



A Semiotics of Cartoons in Two Nigerian Newspapers: *The Punch* and *The Guardian*

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the semiotics of cartoons using selected samples from *The punch* and *The Guardian*, newspapers based in Nigeria. It seeks to bridge the gap between semiotics and the act of cartooning. It also attempts to show the relationship between the cartoons and the semiotic resources employed. It analyses how the cartoonist have been able to manipulate symbols, signs with the addition of little verbal language to convey specific meaning. It also delves into the socio-cultural milieu of the cartoonist. This paper employed the Peircean model which it considers an appropriate approach to the analysis of cartoon texts. This is based on the fact that unlike the Saussurean dyadic or two-part model, the Peircean approach is triadic in nature and distinguishes the *object* from the *representamen*. The study equally examines the metaphorical manipulation of visual elements in the cartoons taking into cognizance such communicative components as: symbols, indexes, and icons. It foregrounds the iconic nature of the cartoon genre by pointing to, and bringing to the fore the semiotic elements deployed. It concludes that cartoons are actually multi-coded such that a sign may appear to one person as symbolic, to another as iconic and to a third as indexical. The implication being that a cartoon text is subject to diverse interpretations, though based on context - the semiotic world invoked by the cartoonist.

INTRODUCTION

The study of the language and meaning of cartoons has not been an area of much focus for scholars and media discourse analysts until recently. This paper, therefore, joins the changing trend to explore the creativity behind the cartoon genre. The rendering of any text whether fictional or non-fictional involves the ability to manipulate the linguistic and non-linguistic resources available to convey meaning. The cartoon genre is one aspect of art that utilizes semiotic elements to create a new world of meaning.

The study of semiotics is associated with the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure who in 1894 coined the term *semiology*. Saussure asserts that:

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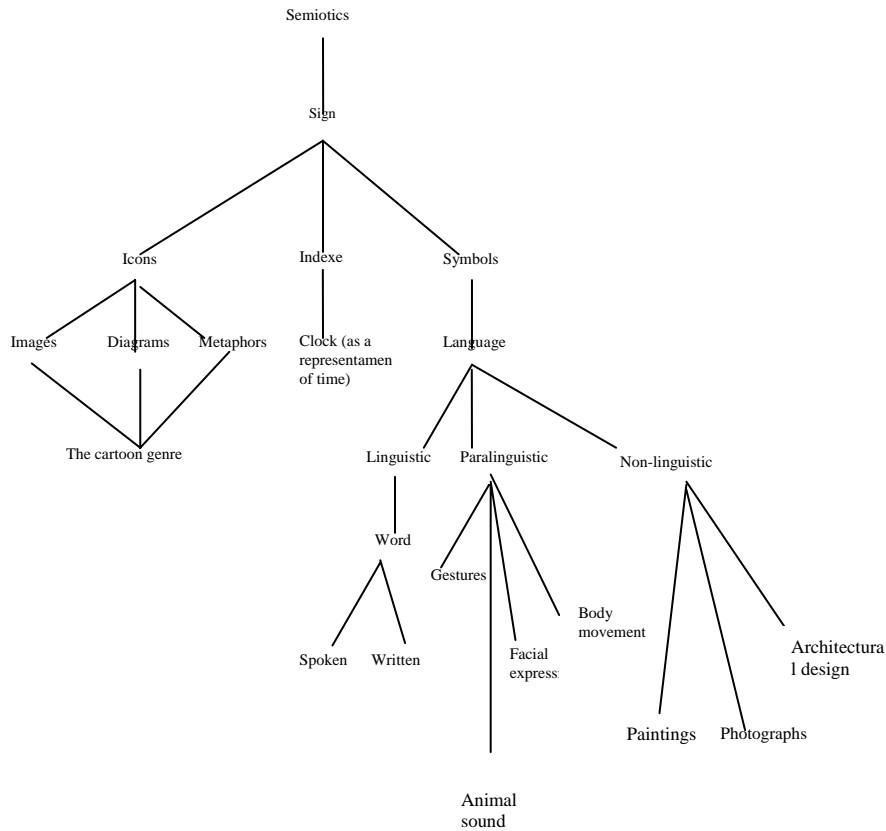
It is...possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it *semiology* (from the Greek *semeion*, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the law governing them. Since it does not yet exist, one cannot say for certain that it will exist. But it has a right to exist, a place ready for it in advance. Linguistics is only one branch of this general science. The laws which semiology will discover will be applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge. (Saussure, 1983:15-16 cited in Chandler, 2002:5-6).

For Saussure, semiology was a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, perceived the field of study which he called *semiotic* as the 'formal doctrine of signs' which was closely related to logic. Thus, Saussure and Peirce are seen as the co-founders of what is generally known as *Semiotics*. Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as signs in everyday speech, but of anything which stands for something else. It is the study of how meanings are made and how reality is represented.

Cartoons are amusing drawings or caricatures of people, things, places e.t.c. often depicting current events. The cartoon genre is a type of media discourse which is humorous in content and form. It could be a topical drawing on a newspaper which presents real or imaginary story with the aim of entertaining, educating, informing. It makes a caricature of and lampoons someone, institution, etc. According to *The world encyclopedia* (1995:216), cartoons generally are understood to be "drawings or series of drawing that tell a story or express a message with the aim of entertaining, teaching, or commenting about a person, event or state of affairs"(cited in Akindele and Oha, 2006:89). Akindele and Oha argue that cartoons are not just verbally represented, but can be represented non-verbally too. They add that the cartoonist has the right to create and suggest certain things about the different inner feelings of the character in the cartoon through visualization of different parts of the body.

Cartoonists have a way of presenting current issues in the society using characters' facial expressions, eyes, mouths, and even the cheeks to show emotions, such as: happiness, sadness, skepticism, cynicism, indifference, etc. The newspapers, magazines and televisions are the various avenues through which cartoonist showcase artistry. The print media (newspapers and magazines) are our concern in this study. The study examines how the Nigerian newspaper cartoonists have deployed signs in the form of indexes, icons, symbols to convey meaning. The print media cartoons are powerful instruments of communication. Katinge Kaviti (2006:59-60) contends that cartoons are more than just plain humour or satire, that they also influence

attitude and values in the minds of the audience. The following schema explains the relationship between cartoons and semiotics:



(Essien-Eyo and Ottoh, 2009:149)

The schema above explains graphically the relationship between semiotics and other fields which convey information and meaning.

The Importance of Cartoons

One of the functions of the print media is to serve as a check in the society. As well as using direct verbal information, cartooning is another of such avenues. It serves as a mirror (reflector), a watchdog, and a conciliator to the actions of persons, institutions or the government. This research seeks to explore the way cartoonists in Nigeria are able to utilize the linguistic and non-linguistic elements within their creative sphere to inform, entertain, educate and satirize.

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The paper, therefore, examines how the cartoonist has been able to represent an actual situation using symbols, icons and indexes to project a message given the limited space provided him by the editor and the art form. It also tries to determine the connections or interactions between the sign, the object, and the interpretant and in what ways people relate the semiotic world of cartoons to the Nigerian socio-political realities?

Theoretical considerations

The Peircean model serves as the framework for the analyses of texts in this study. This is because the model considers a triadic approach to *the sign*. It sees the sign as consisting of *the representamen*, *the interpretant* and *the object*, as opposed the Saussurean model which identifies a dyadic (two)-component to *the sign*: the signifier and the signified. The Peircean approach takes into consideration a cognitive interpretation of the text. It sees the text as being multi-coded, having diverse perspectives and levels of interpretation. Therefore, analysis is based on the analyst's ability to see beyond the ordinary text or discourse. The model recognizes different ways in which a sign accomplishes its communicative task. Charles Sanders Peirce, a pragmatist philosopher and logician adopted his terms from the 17th century philosopher, John Locke. Peirce distinguishes his model of the sign, of "semiotic" and of the taxonomies of signs from Saussure's. He asserts that:

"A sign...(in the form of a representamen) is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of representamen. (Peirce, 1931-58, 2.228 cited in Chandler, 2002:32-33).

The model provides a semiotic triangle which describes the notion of dialogical thought. And in Peircean terms, it describes the interaction or relationship between the representamen (the form which the sign takes), the object (something to which the sign refers) and the interpretant (the sense made of a sign or the interpreter's reaction of the sign). This interaction Peirce calls SEMIOSIS. Peirce argues that 'all thinking is dialogic in form', which means that the signs in a text are in dialogue with each other, such that no sign is meaningful in isolation. Peirce provides us with the idea that a sign can be a representation of another sign provided the context is determined. Following his model in their writings are scholars such as Charles William Morris, Ivor A. Richard, Charles K. Ogden and Thomas Sebeok.

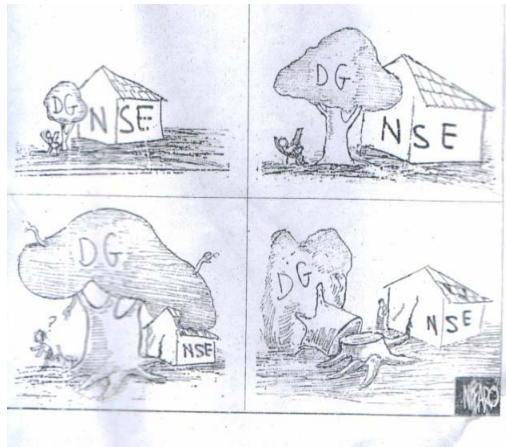
Apart from the Peircean model which serves as the major framework for this study, insights from Roland Barthes and Louis Hjelmslev's (followers of

the Saussure's model), view the iconic image would also be helpful. Also relevant is Charles Morris' five communicative components to the study of meaning. Such as: the sign, the interpreter, the interpretant, the denotatum, and the significatum.

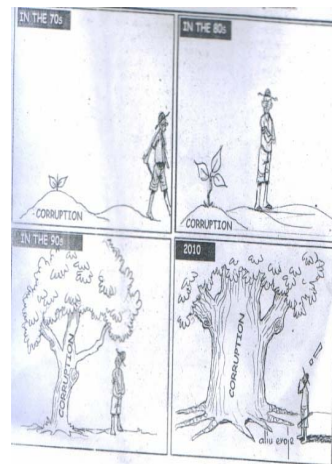
Data Analysis

The Data for analysis is primarily from the *The punch* and *The guardian* newspapers published in August, 2010. Six newspaper cartoons are analysed, one from *The guardian* and five from *The punch*. The Peircean approach to the study of the sign, Chandler (2002), and Johansen and Larsen (2002) serve as our guide to the analyses of the texts.

Iconic representation and the semiotic world of cartoons



Cartoon 1



Cartoon 2

The cartoons above portray a metaphorical manipulation of visual icons. For instance, the tree and house in the four sketches in Cartoon 1 are used to depict the relationship between the Director General (written DG) of the Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE) and the agency. This is an example of what Harris (1996) calls, a semiotic world. For Harris, the cartoon world is symbolically represented by the cartoonist to capture events in the real world. Thus, the semiotic world invoked by the cartoonist in this cartoon text is the crisis in the Nigerian Stock Exchange and the removal of the DG, Mrs. Ndidi Okereke-Onyuike from office in 2010. The cartoonist's creative space is

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fore-grounded as the icons in the text convey deep meaning if limited semiotic resources are applied.

The cartoon is divided into four scenes. In the first scene, there is a tree (signifying the DG's office), a diagram of someone sitting under the tree (representing the DG), and a house (representing the agency, NSE). The tree here is smaller than the house (the agency). In scene two, the tree shows a significant growth and becomes of equal proportion to the house.

By the third scene, the tree has grown bigger and stronger than the house. It has become a 'timber and calibre' (in Nigerian terms) in itself. The implication is that the director has become bigger and stronger than the agency. The climax is arrived at when the tree almost pushed down the house labeled NSE which is portrayed as small and dilapidated. The denouement comes in scene four where to resolve the conflict the tree is cut down to prevent the house from falling.

The sketches and the few letters used to label them tell a story. The director had grown too big and more important, probably, in her own eyes, than the office she was to oversee so she had to be removed. The rapid increase in the size of the tree as compared with the decrease in the size of the office (the house) indicate the extra powers she had arrogated to herself. The agency was almost submerged but for the intervention of the Federal Government, symbolically, the cutting down of the tree.

The cartoonist, used a non-human but living symbol, (a tree) which is capable of growth and a house (an enclosure) which seemingly, do not have any direct connection with the real objects (the Director General and the Nigerian Stock Exchange). A life tree growing within a house would be stifled and even if it is growing outside, its roots or branches would disturb a house if it grows very big and is very close to it. The DG is alive and growing and difficult to be restrained and therefore required the drastic action finally taken.

The cartoon world invoked in **Cartoon 2** is the Nigerian socio-political scene from the 1970s to the present. The cartoon presents four scenes, representing different periods in Nigerian history. The first scene portrays the implantation of corruption in Nigeria in the 70s symbolized here by the planting of a tree by an unnamed man. This scene, significantly, is entitled 'IN THE 70S'. This unnamed man is a metaphor for anybody; a group of persons or an institution. In the second scene entitled 'IN THE 80S', the farmer (the person who had planted the tree) stands aloof looking at the tree as if measuring its growth. From the sketches, the difference between the trees in Cartoon 1 and Cartoon 2 is very negligible. The cartoonist seems to be saying that the rate of growth of corruption within those two decades was very slow. This is in contrast to rapid growth of the tree in the next ten years.

By the 90s, the shoot which became a sapling in the 1980s had become a mature tree portraying a significantly high rate of growth. Metaphorically, therefore, the rapid growth of the tree represents the rapid growth of corruption in Nigeria within that period. The tree has become so mighty that even the farmer seems baffled by it. The climax comes in the last scene

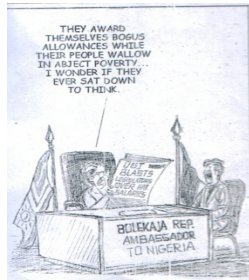
entitled '2010' by which time corruption had grown to such unmanageable proportions that it needed to be pruned down. The 'farmer' therefore comes with a machete to cut down the tree, but the tree had grown so much that its roots had become tentacles, its branches spread over a wide area and the trunk so mighty that the planter alone could not uproot it. The farmer is amazed at its size.

Unlike the first three sketches which spanned a decade each, the fourth concentrates on only one year. The cartoonist seems to be saying that the magnitude of corruption in Nigeria in 2010 alone is greater than that of any other year or even decades. Corruption has spread all over the country and the people are helpless because it is too powerful to fight.

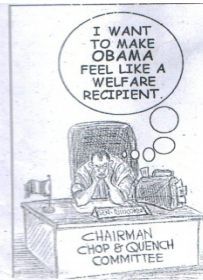
Corruption, an abstract term, is given life, and made to grow - the tree in Cartoon 2. This implies that corruption is alive and growing, either rapidly or otherwise. The cartoonist's ingenuity is displayed in his ability to create meaning out of seemingly unrelated signs. Signs are meaningless when they are interpreted out of context. Context is an important term in the analyses of any text. Signs are also meaningless when they are singled out, that is when they do not interact with each other in context.

The cartoonist, thus, showcases his ability to synthesize the linguistic and non-linguistic, the abstract and intuitive symbols for proper signification. The symbol of 'the man' invoked in the cartoons is that of intuition. Intuitive symbols are those with a close resemblance with what they signify. Moreover, the cartoons analyzed here are iconically represented to capture the events in the Nigerian polity. Both cartoons employ the tree symbol with corruption undertone. Although the tree in Cartoon 2 specifically labeled corruption, the tree in Cartoon 1 illustrates 'status; class or position as it describes the office of the Director General of the Nigerian Stock Exchange. The principles of closure, similarity and proximity are deployed to show the interaction between the representamen, the object and the interpretant.

Codes and structures: Intercodal relation of cartoon texts.



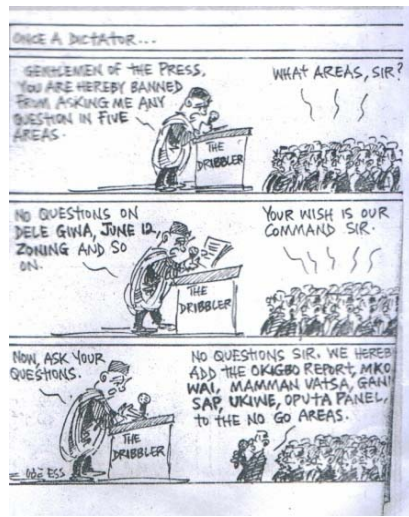
Cartoon 3



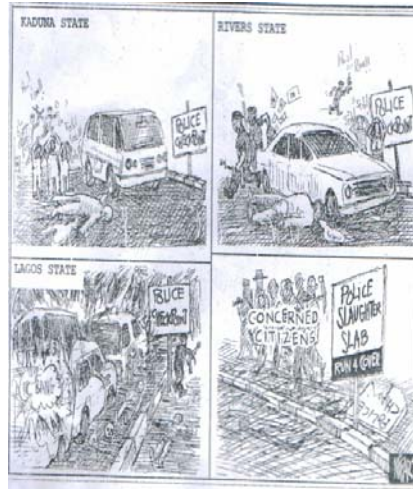
Cartoon 4



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Cartoon 5



Cartoon 6

Cartoons can also be seen as representing the relationship between codes and structures. In such contexts are to enter into intercodical relationships. Codes can be structural or processual. According to Roman Jakobson (1960), codes are context based and are dependent on convention. To him, “a code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework”(see Chandler, 2002). A code therefore is the uniting force between the addresser and the addressee. In sum, the cartoon genre is a semiotic code within which readers are positioned as ‘ideal readers’ through the use of particular modes of address.

A sign addresses a specific audience and as Charles Peirce (1931) declares, signs address us within particular codes. Peirce adds that nothing is a sign until it is interpreted as a sign. Thus, anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as signifying something.

The concept of structure in semiotics depends on other mechanisms - processual codes to convey meaning. Semiotics is not based on the concepts of structure but on the concept of the sign that results from the cooperative action of various structures. Structure refers to the interaction of various components which together form a sign and the relationship between signs and the reality to which they represent.

Cartoon 3 above should be seen in the above light. It is presented in two scenes. In the first scene two people, are seen who appear to be citizens of another country since the inscription on the table in front of them says it is the office of an ambassador to Nigeria from Bolekaja republic country. The interpretation would only be relevant if it has the context and the relationship between signs and the reality they represent at the background. The context in this case is the Nigerian political scene.

The country is, strangely, named 'Bolekaja', a Yoruba word which means literally, 'Come down, let us fight'. It was the name given to crude passenger lorries which plied the city of Lagos between the 1970s and 80 and which were usually in bad conditions and also so overcrowded that the passengers were often in short temper. Fights often broke out amongst them as if they blamed one another for their discomfort. The ambassador is presented as a BOLEKAJA critic of his country of residence.

One of the officials is seen reading a newspaper which has the headline, OBJ BLASTS LEGISLATORS OVER FAT SALARIES while the other comments that Nigerian legislators give themselves bogus allowances whereas the citizenry wallow in abject poverty. Ironically, the person criticizing the government is the immediate past president of Nigeria who during his tenure was accused of amassing wealth for himself. It is amusing that he had now turned critic. Because of who he is, the value and sincerity of his criticism is questionable. The cartoon also suggests that the lopsided political situation in Nigeria is obvious to the outside world as the comment by the foreign official seems to attest and that other nations are not happy with the situation.

The person in the second scene juxtaposed with this is obviously a Nigerian. First of all, he is the chairman of a committee named significantly, 'Chop an Quench'. 'Chop' in Nigerian pidgin means 'eat' so the committee is one in which the members can arrogate wealth to themselves to any lengths without any fear of reprisals. 'Quench' means to put out a fire, that is 'to kill' the fire. Therefore the name of the committee is 'Eat and Die', being a hyperbolic way of referring to the magnitude of the misappropriation of funds that usually accompany political offices. The element of exaggeration is also evident in the thought ascribed to the chairman when he says, 'I want to make Obama feel like a welfare recipient'.

The cartoon fore-grounds the Nigerian political scene. It portrays the degree of the greed of Nigerian politicians. The politician in the cartoon is so sure he will realize his dreams that he sees the possibility of his becoming richer than Obama, the president of the world's foremost nation. He sees himself becoming so rich that in comparison, Obama would seem like someone on social security. In addition, the committee could be a bogus one set up just to provide more avenues for amassing wealth.

In Cartoon 4, a healthy human hand clothed in a black suit is seen squeezing the life out of a tiny human figure that already looked skeletal. This could mean, the rich oppressing the poor or the government oppressing the governed. The hand labeled HARSHIP is a representamen of a situation (economic hardship) in the society. The situation is exaggerated by the contrast between a healthy-looking hand and a sickly-skinny person. If the country is undergoing economic hardship then why is the hand that is doing the squeezing so robust. The inequality in Nigeria is therefore foregrounded.

Cartoon 5 is centred on a particular personality. It is an indexical representation of someone who from what he says is likely to be IBB,

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(Ibrahim Babangida), one of Nigeria's former presidents. He is aptly named the Dribbler here and during his tenure in office he was referred to as Maradona after one famous Argentinean footballer because of his skill in fielding questions and dodging situations. It is a caricature of a press conference organized for him. During such occasions, the pressmen are expected to be free to ask questions of the president from any area. Strangely, that is not the case here, the president lists areas from which he would not entertain questions. As such, the press conference is a sham. The pressmen understand this and so add other sensitive areas to the ones mentioned by the president and so decide that there is no need to ask questions at all if they cannot seek clarification on matters of interest to them and the general public.

This cartoon ridicules Babangida's political ambition towards the 2011 presidential campaign. As president he was not transparent and there were certain things which happened to which he offered little or no explanation. The cartoonist therefore wonders about his chances of success since the people already know what to expect from him.

Cartoon 6 is multi-panel with four scenes. The first three scenes depict police check points in three states: Kaduna state in northern Nigeria, Rivers in the south-south and Lagos in the west, representing different parts of the country. Police check points were supposed to be spots on the highway where crime is checked or where those who break traffic rules are apprehended. The situation in Nigeria is different because there is usually a traffic pile up while the police officers are engaged in collecting bribes from motorists – both offenders and law-abiding ones. The result is that accidents often occur at such points because of the obstruction to free flow of traffic and some of such accidents are fatal.

In the different scenes are seen some vehicles that were involved in different collisions and the bodies of some casualties strewn about. Significantly, the sign post at each of the first three scenes reads 'Police Check Point' but at the last scene it is entitled 'Police Slaughter Slab'. It is as if the police set out deliberately to kill people and so prepare a place to carry out the 'job'.

By the last scene, there is some protest and the sign post is pulled down by 'Concerned Citizens' who see such points as slaughter spots. The cartoonist portrays this by littering the scene with skulls. The use of skulls instead of just corpses is an hyperbolic way of saying that the carnage had been going on for so many years that some corpses had become skulls but the crime was still being perpetrated.

CONCLUSION

Cartoonists use visual but mostly a combination of visual with minimal linguistic materials available to them in the art form to create and project their message. They try to represent a world through the use of signs. The

images created by the cartoonist are interpretable when viewed from the sociolinguistic milieu of the artist. The cartoons analyzed in this paper are mostly from *the Punch* newspaper based in Nigeria and therefore present situations relevant to the Nigerian environment. The signs used by the cartoonist are predominantly local but sometimes universal. For instance, the ambassador's office has the usual furniture but, in addition, it contains two flags – one representing the host country and the other that of the foreign official.

The cartoonist have combined social and linguistic context effectively to creative sketches that tell stories. The concept of semiotics has helped the analyst in assigning meaning. Cartooning has gone a long way in Nigeria but there is still room for improvement.

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