

Language Use in NCDC M-Learning Text Messages on the Global Scourge of COVID-19

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Abstract

The fight against the global scourge of COVID-19 in Nigeria has been achieved through the combined and vigorous exertions of the federal and state governments, the media, medical practitioners, religious groups, and the general public. Combating the impacts of the virus through the Federal Government by NCDC includes the development of relevant educational materials characterized as textual messages that are communicatively grounded towards the populace via the telephonic medium of the ICT (Information Communication Technology). It is on this note that the study, from a linguistic perspective, examines the communicative significance of the language of these texts in the fight against COVID-19 through M-learning (Mobile Learning). By taking cognizance of the organization and structural constituents of the texts and their social meaning on readers, the study aims at three goals. First, it undrapes M-learning as a new technology of learning. Secondly, it unveils NCDC as an agent of education whose intent is tailored towards a general change or modification in behaviour; and thirdly, it accentuates how language is manipulated by the NCDC through text messages to achieve this change or modification in social behaviours. Twelve text messages were purposively selected through a qualitative design. The study employs Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics as a framework for the analysis of the selected text messages. The application of the model enriches our cognitive perception of language use and learning.

Keywords: COVID-19, NCDC, ICT, Telephonic medium, M-learning, social behaviour, Systemic Functional Linguistics

1. Introduction

Edem and Patience (2021) avow that every illustration of language use is a reflection of the current system in the society where it is used as in the event of the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic ravaging the entire globe. Language is not a mere medium of communication in the objective world, but a definite part of the social process (Simpson, 1993). Halliday (1978, p.39) indicates language use as what the speaker can do with a language in a particular social context. To this end, language use, from the perspective of this study, accounts for the word choice employed by the National Centre for Disease Control (henceforth NCDC) texts to the reader to enhance learning or knowledge within a specific context. This presupposes that the functionality of the language deployed in the situated context will stem from the ability of the NCDC to communicate meaning and achieve an interpersonal relationship. Meaning and interpersonal relationships can be ascertained as effective if the writer articulates his message in very clear terms so that the receiver can decode the content very well. Hence, Edem (2018) avers that the more appropriate and

effective the language of the message is, the more the receiver derives satisfying, productive and meaningful relationships in personal, public, social, political and educational lives. This is leaning in all its entirety.

One of the fastest means of orientating the populace through language on the ravaging nature of the novel coronavirus is Information Communication Technology (henceforth ICT). Since the virus impinges on personal contact, the ICT, specifically, the M-learning (Mobile learning) as this study intends to showcase has become a platform for increased information sharing among people through the intermediary of language. The NCDC is aware of the effectiveness of this emerging technology in teaching and learning. M-learning is the ability to deliver educational content via telephony devices as in the event of the present study. What one finds in the sensitization text messages through the heuristic function of language is NCDC's aptness in creating awareness through educating or teaching on the existence and precarious makeup of the virus. Awareness is a vital phenomenon in social life. It is the knowledge or perception of a situation or event in an immediate environment. Thus, the case of COVID-19 is not an exception, as NCDC endeavours to teach or educate Nigerians by making available the information needed for an effective intervention against the continuous spread of the virus. Teaching or educating in this sense is geared towards a modification in the learners or readers' attitude to perform specific functions that will help safeguard him/her as well as minimize the spread of the virus. In other words, the study tends to showcase how the language of NCDC text messages via telephony interacts with the reader's cognition to bring about behavioural modification. The way the language is structured determines the response or action.

2. COVID-19: An overview

The coronavirus disease-19 often signalled by the acronym COVID-19 is a constituent of the RNA virus known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The virus originated from Wuhan, a city in the Hubei Province of China in December 2019. Apart from China, where the virus originated from, the disease has claimed millions of lives across the globe. In the heat of the pandemic, countries such as America, Italy, Japan, Spain, Iran, South Korea, Germany, Britain, Russia, were the most affected. Several countries in Africa also had their fair share of the crisis, and Nigeria was not excluded. Following the devastation wreaked by the virus on millions of human lives, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO rather than an epidemic.

One of the most dreadful and confusing things about the COVID-19 phenomenon is its wild spread formation. The virus can be contacted via infectious substances like respiratory droplets from the nose, the mouth of an infected person, whether asymptomatic, mildly or seriously symptomatic or contaminated objects or surfaces. The aftermath of the infection is often characterized by symptoms such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath that may deteriorate to pneumonia as well as respiratory failure. It is this disturbing formation that leads to the adoption of several measures by different countries in curtailing the spread of the disease, and Nigeria is not left out. Some of the measures taken by Nigeria as this study attempts to showcase are the setting up of the COVID-19 Presidential Task Force (PTF) and various task forces at state levels, lockdowns and curfews as directed by the government. Apart from these measures, the NCDC stepped up its ICT strategies by sending different sensitization messages to educate the populace on what to do and what not to do. These include the need for individual precautions through social distancing,

wearing of gloves and face masks, hand hygiene by constant washing of the hands, and the covering of the mouth or nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.

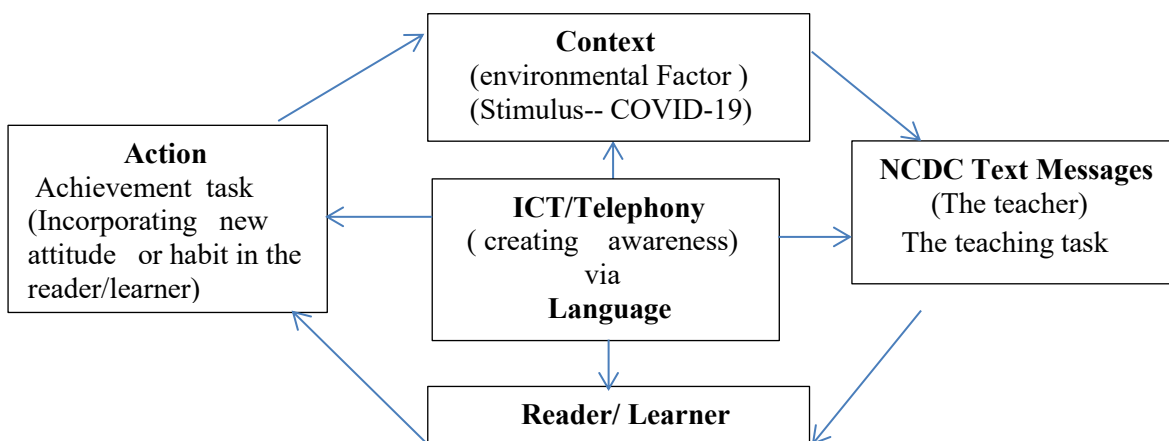
However, some of the disheartening and controversial issues that NCDC has to battle with through the text messages sent to readers include, amongst others, attempts to debunk the erroneous information on the consumption of home remedies cunningly attributed as the treatment and cure for COVID-19, and the deceitful speculation of exposing the virus to hot temperature and humidity as a measure to destroy the virus. In this regard, NCDC through the telephonic ICT progression, attempts to educate and address the Nigerian society on the need for safety guidelines as measures of prevention and spread while anticipating the cure of the virus as against such erroneous information propagated. It is the emulation of the instructions outlined in the text message by NCDC to readers that ascertains NCDC as an agent of education towards a general change or modification in behaviour as this study accentuates.

3. Methodology

The data utilised in this research were collected from relevant NCDC campaign text messages on COVID-19 in Nigeria. All the text messages employed in this study are sent from January – December 2020 by different telecommunication providers in Nigeria. Thus, twelve text messages were purposively selected out of the lots through a qualitative design. The study deploys Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) model as a framework for the analysis of the texts selected. The theory affords us broad latitude in investigating the language used in the production of the selected text messages, the cognitive perception of the messages and the social meaning they have on readers to yield the expected learning. With this, the speaker-reader negotiation in terms of communicative functions is comprehensively garnered and understood.

4. Theoretical Framework and Conceptual clarifications

The study has deployed Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (henceforth SFL) because of its emphasis on context. (Halliday 1985, 1994; Matthiessen, 1995; Martin & Rose, 2003) In other words, the model takes the context as the bedrock for a successful social enterprise. It takes into consideration the dynamic interaction of interactants, the environment, and behaviour with language as the fulcrum as indicated in the schema below. Fig. 1



What this implies is that the process of teaching/learning did not just kick start suddenly; something prompted it which the schema has captured as the context or environmental factor or stimulus called COVID-19. It is this contextual problem that spurs the teaching process via the NCDC text message disseminated by different telecommunication providers to readers, creating awareness of a sudden global change in our world. This in turns affects the attitude of the reader or learner to a new action or habit. This diagrammatic explanation further substantiates SFL as a framework that describes how language as a system account for certain functions such as expressing facts, acquiring knowledge, represent the realities of an event, controlling events, influencing the environment to cause certain events to occur and so on (Halliday 1978, p.112).

It is on this outlook that language use is metafunctionally itemized as (1) Ideational function, which uses language to construe or represent experience; (2) The interpersonal function – Thompson (2014) validates that the interpersonal aspect assists one in establishing and maintaining relationships with people, controlling their behaviour, giving them information, and negotiating with them; and (3) Textual function, which indicates how information is organized into a coherent text. This presupposes that Halliday’s theory describes and explains how social reality is determined in language as this study intends to unveil.

5. Analyses and Discussion of Findings

Text 1: There **has been** a global outbreak of **Coronavirus**, which causes illnesses such as cold, fever and difficulty in breathing. **Coronavirus** spreads via droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes and their droplets lands in the mouth or noses of nearby people. People could also catch **Coronavirus** by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

Text 1 is entwined with several clauses that are declaratively grounded. The first clause serves as the lead because of its attention capacity. Consequently, the reader’s understanding of the world of the text is enhanced through the language. NCDC deploys the technique of reporting to instantiate awareness on the sudden global outbreak of the novel virus called Coronavirus. The seriousness of the virus and its threat in the context is perceived by the reader via verbal processes. Successive verbs such as ‘*has been*’ in the first sentence draw the reader’s attention to the knowledge or the reality of the virus. The verb ‘*causes*’ in the same sentence enhances the reader’s learning process by giving the reader additional information on the configuration of the virus. With this, the reader now has ground knowledge of the common symptoms of the virus. The verb ‘*spreads*’ in the second sentence has an action formula that describes vividly the virulent nature of the virus.

The language enhances the reader’s learning or knowledge process through the additional tips or new information on the contagious nature of the virus. With this new information, the reader’s cognitive perception of droplets of coughs and sneezes becomes broadened, as he/she perceives them as contagious leeway. In the last sentence, the verb ‘*catch*’ is used by the text to elaborate on other means by which the virus can also be contracted. This additional information is characterized by a pragmatic implicature. First, the entire structure calls for caution and the need to desist from a carefree attitude. Second, being abreast with the information, the reader is expected to start planning for an unexpected behavioural modification that would, first, save the reader and then the people around him/her. We have selected the first and second sentences to showcase how the teaching/learning negotiation or process is achieved by SFL in Fig 2.

Metafunctions of language	Structural Realization				
Clause 1	There	has	been	a global outbreak of coronavirus	which causes...
Interpersonal	Subject MOOD--declarative	finite	Predicator	Complement RESIDUE	Complement
Experiential	Existential process			Existent (Participant)	
Textual	Theme	Rheme			
Clause 2	Coronavirus	Spreads	via droplets produced	when an infected person coughs or sneezes	and their droplets land in the mouth...
Interpersonal	Subject Mood--declarative	finite	Predicator Comp	Adjunct Circum1 Residue	Adjunct Circum2
Ideational (Material)	Actor	Material process	Adjunct Circum	Adjunct Circum (contingency)	Adjunct Circum (location)
Textual	Theme	Rheme			
	Given information	New information			

Text 2: #TakeResponsibility. Coronavirus spreads easily from person to person when people gather together.
Stay at home to protect yourself and others.

The teaching and learning interaction in text 2 is unique because of the instructive formation which makes the instructional advice directional. This means, by taking responsibility, the reader or learner is staying at home and by staying at home the reader is taking responsibility. The intent of every teaching is often directed to a general change in behaviour. Text 2 quickly accentuates the learning process in figure 1 which enunciates that the process of education (teaching /learning) is achieved by the teaching task and the achievement task. To achieve these structural poles in text 2, NCDC deploys the imperatives as pragmatic markers at the beginning and at the end of the discourse alongside the declarative that is used to enhance the reader's knowledge of the transmissible trait of the virus. These verbal imperative markers '*Take responsibility* and '*stay at home*' are invested in the context as NCDC recommended preventive health activities as well as socio-behavioural determinants of compliance.

These verbal structures are imperatively constructed to show the actions intended by the text or NCDC. Note, an utterance produces meaning, first, when the speaker deploys it to express a thought; and second, when hearers, in turn, interpret the utterance and assign meaning to it from their knowledge and experiences. By implication, the language teaches that the best means of curtailing the virus is by staying at home – an implicit way of substantiating '*dissociation*'. The

diagrams in Fig 3, 4 and 5 below give us a broader sense that the entire teaching and learning is for meaning negotiation.

Structure A: ‘Take Responsibility (Initiated as a preventive health action/socio-behavioural determinant of compliance)

(ϕ)	take	Responsibility
No subject	Finite	Predicator complement
Mood- imperative		Residue

Structure B: Coronavirus spreads easily from person to person/when people gather together. (Declarative used to enhance the reader’s knowledge on the transmissible nature of the virus).

Metafunctions of language	Structural Realization				
Clause	Coronavir us	spreads	Easily	from person to person....	when people gather together
Interpersonal (mood system)	Subject	Finite	Adjunct 1	Adjunct Circum 2	Adjunct 3 Circum
	Mood → declarative			Residue	
Ideational (transitivity system)	Actor	Material Process	Adjunct Circum	Goal	Adjunct Circumstantial (Contingency)
Textual Theme system	Theme (Given info)	Rheme (New info)			

Structure C: Stay at home to protect yourself and others (Used as preventive health action/socio-behavioural determinant of compliance)

(you) ϕ	Stay	at home	to protect yourself and other
No subject	Finite	Predicator adjunct Circum.	Complement
Mood- imperative		Residue	

Text 3: #Takeresponsibility! Prevent coronavirus by cleaning all surfaces frequently. High-contact surfaces include door handles, stair rails and tables.

Text 3 begins with the imperative ‘Take responsibility!’ that is foregrounded as an interpersonal theme in the context. NCDC uses it as a recommended preventive health action as well as a safety

initiative to the virus. This recommended health action/safety initiative is further explained by the second use of the imperative which indicates the specific task that is demanded to be performed and how to go about the task. The adverbial ‘frequently’ indicates to the reader that the specific task or action (that is cleaning all surfaces) should be carried out always. The third structure is a declarative mood system. In this context, NCDC uses it to elaborate on the meaning of ‘surfaces’. NCDC as a teacher and as an agent of change is aware that certain questions may crop up from readers during this learning process such as ‘what are surfaces?’ To take care of such distortion, NCDC employs the declarative ‘high-contact surfaces include door handles, stair rails and tables’ to enhance or extend the meaning of the imperative structure. The teaching/learning negotiation is also represented below as Fig 6 and 7

	Prevent	Coronavirus	by cleaning all surfaces frequently
	Finite	Predicator	Complement Adjunct circum
Mood- declarative		Residue	

High contact surfaces	include	door handles, stair rails and tables	
	Finite	Predicator	Complement
Mood- declarative		Residue	

Text 4: Wearing a mask alone cannot prevent COVID-19. In addition to a mask, wash hands frequently, stay 2 metres away from others and disinfect commonly touched surfaces

Text 5: #TakeResponsibility! Wash your hands frequently with soap under running water. Avoid touching your face and high-contact surfaces to prevent coronavirus spread.

Note, communication is not merely an event, but it is functional, purposive, and constructed to trigger some effects, however subtle or unobservable on the reader and the environment. An insight into texts 4 and 5 shows the texts are algorithmically constructed to aid learning through the process of ‘**nominalization**’ or ‘**nouning**’ marked by lexical items as ‘*wearing*’— (wear + ing) and ‘*Take Responsibility*’--(the fusion of take + responsibility). The essence is that **nominalization** or **nouning** tends to give precedence or priority to actions. Thus, NCDC invests it to offer a procedural learning process that instantiates warning and elicit some level of action from the reader towards the prevention of the virus. With this, all the verbs in both discourses are pragmatically significant. They enhance the teaching and learning process. On that account, verbs such as ‘*cannot*’, ‘*wash*’, ‘*stay*’, ‘*disinfect*’ and ‘*avoid*’ are deployed as cues of action for the prevention of the disease. They make the entire process very easy for the reader or learner. The imperatives deployed in the context can go for advice than a command. This is because the washing of hands, observing a social distance signalled by ‘*stay 2 metres away*’ as well as the avoidance of high contact surfaces are in the best interest of readers. Text 5 further broadens the NCDC perspective of washing via a descriptive formula – *with soap under running water*. This implies that for the health tips to yield maximum results, those specifications are necessary. It also implies that mere

washing of the hands without soap will not do much and that the washing should be done under running water at the tap and not in a water bowl.

Text 6: Please follow guidelines while at church or mosque. Take responsibility.
Wash or sanitize hands before entering. Leave 2 metres behind yourself
and the next person.

Text 7: Avoid gatherings and physical contact. Practice social distancing by leaving
2 metres distance from others to prevent coronavirus spread.
#TakeResponsibility!

Changes to attitude occur faster when planned and directed. As a result, the Algorithm or set of rules method which makes the learning task simple and direct is also employed in texts 6 and 7. All sample texts employ the imperative formation. In text 6, the first imperative structure indicates that the whole discourse is considered as a piece of advice rather than a command. This is underscored by the polite marker '*please*'. Thus, subsequent imperative markers as '*take responsibility*', '*wash*' and '*leave*' accentuate the tone of the instruction or guideline given. The textual disposition unveils NCDC friendliness and willingness to teach. In text 7, verb markers such as '*avoid*', '*practice*', and '*take responsibility*' also show that the imperatives are of advice rather than a command. NCDC uses the imperatives '*avoid*', and '*practice*' to instantiate a context of dissociation. Hence, the verbs are subtle inducers to actions. This context of dissociation is well captured in the second part of the verbal imperative structure via the term '*social distancing*'. The term is a relatively new one that came into existence because of the virus and may not be understood by many, thus, the prepositional group '*by leaving 2 metres distance from others*' is used to further elaborate on the term. In other words, it is used by the NCDC in the context to define the term. The verbal phrase '*Take responsibility*' is acting as a finisher in the context. It is also geared to achieve a specific change of behaviour or attitude in the learner or reader. It is a popular stock of words that has become a norm in its usage to express the current state of the world due to the pandemic. As a typical imperative structure, the NCDC uses it to demand or request a tenable decisive response from the reader.

Text 8: This Ramadan period let us all take responsibility
to protect ourselves and our loved ones by adhering
to social distancing and other guidelines.

A close study of text 8 shows NCDC's conception or perceived fear on the vulnerability or susceptibility to the virus on the populace knowing the status of the 'Ramadan'. As such, the text is written in response to behavioural modifications occasioned by this event. The entire discourse unit as an interactive text is intended as some sort of call to action represented in the imperatives. In times like this, NCDC as an agent of change feels that there is the need to educate the people against the habit of clustering. The pragmatic markers such as '*social distancing*' and '*take responsibility*' are stock phrases used consistently by NCDC within the domain of COVID-19. They have become staples amongst other words in news reporting and communication concerning the pandemic. They are deployed as situation models. '*Social distancing*' for instance, in the context, is used to show the ongoing practice or action on social precaution globally, while the verbal structure '*take responsibility*' in this context is used to modify attitude. It reminds readers,

through this learning platform, that it is their duty to deal with the situation (Ramadan) wisely or take decisions relating to the situation wisely.

Text 9: Remember, COVID19 is not a death sentence and a recovered patient cannot spread the disease. **Do not** stigmatize. Report your symptoms to your State hotline

Every teaching act is aimed at a purpose or achievement. Knowing the nature of the virus and all the troubles that accompany it, text 9 is initiated with a general intent. To NCDC, there is a need to educate or remind the reader politely of what is already known should the reader have forgotten the importance of the information. This reechoing or reminder is achieved through the use of the pragmatic markers ‘remember’ and ‘is’. The verb ‘remember’ is used attitudinally to indicate an argument while the finite verb ‘is’ carries the validity of the proposition. They establish a context of reassurance and also to disabuse the misconception people have concerning those with or who have recovered from the virus. The verbal structure ‘do not’ is used to achieve this change in the reader or learner’s way of thinking. Such change in the reader is seen as a broad change resulting from the perspective of the message and not as a specific discharge of social function. The last verbal structure is used to reassure an interpersonal relationship. With this, people without shame or fear of stigmatization will come out for voluntary testing. The teaching/learning negotiation is captured thus as Fig 8 and 9

Part A: Indicating the reminder process

Remember, COVID19	is	not	a death sentence
Subject	Finite	Predicator	(Complement)
Mood-declarative	Residue		

Part B: Bringing about a radical attitudinal change.

(ϕ)	Do	not	stigmatize
No subject	Finite	Predicator	adjunct Circum.
Mood –imperative		Residue	

Part C: Reassuring a context of interpersonal relationship

(ϕ)	Report	your symptoms	to your State hotline
No subject	Finite	Predicator	Adjunct Circum.
Mood-imperative		Residue	

Text 10: Please don’t consume any mixture claiming to be COVID-19 vaccine. There is no approved drug or vaccine for COVID19. These substances can cause harm.

Text 11: Note: Self-medication can be very dangerous and may cause death. Treatment for COVID-19 should be under strict supervision

Texts 10 and 11 capture issues that trigger some of the reasons for M-learning. A look at the texts indicates that NCDC notices that the issues in the discourse are issues of concern. The issues are marked as perceived barriers to preventive health action. Text 10 is erupted due to controversies on the treatment and cure of COVID-19. Such controversies include substances consumed as remedies. The text is intertwined with imperative and declarative acts or mood structures. The imperative act, though politely used in the context, is assertively provoked by the prevailing controversial situation. COVID19 is the most searched discourse in our world today. So, people catch the opportunity to perpetrate crime. Given this, NCDC finds it not out of place to politely educate the reader through the resilience of urgent warning. We refer to the imperative act or mood structure as a warning because the event, that is, the consumption of such a mixture is not in the readers' interest. This is an essential condition that plays a fundamental role in determining whether an act is a warning or advice. Greenbaum and Nelson (2002, p.62) avow that mood is the grammatical category that unveils the speaker's attitude towards the proposition' thus, 'Please' as a mood marker in the context is used to underscore an attitudinal function of politeness. Text 11 is a continuum of text 10. Hence, the advisory continues politely with a declaration couched in the term 'note'. This term as a reminder device is used to draw or gain the learner's attention to a said issue for emphasis. The purpose is to dissuade learners from taking wrong decisions that may mar them. See how the learning negotiation is captured below as Fig 10, 11&13

Please	don't	Consume	any mixture	claiming to be COVID19 vaccine
	Finite	Predicator	Complement	Complement
Mood- imperative		Residue		

(ii)

There	Is	no approved drug or vaccine	for COVID19
Subject	Finite	Complement	Complement
Mood- declarative			

(iii)

These substances	can	Cause	Harm
Subject	Finite	Predicator	Complement
Mood- declarative		Residue	

Text 12: Do not ignore your symptoms. A sudden loss of taste/smell, cough or fever, may be COVID-19. Call your State hotline for testing.

Text 12 is characterised by a significant formation that is pragmatically substantial to learning. It is grounded in the imperative, declarative and imperative (Imperative + declarative+ imperative). In other words, it begins with the Imperative and ends with the imperative. Like a pyramidal structure or formation, it seems to be a formidable means for NCDC M-learning, probably because of its aptness. Nonetheless, caution is the watchword of the text. The first verbal imperative structure which precedes the declarative or that opens the discourse serves as a cautionary marker.

It advises or teaches on symptoms. But to properly situate the reader in the M-learning context, NCDC uses the declarative to further define what these symptoms are. As such, the declarative structure is used as an enhancer to the imperative that precedes it. As an enhancer, it aids the reader's cognition of the term being elaborated. To this end, while the first imperative is invested as a piece of advice rather than a strict command, the last imperative marker 'call' is deployed by NCDC as a cue to action. With it, the reader perceives the seriousness of the message and adjust to positive behaviour rather than that which will impede such instruction.

6. Conclusion:

The study so far has shown that the global scourge of COVID-19 is a disturbing phenomenon and that M-learning is pivotal to NCDC's success in minimizing the spread of the pandemic in Nigeria. The educational technology provides the NCDC a viable space in information dissemination as well as instantiates the best learning experience possible by ensuring that learners can learn wherever they are considering the ravaging nature of the virus. The malleability and solemnity of the selected text messages designate that the attitude of the NCDC is more of a concern rather than derision. The reason for this is not far-fetched. Some people are yet to agree to the existence of the virus; as such, they handle the situation with levity. With the aid of M-learning, NCDC makes its valid contribution towards the creation of social awareness that leads to behavioural adjustment as well as minimize the spread of the virus via the telephony aspect of the ICT. This teaching task through the telephonic medium is indeed worthwhile in learning. The study, from the perspective of the selected text messages, proves that M-learning is a channel that has huge access to information sharing amongst people, hence, bringing the entire nation into a knitted community. Considering both the language structure and propositional contents of the messages for learning purposes, the study unveils that, in an attempt to influence or persuade the reader concerning a particular situational context, NCDC reverts to distinct language patterns or choices such as the declarative and the imperative to construct diverse angles of interpretation of the messages conveyed. This dimension of the texts enhances not only the theme but as well as the ideational or experiential aspect of a discourse substantiated by context.

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