack others public self-image. The use on invective language is common when the issue off loyalty and personal opinion is involved. For example, when the issue of ethnicity is on the table for discussion, the use of invective may be experienced. When an argument is raised, the opponent with inferior argument is likely to result to the use of impolite language. This mostly result in crisis.

The growth of social media has brought about so many avenue for discussion. Such avenue includes, Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, Snapchat and so on. These have allowed people across culture to meet and exchange ideas even without physical contact. In this work, we shall exploit the use of invective language on Facebook. This is because we believed facebook has a wider coverage and it allows comment and responses. We shall be extracting invective expressions from the responses of people on the Facebook. For adequate data, we have selected some important post and we shall be examining the responses on their posts.

Facebook is a social networking service launched in February 2004, owned and operated by Facebook, Inc. It was founded by Mark Zuckerberg with his college roommates and fellow Harvard University students Eduardo Saverin, Azel, Andrew McCollum, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. The website's membership was initially limited by the founders to Harvard students, but was expanded to other colleges in the Boston area, the Ivy League, and gradually most universities in Canada and the United States, corporations, and by September 2006, to everyone of age 13 and older with a valid email address (Ogedengbe, et al, 2012).

Facebook profiles include two types of messaging services. A private system, which is very similar to a webmail service, and a public system called 'The Wall,' where 'friends' leave comments for the owner of the profile that can be viewed by other users. Usually, 'The Wall' contains short messages that reflect sentiments, common activities between 'friends,' or call attention to external websites or events. To keep users updated about their social circles, Facebook has two features: 'News Feed', which appears on the homepage of each user, and 'Mini-Feed', which appears in each individual's profile. 'News Feed' updates a personalized list of news stories throughout the day generated by the activity of 'friends'. Thus, each time users log in, they get the latest headlines in their social networks. 'Mini-Feed' is similar, except that it centers around one individual. Each person's 'Mini-Feed' shows what has changed recently in their profile and what content or modules ('applications') they have added. Because individuals can delete from their own 'Mini-Feed' stories they do not like, users retain control of who gets to read or see what about them. Among the most popular modules users can incorporate to their profiles is 'Facebook Groups,' which allows users to create and join groups based around common interests and activities. The 'Groups' application displays each individual's groups as well as groups their 'friends' have joined recently. Thus, an important share of the civic and political impact of Facebook should occur within groups developed by users and organizations. Facebook is growing everyday with different features that make it more user friendly.

Our objectives are; to identify invective language used on Facebook, to know the implication of these languages, and to contextually analyze invective languages on Facebook. At the end of this work we shall be answering such questions as; are there invective languages of Facebook? What are the effects of invective languages on the participants? What are the contextual meaning of these languages? Why do people use invective languages on Facebook?

## 2. Review of Relevant Literature

In this unit, we reviewed literatures that are relevant to the present work. Their opinion and definitions will form part of our bases for analysis.

According to Leontieva, (2012:201), a comprehensive analysis of conflict dialogues allows pointing out a whole gamut of verbal means: at morphological, lexical, phraseological and syntactic levels. The idea was developed by Filippova (2013) who characterizes the language of a conflict dialogue by the use of certain stereotyped logical, syntactic and stylistic structures.

Culpeper, Bousfield & Wichmann (2002) focus on impoliteness as the use of communicative strategies designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony. Using television documentary recordings of disputes between traffic wardens and car owners as source of their data, they revisit the impoliteness framework mapped out in Culpeper [J. Prag. 25 (1996) 349]. Having justified why an impoliteness framework is needed, they explore the notion of impoliteness and consider whether the impoliteness strategies identified in Culpeper can be found in another discourse type. They argue that for impoliteness to be fully appreciated we need to move beyond the single strategy (lexically and grammatically defined) and examine both how impoliteness pans out in extended discourse and the role of prosody in conveying impoliteness. The paper has important implications for politeness theory and discourse studies in general, and the role of prosody in discourse in particular.

Culpeper (1996) applies impoliteness framework to the discourse of army officers in a documentary on female recruits. Culpeper (1996) states that impoliteness characterizes the army life. Mills on his own (in press, cf Mullany, 2002: 5) argues that Holmes' (1995) definition of "polite people", that is female speakers' cannot be generated. He argues that not all female speakers could be polite. Hence, we need to often relate our concept of polite and impoliteness to specific context or a specific speech community.

Gnezdechko, Leontieva & Leontieva (2015) provide a comprehensive review of English language identity representation that is evident from pragmatic and psycholinguistic distinctive traits revealed through its discursive image within conflict interaction. The research highlights pragmatic types of conflict interaction and defines specific speech repertory of strategies and tactics employed by the characters depicted in contemporary fictional texts. Specified in the paper is the entity of invective, and its quantitative parameters were defined. Functional peculiarities of verbal and non-verbal means of communication were studied in detail. The specificity of their frequency in the pragmatic types of the English conflict interaction were also considered. The work emphasized the psycholinguistic nature of such interactive communication phenomena as communicative conflict, strategies and tactics. The typology of language identities has been elaborated on the basis of communicative strategies analysis. As a result of the research, three-level communicative competence classification were developed based on the ground of the English language identity's ability of constructing cooperative interactive communication.

Another relevant study to the present work is Aremu (2015). Aremu (2015) explores fourteen randomly selected invective songs of Western Nigerian Politicians (WNPs), utilizing the modified version of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992a) community of practice (CofP) as the pragmatic tool for data analysis. The findings revealed that, invective songs of WNPs were characterized by impolite/belligerent utterances, indirect speech acts, politic confrontational behavior, lexical borrowing, code-mixing, direct speech acts, use of paralanguage, imagery, and symbolism. The paper concluded that, CofP clearly explicates the signification in invective songs of WNPs and shows the participants' intention in the discourse.

The above reviewed works are excellent and insightful to the present work. They are not only relevant but also useful to this study and pragmatics study in general. However, they differ from this work because none of them deploy pragmatic analysis using politeness concept to the analysis of invective language on social medial. This is the thrust of this work. Hence, it is significant to our society and the study of pragmatics in general.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Subsequently, we shall examine the chosen theory for this work. We have adopted politeness as the theoretical framework for this work. Politeness has attracted the interest of scholars over the years. Brown and Levinson in 1978 originally develop and published

the theory of politeness. It consists of two parts: a fundamental theory concerning the nature of politeness and how it functions in interaction, and a list of politeness strategies following Kitamura (2000:61) in the theoretical part of their work. Brown and Levinson introduce the notion of 'face' in order to illustrate politeness in the broad sense. That is to say, all commentators have an interest in maintaining two types of 'face' during interaction: 'positive face' and 'negative face'. Brown and Levinson define 'positive face' as the positive and consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for approval. On the other hand, 'negative face' is 'the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction'. Yule (1996) also states that in the study of linguistic politeness, the most relevant concept is 'face.' He further explains that, your face, in pragmatics, is your public self-image. This is the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. The present work fall under the 'negative face'.

According Babatunde and Adedimeji (2008), there are some politeness strategies. politeness strategies, according to them are the methods employed by speakers to show awareness of other people's faces. The strategies are; Face Saving Act (FSA), Deference, Off-Record Strategies, and Face Threatening Acts (FTA). The strategies are briefly explained as follows.

### 3.1. Face Saving Act (FSA)

Following Babatunde and Adedimeji (2008) FSAs are utterances and acts which avoid a potential threat to the other person's face. Using this strategy, the speaker recognizes the public self-image of the addressee. The addresser respect the face of the addressee and do not wish to trample on it. Deference

This refers to the respect shown to other people by virtue of their higher status, greater age, upper influence. This is reflected in some languages naturally such as the use of honorific pronoun in Yoruba language.

### 3.2. Off-record Strategies

Off-record utterances are those that are not directly addressed to the other (Yule, 1996b: 132). However, Brown & Levinson (1978) assert that you do so in a way that says that you cannot be held accountable. Maginnis (2011) explains that ways of doing this are by hinting or sarcastic joking. That is one may put a 'tone' in the comment, but if confronted the comment is defensible. According to Babatunde and Adedimeji (2008), this notion of tone is directly from Searle's (1965) and Austin's (1962) work on word meaning. Since face is public, one may use this strategy to avoid a direct confrontation which allows for a future detract of the statement if necessary.

### 3.3. Face Threatening Acts (FTA)

Brown and Levinson (1978) states that FTA's are illocutionary acts liable to damage or threaten another person's face. Babatunde and Adedimeji (2008) explain that performing an FTA is a matter of choice, and people often opt for it in a crisis situation. The concomitant effect of this is deepening the crisis. This is usually adopted when there is quarrel between two parties or when one is dissatisfied with others action or inaction. Babatunde and Adedimeji (2008) state that there are four possibilities of performing FTA's. These are made up of three sets of 'on-record' super-strategies (perform the FTA on-record without regressive action) (bald-on-record); perform the FTA on-record using positive politeness and perform the FTA on-record using negative politeness) and one set of 'off record' strategies (say nothing).

### 3.4. Indirectness

Indirectness is a universal phenomenon in all natural languages (Thomas, 1995: 119) and it functions 'as a form of politeness' (Lakoff, 1990: 34) cited in Babatunde and Adedimeji (2008). Indirectness occurs when there is a difference between what is said and what is meant or there is 'a mismatch between the expressed meaning and the implied meaning' (Thomas, 1995: 119).

### 3.5. Data Presentation and Analysis

In this unit, we shall present our data gotten from Facebook and analysis them in turn. Since we are dealing with invective language, the politeness strategies that we will be analyzing here include, Face Threatening Act and Off-record strategies.

#### 3.5.1. Face Threatening Act

Brown and Levinson (1978) states that FTA's are illocutionary acts liable to damage or threaten another person's face. In this unit we shall extract some comments that are invective on Facebook. These comments are capable of damaging another person's face.

- a. You say they are suspects, which means they have not been trial. And yet you say they will be prosecuted for murder, sometimes I wonder whether this Nigeria force men are sensible at all? Or do they cram the sentence they make before speaking to media.

This is a response to the comment of the inspector general (IG) of police over the operations of the Independent People of Biafra(IPOB). The Inspector general of police has asserted that the members of IPOB will be prosecuted for their actions and this statement was published in the vanguard newspaper. The commentator on this statement is angry on the contradiction in the IG's statement. The IG had referred to them as suspect and he also said they will be prosecuted as a murderer. It is expected that until a law court pronounced otherwise, all arrested person is still a suspect but the IG is referring to them as murderer. This is what got the commentator annoyed and he attacked the public image of the IG not minding his status in the country. This is done through an indirect question, 'I wonder whether this Nigeria force men are sensible at all?' To use this in a statement against anybody is an attack

on such person. The invective use of language here reflect the anger of the commentator against the IG. To the commentator, the IG is incompetent. This is reflected in his choice of words.

As much as individual has freedom of speech, it is important to recognize the public image of others in our utterances so as not to cause any chaos in the society. It is usually expedient to mind the choice of words we use while comment on a post in order to maintain a peaceful environment. The statement is emotional and expressive. It shows the emotion of the commentator and he was able to express himself.

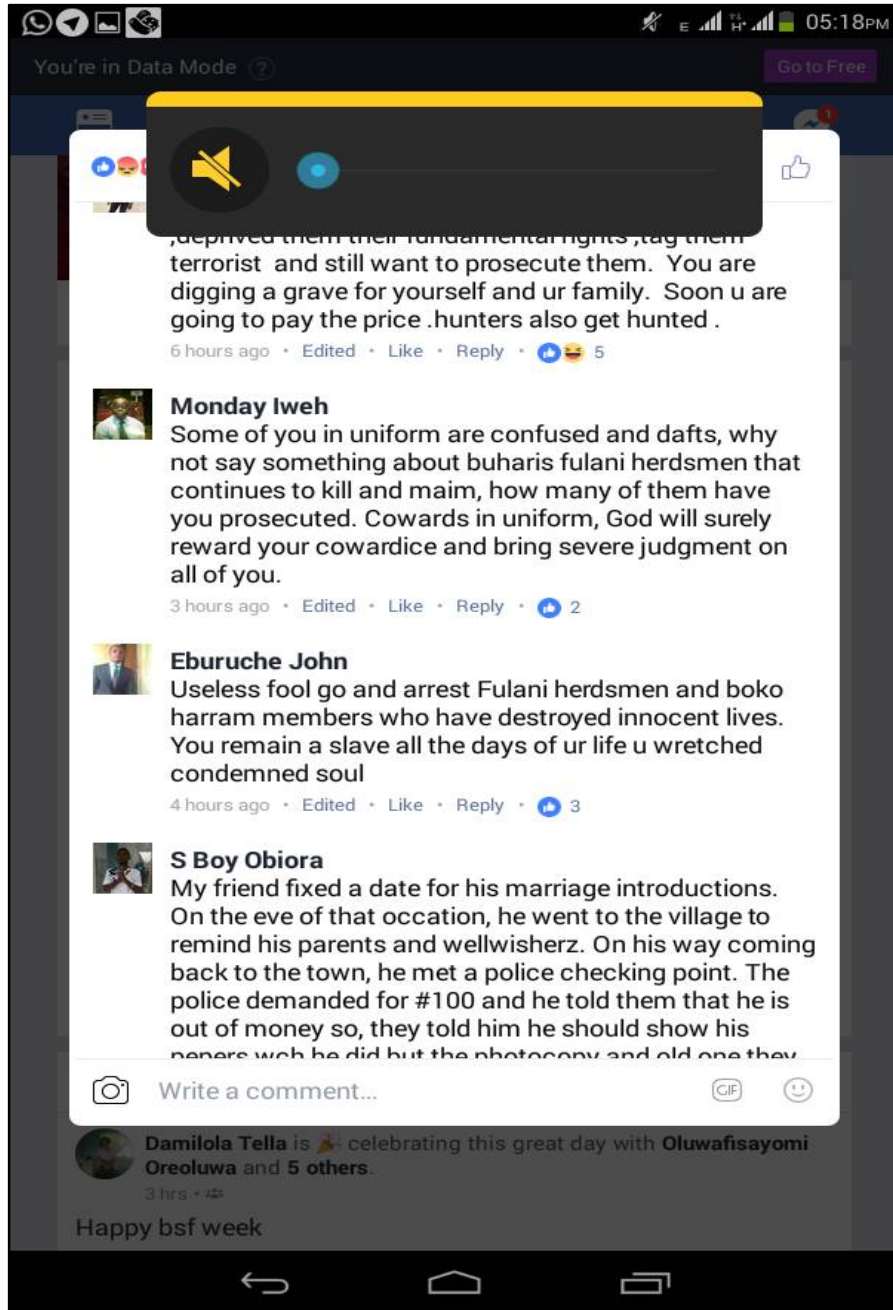


Figure 1

- b. Some of you in uniform are confused and dafts..... cowards in uniform, God will surely reward your cowardice and bring judgment on all of you.

The above comment is another example of invective language on Facebook. The word daft, confused and coward/cowardice are examples of invective language on Facebook. It is a direct attack on public self-image the police force in Nigeria. This reflects the emotion of the commentator. The choice of words here shows that the commentator does not have any regards for the police. This is not encouraged on the social media because it can create chaos in the society.

- c. Useless fool go and arrest Fulani herdsmen and boko haram members who have destroyed innocent lives you remain a slave all the days of ur life u wretched condemned soul.

The bolded phrases in the above example are instances of invective phrases. The combination of useless fool, remain slave and wretched condemned soul are example of an attack on the Nigeria army forces. The comment is on the statement credited to the Nigerian army that the IPOB members are terrorist. This reflects the feelings of the commentator. This is not in any way encouraged on a social media that has no bound. It is a direct attack on the public self-image of the Nigerian army which is capable of causing chaos.

d. Coward rat...idiot...with his blind followers

The choice of words here is also a direct attack on the leader of IPOB. The post was addressing the leader of IPOB that hide himself from the security men so that he will not be arrested. The comment shows that the commentator does not believe in the course of the IPOB. Using words like, a coward rat, idiot and blind are strong words to be used against fellow human being. These are examples of invective words on Facebook. It does not consider the public self-image of the addressee. This can also cause public uproar should the addressee retaliates with another invective words. This is used to show displeasure in the activities of the IPOB.

e. Reckless tackle. Poor timing. He was provoked to make such tackle? That's a silly excuse. He's a professional, he should behave like one. After all, his colleague, Diego Costa, is used to provoking Arsenal players to red card. Anyway, wetin concern me? Meanwhile... Chicharito back at Old Trafford

The use of reckless, poor and silly are examples of invective language on Facebook. Football is been discussed here. The commentator shows his aggression towards the comment of one of the coach. The choice of those words are examples of a strong attack on the coach's public self-image. This type of comment can aggravate into societal crisis. It is not encouraged at any level.

f. David luiz was very stupid yesterday. He almost jeopardized our game because of his indiscipline. It's becoming a problem with our players and Conte better address it now that the season hasn't gone too far. It was a shameful, rash and unnecessary tackle. He could have been sent off earlier for his stupid bicycle kick on Koscieny. It is well

Very stupid, indiscipline, shameful, and rash exemplified the use of invective language on Facebook. It shows the displeasure of the commentator on the player who behave in an unprofessional way. This is a threat to his public face. The commentator does not preserve the player's face. He gave him a public attack. Such words are not to be used against fellow human. It can cause public chaos.

g. Believe me, if every other hausa fulani animals will decide to be reasonable like saraki, then ONE NIGERIA will work to a great extent

This is an attack on the Hausa Fulani race. Hausa Fulani is a notable race in Nigeria. Calling them animal is an attack on their public self-image. If they should retaliate, it may lead to chaos in the society. In fact, it may lead to ethnic crisis. This type of words are not encouraged on the social media.

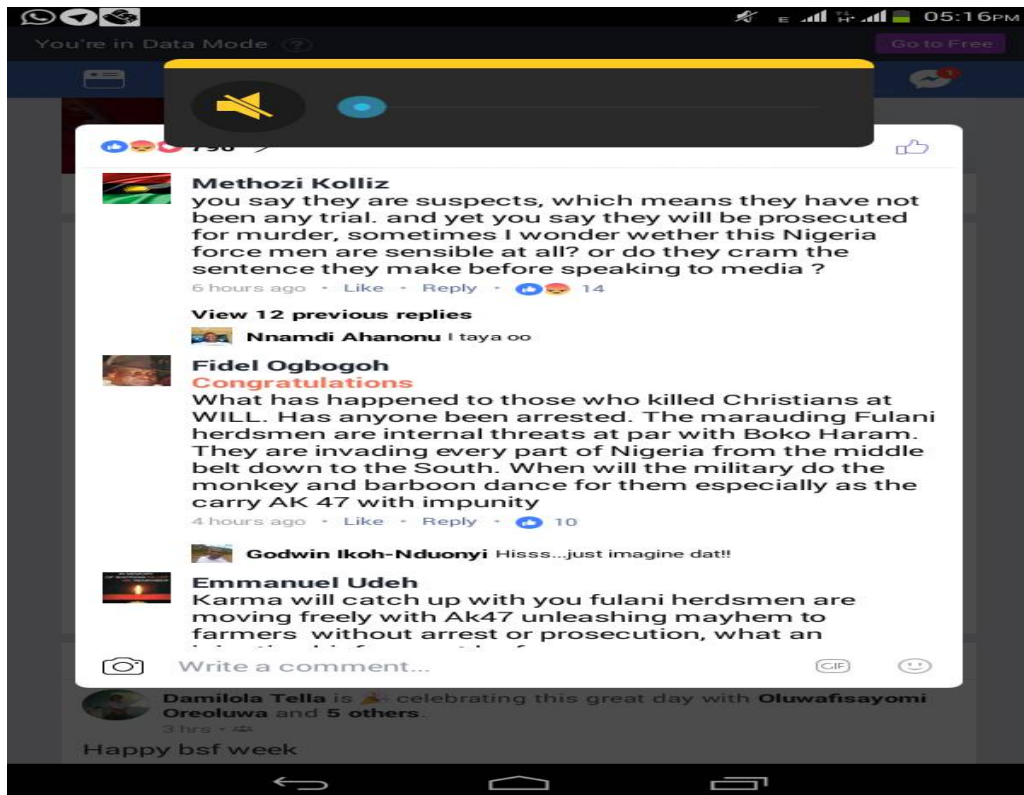


Figure 2

In all the examples above, invective words are used to recklessly abuse and attack public self-images on Facebook. This constitutes a serious attack on people.

### 3.6. Off-record strategies

Off-record utterances are those that are not directly addressed to the other (Yule, 1996b: 132). However, Brown & Levinson (1978) assert that you do so in a way that says that you cannot be held accountable. We shall exemplify this below.

- h. Reckless tackle. Poor timing. He was provoked to make such tackle? That's a silly excuse. He's a professional, he should behave like one. After all, his colleague, Diego Costa, is used to provoking Arsenal players to red card. Anyway, wetin concern me?  
 Meanwhile...  
 Chicharito back at Old Trafford

The commentator here is using an indirect way to refer to the footballer as unprofessional. "he should behave like one" in the above excerpt shows that he does not want to be held responsible for his statement. However, it is an attack on the player's public self-image.

- i. an organization that set a police stations blaze, attacked travellers, kill policemen, have intention of destabilizing the country to mention but few, if they are not terrorist what's their name?

This is an indirect way of calling the organization a terrorist group. There has been earlier pronouncement that the group is a terrorist group but this commentator does not want to come out directly to call it a terrorist group. This is an example of off-record strategy. It is an instance of invective language on the Facebook because it also attacks the public self-image of the group.

- j. South east governors are just being biased all they care for is power to be governor and enrich their family members... If only the politicians in the east can answer this question... Why do they use thugs to cause chaos and killings of citizens during...?

The above excerpt from Facebook comment is an example of off-record strategy which is also an example of invective language. This is simply saying that the governors in that geopolitical zone are not responsive. The commentator does not want to say this directly that is why he employed the strategy to attack this governors. It is a serious attack on their public self-image.

- k. Even though the holy spirit has forced you to say the truth, I still find it difficult to trust any politician. So saraki I don't trust you bcas you're a politician. God is with Biafrans

To assert that Holy Spirit forced the person to say the truth means the person is not known for saying the truth. The statement is simply saying that the person is a liar but the commentator does not want to come out rightly to call him a liar. To call an elderly or person in the position of authority in African may be seen as a public attack on the public self-image. This is what the commentator tries to avoid. He has adopted the off-record strategy to achieve this. He cannot be held responsible for such but the general public can infer from that. It is an example of invective language on the Facebook.

- l. What's all this grammars? D person that collected red card left the field smiling, to show that he did it purposely and dammed the consequences. U nna dey here dey drink panadol for another man headache.

The above excerpt is another example of off-record strategy. To say somebody is using Panadol for another man headache in this context is to say the person is not responsible because he/she is jobless. The commentator does not want to state this openly, hence he adopted the strategy. This is a form of invective language. It is used to attack other commentators.

The above are examples of off-record strategy. Although they are not directed at any particular person, however, they constitute invective language as they are capable of attacking the public self-image of the addressee.

## 4. Conclusion

We have been able to identify two politeness strategies under which invective languages fall; Face Threatening Act (FTA) and off-record. The duo show how aggressive people could be on the social media. We discovered invective languages that threaten the public self-image of others on Facebook. The FTA and off-record are examples of negative politeness that threaten the public image of the President despite his position in the country. Those that used off-record strategy are pretending to be indifferent, yet they also threaten people's face. We discovered that majority of the invective languages are directed at people in position of authority or their supporters. These strategies have permitted people to express their emotions and feelings about others and public debates. Through social media, people can express their displeasure using invective language. This will help people in position of authority to know the feelings people are having as regards their actions and inactions. However, we want to suggest that people should be conscious of their use of language as it is capable of disintegrate the society. Language is meant to be an instrument of unity and not otherwise. The use of invective language can breed political and ethnic crisis, therefore people should be mindful of their use of it. It is always better to jaw-jaw than to war-war.

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