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The Role of Discursive Constructions in Nigeria's ASUU-FGN Labour Conflict of 2013

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Abstract
The performance of Nigeria's tertiary education sector has been undermined on numerous occasions by labour conflicts. While these labour disputes are widely reported in the media, there has been only minimal scholarly examination of the discourses that predominate in the media during these conflicts. Using the critical discourse analysis (CDA) and conceptual metaphor (CM) frameworks, this study examined the discursive features of a labour conflict in 2013 between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). Statements by ASUU and FGN officials and their supporters, as published by Nigerian print and online news sources during the dispute, were purposively sampled, along with media outlets' editorial statements and readers' online comments. It was found that the labour dispute was discursively and metaphorically constructed in militaristic terms, as a conflict between two enemies engaged in a kind of battle or war. It was also found that both ASUU and the FGN engaged in propagandistic discourses in line with their militaristic discursive constructions, and that the two sides propagated disparaging discourses in respect of each other's motivations and behaviours. It was also found that certain readers reproduced elements of the prevailing discourses in their online comments on media coverage of the strike.

Keywords
Nigeria, tertiary education sector, universities, labour disputes, strikes, critical discourse analysis (CDA), conceptual metaphor (CM), sociolinguistic registers, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN)

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1. Introduction

Industrial conflict is a significant socio-political and economic problem affecting development in Nigeria. The nation witnesses frequent breakdowns in industrial relations between employees' unions and government, most of which result in strikes. Even though a strike action by employees or a lockout by management can be a useful tool in negotiations between employees and employers, these tools are generally very costly. During a strike or lockout, management (e.g., the government), the employees, and the public typically all suffer losses.

Ubeku (1983) has looked at the social and economic costs of strikes in Nigeria, including reduction of gross domestic product (GDP) and contribution to underdevelopment. Looking at Nigeria's tertiary education sector, Ofoele (2000) points out that industrial actions can sometimes be sufficiently protracted that they result in shifting of academic calendars, such that students are unable to graduate as and when due. The calendar of many public universities in Nigeria today is not in agreement with others at the international level because of incessant strikes in these institutions.

One major union in Nigerian universities that has consistently engaged government in labour disputes is the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). ASUU is the national union of all academic staff in public universities in Nigeria. It has branches in over 60 public universities across the nation. The union was formed in 1978 mainly to protect the interests of its members and as a platform to respond to the critical problems facing higher education in Nigeria (see ASUU (2008), as referenced in Odiagbe, 2012). Its formation coincided with the time when the country began to witness a decline in the oil boom and military dictatorship had become institutionalised to the extent that fundamental freedoms had been eroded. Over the years, ASUU has engaged in many industrial actions during labour disputes with the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). The first major challenge ASUU faced after its formation was the repressive measures taken by the President Olusegun Obasanjo military dictatorship in response to the 1978 "Ali Must Go" student protests. The union resisted the FGN's attempt to usurp the disciplinary functions of University Governing Councils and to control the universities by appointing their surrogates to Vice-Chancellor positions in contravention of established institutional procedures (Jega, 1995, p. 252).

In 1980, on the orders of President Shehu Shagari, six union members (lecturers) from the University of Lagos were dismissed for acting in opposition to FGN positions. ASUU rose against this, with a legal challenge, and the case went to the Supreme Court where, in 1986, a ruling was secured in favour of the lecturers. From the start, ASUU was a politically focussed union. As an affiliate of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), ASUU brought high-profile debates on all major issues in the country into the operations of NLC.

The FGN, not comfortable with the rising profile of ASUU and its activities in NLC, disaffiliated ASUU from the NLC in 1988. This led to ASUU declaration of a strike in that year. ASUU also fought vehemently against the FGN's adoption in the mid-1980s of a structural adjustment programme (SAP) dictated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). The union's position was that the SAP sought to remove responsibility for education from the hands of the state and place it in the hands of the private sector. The FGN responded to ASUU's anti-SAP strike by proscribing ASUU, seizing all its properties, and banning its activities in the country. This led to a large exodus of academics, with over 1,000 leaving the country between 1988 and 1990 (Jega, 1994, p. 42).

Following its de-proscription in 1990, ASUU returned to the negotiation table with the FGN in 1991, but the negotiations—which centred on sector funding and improved working and salary conditions—broke down. In May 1992, ASUU declared another strike, but it was cut short by an order of the Industrial Arbitration Panel (IAP), which called for the suspension of the strike and ordered both sides to return to negotiations. The negotiations were successful and resulted in an agreement signed by both parties in September 1992 (see Jega, 1994; 1995; Odiagbe, 2011). In 2009, ASUU embarked on a four-month strike over government funding allocations to education and payment of academic allowances to ASUU members. This strike ended with the signing of the 2009 ASUU-FGN Memorandum of Understanding. Following what it saw as non-implementation of the provisions of the 2009 Memorandum, ASUU declared a strike—the strike that was the focus of my research—on 1 July 2013.

During the six months of this 2013 strike, both parties (ASUU and the FGN) engaged in intensive efforts to influence public opinion towards their positions. Even though strikes are widely reported in the Nigerian media, scholarly examination of the discourses deployed by competing sides in such disputes is scant—in spite of the potential usefulness of such analyses for understanding potential paths to resolution of such disputes. Accordingly, my study aimed at contributing to filling this research gap, through a critical study of some of the key discursive features, evident during the 2013 conflict, in the statements of participants, the statements of the participants' supporters, the content of media reports, the content of opinion pieces appearing in the media, and the content of reader responses to these writings.

My choice of the 2013 strike was motivated by two reasons. First, the strike was a continuation of the 2009 strike, which culminated in the signing of the landmark 2009 ASUU-FGN Memorandum of Understanding. Second, the strike discourses appearing in the media prompted many readers to post comments on news sites.

The study drew data from news articles, editorials, opinion pieces, and readers' comments that I purposively sampled from six widely-read, daily print and online

news sources (*The Punch*, *The Nation*, *Vanguard*, *This Day*, *Osun Defender* and *AIT Online*), with the data drawn from the period July to December 2013. Altogether, 17 statements present in the media, from ASUU and FGN officials and their supporters, and from media outlets' editorial-writers, were purposively selected for analysis based on their connection to the 2013 strike and their meaningfulness in discursive terms. In addition, six reader comments were purposively selected on the basis of their links to media content on the strike and on their discursive meaningfulness. The data were subjected to discourse analysis and analysis of metaphors.

2. Perspectives on industrial conflicts

Generally speaking, scholarly inquiries into industrial conflicts emerge from fields such as commerce, industrial relations, personnel management, law, political science and sociology, and are dominated by attempts to explain the prevalence of industrial conflicts in sectors and countries. There is a relative dearth of scholarly analysis of the discourses prevalent during industrial conflicts, in spite of the pragmatic relevance of such analysis to such conflicts' management and resolution.

Akhaukwa, Maru and Byaruhanga (2013) investigate the effect of sub-optimal collective bargaining processes on industrial relations environments in public universities in Kenya, and conclude that if labour and employers were fairer in their behaviour during labour negotiations, and if they were committed to implementation of agreements, collective bargaining processes could have much more positive effects on Kenya's industrial relations environment. Longe (2015) examines the impact of workplace conflict management on organisational performance in a Nigerian manufacturing firm, finding that collective bargaining strategy displays a highly significant positive correlation with organisational performance.

Odiagbe (2011) provides a historical and sociological account of industrial conflict between ASUU and the FGN. The study identifies poor teaching, poor learning and research facilities, poor remuneration, inadequate and poorly maintained accommodation facilities for students and staff, poor social amenities, and occupational stress among academics due to excessive workload, as major factors confronting higher education in Nigeria. Odiagbe concludes that ASUU-FGN conflict is made difficult to resolve by the fact that it entails both economic and political factors which have become institutionalised and embedded in the Nigerian polity.

Akinwale (2011) examines labour reform and industrial conflict management in Nigeria, and observes that efforts made towards ensuring industrial peace remain inadequate and largely mismanaged. Dahida and Adekeye (2013) have found that unstable industrial relations in public universities are to a great extent a result of government insensitivity to dispute-resolution mechanisms. Ahmed (2014) critically examines legislation on the right to strike in Nigeria, and observes that there are many stringent conditions which serve to dilute strike rights. Ekankumo and Konye (2014)

focus on the management of industrial disputes in teaching hospitals in Nigeria, identifying breaches of agreements, poor remuneration, and poor infrastructural facilities as the main causes of strikes.

In the existing research on the ASUU strike of 2013, the study by Aragbuwa (2014) employs Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG) framework (see Halliday, 1978) to analyse the thematic structure of statements by ASUU and FGN officials. Another study, by Ugwoma (2016), examines discourses in internet content on the strike through the lens of Van Dijk's psychologically-focused version of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (see Van Dijk (2006)), focusing on mental, context and event models in the media statements of FGN officials and FGN sympathisers. My study differed from those of Aragbuwa (2014) and Ugwoma (2016), in that (1) it examined the discourses deployed by official and supporters of *both* ASUU and the FGN; (2) is specifically examined the discourses as they appeared in print and online media reports; and (3) it also examined the discourses of readers via their online comments on media items. It is hoped that the findings offer a pragmatic resource that can inform mechanisms of conflict management and resolution in Nigeria.

3. Theoretical framework

There continues to be sustained interest, in the fields of media studies and related disciplines, in analysis of discourses that appear in the media. This is not unconnected to the important role of media in contemporary societies, coupled with the increased availability and accessibility, via online platforms, of media materials to researchers and the general public. Discourse analysis of media content can be made from a variety of theoretical perspectives. In this study, I employed both elements of both the aforementioned critical discourse analysis (CDA) frame and a compatible model focused on metaphors.

According to key CDA theorists (see Chuliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2001; Van Dijk, 1988; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), CDA studies, inter alia, the ways in which discourses are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in social and political contexts. Van Dijk (1988) observes that CDA is concerned with the analysis of words used in discourses to reveal the sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias, and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced and transformed within specific social, economic, political and historical contexts. The theory contends that effectively accounting for a discursive event requires an adequate understanding of the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s) that frame it. This implies that discourse is constitutive of situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities and relationships which exist between people and groups of people (see Wodak, 2002). CDA is political in its objectives, as it attempts to explain the connections between discourse, social practices, and social structures. It examines societal dynamics such as power, dominance, hegemony, ideology, class, gender, race, and discrimination. CDA seeks to understand how language can be used—in both

readily apparent and less readily apparent ways—as a tool to influence the thinking and actions of people and how powerful groups exercise control over public discourse.

CDA views our language as a system that encodes ideological patterns, whereby language is not just a mere means of communication but a representation of dynamic realities. CDA is often associated with Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG) framework in its focus on linguistic functions (see Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Hassan, 1989). SFG views language as a social process and, accordingly, Eggins (2004, p. 2) contends that the emphasis of SFG "has always been with the meanings of language in use in the textual processes of social life". This implies that there is an interrelation between form and content; between linguistic structures and the underlying ideology.

Another framework relevant to my study was the approach to the study of metaphor known as conceptual metaphor (CM). The 1980s saw a strong emergence of metaphor research, especially in the context of political discourse, following the publication of Lakoff and Johnson's seminal *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 2003). According to Cserép (2014), a central thrust of the work of Lakoff and Johnson was that "[o]ur language is saturated with metaphors, rooted in recurring bodily experience, and our language is metaphorical simply because our conceptual system is metaphorical" (Cserép, 2014, p. 262*)*.

Lakoff and Johnson challenged the conventional, traditional view of metaphors as simply poetic or linguistic devices. In their analysis, metaphors are not just poetic "twists" of language; they are an integral part of how we conceptualise difficult and abstract concepts. Conceptual metaphor aligns with the view that linguistic units are symbolic structures, consisting of a pairing of phonological structure with semantic structure (see Langacker, 1987, p. 76). Cognitive linguists and CDA analysts recognise the discursive significance of metaphor in the communication and interpretation of meaning. In my study, I sought to make use of elements of both the CDA and CM approaches in my analysis of the data collected.

I also made use of the sociolinguistic concept of "register" during the course of the data analysis. Register refers to language usage variations dictated by situational context (see Halliday, McIntosh & Strevens, 1964). Register involves language use in relation to a given occupation or field of human endeavour, and it has to do with the patterned variation in language use that is peculiar to domains such as law, medicine, the military, and agriculture. Register is contextual, or situation-determined, because some socio-cultural elements exert influence on our choice of words in a given situation. Hence, context plays a significant role in the analysis of register and this, perhaps, explains why it is often deployed in CDA analysis. Halliday (1978) observes that the notion of register provides a means of investigating the linguistic foundations of everyday social interactions.

4. Findings and analysis

The findings and analysis provided in this section are divided into three sub-sections, namely: (1) discursive construction of the strike by its participants and supporters; (2) discursive representations of ASUU and the FGN; and (3) reader discourses in their online comments on elements of media items on the strike.

Participants' and supporters' discursive constructions of the strike: The strike as fight, battle, war

The main metaphorical ways in which the 2013 ASUU/FGN conflict is conceived in the statements of ASUU and FGN officials are as a fight, a battle, or a war, with the actions and decision-making of the opposing parties conceived in terms that one associates with severe conflicts. The strike is metaphorically conceptualised as contested terrain, even a battleground, where two opposing parties (ASU and the FGN) are clashing, adjusting tactics, anticipating the actions of the enemy, and reacting to the actions of the enemy.

The following statements, drawn from the sampled publications, reveal the fighting, battling and war registers present in the FGN and ASUU discourses during the labour conflict:

> **Statement 1 (FGN)**
> "We are not yet disposed to wielding the big stick, but if the government is pushed to the wall, it will invoke relevant laws to manage the situation. We are waiting for what they will do." ***– quoted by Information Nigeria (2013, November 30), in Osun Defender***

> **Statement 2 (FGN)**
> "[…] the security agencies have been directed to protect lives and property on all the campuses nationwide, especially in the universities that have reopened. […] The government will not tolerate any intimidation or harassment, and any violent union leader risks being arrested. But those who restrict themselves to the confines of the law have nothing to fear." ***– quoted by Information Nigeria (2013, November 30), in Osun Defender***

> **Statement 3 (ASUU)**
> "So, we are back to our trenches as it was the situation during the military era. We are ready for the worst now. If the situation becomes uncontrollable, we will also go underground and resort to guerilla [sic] tactics." ***– quoted by Information Nigeria (2013, November 30), in Osun Defender***

> **Statement 4 (ASUU)**
> "Our members are left with no other choice than to prosecute this strike to its logical conclusion. ASUU members nationwide are saying this strike will not be suspended until and unless the government respects the 2009 Agreement and makes concrete efforts to implement it in the best interest of the country." ***– quoted by Olugbamila (2013, August 23), in The Nation***

Statement 5 (FGN)
"[…] the strike action seems to have the backing of external forces seeking to bring his [President Goodluck Jonathan's] administration down." – ***quoted by Osun Defender, 30 November 2013***

Statement 6 (FGN: President Goodluck Jonathan)
"What ASUU is doing is no longer trade dispute but subversive action." – ***quoted by The Punch (2013, December 1)***

These statements by the opposing parties, as reproduced and disseminated in the media, reveal the participants discursively constructing the strike in fighting, battling, and even warlike, terms. A characteristic typical of situations of extreme conflict is a party or individual resorting to use of threats to intimidate an opponent. There is evidence of this in statement 2, in which the FGN speaker attempts to intimidate ASUU through threat of arrest ("any violent union leader risks being arrested") and prosecution ("will invoke relevant laws to manage the situation"*)*.

The phrases "wielding the big stick" and "we are waiting for what they will do" in statement 1, and the words "government will not tolerate any intimidation or harassment" in statement 2, are suggestive of a conflict that has, or will soon have, violent elements. President Jonathan's claim, in statement 6, that the ASUU is engaged in "subversive action", again suggests a conflict that is going to require, or already involves, a quasi-military or military dimension.

In statement 3, ASUU speaks in clearly militaristic terms, deploying multiple military/war registers: "we are back to our trenches", "we will also go underground and resort to guerilla [sic] tactics." Words such as *trenches* (dug out channel/trough), going *underground* (going into hiding), and *guerrilla tactics* (insurrectionary tactics involving going into hiding and occasionally hitting targets), are linguistic elements clearly suggestive of military engagements, battle scenes, and war. Meanwhile, the FGN suggestion, in statement 5, that ASUU's strike action has "the backing of external forces" also seems to imply that the labour dispute has elements akin to a military conflict—with ASUU's actions cast in terms usually reserved for descriptions of violent insurrections or terrorist activities prompting a state security or military response.

Also significant in statements 1-6 are several instances of the use of propaganda. Both sides appear to engage in propaganda in a manner characteristic of how this tool is used in violent conflicts, including military conflicts—as a tool aimed at gaining the support of the general public and/or turning public opinion against one's opponent. Propaganda during military conflicts heightens distrust between the opposing parties. The FGN's use of the expressions "subversive action", "backing of external forces", and "seeking to bring his [President Goodluck Jonathan's] administration down" are

propagandistic in a manner typical of military confrontations or of conflicts that may soon take on a military dimension. And ASUU is clearly aiming to sway public opinion to its side, and to demonise the government, with the warlike statement that "we are back to our trenches as it was the situation during the military era. We are ready for the worst now."

Discursive Representations of ASUU and the FGN

Representations of ASUU

Examination of statements 7-12 below, by FGN representatives and FGN supporters, reveals use of language that categorises, frames, and constructs ASUU members in an extremely negative light.

Statement 7 (A "social critic" sympathetic to the FGN)
"While the Federal Government […] continued [to] back down on all its positions, ASUU remained rigid. ASUU spurned all entreaties from […] all levels of the Federal Government." ***– opinion piece by Mohammed (2013, December 9) in Vanguard***

Statement 8 (FGN representative)
"Let them study the enabling laws to see what they have been violating." – ***quoted by Osun Defender, 30 November 2013***

Statement 9 (FGN representative)
"What they have done in the last four months amounted to economic sabotage […]. If they continue to take the law into their hands by paralysing activities in the universities, we may try them for economic sabotage." – ***quoted by Osun Defender, 30 November 2013***

Statement 10 (FGN: Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala)
"At present ASUU wants the government to pay N92 billion in extra allowances when resources are not there and when we are working to integrate past increases in pensions. We need to make choices in this country as we are getting to the stage where recurrent expenditures take the bulk of our resources and people get paid but can do no work […] [if ASUU's allowance demands are met and] we continue to pay them salaries and allowances we will not be able to provide infrastructure in the universities." ***– quoted by The Nation, 13 August 2013***

Statement 11 (A former student sympathetic to the FGN)
"Only a few of our academics engage in fruitful research capable of solving the needs of our society. Most of the university teachers set their target in journal publication that would help them gain promotion in their academic career even when such is far from rendering solution to our societal needs." ***– opinion piece by Festus (2013, August 29), in Osun Defender***

> **Statement 12 (A "social critic" sympathetic to the FGN)**
> "As the strike continued, some discerning Nigerians began to pick holes in the unwholesome practices of the ASUU National President, Dr Nasir Fagge and his leadership. All they did was to prolong the strike without listening to any word of reason. It was as if they were struggling to break the record on the longest lasting strike. Fagge bestrode negotiation rooms like a despot seeking who to damage." ***–opinion piece by Mohammed (2013, December 9), in Vanguard***

One can see, in statements 7-12, the FGN and its supporters deploying a wide range of condemnatory rhetoric and discourse to categorise and construct ASUU in disparaging terms. In statement 7, the FGN and ASUU are juxtaposed, with the FGN presented as accommodating ("continued [to] back down on all its positions"), and the ASUU as unyielding and rigid ("remained rigid"; "spurned all entreaties from […] all levels"). Statement 12 portrays ASUU as unyielding ("without listening to any word of reason").

Also among the discursive strategies employed by the FGN and its supporters in their portrayals of ASUU are appeals to patriotism—a characteristic of Nigerian political discourse that Okpanachi (2009) has pointed to. Appeals to patriotism are discursive, ideological devices employed to influence public perception and obtain public sympathy. Statement 9's reference to the ASUU's actions as "economic sabotage" seems clearly to suggest that ASUU is unpatriotic. And Finance Minister Okonjo-Iweala, in statement 10, also appears to cast the ASUU as disloyal to the country, when she says "We need to make choices in this country" and "[if ASUU's allowance demands are met and] we continue to pay them salaries and allowances we will not be able to provide infrastructure in the universities." The word "sabotage" also suggests illegality, implying that ASUU members are lawless, even criminals—a discourse that is also apparent in statement 8: "Let them study the enabling laws to see what they have been violating." Also suggesting a lack of allegiance to Nigeria's national interests is statement 9, with its allegation that "[o]nly a few of our academics engage in fruitful research capable of solving the needs of our society".

Statements 7-12 also contain instances where the FGN and its supporters appear to call into question the morality and integrity of ASUU members. In statement 10, the Finance Minister portrays ASUU as asking for too much ("extra allowances"), and asking to be paid for indolence ("people get paid but can do no work"). And in statement 12, the "social critic" sympathetic to the FGN, Mohammed, harshly attacks the character of the ASUU President Nasir Fagge, alleging that Fagge has engaged in "unwholesome practice" and has behaved "like a despot seeking who to damage."

At the same time, some of the FGN discourse reveals a desire to forge a sense of commonality between the government and the people of Nigeria. In contrast to the portrayals of ASUU leadership and members as being unpatriotic, the Finance Minister, in statement 10, seeks to present her government as speaking and acting on behalf of the general Nigerian public, employing linguistic elements that suggest commonality, togetherness, and solidarity. The Minister uses several phrases introduced by the plural pronoun "we", accompanied by verb forms followed by the preposition "to", suggesting forward movement, e.g.,

> […] we are working to […]
> We need to […]
> […] we are getting to […]
> […] we continue to […]
> […] we will not be able to […]

The plural pronoun "we" is a solidarity marker which serves to achieve an interpersonal function by presenting the Finance Minister as part of the general public, or at the very least someone protecting their interests. This is apparently aimed at influencing the general public towards believing her claims and giving her their support. Also, the verbs followed by "to" perform the linguistic act of seeking to convince the general public that the government is in motion, i.e., is active in working to ensure the betterment of the entire populace.

Representations of the FGN

In the media content sampled, the FGN and its officials are also subjected to negative discourses. Below are the key anti-FGN statements extracted from the data:

> **Statement 13 (ASUU: Union President Nasir Fagge)**
> "That a minister of education would pronounce a threat of mass sacking of academic staff is a tragedy of huge proportion for Nigeria and Africa." – ***quoted by AIT Online (2013, December 1)***

> **Statement 14 (ASUU: Union President Nasir Fagge)**
> "While ASUU has been struggling for conditions in which Nigerian students would benefit from a very much enhanced academic environment in teaching and research facilities, the Minister of Education is thinking of a thoughtless mass sack as a solution to the problems arising from government's non-implementation of an agreement reached with ASUU as if Nigerian rulers have made no intellectual progress since Abacha. […] we have noticed with disgust how easy it is for ministers and governments to take refuge in political blackmail." – ***quoted by AIT Online (2013, December 1)***

Statement 15 (editorial in *This Day*)
"After his recent rash pronouncement that striking members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities must return to work or get the boot, Supervising Minister of Education Nyesom Wike has had a lot of rationalisation to do in the court of public opinion. […] ASUU's request for greater validity of its agreements with the Federal Government was an opportunity for the government to prove its sincerity and preparedness to emerge from a history of untrustworthiness. If the government ever intended to honour the latest agreement with ASUU, signing a document to authenticate the agreement surely would have been the best way to demonstrate it to try get the trust of the union. [...] But the government has deliberately returned its relationship with the university teachers to a past of mistrust, a past any serious government would love to leave behind it." – ***This Day (2013, December 8)***

Statement 16 (ASUU: Union President Nasir Fagge)
"ASUU cannot believe that the [2009] agreement, the MoU and the Needs Assessment Report undertaken and endorsed by the highest public officials in the land, would be so blatantly ridiculed by the same people." ***– quoted by Olugbamila (2013, August 23) in The Nation***

Statement 17 (editorial in *The Punch*)
"For a leader who wants to leave a mark, the prolonged ASUU strike should be an opportunity for President Goodluck Jonathan to jump-start a serious discussion about the future of higher education in Nigeria. Since the government and teachers have failed to agree, an emergency has to be declared so that the problem can be solved holistically." – ***The Punch (2013, October 20)***

In statements 13 and 14 above, ASUU President Nasir Fagge portrays the FGN as negligent, framing the Minister of Education as "thoughtless" (statement 14) for considering a mass firing of teachers, which would, in Fagge's description, be "a tragedy of huge proportion" (statement 13). Fagge also calls into question the morality and integrity of the FGN—a strategy which, as seen earlier, the FGN also employs in its discourses on ASUU. Fagge makes reference to the regime of the late President Gen. Sani Abacha, a notoriously authoritarian and corrupt government in the 1990s, by suggesting "Nigerian rulers have made no intellectual progress since Abacha" and have engaged in "political blackmail" (statement 14). And in statement 16, in accusing the FGN of violating the terms of the 2009 ASUU-FGN Memorandum of Understanding, Fagge says "ASUU cannot believe" that the MoU and its accompanying texts, "endorsed by the highest public officials in the land, would be so blatantly ridiculed by the same people." This kind of discourse is clearly aimed at suggesting the FGN lacks integrity.

In a similar vein, *This Day*, in statement 15, casts the FGN as untrustworthy. *This Day*'s use of the wording "rash pronouncement" in statement 15 is an attack on the character of the Minister of Education, Nyesom Wike. And the clause, "If the government ever intended to honour the latest agreement with ASUU", accuses the FGN of deception and insincerity. Also, the *This Day* editorialist accuses the FGN of failing "to prove its sincerity and preparedness to emerge from a history of untrustworthiness", and in the process returning "its relationship with the university teachers to a past of mistrust, a past any serious government would love to leave behind it".

Statement 17, which comes from an editorial in *The Punch,* is an attack, albeit mild, on the character and office of the President. The reference to President Jonathan as someone "who wants to leave a mark", and the call for the President to declare "an emergency" to deal "holistically" with the future of higher education, appear to constructs President Jonathan as playing politics with the future of higher education in the country and failing to deal effectively with this important public policy area.

Reader discourses

The third type of discursive data analysed were reader inputs, via online "comments", in reaction to media items on the labour dispute. Below are six reader comments found to be meaningful in discursive terms. The reader responses provide indications of the degree to which the discourses discussed above—the discourses propagated by the FGN, by supporters of the FGN, by ASUU, and by media sympathetic to ASUU—are replicated in the discourses of consumers of the media items in which the discourses appear.

> **Reader comment 1**
> "I am presently a PHD student in the University of Ibadan and I must tell you that you spoke my mind. ASUU is not being sincere and considerate. The major thing they are fighting for is their earned income not infrastructural development. And it's so sad that majority of them don't merit this allowance. […] I had my MSc in UI and I can tell u dt [sic] my supervisor didn't monitor my project, as a matter of fact he did not correct anything in my study neither did he teach me anything and he is part of d [sic] lecturers requesting for earned income." ***– reader of Osun Defender, 29 August 2013.***

> **Reader comment 2**
> "It is obvious that ASUU is being used by APC [the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress] in order to discredit and undermine the government of President Goodluck Jonathan by scoring cheap political points. Otherwise, how else can one describe ASUU's foot dragging method after having met with Mr Presdent [sic] [?]" – ***reader of Osun Defender, 30 November 2013***

Reader comment 3
"So, the President's associates think the President has done the unimaginable by sitting for 13 hours with union leaders. Did they remember the total number of days (not hours) the President sat down with the G-7 governors, most of who have now abandoned him? The truth is that we are no more in a military regime and the President cannot use high-handedness to run the country." ***– reader (Information Nigeria), in Osun Defender, 30 November 2013***

Reader comment 4
"I think the threat from the president has clearly indicated the stand of the government on this issue- they never meant all they've said in the previous meetings with ASUU leaders […] It has to go this way because their children are not studying in this country and those who do are in the private universities." ***– second reader of Osun Defender, 30 November 2013***

Reader comment 5
"What is the problem with our leaders [?] You failed to keep to the terms of an agreement you consciously entered into with ASUU since 2009, this time ASUU wants a little more commitment from you to avoid history repeating itself. Instead of doing the right thing in the interest of Nigerians, you are threatening to sack lecturers. Go ahead and see how that can solve the problem." ***– reader (Information Nigeria), in Osun Defender, 30 November 2013***

Reader comment 6
"What does it take the government to sign the agreement as being requested by ASUU if they are sincere? In fact, there would not have been any need for the strike if government had done 30% of what they have done now but they decided to allow them to go on strike before listening to them. It does not show any sign of seriousness on the part of government […]" – ***reader of This Day, 8 December 2013***

Reader comment 1 replicates, to some extent, the discourse seen earlier, in the statements of the FGN and its supporters, whereby ASUU members are framed as lacking integrity. Reader comment 1 is quite demeaning in its critique of ASUU, arguing that "[t]he major thing they are fighting for is their earned income not infrastructural development. And it's so sad that majority of them don't merit this allowance." And the reader seeks to add power to her/his critique by supporting it with reflection on personal experience, as follows: "I had my MSc in UI and I can tell u dt [sic] my supervisor didn't monitor my project, as a matter of fact he did not correct anything in my study neither did he teach me anything and he is part of d [sic] lecturers requesting for earned income."

The discourse in reader comment 2 reinforces the FGN discourse seen above, in which the ASUU is cast as being a proxy for forces hostile to the government—with the reader suggesting that ASUU is being sponsored by the APC (the opposition party) to discredit government. This reader seems to have been swayed by the content of the report she/he is responding to, in which the President is quoted as saying that the strike is "no longer trade dispute but subversive action", and by the report in which an FGN source says the strike action seems to have the backing of "external forces seeking to bring his [President Goodluck Jonathan's] administration down".

Reader comments 3 to 6 replicate discourses seen above in the statements of ASUU representatives and in the editorial comments of media outlets (*This Day, The Punch*) supportive of ASUU during the labour dispute. Comment 3 casts the President as ineffectual, mocking the FGN's applauding of the President for conducting lengthy negotiations with ASUU, and pointing to the President's much more protracted talks with "the G-7 governors, most of who have now abandoned him". Comments 4 and 5 question the morality and integrity of the FGN, which, in the words of reader 5, is not "doing the right thing in the interest of Nigerians". Comment 4 accuses the FGN of not acting in good faith, saying that "they never meant all they've said in the previous meetings with ASUU leaders". The comment goes on to cast doubt on the FGN's commitment to public tertiary education, arguing that politicians' children do not make use of public universities because they "are not studying in this country and those who do are in the private universities". Comment 6 accuses the government of lacking sincerity in its dealings with ASUU during the strike, and of not showing "any sign of seriousness" in the run-up to the labour dispute.

5. Conclusions

This study found that the 2013 labour dispute between ASUU and the FGN was discursively and metaphorically conceptualised by its participants as a conflict between two enemies engaged in a fight, a military struggle or battle, and even a war. It was also found that both the FGN and ASUU engaged in propagandistic discourses in support of their militaristic castings of the conflict, and that the FGN (and its supporters) and ASUU (and media sympathetic to it) propagated harshly disparaging discourses of each other. Finally, it was found that certain readers, in commenting on media items containing the aforementioned discourses, reproduced, and thus reinforced, elements of those discourses.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that, even though poor remuneration and poor teaching and learning facilities are basic factors motivating strike actions in Nigeria's higher education sector, the discourses at play during these labour disputes are, at the same time, likely to be significant contributors to the frequent recourse to strike action and the protracted nature of the disputes and strikes. Use of conflict-oriented, militaristic discourses, and harsh, demeaning discursive constructions of the characteristics of the opposing side, are certainly not helpful to resolution of such

labour disputes. Such discourses during the 2013 strike can only have increased the levels of animosity, bitterness and confusion.

There is, therefore, a need for realignment in the discourses of ASUU and the FGN when they are in disagreement. These two entities should seek to reduce the prevalence of conflict-oriented discourses and to seek to engender emergence of more constructive, trust-building discourses. Trust is key to the existence and success of any symbiotic relationship, and it is indispensable in resolution of conflicts. ASUU and the FGN should each seek to earn a measure of trust in the interactions with each other, so that their negotiations, while still inevitably oppositional in many respects, can, in some respects, be grounded in a shared ambition to improve the quality of Nigeria's public higher education sector.

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