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To be removed or not to be removed: A lexical examination of the soil subsidy debate in Nigeria

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Abstract

Whether oil subsidy should be removed or not has been a controversial issue in Nigeria, generating much heat but perhaps least light. This paper makes an attempt to examine the lexical features of selected online contributions on the oil subsidy debate, between October 2011 and February 2012, using a combination of approaches: Computational Stylistics, Stylometry and Critical Stylistics. The study aims at revealing the frequencies of keywords in the oil subsidy debate and providing a comparison of close correspondences between words and their contextual implications. Data for the study are provided by twenty-one (21) selected online articles in Nigerian newspapers on the oil subsidy debate. The lexical investigation reveals that majority opinion favours non – removal of oil subsidy. In other words, oil subsidy should stay.

Keywords: computational stylistics, critical stylistics, debate, lexical features, oil subsidy, stylometry

Introduction

The oil subsidy removal by the Federal Government of Nigeria on the 1st of January, 2012 generated a lot of controversies before and after it was announced. It was an issue of interest to Labour, the politicians, economists, journalists, scholars, government among others. Two major groups emerged; namely, those who argued that it is beneficial to remove oil subsidy and those who believed that it was unnecessary to do so. There was the third group who expressed that there was nothing called 'subsidy' at all. Akpamiko and Ayandele (2012: 19 – 27) wrote on 'Oil Subsidy Removal in Nigeria: Chasing Water Falls' and state that

> *The fact of the matters is that there is no economy in the world, including capitalist America, where government subsidy in one form or the other does not exist. The difference lies in who the beneficiaries are and how sustainable the subsidy is.*

Whatever perspective is expressed by the contributors to the debate, it is done through the medium of language. This paper is a lexical assessment of selected contributions on the oil subsidy debate, as words are the building blocks of oral or written communication. It provides a stylo-statistical examination of the lexical features of the debate on fuel subsidy removal.

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Theoretical framework/methodology

The lexical investigation of the oil subsidy debate in this paper involved a combination of three interrelated approaches : Computational Stylistics, Stylometry and Critical Stylistics. According to Craig (2009 – 10), Computational Stylistics can be defined as 'the application of statistics to style'. A computer – assisted statistical approach provides more rigorous and objective analysis in an to attempt quantify stylistic features. Bagavandas and Manimannan refer to Peng (2001 as expressing that 'the availability of modern computing facility has provided a unique opportunity for many stylometricians to produce many multivariate methods like factor analysis, cluster analysis and correspondence analysis for conducting experiments with high dimensional data and also to widen the frontiers of Stylometry. Though stylometry is a useful tool in authorship attribution, its scope is widened to include cluster analysis which constitutes a section in this paper under Data Analysis and Presentation. Jeffries' (2010) *Critical Stylistics: The Power of English* proves relevant to our study in the way it 'gives the reader a clear set of analytical tools to follow in carrying out the critical analysis of texts with the aim of uncovering or discovering, the underlying ideologies of the texts''. The analytical tools of 'Equating and Contrasting and 'Exemplify and Enumerating' are useful in the data analysis. The theoretical framework of this paper is a blend of the three approaches which are modified to meet lexical analysis and evaluation.

Data presentation and analysis

The data for this study are sourced from selected online publications on the oil subsidy debate as listed below:

Table 1. Selected publications

Code	Title of Publication	Author	Newspaper	Page	Date of Publication	Source
1	Fuel Subsidy: Fiction made real.	Rasheed Olokode	The Punch	40	18/02/12	Online
2	Senate Probe	Ayodele, A. et al	Nigerian Tribune	Web	13/10/11	Online
3	The Subsidy Debate: Matters Arising	Yemisi Shyllon	PM News	Web	30/01/12	Online
4	Removal of Subsidy, tantamount to anarchy	Taiwo Oluwadare	Daily Sun	34	26/12/11	Online
5	Fuel Subsidy: Nigerians can't trust FG	Emma Okah	Sunday Sun	15	6/11/11	Online
6	The oil subsidy argument	Olagoke Kuye	Daily Sun	19	12/01/2012	Online
7	Subsidy Probe: How it all started	Oladele Akanni	Business Day	14	30/01/2012	Online
8	NNPC faults audit report…	House Probe	The Guardian	2	30/01/12	Online
9	Subsidy fund Probe: A sail or sink game…	Azimazi Momoh	The Guardian	1	22/01/12	Online
10	Fuel subsidy: House probe and revelations	Obiora Aduba	The Guardian	4	25/01/l2	Online
11	Channels TV Fuel Subsidy interview with Atedo Peterside	Channels TV	Punch	29	18/01/12	Online
12	A peoples probe of the oil subsidy cartel: memo to …	Biodun Jeyifo	The Guardian	44	05/02/12	Online

13	Fuel subsidy probe		Business Day	49	23/01/12	businessdayonline.com
14	The senate probe: all eyes on Legislature to deliver	John-Abba Ogbodo	The Guardian	57	19/02/12	Online
15	Pains, gains of fuel subsidy: labour's perspective	The Guardian	Guardian	Web	15/11/11	Online
16	Fuel Subsidy: Myth and Reality (111)	CaW	Guardian	57	24/10/11	Online
17	Fat cows will not allow fuel Subsidy removal	The Guardian	Guardian	22	28/10/11	Online
18	Removal of fuel subsidy and economic collapse	Olufemi Adebiyi	Punch	16	31/10/11	Online
19	Fuel subsidy: Consolidating the gains	Guardian Editorial	Guardian	14	27/01/12	Online
20	Fuel subsidy: The corruption index	Guardian Editorial	Guardian	18	24/01/12	Online
21	Oil theft, subsidies and cost of crude	Nnimmo Bassey	Guardian	52	09/11/11	Online

There are many publications on the issue of oil subsidy that are relevant to this study but the selected ones are samples that serve the purpose of our investigation. The lexical examination of the corpus of data is en-route Keyword Method, Collocation Analysis and Word Clusters.

Keyword analysis

Keyword Analysis model presents a framework on which to base a lexical assessment of a language item. According to Esimaje (2010: 198), the notion of Keyword was originated by Firth (1957), highlighted by Williams (1983) and developed by Scott (1997). In Scott (1997, 2006), the term keyword "is used to stand for words which are particularly common or uncommon in a text or group of texts in relation to certain norms". Theoretically, Keyword Analysis Model draws strength from the argument that 'repetition' constitutes a meaning making resource. Two major considerations made in this keyword analysis were the frequencies of the word relative to the number of selected publications and the statistical significance of the frequency. This is a measure of the keyword and its peculiarity.

Table 2. Keyword analysis of the oil subsidy debate

S	KEYWORD	WORD FREQ	No of publications	%	SCORE GRADE
1	SUBSIDY	106	21	504	1
2	THIEF	3	21	0.6	9
3	GRADE	22	21	4.5	7
4	FUEL	88	21	17.8	2
5	REMOVAL	51	21	10.3	4
6	OIL	83	21	16.8	3
7	FUNDS	24	21	4.8	5
8	LABOUR	14	21	2.8	8
9	STAY	1	21	0.2	10
10	ECONOMY	23	21	4.6	6

The analysis above demonstrated the keyword of subsidy as established by its topmost position in the list. The first ten (10) most significant keywords were shown to be subsidy, fuel, oil, removal, funds, crude, economy, labour, thief and stay. Since subsidy is the major theme in this political discourse, it is not surprising that it has the most unusual frequency in the corpus.

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As can be seen in the table above, subsidy occurs 106 times in the 21 selected publications and with 506 % significance in the debate. Table 2 above portrays subsidy on the key word list as the most statistically important word in the oil subsidy debates and indicates that its significance level in this discourse far exceeds its significance in general English. This is clearly illustrated by the unambiguous frequency in the oil subsidy debates. It is further illustrated in Figure 1 below:

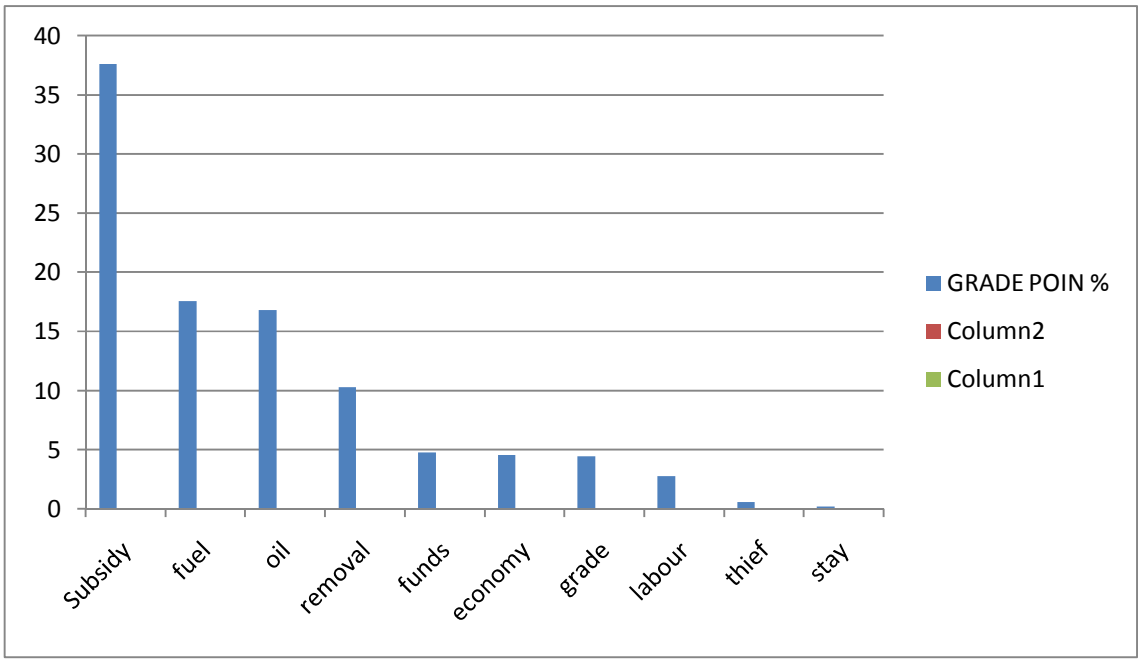

Figure 1. *Proportion chart of 'subsidy' in the oil subsidy debate*

A proportion chart is a keyword tool which provides useful insights into how often and where a keyword occurs in a text and compares it with other keywords existing in the text. The figure above shows that *subsidy* has a very high keyword value of **506 %**. The bars beside it for *-fuel* and ----*oil* are close to subsidy in the spread as we can see in the visual representation above.
Fuel has a keyword % value of - while *oil* has ---. The implication is that the two words are the highest collocates of subsidy in the data under study. It further explains that in the fuel subsidy debates, *oil* is the chief synonym of *fuel.* This point is made clearer when we compare and contrast its plot to those of *funds, economy, grade*, etc. in the text.

Consider the two lexical words, *removal* and *stay* as used in the corpus. *Removal* value of --- with a percentage of 10.3 and a grade of 4 while *stay* has a value of --- with a percentage of --- and a grade of 10- Being the least in the chart. We can also see from the chart above that the bar for the word *stay* could not even been seen because it is too insignificant, but we can still see the bar for *removal.*
This implies that *removal* is evenly dispersed in the text while *stay* is unevenly dispersed. –this unusual appearance could be interpreted that it was the removal of the subsidy that was the bone of contention and not it being allowed to stay. It can also mean that a lot of debaters did not want the subsidy on fuel removed.

Collocation analysis

Collocation refers to the tendency for sets of words to occur together in discourse and convey meaning by association. Collocation range has to do with the set of items that typically accompany a word. Collocation analysis necessarily involves an explanation of the vocabulary relationships in the text.

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Collocation analysis requires corpora and computers and software to analyze the vocabulary relationships in the corpora. We are now getting dictionaries that provide us with collocational information about words.

Others are *fuel subsidy, foreign reserve, long run, monumental fraud, public outcry, price increase, petrol subsidy, organized labour, economic growth.* Collocation is one way to explore a lexical item and its structures, that is, its patterns or phraseologies. The general aim of this analysis is to identify patterns of unusually high words co-occurrences. That is where two words are found together more than chance would reasonably allow. See table below:

Table 3. The relationship of 'subsidy' to the top-10 collocates

S/N	WORD 1	FREQ	WORD2	TOTAL FREQ	JOINT FREQ	GAP
1	SUBSIDY	186	FUEL	88	88	0
2	SUBSIDY	186	OIL	83	82	1
3	SUBSIDY	186	REMOVAL	51	49	2
4	SUBSIDY	186	FUNDS	24	20	4
5	SUBSIDY	186	PAYMENT	20	15	5
6	SUBSIDY	186	SO-CALLED	19	13	6
7	SUBSIDY	186	SCHEME	18	10	7
8	SUBSIDY	186	PETROLEUM17	17	9	8
9	SUBSIDY	186	Scan	15	12	3
10	SUBSIDY	186	cabal	12	8	4

The chart below, Figure 2, graphically illustrates Table 3.

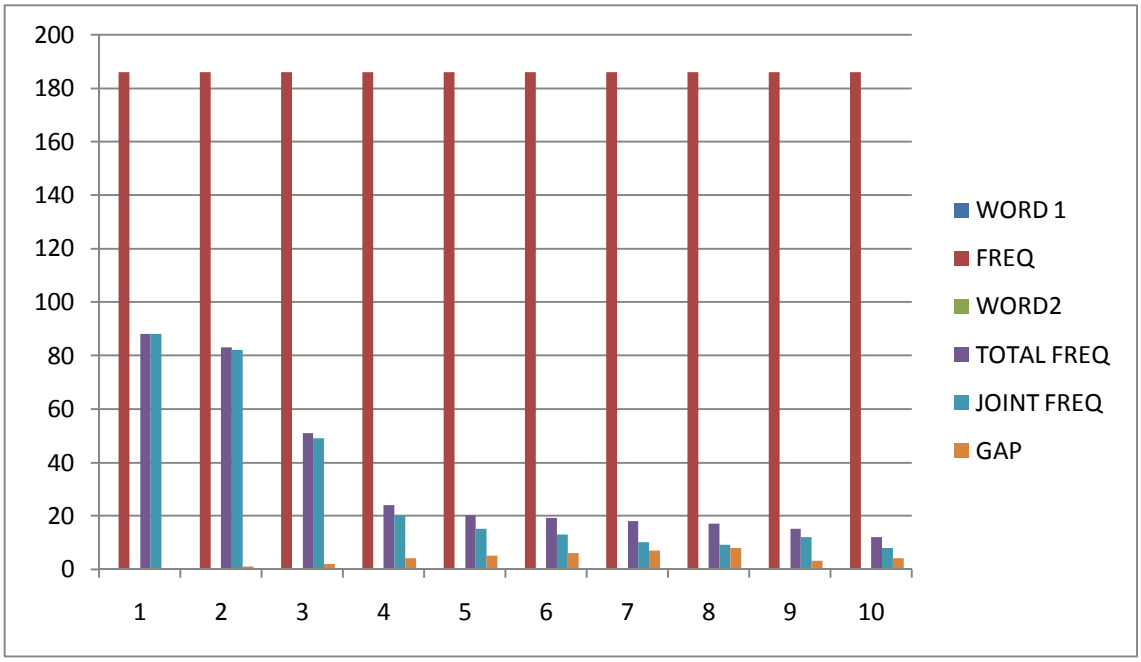

Figure 2. *Graphical representation of Table 3*

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Tables 3 and the graph above is performed to show the strongest collocates of *subsidy.* It presents 10 words: *fuel, oil, removal, funds, payment, so-called, scheme, petroleum, scan and cabal* to be strongly associated with *subsidy* in the data. This is confirmed by their number of joint occurrences illustrated in the table as their joint frequencies are compared to their total occurrences in the text. For instance, *fuel*-(total frequency -88; joint frequency-88), *oil* -(total frequency-83; joint frequency 82), *removal* -(total frequency-51; joint frequency-49) and so on. The gap column shows the difference – the number of times(s) the word appeared individually in the text as compared to the times it formed associations.
A careful look at Table 3 above shows that the words listed are 50 to 100% primed to occur with *subsidy*. Therefore, they are primed for each other such that whenever one is encountered; the other is anticipated, not minding that the strength of bond between them is unequal. In terms of directionality, we need to the frequency rating of *subsidy* alongside it's collocates. This reveals that *subsidy* is more than twice as frequent as each of its collocates. For example in table 3, subsidy is shown to have a frequency much higher than those it collocates with. It becomes obvious that subsidy relates to the words which collocate with it in a downward collocating style-meaning that each of them can then be said to need it more than it needs them. It is a semantic cornerstone for most of them in the text.

The phraseology / word clusters of 'subsidy'

In linguistics, **phraseology** is the study of set or fixed expressions, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, and other types of multi-word lexical units (often collectively referred to as *phrasemes*), in which the component parts of the expression take on a meaning more specific than or otherwise not predictable from the sum of their meanings when used independently. For example, 'Dutch auction' is composed of the words *Dutch* 'of or pertaining to the Netherlands' and *auction* 'a public sale in which goods is sold to the highest bidder', but its meaning is not 'a sale in the Netherlands where goods are sold to the highest bidder'. Instead, the phrase has a conventionalized meaning referring to any auction where, instead of rising, the prices fall.

By the phraseology of *subsidy*, we mean the patterns associated with *subsidy* in the data. The purpose is to determine those fixed formulaic expression in political discourse especially in political debates, which are formed using 'subsidy' of the oil subsidy debates. "A pattern is a sequence of two or more words in a text which semantically and, or syntactically form a meaningful and insuperable unit" (Moon, 1997: 43). They are variously referred to as clusters, lexical bundles, multi-word units, n-grams or lexical phrases.

Table 4. Top two- word clusters

S/N	TWO-WORD CLUSSTERS	FREQUENCY
1	THE SUBSIDY	120
2	FUEL SUBSIDY	88
3	OIL SUBSIDY	82
4	SUBSIDY FUNDS	20
5	SO-CALLED SUBSIDY	10
6	SUBSIDY PAYMENT	16
7	SUBSIDY SCAN	12
8	THEIF SUBSIDY	118
9	TO SUBSIDY	98
10	SUBSIDY	10

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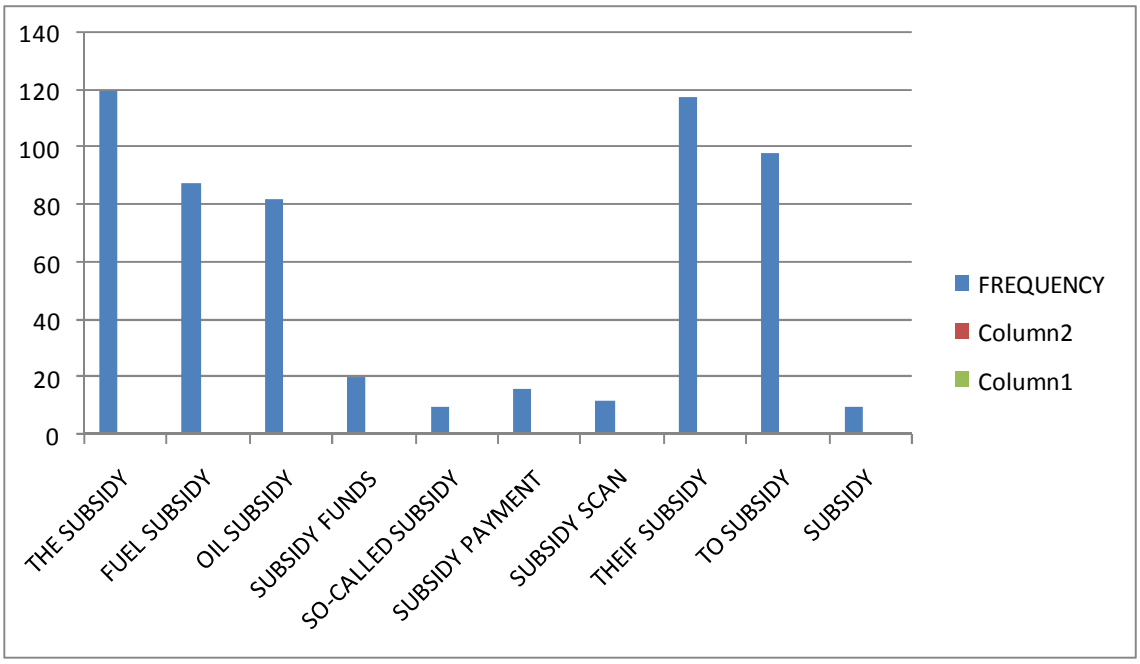

Figure 3. *Top two-word clusters*

Table 5. Top three-word clusters

S/N	THREE-WORD	FREQUENCY
1	THE FUEL SUBSIDY	80
2	THE OIL SUBSIDY	76
3	REMOVAL OF SUBSIDY	82
4	WITH FUEL SUBSIDY	78
5	FUEL SUBSIDY REMOVAL	75
6	THE SUBSIDY REGIME	25
7	NAME OF SUBSIDY	18
8	OTHERWISE OF SUBSIDY	17
9	OF PETROLEUMSUBSIDY	16
10	ON OIL SUBSIDY	35

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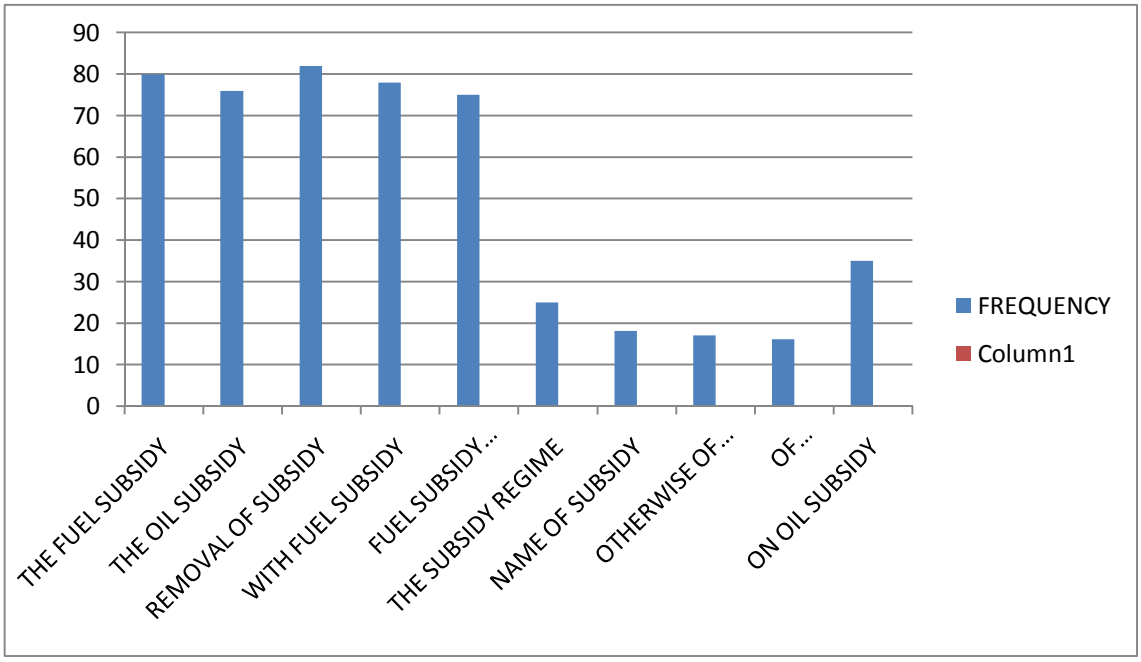

Figure 4. *Top three-word clusters*

Table 6. Top four-word clusters

S/N	FOUR-WORD	FREQUENCY
1	THE REMOVAL OF SUBSIDY	56
2	THIS REMOVAL OF SUBSIDY	44
3	THE SUBSIDY ARGUMENT IS	24
4	REMOVAL OF FUEL SUBSIDY	64
5	THE FUEL SUBSIDY CLAIMS	21

From Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7 above, the phraseology of subsidy is mainly a two to five word string and is typically a propositional phrase when it is a two word cluster and a noun phase when it is more than a two-word cluster.

The frequent use of the determiner 'the' in almost all the clusters suggests that a noun phase with *the* as definite article is a predominant pattern in the phraseology of subsidy in the fuel subsidy debate examined. A closer observation shows that the determiner *the* points to just one noun-*subsidy*-showing the relation of the words to it; being a case of either possession or attribution. Even when prepositions are used, they are in connection with *subsidy* with few exceptions.

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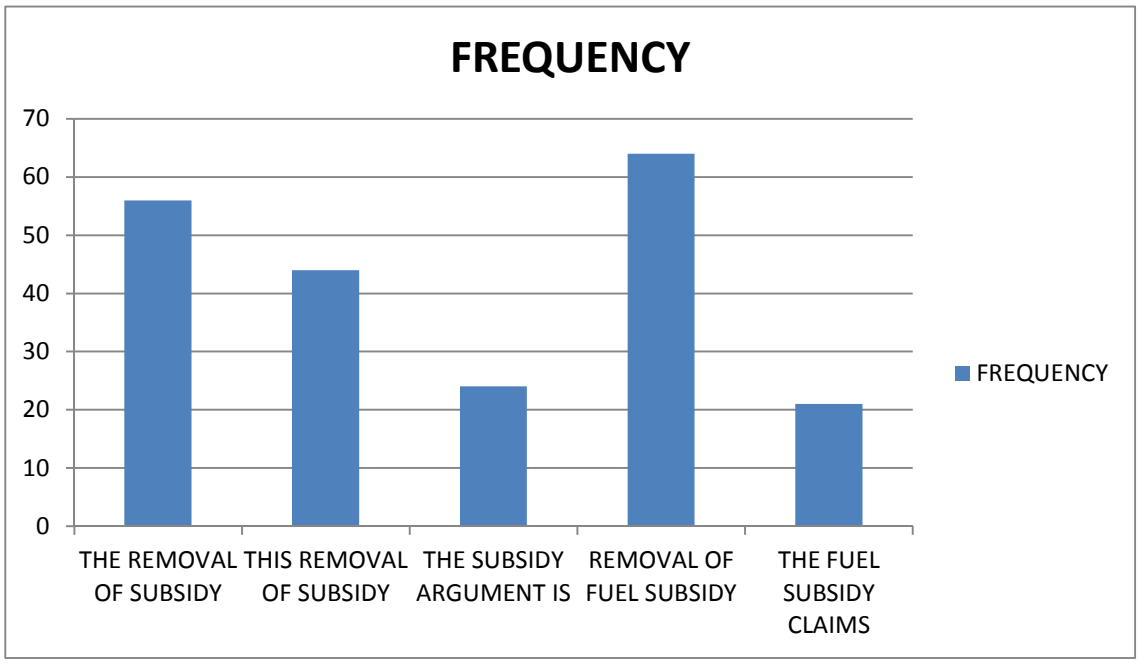

Figure 5. *Top four-word clusters*

Table 7. Top five-word clusters

S/N	FIVE-WORD CLUSTERS	FREQUENCY
1	THE REMOVAL OF FUEL SUBSIDY	60
2	OF THE FUEL SUBSIDY SCHEME	34
3	AS WELL AS FUEL IS	44

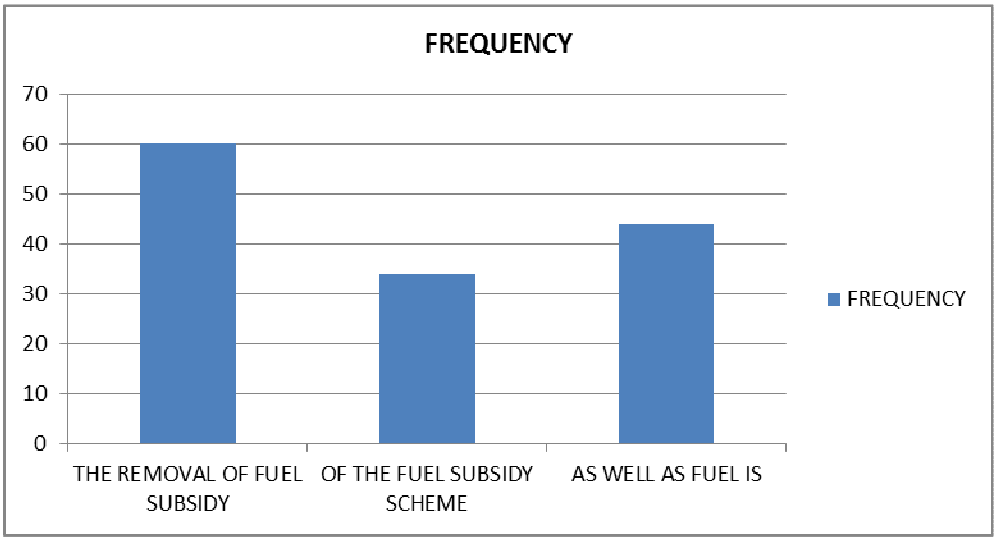

Figure 6. Top five-word clusters

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Conclusion

This paper has revealed through lexical examination that 'subsidy' is very widely used and dispersed in the texts. The analysis shows 'subsidy' as the keyword in the Nigeria oil subsidy debates and that its collocates are situational and contextual. Statistical tools like tables, figures and percentages serve to illustrate the frequency of word count. This paper's contribution to language studies lies in its examining the nature of the lexical features of oil subsidy debate in Nigeria, using a more quantitative, descriptive and computer-assisted approach than in many previous studies. Nonetheless, the data analysed tilt towards the argument in favour of non-removal of oil subsidy.

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