

PRAGMATIC ACTS IN COMMENTS ON THE REMOVAL OF FUEL SUBSIDY IN PRESIDENT BOLA TINUBU'S INAUGURAL SPEECH

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Abstract

The paper examines the use of pragmatic acts in Twitter comments from May to August 2023. The study focuses on a population of fifty tweets, with a sample of fifteen selected for detailed analysis. The theoretical framework employed for the analysis is the Speech Act Theory by Searle, and the research design follows a qualitative model. The findings of the study indicate the prevalence of various pragmatic acts such as commissives, assertives and declaratives in the tweets. While directives and commissives are present, they are relatively few in number. The study identifies political opinions, criticism and the desire to share public opinions as underlying motivations behind the tweets. The research emphasizes the importance of pragmatics and context in meaning formation, highlighting that transparent communication is crucial. Furthermore, the recommendation is to encourage transparent communication and consider diverse communication platforms to facilitate a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of public opinion. Overall, the study sheds light on the nuanced use of pragmatic acts in online discourse, particularly in response to a significant political event such as the removal of fuel subsidy.

Key Words: Pragmatics, Pragmatics act, Tweets, Inaugural speech, Fuel subsidy

Introduction

Political speeches do not end with their delivery; rather, they take a second life in the public sphere, where meanings are expressed. These expressions, in contemporary Nigeria occur on digital platforms, where citizens respond instantly to political utterances through comment, reactions and debates. One of such politically consequential utterance is President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's declaration on the removal of fuel subsidy in his inaugural speech on 29 May 2023.

Fuel subsidy has long occupied a sensitive position in socio-economic and political landscape. As a policy that directly affects transportation fares, food prices and in short, daily living, its removal represents not merely an economic reform but a disruption of the status quo. The succinct pronouncement was not just an informational statement but a performative political statement with far-reaching implications. The immediacy with which Nigerians turned to digital platforms to comment on this announcement underscores the centrality of online discourse in contemporary political participation.

While several studies have examined the removal of fuel subsidies from economic, political and sociological perspectives, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to how Nigerians linguistically enact their responses to this policy in digital spaces. Online comments are often dismissed as emotional outbursts or informal talk. However, from a pragmatic perspective, they are rich sites where speakers perform actions. Unlike formal political discourse, comment sections allow users to speak without institutional constraints, leading to 'unfiltered' language. This raises important questions, such as: What are the pragmatic acts in the comments? What are the underlying motivations and intentions behind the pragmatic acts? How do the linguistic features and context influence the pragmatic acts? Analysing the pragmatic acts in comments on oil subsidy removal provides insights into the implications of words and their meaning in

public. This insight is an important yardstick for dissecting the ideologies that people have and which are made evident through their words. The study will examine the insinuations that government speeches or policies can produce in the masses. The paper explores only pragmatic acts identifiable in the comments of the Nigerian tweeting masses regarding the fuel subsidy removal. It focuses primarily on the linguistic elements of the comments.

Against this backdrop, the paper at hand borders on the examination of the masses' comments on the issue of fuel subsidy removal on X. X (formerly known as Twitter) is the most widely used social media site in Nigeria for discussing important matters. Identifying the pragmatic acts in these comments posted on X will help reveal the underlying messages expressed by the masses and illuminate how language is used as social action in times of economic uncertainty.

Aim/Objectives

The aim of the paper is to investigate and understand the pragmatic acts employed in public comments on the removal made of the fuel subsidy by President Bola Tinubu. The following objectives will aid the achievement of the aim:

- 1) To identify the types of pragmatic acts used in the comments;
- 2) To explore the underlying motivations and intentions behind the pragmatic acts;
- 3) To examine how linguistic features and context influence the pragmatic acts.

Review of Related Literature

One relevant study is "Analysis of X (Twitter) and Facebook' Dialectics on Fuel Subsidy Removal in Nigeria" conducted in 2024 by Daniel Ezegwu, Gloria Nwakego Chukwuemeka, Agnes Ezeji and Sunday Chibueze. This study employed content analysis to examine social media posts following the removal of the fuel subsidy. The findings indicate that a large proportion of posts expressed negative sentiment, criticism and dissatisfaction with government policy. While

the study provides empirical evidence of public mood and the intensity of reactions, it treats posts mainly as sentiment-bearing texts. As such, it does not account for how commenters use language to perform specific actions such as asserting beliefs, committing to positions, or making declarations within context. This limits its explanatory Power from a pragmatic perspective.

Broader studies on Nigerian online political discourse provide further context. In “A Discourse Analysis of Online “ Comments on Political Discourse in Nigeria” conducted in 2022, Abubakar Jibril, Sabiu Idris and Adamu Mohammed analysed readers’ comments on political news stories. Their findings reveal that commenters actively construct political identities and ideological positions through language. This study underscores the interactive and participatory nature of online comment sections. Nonetheless, it does not focus on a specific political speech event, nor does it adopt a pragmatic or speech act framework capable of explaining the communicative intentions behind individual utterances.

From a pragmatic standpoint, “The Pragmatics of Political Claims and Social Responses amidst COVID-19 and EndSARS Saga in Nigeria” in 2021 by Chioma Onwubiko is particularly instructive. Using Speech Act Theory, the study demonstrates that social media users perform acts such as accusing, warning, demanding and legitimising resistance in response to political claims. This research empirically validates the application of speech act theory to Nigerian digital discourse. However, its focus is on protest-related discourse rather than economic policy announcements, leaving unanswered questions about how pragmatic acts operate in responses to presidential inaugural speeches and policy pronouncements such as fuel subsidy removal.

Similarly, “Politeness on Facebook: A Pragmatic Study of the Comments on President Buhari’s 2016 Independence Day Speech”

was published in 2024 by Joshua Sunday Ayantayo. Overall, these empirical studies collectively establish that Nigerian social media users actively engage in political discourse and that their online comments are linguistically and socially meaningful. However, notable gaps remain. Most existing studies prioritise ideology, sentiment or politeness over a systematic analysis of pragmatic acts.

Theoretical Framework

Speech act theory was developed by J.L. Austin and later expanded upon by John Searle. It explores how language is not just a means of conveying information but a tool for performing various acts. These acts, known as speech acts, encompass a wide range of intentions and functions in communication. Speech act theory delves into the multifaceted nature of language. As John Searle, a prominent figure in this field, notes, "We perform many kinds of acts in saying something, including, for example, predicting, warning, advising, and requesting" (4). In essence, it recognises that language is not just about words and sentences but is a means for individuals to perform actions and convey intentions in conversation.

Speech acts can be deconstructed into three layers: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The locutionary act refers to the surface structure of a sentence, while the illocutionary act pertains to the intended function of the utterance (e.g., making a request). The perlocutionary act concerns the effect on the listener. As Searle explains, "The performance of an illocutionary act... is the performance of an act the performance of which involves the utterance of a sentence"(9). Speech acts are categorised into various types, primarily following Austin's distinctions. John Searle further refined this by categorising illocutionary acts into five classes: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. As Searle explains, "An assertive speech act commits the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition." (11)

Searle in 1969 and 1976, reworked the classification of speech act theory upon the recognition of the illocutionary force of utterances.

By defining speech acts as constitutive norms for carrying out illocutionary acts, Searle's classification saw speech acts from a social standpoint of linguistic meaning (Korta & Perry 8, Sarafa 11). He categorized the acts into (i.) assertives which commit speakers to the truth of some proposition e.g. stating, claiming, reporting, announcing, etc., (ii.) directives which count as attempt to bring about some effect through the action of hearer e.g. requesting, ordering, demanding, begging, etc., (iii.) expressives which count as the expression of some psychological state e.g. thanking, apologising, congratulating, etc., (iv) commissives which commit speakers to some future action e.g. promising, offering, swearing, etc. to do something, and (v.) declarations which are speech acts whose successful performance brings about the correspondence between the propositional content and reality e.g. naming a baby/ship, resigning, dismissing, accepting, etc.

In the context of the present research, speech act theory is a fundamental framework that provides a profound understanding of language's pragmatic functions. It is crucial in deciphering the diverse intentions and effects of utterances in communication.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design and content analysis. Data was collected via X tweets from the 29th of May 2023 to August 30th 2023. This span of time was chosen because it was within the period when the removal of the fuel subsidy was of much concern to the public and so many reactions were generated. A combination of pertinent keywords, such as "fuel subsidy removal, and "Tinubu's inaugural speech," was adopted to find appropriate comments to include in the study. Purposive sampling was used to guarantee a diverse and representative sample of fifteen tweets out of the fifty tweets.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Tweet 1:

Assertives: "On the issue of fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria" - This part of the tweet sets the context for discussion without expressing a specific assertion.

Expressives: "I stand to say" - This phrase reflects the author's expression of their personal viewpoint, indicating their feelings and opinion.

Commissives: "I stand to say" - While it expresses the author's willingness to speak out and assert their opinion, it can also be seen as a commitment to expressing their perspective.

"I prefer dangerous freedom to peaceful slavery" - This statement contains an implicit commitment to the author's personal preference and values.

There are no explicit declarations in the tweet. There are no directives in the tweet.

In this tweet, the author primarily performs an expressive speech act by sharing their personal opinion on the removal of Nigeria's fuel subsidy. The use of "I prefer" indicates their feelings and sentiments. Additionally, the tweets contains an indirect commissive element, as the author implies a commitment to expressing their viewpoint. The tweet doesn't contain any explicit directives or declarations.

Tweet 2:

Assertives: "A cup of rice as palliative to cushion the effects of Fuel subsidy removal" - This part of the tweet makes a factual assertion about offering a cup of rice as a form of palliative in response to the effects of fuel subsidy removal.

Expressives: "I pledge to Nigeria my country oooo" - This phrase reflects the author's expression of patriotism and commitment to Nigeria. It conveys the author's sentiments and emotional attachment to their country.

Commissives: "I pledge to Nigeria my country oooo" - This statement is a clear commissive speech act where the author commits to pledging allegiance to Nigeria.

Declarations: "I pledge to Nigeria my country oooo" - This part of the tweet includes a declaration of loyalty to Nigeria.

Directives: There are no explicit directives in the tweet.

In this tweet, the author combines assertive, expressive, commissive, and declarative speech acts. They assert that providing a cup of rice is a palliative measure. The phrase "I pledge to Nigeria my country oooo" is an expression of patriotism and a commissive statement which the author commits to pledges allegiance to Nigeria. The tweet concludes with a declaration of loyalty to the country. There are no explicit directives in the tweet.

Tweet 3:

Assertives: "What I discovered so far is that those who still support fuel subsidy removal are not aware of the economic hardship we are facing" - This part of the tweet presents an assertion regarding the awareness of those who support fuel subsidy removal and their understanding of the economic hardship.

"Because when I asked them, they claim that there is no hardship in Nigeria and that fuel subsidy removal is not causing hardship" - This further asserts the responses the author received when questioning supporters of fuel subsidy removal, highlighting their claims about the absence of hardship and the impact of subsidy removal.

Expressives: There are no explicit expressions of feelings or emotions in the tweet.

Commissives: There are no explicit commitments or promises in the tweet.

Declarations: There are no explicit declarations in the tweet. There are no explicit directives in the tweet.

In this tweet, the author primarily makes assertive speech acts by presenting their observations and the responses they received from individuals who support fuel subsidy removal. The tweet does not contain explicit expressions of feelings, commitments, declarations, or directives. It is focused on conveying information and the author's perspective on the issue.

Tweet 4:

Assertives: "I've lived in Nigeria all my life" - This statement provides factual information about the author's residency in Nigeria.

"Immediately that man talked about removal of fuel subsidy" - This part of the tweet describes an event, the mention of fuel subsidy removal.

"I go buy 80 litres of fuel" - The author claims to have purchased 80 litres of fuel as a response to the news about fuel subsidy removal.

Expressives: "I know how foolish this will be" - This statement expresses the author's opinion and judgment about the decision to remove fuel subsidy. It reflects their feelings and assessment.

"E go sustain me till fuel stations decide to open, bastards" - The term "bastards" expresses strong negative emotions and disapproval.

Commissives: There are no explicit commitments or promises in the tweet.

Declarations: There are no explicit declarations in the tweet.

Directives: "abeg make una avoid me o" - This is a directive asking others to avoid bothering the author or not engage in further discussion with them regarding the topic.

In this tweet, the author primarily engages in assertive speech acts by providing information about their life in Nigeria and their reaction to the news of fuel subsidy removal. Additionally, the tweet contains expressive speech acts, including the expression of their opinion and strong emotions about the situation. There's also a directive at the end, asking others to avoid discussing on the topic. The tweet doesn't contain explicit commissives or declarations.

Tweet five

Assertives: "I say NO to the planned removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria" - This statement asserts the author's stance on the planned removal of fuel subsidy, expressing their opposition to it.

Expressives: "YES!" - This exclamation reflects the author's enthusiasm or emphasis.

"NO NO NO NO." - This repetition of "NO" with capitalisation expresses strong negative emotions, disapproval, and a clear stance on the issue.

"I don't wanna become an armed robber or assassin" - This statement expresses the author's concerns and fears about the potential consequences of fuel subsidy removal.

Commissives: "I say NO to the planned removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria" - This is a commissive speech act as the author commits to their decision to oppose the removal of fuel subsidy.

Declarations: "I say NO to the planned removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria" - This part of the tweet includes a declaration of the author's position on the issue. There are no explicit directives in the tweet.

In this tweet, the author makes assertive and expressive speech acts by declaring their opposition to the planned removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria and expressing strong negative emotions and fears about the potential consequences. There's also an implied commissive element in their declaration. The tweet does not contain explicit directives.

Tweet 6:

Assertives: "Some Nigerians are jubilation because of the removal of Fuel subsidy in Nigeria" - This statement asserts that some Nigerians are celebrating the removal of the fuel subsidy, providing information.

"but I need those people to explain to me in layman's English on how this development will yield positive results" - This part of the tweet

questions the rationale behind the celebration and requests an explanation for the expected positive outcomes.

There are no explicit expressions of feelings or emotions in the tweet. There are no explicit commitments or promises in the tweet. There are no explicit declarations in the tweet. "I need those people to explain to me in layman's English on how this development will yield positive results" - This is a directive requesting others to provide an explanation in simple terms.

In this tweet, the author primarily engages in assertive speech acts by providing information about the celebratory reactions to the removal of fuel subsidy and by questioning the reasoning behind these reactions. The tweet also contains a directive, as the author asks for an explanation in simple terms. There are no explicit expressions of feelings, commitments, or declarations in the tweet.

Tweet 7:

Assertives

1. "The obedient movement is home to the dumbest sets of Nigerians" - This statement asserts the author's opinion about the intelligence of a group of Nigerians associated with the "obedient movement."

2. "The Nigerians that don't know history, that don't know which body makes law in Nigeria" - These phrases describe the lack of knowledge or awareness among certain Nigerians regarding their country's history and legislative processes.

3. "Those that think subsidy removal means cheaper fuel (I've seen that One live)" - This segment asserts the author's firsthand experience with individuals who mistakenly believe that subsidy removal results in cheaper fuel.

4. "Those that thinks PMB was cloned" - This phrase points out a particular belief held by some individuals, suggesting they believe President Muhammadu Buhari was cloned.

There are no explicit expressions of feelings or emotions in the tweet. There are no explicit commitments or promises in the tweet. There are

no explicit declarations in the tweet. There are no explicit directives in the tweet.

In this tweet, the author primarily engages in assertive speech acts by expressing their opinion about a group of Nigerians associated with the "obedient movement" and highlighting the perceived ignorance or misguided beliefs among them. There are no explicit expressions of feelings, commitments, declarations, or directives in the tweet,

Tweet Eight

Assertives

1. "With all this decision, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu is taking" - This part of the tweet asserts that President Bola Ahmed Tinubu is making certain decisions.
2. "Even with the fuel subsidy removal" - This segment acknowledges the removal of fuel subsidy as a fact.
3. "I'm feeling Nigeria is getting relief from the Buhari administration" - This statement asserts the author's belief that Nigeria is experiencing relief due to actions taken by the Buhari administration.

Expressives

"may God protect him for us" - This expression reflects the author's hope for President Tinubu's protection and well-being, conveying their feelings of concern.

Commissives

"because I'm begging to see this man is ready" - This part of the tweet implies a commissive element as the author expresses their eagerness to witness President Tinubu's readiness.

There are no explicit declarations in the tweet. There are no explicit directives in the tweet. In this tweet, the author primarily engages in assertive speech acts by discussing President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's decisions and the fuel subsidy removal, as well as expressing

their belief that Nigeria is experiencing relief under the Buhari administration. The tweet also includes an expressive element by conveying the author's hope and concern for President Tinubu's well-being. There is an implicit commissive element in the author's eagerness to observe President Tinubu's readiness, but there are no explicit declarations or directives.

Findings

1. The tweets analysed showcase a variety of pragmatic acts, including assertive statements, directives, declarations and expressive elements. The analysis highlights the absence of explicit directives in the tweets and Declaration are notably less common in the analysed tweets.
2. The underlying motivation and intention behind the pragmatic acts vary across the tweets. In the assertive acts presenting facts and forecast, the intention is to inform and provide information to the audience. Expressive acts, on the other hand, reflect the tweeters' emotions or concern about certain economic policies.
3. Linguistic features, such as choice of words and expressions, played a crucial role in shaping the pragmatic acts.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of tweets on fuel subsidy removal reveals intriguing pragmatic acts, with assertives, declaratives, expressives and directive acts prominently featured throughout the sampled comments. However, it is the expressive acts that emerge as the most prevalent among the tweets analysed. Users frequently convey their emotions, attitudes, and reactions towards fuel subsidy removal, expressing sentiments of support, opposition, frustration, or concern. This dominance of expressive acts underscores the emotional intensity and personal investment inherent in discussions of socio-political issues such as fuel subsidy removal.

The underlying motivations and intentions behind the pragmatic acts identified in the tweets are rooted in political opinions, criticism, and the desire to shape public perceptions. Users express their support or opposition to fuel subsidy removal based on their ideological beliefs and affiliations, reflecting the polarised nature of political discourse in Nigeria. Additionally, criticism of government policies and officials is prevalent, with users resorting to assertive and directive tactics to voice dissent and advocate for change.

Linguistics features such as the choice of words in expressive language play a crucial role in evoking strong emotions within the tweets. Users employ emotive language, vivid imagery, and rhetorical devices to convey their feelings and opinions passionately. This rhetorical strategy aims to elicit empathy, solidarity, or outrage among fellow users, amplifying the impact of their messages within the digital sphere.

Conclusion

The research explores the pragmatic acts that are found in the Tweeter comments of Nigerians about the declaration of fuel subsidy removal by President Bola Tinubu. The study collated and analysed fifty tweets from diverse tweeter accounts between May 2023 and August 2023, but due to space constraints not all fifty have been presented in this Publication. The tweets were subjected to Speech Act theory parameters. By employing the Speech Act Theory as a framework and it also uncovered the communicative intentions behind comments on fuel subsidy removal. The findings revealed that tweets manifested assertive acts by presenting forecasts, historical data, and opinions, while expressives conveyed emotions, scepticism, or dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the study revealed that linguistic features, such as specific verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, played a pivotal role in shaping the pragmatic acts within the discourse. The contextual backdrop,

referencing historical events and policy changes, significantly influenced the interpretation and expression of opinions within the comments.

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