COGNITIVE VERBS AND STANCE TAKING IN NIGERIAN JOBS AND CAREERS PORTALS ONLINE[1]

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Abstract

This study investigates participants stance-taking in Nigerian job and career online discussion groups focusing on the use of the cognitive verb *think*. It explores the frequency of the use of the verb, its common positions, its clusters and some typical functions it performs in these discussion boards. The findings show that while the expression of cognition through the use of the verb *think* in the corpus may be similar to what obtains in English as a mother tongue speech context in terms of frequency of occurrence, its syntactic positioning and clusters mirror the patterns typical of some major Nigerian languages. The peculiarities of the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) mode are also found to influence the clusters the verb takes in the discussions. The study therefore concludes that the use of *think* for cognition in online communication is shaped by the peculiarities of the Nigerian sociolinguistic context as well as the CMC context.

Keywords: Stance-taking, *think*, unemployment, online forum, cognitive verb, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Every interactive discourse is characterized by varied and complex epistemic and evidential expressions and a major approach to analyzing such kind of discourse focuses on extracting the embedded communicative significance of such expressions, which are referred to in the literature as stance markers (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Englebretson, 2007; Ginzburg, 2012). Since meaning in dialogue is socially constructed, participants in a discourse construct their utterances to reflect their attitudes, feelings and commitments to the status of the information they are providing in them. Studies on stance-taking have approached it from different perspectives. A group of studies have focused on differences in stance taking in spoken and written registers (Biber, 2006a; 2006b); differences in stance-taking between native and non-native speakers of English (Baumgarten & House, 2007; 2010; Hyland, 2004; Mauranen, 1993). Others have focused on linguistic contexts such as news interviews (Haddington, 2004, 2006); political discourse (Fetzer, 2008; Lempert, 2009); academic writing (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Hyland, 2005). The scope of scholarship in stance taking has expanded in the last decade since the popularization of online discourse. The cyberspace has presented myriad opportunities for engagement in public sphere discussions. In order to uncover participants' attitudes, expression of beliefs and certainty toward co-interactants, people outside discourse context and specific issues, studies on online discourse have focused on specific lexical and grammatical expressions which tend to reveal such issues. There have been a number of studies on stance taking in online discourse emanating from fields related to functional interactional linguistics, such as

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sociolinguistics, discourse and conversation analysis, and linguistic anthropology (Langlotz & Locher, 2012; Chandrasegaran & Kong, 2006; Claridge, 2007; Myers, 2010; Somasundaran & Wiebe, 2010).

Online discussion boards allow users to share opinions, take positions and discuss various topics. Past studies have shown that a closer look at the way vocabulary is used in these online public forums suggests that 'the main concern of writers is self-presentation, positioning themselves in a crowded forum, in what has been called stance-taking' (Myers, 2010, p. 1). Just as in other parts of the world, internet facilities have provided greater avenues for the youth population in Nigeria to engage themselves in all sorts of activities online. Most of them engage the social media for networking and sharing common interests with people. With this advancement in technology, there has been a growth in the number of websites for discussing jobs and careers related issues. This gives the young people access to information on jobs and career enhancement. It also helps them to discuss as well as share experiences on their challenges and learn from others on the best ways to hunt for jobs in the country. These young people constitute a virtual community with shared interest (unemployment, under-employment and career development and enhancement) in different asynchronous internet forums, and their discussions are characterized by certain discursive and pragmatic features which are of interest to the present study. This study is inspired by the extensive variety of conversations now freely available online and possible ways participants mark their stances (aligning themselves with other participants and posts, as well as signaling their own distinctiveness) through the use of cognitive verbs. Existing studies on stance taking in public blogs have investigated political, academic as well as general topic weblogs. Myers (2010) for instance, notes how writers mark their stance in public discussion blogs through the use of the cognitive expression *I think.* This expression shows different ways of "signalling a relation to others, marking disagreement, enacting surprise, and ironicising previous contributions" (Myers, 2010, p. 1). As noted in previous studies, the contextual affordances of different discussion in websites vary a great deal (Anand, *et al.*, 2011). One important contextual variable in discussions in Nigerian online job portals is cognition of the general experience of frustrations by Nigerian unemployed graduates and the state of the nation. This work is based on the premise that the use of the cognitive verb *think* to mark stance in online job portals may be different from its use in other kinds of public blogs.

2. Youth Unemployment in Nigeria

Youth unemployment is one of the most critical socio-economic challenges facing economies of the world, particularly the developing ones. Unemployment and under-employment rates have continued to worsen in many developing economies of the world, especially in sub-Sahara Africa (*World Youth Report*, 2011). The International Labour Organization (ILO) recently indicated that 'the world is facing a worsening youth employment crisis: young people are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults' (http://www.ilo.org). The unemployment rate in Nigeria according to the National Bureau of Statistics in 2011 is 23.9%. Nigeria is also said to have one of the worst youth unemployment rates in sub-Sahara Africa. This, according to a United Nations report, published by *Premium Times* of September 13, 2012 implies that 'two in five Nigerian youths are unemployed'. According to the United Nations, the youth population accounts

for about 35% of the entire estimated population of 170 million people. Youth unemployment reality in Nigeria has a wide range of implications for social stability in the country. The recent social unrest and crime in the country manifesting in kidnapping and hostage taking, armed robbery, ritual killings, internet scam, and so forth can be traced to the rising youth unemployment and under-employment (Okafor, 2011, Ajufo, 2013).

A 2012 National Baseline Youth Survey Report issued in Abuja by the National Bureau of Statistics in collaboration with the Federal Ministry of Youths Development says that 54% of Nigerian youths were unemployed (*Vanguard*, December 13, 2013). Scholars have identified some of the causes of youth unemployment in Nigeria which include the following: rural-urban migration, rapid population growth, low standard of education, rapid expansion of the educational system, lack of steady and sustainable power supply, the perception of policy makers and the youth on employment and corruption (Adebayo, 1999; Ayinde, 2008; Ajufo, 2012; Uddin and Uddin, 2013).

In the last ten years, graduate unemployment has been growing at an alarming rate. Gbosi (2005) observed that the current proliferation of higher educational institutions and those seeking higher education for white-collar jobs is the main factor responsible for the rising graduate unemployment in Nigeria. The proliferation of tertiary institutions in the country, especially with the issuance of license to individuals and religious missions to establish colleges, polytechnics and universities, has greatly reduced academic standards. The possession of degrees, diplomas and certificates from a higher institution in the country no longer guarantees communication skills or technical competence. Closely related to this, according to Gbosi, (2005) is the problem of mismatch between educational and economic planning. Every year, about 1.8 million graduates enter the labour market with very little hope of securing gainful employment. This makes the labour market highly competitive. Incessant industrial actions by academic staff unions in government-owned institutions due to government's reluctance to honour agreements entered into with them has led to instability in the educational system. Poor funding and conditions of service have impacted on the quality of education, thereby reflecting on the quality of graduates eventually produced. In order to cope with the large number of responses to job advertisement placements, most organizations in Nigeria (both government and private) have now resorted to conducting aptitude tests, which are typically outsourced to job consultants. Such aptitude tests have also been observed not to have much to do with the competence of these graduates in their fields of study or job schedules. The result is that job-seekers now memorise specimen questions and answers contained in books of past questions and solutions in order to pass such tests and possibly get recruited.

In a bid to meet up with the current and best practices in labour and personnel management in the digital age, most government agencies in the country have created websites through which the public could get to know more about and interact better with them. Vacancies are often published on these websites for wider accessibility and they usually require job-seekers to purchase internet scratch cards from banks or other sales outfits, which charge commissions, in order to access these websites and apply for these jobs. Many employers in recent times also limit the category of qualified applicants to holders of first class and second class (upper) degree, as well as people below particular age brackets. In addition, some of them demand cognate work experience for most of the positions they advertise in their organizations.

Some exploiters also capitalize on the acute youth unemployment in the country by taking advantage of many helpless Nigerian graduate job seekers. Such exploiters include companies popularly referred to as employment consultants or work-engagement centers, whose owners are typically business people who scout for organizations in need of employees. Such organizations demand registration fees and agreement to pay a percentage of or the entire first month salary as fee for its services. Another group of people are scammers who extort money from job seekers with the promise of securing them jobs. They could be employees of the recruiting organization or other people who claim to have connection to the top management of the organization. In order to create a network for Nigerian job seekers and those seeking to advance their careers, a number of websites have sprung up. Some of the popular ones are Naijahotjobs, JobsSearchNigeria, Nigeriajobslink, Nigeriabestjobs, CVShore, Ngcareers.com, Joblistnigeria, Hotnigerianjobs, Latestnigerianjobs, Jobberman, Gblcareers, and Naijabestjobs. In addition to serving as platforms for job seeking, some of these websites have discussion groups or boards, where some of these issues arising from the acute unemployment problem in the country are discussed daily. The process of production and of the discourse of the participants in these portals is not free from the social conditions of production of such text. This study therefore focuses on the use of the cognitive verb *think* in taking stance in online job portals and how cognition about the general experience of frustrations by unemployed Nigerian graduates and the state of the nation manifests in these stance markings.

3. Stance-taking in discourse

Linguistic mechanisms used for indicating personal expressions of commitment to or attitudes about a person or proposition in discourse have been given different labels, such as 'evaluation', 'evidentiality', 'hedging', and 'stance' (Biber, 2004; Gales, 2011). Biber and Finegan (1989, p. 124), define stance as 'the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgements, or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message'. DuBois (2007) defines stance as:

> a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field (p. 163).

Hyland (2005, p. 176) refers to stance as 'a textual voice' that reflects how 'writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions and commitments'. Some identified common stance marking items in discourse are: stance adverbs (*certainly, definitely*); evaluative adjectives (*excellent, natural*); discourse particles (*well, okay, of course*); modal verbs (*can, may, will*); cognitive verbs (*think, know, believe*). Other stance indicators can be found in grammar and prosody.

Stance-taking has been studied in different discourse types including academic discourse (Hyland, 2005), political discourse (Fetzer, 2008; Lempert, 2009; Arrese, 2011), and media discourse (Haddington, 2006; Haarman & Lombardo, 2009). The literature on stance taking in online discourse can be divided into two groups: stance-taking in online educational context (Chandrasegaran & Kong, 2006; Hewings, 2012) and in public blogs (Myers, 2009, 2010; Rahimpour, 2013).

Englebretson (2007) explored how speakers and writers, take stances in natural discourse. Some of the overt linguistic expressions that index stance according to him are adverbials, modals, evaluative adjectives and nouns, complement clauses and complement taking predicates. In a qualitative analysis of the tokens in *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (SBCSAE) and the *British National Corpus* (BNC), according to Englebretson (2007), five conceptual principles define stance. Firstly, it occurs at three levels: physical action, personal attitude/belief/evaluation and social morality. Secondly, "stance is public, perceivable, interpretable and available for inspection by others" (p. 6). Thirdly, stance is interactional in nature and collaboratively constructed with respect to other stances. Fourthly, stance indexes and evokes aspects of socio-cultural and physical contexts of the interaction and lastly, stance consequently leads to real outcomes for the interactants (p.6)

Langlotz & Locher, (2012) in a descriptive study of how emotional stance is engaged in online conflicts and disagreements, investigated 120 English postings from the *Mail Online* and argued that participants when interacting in the commentary section of an online newspaper express their orientation to this socio-communicative world of experience through emotional stance. They identified the complex and dynamic links between emotional display, disagreement and relational work and concluded that emotional stance is present through the display strategies of conceptual implication, explicit expression, and emotional description.

Chandrasegaran & Kong (2006) explored stance-taking and stance-support in students' asynchronous online forum discussion. The study was carried out to test the effect of a method of teaching expository writing in two upper secondary schools in Singapore. To find out if stance-taking and stance-support acts are within the verbal repertoires of the selected upper secondary students in a typical Singapore school, the authors examined a collection of the students' postings on a school-administered online discussion forum. The authors also observed that in addition to the projection of stance, many of the stance support strategies ranging from "assertion of personal belief to rebuttal of anticipated" also feature in the discussion (p.374). The stance-projection acts observed in the students' discussion include evaluation of issues, expression of attitudinal meanings, of degree of commitment to the truth of claims, and amplification of evaluative and attitudinal meanings. They also observe that "more sophisticated strategies, like countering anticipated objection through hypothesised outcomes, appear to be activated by students' enthusiastic interest in an issue about which they have some topic knowledge" (p.389). The study concluded that the knowledge derived from the findings on the students' awareness of stance taking and support strategies can be used in constructing lessons that will teach them the less familiar ones.

The main concern of participants in discussion in public blogs according to Myers (2010) is to position themselves in a crowded forum by presenting their contribution as distinctive, and showing their entitlement to a position. Myers showed this through an analysis of specific stance markers, especially the cognitive verb *think*, stance adverbials, conversational particles and irony. Myers demonstrates how cognitive verbs were engaged to show relationships of persons rather than mark epistemic uncertainty. Adverbs, when used at the initial part of a comment, perform the function of contrasting such comments with the previous ones. Myers also observes that conversational particles were used to show hesitation, surprise or self-interruption (p.17), while ironies were employed to "dramatize

an opposing position to undermine it" (p.21). Similar to Myers study is Rahimpour (2013), which is an investigation of self-presentation in discussion of public issues in some popular blogs. The use of cognitive verbs, stance adverbs and conversational particles were examined. The result is similar to Myers' findings.

The elasticity of *I think* is the focus of Zhang and Sabet (2014). These scholars' investigation of the use of the expression by L1 American English speakers and L2 Chinese and Persian speakers revealed the manifestation of three "stretchable, non-discrete and fluid continua of frequency, position and cluster' (p.21). *I think* is therefore said to be elastic in terms of how many times it may be used, where it may be positioned, and with what it may combine. Their study reveals different orientations in the use of *I think* by L1, Chinese and Persian speakers. While L1 speakers are "more speaker-oriented and assertive", Persian speakers are "more listener-oriented and Chinese speakers' orientation is somewhere in between (p. 1). The study also stresses that the different uses of *I think* between L1 and L2 speakers are not necessarily an indication of overuse or underuse, but different focuses and preferences.

This present study is connected to earlier studies because its major pre-occupation is stance-taking which has been handled extensively by these studies and several others. While the subject matter and aspects of the approach to the study of stance in discourse may be similar to earlier studies, the focus of the present study is different in terms of the discourse context. While most of the existing studies focus on stance taking in public blogs or online learning forums, this study investigates the discourse of the unemployed graduates whose stance taking can vary considerably from what obtains in other public discourse due to the kinds of topics generally discussed. Most existing studies on the unemployed were carried out by sociologists, economist and psychologists. Linguistic studies of the discourse of the unemployed online as far as I know, especially in the developing world, are almost non-existent. A study of this nature, which addresses the ways the unemployed in Nigeria position themselves in a public forum and convey their judgments, opinions, and commitments is necessary because it gives a better understanding of the social problem of unemployment in Nigeria and the attitudes of Nigerian graduates to it.

4. Data and Methodology

This study is based on a mini corpus of 40 postings together with their comments consisting of 139,104 words extracted from two online discussion boards. They are *Naijahotjobs* and *Nairaland. Naijahotjobs* is a Nigerian graduate jobs and vacancies career forum. The forum is designated as a forum for job searchers and people who want to boost their career advancement. It is reputed to be the largest website for jobs and vacancies in Nigeria. It has four major sections: Hotjobs, which features job vacancies placements; Career Talk Centre, where educative and motivational information are placed; General Discussion, where people share their employment related experiences; and the 'Xtras', where participants can place their testimonies and suggest changes. As at the end of the period of data collection, the forum had 278,405 topics, 585,464 posts and 294,429 members. *Naijahotjobs* can be found at: http://www.naijahotjobs.com/

Nairaland is a general interest website with several discussion sections including: entertainment, politics, romance, jokes, culture, religion, education, jobs/vacancies, fashion, and sports. I focused on the job/vacancies section, where activities are similar to what

obtains in *Naijahotjobs*. *Nairaland* is Nigeria's largest online forum and discussion portal. As at the end of the period of data collection, *Nairaland* had 1,197,966 members, 1,537,878 topics and more than 600,000 page views per day. The website can be found at: http://www.nairaland.com/. The dialogical and conversational style on the discussion portals reflects discourses characterized by exchanges of views and opinions. The members of these two forums are seen as having formed a virtual community that is characterized by linguistic as well as social variation.

Through a systematic observation of and participation in the discussions, the postings together with threads of discussions on them were selected from these discussion portals between January 2013 and March 2014. This period which falls within the time this research was being carried out was chosen to be able to capture the most recent discussions in the portals. The topics were chosen in order to elicit the linguistic expression of opinions, beliefs, feelings and personal experiences. In each of the postings and discussion threads, instances of cognitive verbs employed for stance taking were noted and analyzed. Specific attention was given to the cognitive verb *think* because of its high frequency. According to Kidd *et al*. (2010), the verb *think* has special status amongst English complement-taking verbs (CTVs) because it has an arguably separate and highly frequent role as an epistemic marker (see Thompson, 2002). Cognitive verbs have attracted a lot of attention in linguistics and this is particularly true of *think*, when it collocates with the first person singular pronoun *I*. According to Baumgarten & House (2010: 1186), '*I think* is the single most frequent *I + verb* combination in the spoken components of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and British National Corpus (BNC)'. Since online discussions are typically known to be characterized by emotive and cognitive behaviours which denote participants' psychological dispositions to the topic, this study set out to investigate the manifestation of this verb in a non-native English discussion online.

Participants in online job and career portals discuss several issues, mainly those related to their job seeking and career advancement. Members will normally post anything related to employment and other members will comment. Such posting could be a piece of information about a recruitment exercise about to take place or that has taken place, some educative or motivational piece for members, job vacancies, news items, and so forth. While some postings attract several comments, others do not. Posts that address topics that are generally debated offline tend to attract more comments than those that are merely informational in nature. As observed by Myers (2010, p. 5), 'threads tend to fray over time, leading on to other discussions, either because of a deliberate deviation from the topic by one commenter, or because of the gradual mutation of one topic into another'. Also, as it is typical of most discussion forums, there are trolls who start threads with controversial postings which usually generate heated debates. There are also trolls who wait for others to make postings before they bring in their disruptive comments (Taiwo, 2014, p. 69). Some of the topics that dominate discussions in the portals are: age requirements for employment, aptitude tests for job applicants, discrimination against mono and polytechnic graduates, the use of quota system[2] to fill vacant positions, desperation of graduates for white-collar jobs,

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[2] Quota system is a system of selection for any position that takes into account the multi/ethnic and religious situation of the country. The system usually stipulates that a certain percentage of those selected must be of a given ethnic, religious and/or of a particular sex

employment agencies scams, class of degree and prospect of securing jobs, and how recruitment tests are conducted.

Findings and Discussion

The first step was to identify instances of cognitive verbs in the data. Findings reveal that eleven cognitive verbs are frequently used in the data. They are: *think, know, believe, imagine, hope, guess, understand, wonder, feel, see* and *realize*. There are 64 occurrences of *I think* out of the total number of 84 occurrences of *I* (the speaker). A few of them are used for other purposes, such as demanding cognition from other participants (e.g., *think* and *imagine*). Table 1 below presents the overall frequency of cognitive verbs in the data

Table 1: Cognitive verbs frequency

Cognitive verbs	Frequency	Percentage
think	96	32.6
know	72	24.5
believe	27	9.1
imagine	22	7.5
hope	19	6.4
guess	15	5.1
understand	13	4.4
wonder	12	4.1
feel	7	2.4
see	7	2.4
realize	4	1.4
Total	294	100

Below are some instances of the use of cognitive verbs in the corpus.

Ex. 1   ___*i think*___ *EFCC should investigate the activities of such agencies, they - jobsearch consultancy are now on another scam called nationwide aptitude tests*
[3]*NHJ D17: 419 Recruitment Agencies*

Ex.2   ___*I know*___ *you may have a reason for stating a minimum of 2.1/upper credit as the requirement, one of which might be population control, but for the sake of well spirited Nigerian graduates who didnt meet that class of degree during their school days, try and make it open for all degree holders, irrespective of class.*
NLD D31: An Open letter to all employers

Ex. 3   *what about us that did not fail? cos* ___*i believe*___ *i can never fail that test and i was not called for any interview. most time level of intellegency does not determine your chance of getting job in this country.*
NHJ D02: 80% job seekers failed NNPC aptitude test

Ex 4   *most of these employers give age limit thatts practically unrealistic.* ___*I hope*___ *most of us saw the requirement for access bank recruitment.*

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[3] This is a way of codifying the data and identifying where examples are taken from. So I typically have the name of the web portal followed by the data, its serial numbering within the entire corpus and the topic of discussion. NHJ = *Naijahotjobs*, D = data and the then the number. NLD = Nairaland

Ex. 5   It was rili disappointing. I also wrote d exam UI venue in ibadan. phillips
consulting firm needs to kick up their heels cos they showed their mediocrity to d
highest level yday... **i guess** mediocrity is in d incipient disease that is killing us
rapidly in nigeria... so sad
NLD D12: Sampede @ NNPC Recruitment

Ex.1 is a response to a posting in which participants' attention was being drawn to
recruitment agencies scams in Nigeria. A particular agency called Jobsearch Consultancy
Services was identified as one of the notorious agencies involved in scamming
unsuspecting job searchers. The writer of Ex.1 was calling for an investigation of the
agency by the nation's economic and financial crimes organization. In Ex. 2 the writer is
making an appeal to employers not to discriminate against graduates with degrees lower
than the second class (upper) division. Ex. 3 is the writer's expression of his confidence in
his ability to pass the employment test being discussed. Ex. 4 calls the attention of other
members to the age limit requirement in the vacancies advertisement of a Nigerian bank -
Access Bank. In Ex. 5, the verb *guess* is used to express a lamentation of what the writer
describes as 'mediocrity' in the country.
        Cognitive verbs are also used in the discussion portals to attribute stance to
someone else either within the context of the discourse or outside the context, as can be
seen in the extracts below.

Ex. 6:   *After thorough questioning about his work and life experiences, we were able to
identify some transferable and job skills. But **he thinks** those skills do not amount
to much*
NHJ D09: Job search fundamentals

Ex. 7:   *One, organisations receive large volume of cvs, solicited and unsolicited, most
times they don't use them because they are too many and **they know** many of them
are junks.*
NLD D27: How to discover and benefit from the hidden job market

Apart from using the cognitive verb to attribute stance to the speaker and other people, it is
also deployed to attribute hypothetical stances in the form of rhetorical questions, questions
that are not likely to be answered by members of the forum, and in some cases, as in Ex. 8,
the enquirer decides to provide the answer immediately.

Ex. 8:   *And finally – you catch the deer – you get an offer of employment letter: **you think**
this is where it ends?.. Nope*
(NHJ D4: Why do job seekers lie about their age?)

There are a number of expressions with the use of cognitive verbs which do not mark
stance at all, for example:

Ex. 9:   ***Think*** *smart, work less, use your phone and the internet to network. It will save
you money and time.* NLD D35: Hard copy submission of CV

> Ex. 10: ***Imagine*** *this kind of thing in this country, even we Nigerians are killing our ownselves! Even the employers are contributing to the unemployment rate in the country and at the same time, depriving us of our constitutional rights.*
> NHJ D07: Age requirement is unconstitutional

From their usage, these verbs are employed to demand cognition from the reader and not to mark stance by the writer. However, since the analysis in this study is focused on the use of cognitive verbs for stance marking, instances of use of cognitive verbs like the ones above (Ex. 9 Ex. 10) where they are only used to describe or demand the act of cognition from other participants were not considered in the analysis.

The higher frequency of *think* and *know* agrees with the findings of previous studies on the frequency of these verbs of cognition in spoken discourse (Ajimer, 1997; Baumgarten & House, 2010). The prominence of the collocation *I + think* in the corpus agrees with what obtains in Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) where *I + think* is the single most frequent I +verb combination in spoken component (Baumgarten & House, 2010).

However, the data we have here is not strictly spoken discourse, but one that blends both written and spoken features. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has been observed to combine features of informal spoken language and those of structurally complex written language. According to Hale and Scanlon (1999, p. 75) participants in cyberspace discourse 'write the way people talk'. Other researchers such as Davis and Brewer (1997, p. 2) say that 'electronic discourse is writing that very often reads as if it were being spoken—that is, as if the sender were writing talking'. As also observed by Baron (2010), CMC is essentially a mixed modality, in the sense that it resembles speech, containing heavy use of first and second person pronouns, present tense, and contractions; its level of formality is generally low; and it could be rude or even obscene. She also notes that CMC resembles writing because interlocutors' physical separation fosters personal disclosure and helps level the conversational playing field between them at different points on a social hierarchy. It however, is very clear that the kind of discourse we are dealing with is dialogical and interaction-oriented. The task therefore in this study is to unveil the patterns of stance taking peculiar to the kind of asynchronous CMC we have.

Looking more closely at the different instances of the use of the predominant cognitive verb *think* in terms of its collocation with nominal or pronominal subjects, the data reveals that *I + (don't) think* combinations occur more than other pronoun-verb combinations. This agrees with the findings by Ajimer (1997) and Kaltenböck (2013) that *I think* is the most frequent and most prototypical of all comment clauses. A broad definition of *I think* according to Zhang & Sabet (2014) is that it is a stance marker which signals the speaker's stance or attitude toward segments of discourse (Carter and McCarthy, 2006; Kärkkäinen, 2006). *I think* according to Kärkkäinen (2003) is often used to express degrees of certainty, commitment, and epistemic stance towards the clause to which it is attached. Quirk *et al*. (1985, p. 1112) regard *I think* as a comment clause – a parenthetical disjunct, that is an optional clause loosely connected to another clause. The behavior of this string will be the focus in the rest of the work. Table 2 below shows the frequencies of pronoun-*(don't) think* sequences in the corpus.

Table 2: *I + (don't) think/know* collocations

Subject + (don't) think	Occurrences	Percentages
I (don't) think	64	79.1
You (don't) think	09	11.2
He (doesn't) think	1	1.2
We (don't) think	1	1.2
They (don't) think	6	7.4
Total	81	100

Now, looking specifically on *I think* and *I don't think,* there are 55 instances of *I think* and just 9 instances of *I don't think*. *I think* is said to have elasticity in terms of its position in a clause (Kaltenböck, 2013; Zhang & Sabet, 2014). It could be positioned at the beginning of a clause, covering the entire host clause, as in Ex.1. It could occur in medial position. For example, *The lecture is going to hold, I think at the 1000 LT*. Here it singles out parts of the host construction. Finally, it could also be in clause final position. For example, *The lecture is going to hold at 1000 LT, I think*. In the corpus, *I think* occurs predominantly initially. Previous studies have also shown that the initial position is significantly favoured for the occurrence of the expression (Kärkkäinen, 2003; Zhang & Sabet, 2014). It must be pointed out however that these scholars found few instances in which the combination occur in medial and final positions. This predominant use of *I think* in initial position in online discussion may have implication for the function it performs in discourse. Nigerian ESL users may be aware of the possibility of the elastic positioning of comment clauses such as *I think* through classroom instructions, but they do not use them in medial and final positions. This may not be unconnected with the behaviour of such strings in many Nigerian languages. For instance in Yoruba, one of the major ethnic languages in the country, the initial position is the default position for *I think* (*mo ro pe*). So, it is possible and acceptable to say:

> 1.   *Mo ro pe o nbo laago meta.*
>   [I think he will come at three o'clock.]

However, it will be odd to use *mo ro pe* in either the medial or final position. It is therefore unacceptable to say:

> 2.   **O nbo, mo ro pe, laago meta.*
>   [He will come, I think, at three o'clock.]

> 3.   **O nbo, laago meta, mo ro pe.*
>   [He will come, at three o'clock, I think.]

The English versions of 2 and 3 are possible and acceptable. In the medial position, *I think* may serve the function of a discourse marker or filler, thereby having a reduced epistemic

meaning, while in final position it may be used to convey an epistemic afterthought and primarily serves the purpose of mitigating (Conrad & Biber, 2000; Kaltenböck, 2013).

The kind of pronominal item that occurs directly after *I think* is also crucial for the understanding of its use. This may tell us something about the focus of the cognition. For instance in this extract from Ex. 1, ***I think*** *EFCC should investigate the activities of such agencies,* the focus of cognition is the idea that *EFCC should investigate the activities* of some agencies. In the corpus, *I think* is used more to stress cognition on issues and not persons. The tendency therefore is for personal thinking on the discussion portal to be mostly about issues, such as:

> *I think the whole issue is complicated*
> *I think there is a problem with the guy*
> *I think everyone's mind should be @ rest*
> *I think they'll start calling for interview immediately they are done with their test*

The use of *I think* to stress self, such as *I think I* occurred only 4 times in the corpus and these are in specific contexts where there is an explicit demand for personal opinions of participants.

I also examined the use of *I think* with or without *that* coming immediately after it. This according to (Zhang & Sabet, 2014) is also an indication of the complex elasticity of the expression. *I think that* expression can be divided into two categories:

(i)   One in which *that* clause serves as the object of *think* and *that* itself is the subject of the following clause, e.g., *I think that is not fair.*
(ii) One in which *that* serves as a complementizer, e.g., *I think that you are not fair.* (Zhang & Sabet, 2014, p. 9)

The pattern of usage in the corpus shows that all the instances of *I think* occur without an accompanying *that* either as an object of *think* or as a complementizer. Thompson & Mulac (1991, p. 315) finds that even in speech, verbs like *think* and *guess* occur without *that* much more frequently than other formal verbs such as *believe,* and concluded that *that*-deletion is a sign of grammaticalization. The use of *I think* with or without *that* might be linked with stylistic shift towards less formality as noted in Zhang & Sabet (2014). Online discussion is typically characterized by informality being guided by the principles of brevity, speed and language economy.

The use of *think* to express negative view in the corpus is also another significant area of this study. There are two ways of doing this:

> *I don't think* + affirmative, e.g., *I don't think we can go there.*
> *I think* + negative, e.g., *I think we cannot go there.*

While *I don't think* + affirmative is typically used to reject a proposition and sometimes express doubts preferred by some participants, *I think* + *not* features only once in the corpus. According to Zhang & Sabet (2014), *I don't think* appears to be a stronger claim and gives more weight to the speaker's view than *I think* + negative. *I don't think* is a more direct, confident and assertive expression that seems to stress the user's personal view. Its use is prevalent in contexts of arguments to emphasize the users' doubt on a proposition.

For instance, there was a posting on a bride who went to write a job test in her wedding gown. An argument ensued on whether she actually abandoned the wedding ceremony for the test or she came after the ceremony. While some participants felt what she did was alright, taking into consideration the kind of job at stake - an NNPC[4] job, others condemned the act. In the debate, many of the participants in their postings use the cognitive verb *think* to express their negative views. Below are extracts from their arguments.

> Ex. 11 *Going by the events of the day during the NNPC Test, I do know it started very late. **<u>I don't think</u>** anybody will stall her wedding for a job text that is not 100% guaranteed. Now for you haters and ballers and tongue waggers, reason this out.* NHJ D10: Bride abandons wedding for NNPC job test

> Ex. 12 ***<u>I don't think</u>** this can be true because ladies value their wedding date more than anything… This post is just to make fun cos this cant be real. She was notified before the test day by NNPC and she knew it quite all right that she picking the test instead of the wedding then, why will she still come to the exams hall in her wedding gown if this scenario not to create fun...*

I think can have a wide range of functions. I will later highlight the different functions of the expression in the data. *I don't think* + affirmative naturally dominates the discussions to give expressions to strong and assertive positions of the participants in the debate of contentious issues. This singular pattern of expressing personal negative view in the discussion boards may also be due to the lack of understanding of indirect, non-authoritative and less confrontational method. I don't think + affirmative appears like the default means of expressing negative views to ESL users in Nigeria, who may have the tendency of sticking to certain fixed phrases and expressions they feel more confident using.

The functions of *I think* as used by the participants in their discussions were identified and classified and the results show seven functional ways that the expression was used. There are, however, some overlaps in these functions. Notwithstanding, what is presented here can be said to be fairly representative of the contexts in which *I (don't) think* is used in discussion threads in the jobs and career online portals selected for this study. Table 3 below highlights the functions of *I think* in the corpus.

Table 3: Functions of *I (don't) think*

Functions	Frequency	Percentage
Advice	24	37.5
Conclusion	14	21.9
Commitment	5	7.8
Condemnation	4	6.2
Doubt	9	14.1
Possibility	8	12.5
Total	64	100

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[4] NNPC is the nation's oil corporation. The corporation is one of the government's organisations that offers the most attractive remunerations to its workers.

Firstly, the expression is used to offer advice to participants within and outside the discourse.

> Ex. 13   *even if 1 billion Nigerian student home and   abroad do that it might not work.* **_I think_** *in my opinion, everybody should start thinking about how to be self-employed*
> (NHJ D21: Nigerian graduates enough is enough it is unbearable!!)

In Ex. 13, the writer's personal opinion about the solution to youth unemployment is expressed as a piece of advice to fellow unemployed people. The posting that generated this opinion suggested that the unemployed graduates invade Aso Rock Villa[5] in protest to demand from the government means of livelihood. This posting is a piece of advice to the unemployed; that rather than taking the extreme position of staging a protest, they can move forward through self-employment.

I think also functions as an introductory clause to a conclusion to be drawn by the writer. As can be observed in Ex. 14, the conclusion is based on some premise also stated by the writer. This posting came in the context of an argument about the authenticity of Graduate Self Employment (GSE), a recruitment agency.

> Ex. 14   **_I tink_** *GSE is really existing cos sometimes ago that i want to apply to union bank i was asked my GSE number and that i need to have their score before i can apply to their organisation. if its nt real i wnt be asked to give my score and no.*
> (NHJ D17: 419 Recruitment Agencies)

It is also the case that sometimes participants express their personal commitment to a cause through the use of *I think*. The writer of Ex. 15 made a personal commitment to read the Nigerian constitution in order to see what it says about the issue of age requirement for employment. The original poster argues that age requirement which most employers stipulate in their advertisements, is unconstitutional.

> Ex. 15:   *Even the employers are contributing to the unemployment rate in the country and at the same time, depriving us of our constitutional   rights. I have nt realy read dat constitution very well and* **_I think_** *its high time i get started!*
> (NHJ D07: Age requirement is unconstitutional)

I think also precedes the condemnation of a behaviour or even a person. As Ex. 16 shows *I think* signals a tactical condemnation of what a participant, def_lover, posted earlier in the thread.

> Ex. 16   *As for def_lover,* **_I think_** *it's okay to be funny but not at the expense of the company that helped your career. You might have used Guinness as a spring broad but you need not ridicule the company.*
> NLD D39: Graduate & Experienced Recruitment at Guinness Nigeria Plc

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[5] Aso Rock Villa is the Nigerian Presidential Complex which houses the residence and office of the Nigerian President. It is variously called Aso Villa, The Villa, Aso Rock and State House.

The writer of this post presents the view in a generous way by a conscious deviation from direct condemnation of the act of another participant. The expression *I think it's okay to be funny* has mitigated the weight of the condemnation eventually expressed.

Another function of *I think* is to express possibility when a writer is not sure of the propositions being expressed. In this case, the writer is only postulating, probably based on experience.

> Ex. 1   ***I think*** *the cut-off mark will depend on departmental performances or scores. It could be 25 over 50 if the highest score is 30, or it may be higher depending on the highest score.*
> NLD D33: Uniosun… who else got this?

The use of the three modal verbs *will, could* and *may* clearly shows that the writer is talking about a possible cause of action rather than a scenario that is certain.

The last function is the exclusive use of *I don't think* to express doubt. As mentioned earlier, *I don't think* is the default expression for negative views and doubts in the forums. All functions outlined signal different ways of marking disagreement to previous contributions.

Still related to the functional use of *I think* is the general observation made on the prevalence of its use in threads that address debatable unemployment topics, such as employment scams and scandals as well as youth desperation for employment. For example, the highest number of the use of *I think* occurs in the following topics:

> NHJ D10: Bride abandons wedding for NNPC job test (23.4%)
> NHJ D17: 419 Recruitment Agencies (12.7%)

The two postings appeared on *Naijahotjobs*. The first one which reports on a bride who went to write an employment test in her bridal dress, as indicated earlier generated a lot of comments from participants, as they discussed the propriety of this behaviour. Expression of stance came through arguments, supporting or opposing propositions on whether it really happened or not and if it did happen, whether or not it was proper. The second posting has to do with the activities of job scammers who exploit the unemployed. This appears like a common experience to many job seekers in Nigeria, so the topic afforded them the opportunity to express their personal experiences as well as their feelings about this problem. The posting generated a debate in which people argued, and rationalized using the cognitive verb *think*. The debate reveals the stance of the participants.

The use of *think* to demand for the cognition of other people is prevalent in motivational writings. The topics below recorded higher occurrences of *think* relative to other kinds of postings.

> NHJ D21: Nigerian graduates enough is enough it is unbearable!!
> NHJ D08: Nigerian Youths, let's stop this craziness

Motivational writings, which address major issues related to employment such as how to answer interview questions, things that can go wrong with job search and self-employment tips, are quite common in the discussion portals examined. Motivational bloggers typically

use the cognitive verbs *think* and *imagine* to set their reader on the path of reflection in order to achieve their goal of motivating them to do what will help them to secure their desired employment.

5. Conclusion

Using a mini corpus from two online discussion portals for jobs and career advancement, *Naijahotjobs* and *Nairaland,* this study has shown how participants engage in stance taking through the use of cognitive verbs. The study examined the frequency of the use of the clause *I think*, its common positions, the clusters that it goes with and its typical functions in job and career discussion boards. The study reveals that *I think* predominantly occurs in the initial position and without an object or complementizer *that.* The findings also show that *I don't think* is preferred to *I think +* negative combination. The expression is used more often to offer advice and draw conclusions although it was also prevalent in topics which tend towards debate and those which were of particular common experience. In terms of frequency of occurrence, the expression of cognition using the verb *think* in the corpus for this study compares with what obtains in English as a mother tongue context. However, the syntactic patterns typical in the discussion forums investigated are influenced by mother tongue interference and learner strategies as well as by the peculiarities of the CMC mode.

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