

“Leave or Perish” Metaphorical Construct in *Japa* Discourse among Nigerian Digital Media Users

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17129563>

Abstract

Migration is a natural phenomenon that occurs when there is a need to leave the current social community in search of a better place. However, the current trend in mass migration out of Nigeria, which is code-named *japa*, has raised concerns of many people, including scholars, because of its impacts on the country's development. Though scholars have studied the causes and impacts of the current mass migration trend, enough scholarly attention has not been given to the use of language in describing and conceptualising the phenomenon in Nigeria, especially on the “leave or perish” metaphorical construct used by Nigerians while engaging in migration-related conversations. The aim of this study is to explain the “leave or perish” metaphorical construct in *japa* discourse among Nigerian digital media users in order to identify the metaphors and mental mappings in them as well as the impacts of such constructs on Nigerians' decision to migrate. Data were collected from related conversations on Nairaland and qualitatively analysed through the lens of Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Findings reveal that the site users constructed positive metaphors about migration and negative metaphors about Nigeria. It was discovered that the metaphors about *japa* capture it as a zealous spirit, an investment, a divine intervention, a form of wealth creation, and an emergency, while Nigeria is reflected as a disaster, a dream killer, a punishment, and state of hopelessness. The study concluded the positive perception of migration and the negative perception of Nigeria are factors that can influence mass migration in the country.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor theory, metaphor, *japa*, language, conceptual mapping

Introduction

Migration is a natural phenomenon that is found in every animal, irrespective of species. This means it is also common for humans for migrate. People move or relocate and settle in other places for several reasons, among which are the search for better economic opportunities, improved living standard, security, good climate, avoidance of natural disasters, freedom to practice preferred religious faith, and other personal reasons. Humans are known to engage in this activity even during the prehistoric period, indicating that migration is not peculiar to any social or economic group. It also means that as long as man sees a reason to migrate, the social phenomenon will always occur.

Nigeria and Nigerians are not left out of the migration phenomenon as people have long been relocating with their families to different parts of the world. However, it has been observed that there is a current trend in mass emigration, which is code-named *japa*, a word that is originally Yoruba and means “to escape” or “to run” in the language. But it was borrowed into the Nigerian English parlance to refer to this mass migration, whereby many Nigerians urgently leave or desire to leave the country in search of better living. The quest for better education, improved living condition, job

opportunities, access to basic amenities, and secured future are some of the reasons for this current migration trend (Adeyanju et al., 2024; Adeniran, 2024). This means that Nigerians migrate to other countries because they envision that all their quests will be satiated there.

The migration situation in Nigeria has attracted a great number of scholarly interests, most of which focus on its causes and impacts. The number of scholarships the situation has attracted has helped in identifying the socio-economic, socio-cultural, and socio-business motivators of the migration. However, much attention has not been given towards identifying how Nigerians use language to describe and conceptualise migration. Specifically, scholars have not given attention towards discovering the use of the “leave or perish” metaphorical construct while engaging in any discussion related to migration as well as how such construct influences migration decision.

The aim of this study is to explain the “leave or perish” metaphorical construct in japa discourse among Nigerian digital media users. The objectives of the study are to identify the metaphors in related discourse, the mappings of the metaphors, and their impacts on Nigerian’s decision to migrate. Achieving these objectives enables the study to discover the perceptions that contribute to the mass migration in the country. This study, therefore, answers the following research questions: (1) what migration-related metaphors and metaphorical mappings feature in the conversations? (2) how can the metaphors and their mappings influence mass migration in Nigeria?

Conceptualising Metaphor

Metaphor is generally known as a figurative expression that directly compares two distinctly different items by ascribing the quality of one to the other. According to Zhang and Hu (2009), metaphor is both a rhetorical and a cognitive device. It is considered a rhetorical device when used traditionally to transfer the quality of one thing to another item. This is usually found in situations where talented individuals use them in their speeches as figurative language for embellishing their interactions and making them (their interactions) more forceful and persuasive. Nevertheless, metaphor is also considered as an outcome of cognitive processing because it can be used to conceptualise thoughts and actions.

Kiseleva and Trofimova (2017) submit that metaphor is more than a linguistic device that is used for ornamental purposes. They explain that it is also a cognitive-semantic device because it has the capacity to capture and paint an abstract and unknown concept in such a way that the mind of the receiver will form a vivid imagery or visualisation of what it is. For example, the expression “the man is a lion” automatically paints the image of a lion in the mind of the listeners and then helps them visualise the qualities the man possesses. In this instance, the speaker used what the listeners are familiar with to describe what is unknown to them. From the traditional point of view, that expression is rhetorical and ornamental because it is embellishing and also creates an imagery that can persuade the listener to act in an expected manner. However, from the perspective of modern metaphor, it is a cognitive-semantic device that allows the listener to conceptualise and also visualise the information being delivered.

According to Duran-Escribano and Cuadrado-Esclapez (2017), metaphors can be categorised into terminological and conceptual metaphors. While the former refers to the terms or expressions that embody the linguistic concept (that is, the metaphorical language), the latter refers to the cognitive process and aspect of the metaphorical language or terms. This categorisation reveals that every metaphorical expression has two components – the surface/physical component and the cognitive/semantic part. However, Aloairdhi and Kahlaoui (2020) maintain that metaphor has three components or perspectives, which are linguistic (linguistically expressing metaphors), cognitive (the thought process that follows the expression in order to understand the message conveyed), and psycholinguistic (how the metaphor stimulated the mind) perspectives. These three perspectives are necessary in the interpretation of metaphors.

Kiseleva and Trofimova (2017) explain that context plays a key role in the interpretation of metaphors. However, Duran-Escribano and Cuadrado-Esclapez (2017) state that the knowledge of

the listener is also important because if there is a knowledge gap, the reason for the transfer of concerned qualities will be lost. Put differently, if the listener has no knowledge of the item that possesses the transferred qualities, he will fail to conceptualise and visualise the message accurately if at all. The intended meaning will be lost to him.

Even though traditionalists, such as Aristotle, treat metaphor as rhetoric, which is only used by a few talented and well-trained public speakers, studies have shown that the concept is used in daily ordinary conversations (Sattaran, 2016; Zhang & Hu, 2009; Siman, et al., 2022). Siman et al. (2022) state that the recognition of this linguistic device as a feature of daily conversation started in 1980 when George Lakoff and Mark Johnson propounded the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Ever since then, the linguistic device has been considered through cognitive instead of rhetoric perspective (Zhang & Hu, 2009; Siman et al., 2022). This study, therefore, also views metaphors through the cognitive perspective. It defines the concept as a linguistic device found in everyday ordinary conversations and which enables understanding by transferring the qualities of one item to the next.

Insights into the Causes and Impacts of *Japa* in Nigeria

Several researchers have examined the causes and impacts of massive emigration (also to as *japa* in this study) in Nigeria. Among these scholars are Ogunmuyiwa and Toyosi (2024), who examine the causes and impacts of the *japa* syndrome on the country's socio-economic and socio-business development. They identify the causes of this mass emigration as a result of the neglect of the agricultural sector, poor governance, collapse of the manufacturing sector, poor economy (which leads to lack of enabling entrepreneurial environment), and challenges with the country's education system. They further observe that the exodus is causing brain drain on the country's social, economic and business development. Umeh et al. (2024) agree with this observation because they reveal that the high rate of emigration of experts and skilled professionals from Nigeria has many negative effects, which include the shortage of skilled workers, over-dependency on foreign remittances and other social implications, such as separation of families, acculturation challenges, and lack of social cohesion within the host community.

Other identified causes of the *japa* syndrome in Nigeria are insecurities (Adeyanju et al., 2024; Liu, 2023; Okunade & Awosusi, 2023), unfavourable working conditions (Olumoyo & Abiri, 2023), and unemployment (Adegoke, 2023; Afunugo, 2024). Other factors are family influence (Nwobodo, 2024), unfulfilled aspirations (Adeyanju et al., 2024), incessant strike in Nigerian schools (Olumoyo & Abiri, 2023), and political instability (Liu, 2023). Nevertheless, Okunade and Awosusi (2023) reiterate that even though the poor situation of things in Nigeria may motivate emigration, some migrants leave the country because they desire to change their environment and secure a future for their dependents abroad. They also observe that Nigerians migrate because they believe they cannot survive in Nigeria while others hope to gain easier access to better jobs abroad. In addition, they suggest that neo-liberal structure of the western cultures and the seamless admission into postgraduate programmes are other motivating factors for *japa* in Nigeria. Okey-Kalu and Okorie (2023) agree that the western socio-cultural environment is a pull factor in Nigerian migration situation because western literary artists depict their countries positively while their African counterparts focus only on the portraying the negative aspects of their local communities.

Adegoke (2023) further adds that online and offline social networking is another factor that motivates emigration in Nigeria because it enables Nigerians to discover the possibility of living a better life if they leave the country. Adeniran (2024) blames the country's education system for the high rate of migration because, he argues, if teachers of certain subjects, especially Social Studies, have a negative or indifferent perception of *japa*, they will influence their students to perceive the concept negatively. However, he observes that Social Studies teachers also view the *japa* syndrome as the best economic and social decision for many Nigerians. The reasons for their views border around political instability, poor governance, poor funding of the education system, corruption, and other socio-economic problems that plague the country today. However, Afunugo (2024) submits

that the negative perception of Nigeria as a failed state and a country lacking future prospects of improvement or remedy also motivates japa.

According to Adeyanju et al. (2024), Nigerians currently perceive migration as a way securing a better living condition for their future generations. They also see it as a way of having access to basic amenities, which they could not experience in Nigeria. In addition, they submit that Nigerians willing to migrate believe that they will enjoy a better standard of living abroad. Nwobodo (2024) reveals that discussions surrounding the japa syndrome in Nigeria have become sentimental because many Nigerians are disenchanted about the country and, as a result, believe that migrating is the only way to survive. This has caused many of them to migrate through illegal routes, thereby leading to the death and imprisonment of many Nigerians.

Besides the death and imprisonment of Nigerians as a result of resorting to illegal migration methods, japa has caused other identifiable problems in Nigeria. As already observed by Umeh et al. (2024), Ogunmuyiwa and Toyosi (2024), Afunugo (2024), and Olumoyo and Abiri (2023), japa is causing brain drain in Nigeria because most of the people leaving the country are experts and skilled workers. This further causes other problems for the country, which may lead to an adverse situation in the future. For instance, Afunugo (2024) observes that japa is causing a further decline in the country's educational standard as a result of shortage of skilled teachers and educators. In addition, the professionals that did not migrate are being overburdened and de-motivated. It is also believed that if nothing is done in the near future, japa will cause Nigerian youngsters to become lazy and fraudulent.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). This theory explains that metaphors are more than figurative expressions that embellish utterances because they are found in ordinary day to day conversations and influence how people think and communicate about abstract things. Lakoff and Johnson explain that metaphor is a form of communication, whereby the experience of an abstract is understood through the experience of something concrete and familiar. Kovecses (2017) identifies this as a cognitive process that transfers experiences to ensure that the abstract concept is understood. The cognitive process of transferring experiences is known as mapping. The unfamiliar or abstract concept and the familiar or concrete concept are known as domains. CMT propounds that during communication, interactors ensure that what they describe is understood by mapping the concept from the concrete domain (the source) to the abstract domain (the target). Here, the source domain provides the means of understanding the content of target domain. For example, the expression, "don't waste your food", is an everyday utterance that has no embellishment. However, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) argue that it contains a metaphor, which can be "food is money," depending on the cultural and situational context of the conversation. In this case, the listener understands that the speaker does not want him to waste food because it has the same prestigious value as money. Hence, he mapped his experience with money (the source) into the experience with food (the target) in order to understand what was said to him and why it was said.

CMT provides this study with the theoretical perspective for finding the metaphors and mappings in the selected digital conversations that related to the japa trend in Nigeria. With the discovery of the metaphors and their mappings, the study identifies how the metaphorical mappings influence and motivate Nigerians to leave the country.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected from Nigerian migration-related posts on Nairaland, a website that provides a platform for people to discuss different issues and topics. Three major posts on this topic (japa) and their replies were examined and then expressions that reflect the "leave or perish" construct were extracted. In the end, twenty-three extracts were obtained from the posts.

These extracts comprised the initial posts that started off the threads and some of the comments they attracted. The titles of these threads were “Japa or Stay in Nigeria”, “I Am Considering Japa for the First Time in my Life. The Hardship is Unbearable,” and “Thinking out of the Box when it Comes to Japa”.

The study further adopted qualitative research analysis method to present, categorise, and describe the data. This method provided it with the needed room to give an in-depth description of the expressions used in the examined posts, the metaphors they constructed, and how they mapped the source and target domains. With that, the study was able to identify how Nigerians used language to construct the “leave or perish” metaphorical construct in japa-related discourse.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section is broken into two subsections according to the metaphors about japa and Nigeria.

Japa-Related Metaphors

The study identifies five metaphors related to migration in the social media interactions. Below are the metaphors and examples of utterances used to construct them.

Japa Is a Zealous Spirit

This metaphor transfers the qualities of a zealous spirit to migrating from Nigeria. It construct captures the enthusiasm and passion that surrounds Nigerians’ desire to leave the country. Extract 1 is an example of an expression that conceptualises this metaphor.

Extract 1

Just of recent, the zeal to japa to Canada has been on my mind through school route (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

This expression reveals the intention of a Nigerian as he suddenly developed the passion to migrate to Canada. The poster reveals that he has never considered migration until the country’s condition kindles the passion. This expression equates japa with a zealous spirit.

Japa Is Investment

Nigerians also perceive migration as an investment, which requires them to spend a lot of money. Many of the examined conversations portray this ideology. Examples of these conversations are presented as extracts 2 to 5.

Extract 2

I currently have like 7m in my account and I know I could raise it till 15m before the end of the year. The cost of schooling keep giving me issue. How will someone travel abroad and spend over 15m when I could used the money to invest in real estate (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

Extract 3

Money wey u no use japa, you go use am pay EL-BANDITO.... (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

Extract 4

I'm only here today because I don't have the means to leave. (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

Extract 5

Who so ever have enough funds should qualify japa before dem use depression finish ham. (“Thinking out of the Box”)

Extracts 2 to 5 show that planning for migration is expensive but worth it. Extract 2 reveals that the amount spent on migration is enough to invest in a property in Nigeria but extract 3 argues that failing to invest in japa is disastrous because the money will be lost to criminals. Extract 4 reveals that some people have not left because could not afford to. Extract 5 advises Nigerians not to hesitate to invest in migration. All these expressions show that migration is a form of investment that yields benefits in the long run.

Japa Is Wealth Creation

Some posts conceptualise migration as the means of generational wealth creation. Examples of these posts are captured in extracts 6 and 7.

Extract 6

If you have the option to leave Nigeria, never think twice about it. Imagine the possibilities and doors of opportunities you'd be opening for your kid and by extension, your future generation. You could be the man to alter the path of your family tree in a profound way. (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

Extract 7

If you have the resources and good prospects, please leave (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

Extracts 6 and 7 identify migration as the path to better economic opportunities. Extract 7 further suggests that people with prospects are better off if they migrate. Extract 6 also shows that the opportunities abroad will ensure generational wealth. These posts reveal that Nigerians perceive migration as form of wealth creation.

Japa Is Divine Intervention

The challenges Nigerians face as they plan to migrate make some of them believe they need the intervention of God to achieve that. Extract 8 captures this perception.

Extract 8

God, my father, it is my time and my turn. Please show me mercy (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

Extract 8 is a prayer said by a Nigerian concerning his desire to leave the country. It is a plea for divine intervention on his migration plans. It conceptualises migration as a divine help.

Japa Is an Emergency

This metaphor captures migrating out of Nigeria as an emergency. It discloses the urgent need to leave the country that feature the japa trend. Examples of expressions that construct this metaphor are presented as extracts 9 to 12.

Extract 9

Leave! Now! (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

Extract 10

If you still have the bones and balanced mental state, Japa! (“I Am Considering Japa”)

Extract 11

If you can Jakpa legit, make the move ASAP. (“I Am Considering Japa”)

Extract 12

Be fast o cause by year end, a dollar would be exchanging for 4000 naira. (“I Am Considering Japa”)

The use of exclamation mark in extracts 9 and 10 add the sense of urgency in the conversation. In extract 11, the poster used the acronym “ASAP” (as soon as possible) to capture the urgency of the situation. Extract 12 also projects the urgency of the need to leave Nigeria by using the term, “be fast” and further giving reasons for the suggestion. These posts create the concept of emergency in the Japa trend.

4.1.2 Nigeria-Related Metaphors

The study also identifies four metaphors that conceptualise Nigeria in relation to the mass migration trend. These instances are presented below.

Nigeria Is Disaster

This metaphor directly compares Nigeria to disaster. As shown by extracts 13 and 14, Nigerians view it through this perspective as a result of the insecurities and other socio-cultural disasters happening in the country.

Extract 13

Hope u see wat is happening in Nigeria, from Abuja to Benue and Jos, even south east, no talk say e no go reach ur area, if u hv means to liv bro liv naija (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

Extract 14

Nigeria is no longer safe. Kidnappers are slaughtering people and a former Minister of Nigeria wants to pay them for it. (“Japa or Stay in Nigeria”)

Extracts 13 and 14 show what Nigerians think about their country as a result of the high rate of insecurities they are experiencing. They painted insecurities as a disaster and then mapped the experience into Nigeria. With this, they conceptualise Nigeria as a disaster because its citizens are experiencing insecurities.

Nigeria Is a Dream Killer

This metaphor reveals the socio-economic situation in Nigeria that makes the country unfavourable for entrepreneurs and skilled professionals to thrive. It maps Nigeria in the domain of something that kills people’s dreams and prevents their growth and development. Extract 15 is an example of a conversation that constructs this metaphor.

Extract 15

These are too much for me to bear. I can't continue to act strong...I am already broken. (“I Am Considering Japa”)

The poster here reveals his despair for failing to actualise his dreams in Nigeria. His expression captures Nigeria as a state that kills the dreams of its citizens. In other words, he mapped the killer trait into Nigeria to describe how bad and serious the country’s situation is.

Nigeria Is a Punishment

This metaphor conceptualises Nigeria as the right punishment for certain people. Extracts 16 and 17 show some of the sentences that construct this metaphor.

Extract 16

if you're one of those that forced buhari and APC government on the innocent Nigerians ... this your japa plan won't work out...But if you're not one of those I listed may this journey you're about to start favour you and your family. ("Japa or Stay in Nigeria")

Extract 17

If u voted this govt and now wants to run away...The land where u go to will not spare u. But if innocent, may it go well with u and so shall it be. ("I Am Considering Japa")

Extracts 16 and 17 capture Nigerians' belief that living in Nigeria being befitting punishment for certain people. They also perceive being prevented from leaving Nigeria as a punishment. With this conceptualisation, they mapped the experience of punishment into Nigeria and used the former to describe the kind of experiences people have in the latter.

Nigeria Is Hopelessness

This is another metaphor that featured severally in the studied conversations. Here, Nigerians transferred the experience of hopelessness to Nigeria to describe the bad state of the country. Extracts 18 to 23 are examples of utterances that construct this metaphor.

Extract 18

I have always believed I will make it in Nigeria no matter what. But with the current realities in this country I am seriously considering japa. Nothing is working anymore. ("I Am Considering Japa")

Extract 19

There is no hope insight coz our fellow country men are not even ready to get this country working. Tribalism won't let them yet their rich tribesmen in power don't care about them ("I Am Considering Japa")

Extract 20

Isn't it funny that the same thing that pushed us enmasse to Jakpa over 2 decades ago is even gotten worse today? Where is the hope, my people? ("I Am Considering Japa")

Extract 21

Nigeria is worse off, guys. It is disgustingly a hopeless situation, I must confess. ("I Am Considering Japa")

Extract 22

Nigeria can't get better in this generation, this is no curse, but fact!. 20 -25 years ago, there was a massive japa train. 20 years after, nothing has changed, things have gotten worse even! Don't gamble your life believing in Nigeria! ("I Am Considering Japa")

Extract 23

Our politicians, pastors and celebrities have second passport. The Nigeria elites know Nigeria has no future and have secured citizenship somewhere for themselves and families pending the doomsday (“Thinking out of the Box”)

Extracts 18 to 23 capture the frustration of Nigerians as a result of the situations they found themselves in the country. Extract 18 shows that the poster started considering migration when things became unbearable for him. Extracts 20 to 22 show that Nigerians believe that things are becoming worse in the country. Furthermore, all the extracts capture the belief that Nigeria has no prospect of improving, thereby, indicating hopelessness.

4.2 Discussion

The objectives of this study are to discover the metaphors and mental mappings in online migration-related discourse and how such metaphors can motivate the migration trend. The analysis of the collected data through the lens of Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) Conceptual Metaphor Theory gives insight into the cognitive states of Nigerians when they discuss migration. This study discovers that Nigerians perceive migration and their country from different perspectives. It was observed that while they have a positive view about migrating out of the country, they perceive the country through a negative perspective. Put differently, they constructed positive metaphors about migration and negative metaphors about Nigeria.

The metaphors constructed around migration reveal that Nigerians believe that leaving the country is the best solution to the challenges they are facing in Nigeria. They also view the concept (migrating out of Nigeria) as a way of securing the future of their children and generations unborn. These perspectives about japa align with the observations of Adeyanju et al. (2024) and Okunade and Awosusi (2023). Japa is perceived as an investment with a great and secured return as well as an opportunity that should be grasped immediately it shows up.

In addition to the above, the metaphors constructed in the examined conversations reveal that many Nigerians believe that the country has lost every prospect of being better. It is seen as a threat to human lives and development and, therefore, it is a form of punishment to remain in the country. These conceptualisation of the country as a ‘perish’ zone aligns with the observations of Afunugo (2024) and Nwobodo (2024). These site users’ perception of the country has shown that they have lost hope in it and, as a result, need to leave its borders as soon as possible to be able to survive. The positive perception of japa can encourage migration while the negative ideology about Nigeria will discourage people from staying back in the country, especially if they have the opportunity to migrate.

5.1 Conclusion

Migration is a natural phenomenon that occurs in the social communities of every animal specie. However, the mass migration of Nigerians out of the country has raised concerns because most of the people leaving the country are experts and skilled professionals, meaning that their departure creates a gap in the labour force and also heaps burdens on those that are staying back. The reason for this migration has been attributed to socio-economic, socio-cultural, and socio-business factors. This study has further discovered the contribution of metaphors to the migration trend.

From the findings of this study, it is obvious that some Nigerians believe that migration is the best solution to the challenges they are facing in the country. They also believe that staying back in Nigeria will lead to the loss of lives, properties, and opportunities. Hence, they create a positive ideology about leaving Nigeria and a negative perspective about staying back. The construction of the “leave or perish” ideology about migration can influence many Nigerians to consider joining the japa syndrome trend.

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Appendix

Links to Nairaland Conversations

1. Japa or stay in Nigeria. <https://www.nairaland.com/7970039/japa-stay-nigeria>.
2. I am considering japa for the first time in my life. The hardship is unbearable. <https://www.nairaland.com/8002810/considering-japa-first-time-life>.

3. Thinking out of the box when it comes to japa. <https://www.nairaland.com/8033649/thinking-out-box-when-it>.