

# A SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF THE LANGUAGE OF PROTEST IN 2024 #ENDBADGOVERNANCE PROTEST IN NIGERIA

Daniel Abuh,  
Martina Awodi Mamenoka  
&  
Josephine Ali

## Abstract

This study evaluates the language of protest which has been examined using different approaches. Certain linguistic features such as claim, threat, demand, appeal, and dissatisfaction have been reported. However, there is dearth in similar studies despite constant protest in Nigeria. The researchers adopt Speech Act Theory J.L. Austin as a framework for the analysis. The present study examines the language of protests in Nigeria using the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protest. The data for the study were collected from social media and reputable news platforms, and 36 data were gathered and grouped under their linguistic features. This research reveals that more demands were made during the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protest. Qualitative methods of findings from the analysis were employed. It was discovered that the protest placards used by the protesters really portrayed their views on the government and their demands from the demands were explicitly stated. In furtherance of this, the study can contribute to protest discourse and set in motion other studies using the language deployed in the #EndBadGovernance protest in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Speech Act Analysis, Language of Protest, 2024 #Endbadgovernance Protest

## Introduction

A protest which is synonymous with agitation, ferment, brouhaha, ruckus, dissent and so on is a public objection or disapproval towards a particular idea, policy, or action. Protest, according to Chilwa (2015) is the expression of objection by protesters through words or actions or others forms of social behaviour that rejects or resists certain government, policies, or the existing socio-political structures. A protest usually involves a great number of people expressing a collective disapproval or dissent publicly through means of an organized demonstration to engage in a mass protest. Protest is mostly against government policies, however, there can be social protests, religious protest, and occupational protests among others. The aim of every protest is to systematically campaign to achieve a particular objective through peaceful and non-violence means. Public demonstrations-protest, dates to before Nigeria's independence. Before her independence, protest such as the Aba Women's Riot of 1925-1930 or Abeokuta Women's Revolt of 27th November 1947 has been a thing of historical note. After the independence, there have been protest such as Anti-SAP riots of 1989, June 12th protest of 1993, which was against General Sani Abacha, Ali must go protest on 17th April 1978, continuous ASUU strike, the EndSars protest in Nigeria which was experienced in the year 2020 and recently the #EndBadGovernance protest from August 1-10 2024.

The #EndBadGovernance protests represented a culmination of years of frustration and a demand for fundamental reforms. The movement gained momentum through social media, with protesters using platforms like Twitter and Instagram to share their experiences, organize demonstrations, and raise awareness. The protests were marked by a diverse range of participants, including students, youth activists, and ordinary citizens from all walks of life.

In all six geopolitical areas, the protests were spearheaded mostly by children, adults, and youths in Nigerians, who joined forces

together to demand accountability and improvements in their social well-being. Protests and rallies of solidarity by Nigerians living abroad and their supporters took place in numerous major cities across the globe, including the UK, the US, Canada, and Germany. Furthermore, it was alleged that Nigerian security personnel had broken up nonviolent demonstrations in a few towns by shooting, hurling tear gas, and using water cannons against unarmed protestors, particularly in Abuja, Lagos, Kano where they gathered (BBC News, August 1, 2024).

As a result, a disputed number of people died, which heightened their demand for responsibility and change in public operations (Aljazeera.com, August 2, 2024). Following the government's denial of responsibility for these startling indictments made public by newspaper headlines, the public turned to Facebook and the reader's page of the chosen newspaper to expose the political hypocrisy and occurrences like the ones mentioned above to bring about change and social improvement. The current study examines the demonstrators' claims and pragmatic implications based on this premise.

It would also examine how the illocutionary acts embedded in the claims of these protesters portrays their intentions. It is known fact that a protest is incomplete without the use of effective language, as such, language a medium of communicating, interacting, and expressing oneself in a protest situation. Language, which performs several functions with regards to communication is used in every field of life including politics, religion, business, sciences and even protests among others. Each of these fields has their distinctive peculiarities and linguistic acts are carried out though the instrumentality of language. Language according to Chaer and Augustina (2004, p. 11) is a “system, which means that language is formed by a number of components that has constant pattern and can be regulated”. Traditionally, it is stated that language is a tool to interact or communicate, in the sense, which means to convey thoughts, ideas, concepts, or even a feeling. In

sociolinguistics, it is seen as involving activities of “who speaks what language, to whom, when and to what end”. Therefore, from the view of sociolinguistics, language functions can be viewed from different angles such as speakers, listeners, the topics, codes, and conversation purpose (Chaer and Augustina 2004).

Language fulfils the role of a personal or private identity for speakers. Jakobson refers to this as "the emotive function." It denotes that speakers are voicing their opinions about what they have to say. The speakers display their emotions while giving their speeches in addition to expressing them verbally. As a result, the audience can discern if the speaker is joyful, sad, or furious. From both the speaker and the listener's perspective, language serves as a directive that controls the listener's behaviour; Halliday (1975) refers to this as an instrumental function, while Jakobson refers to it as rhetorical.

From this angle, language not only makes the listener to do something, but also shows that the activities are in line with what the speaker wants. This can be done by the speakers through sentences that express a command, direction, demand, or suggestion. This study will take a little twist as it will analyse the linguistic features of the language of protest as demonstrated during the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protest in Nigeria. The linguistic acts and pragmatic strategies employed by the protesters will also be exposed.

## **Literature review**

### **Protest**

Protests are social movements increasingly drawing global attention at variance, some having become truly historical landmarks, viz.: the nonviolent marches of the Civil Rights Movement in segregated United States in the 1950s and 1960s; the youth revolt in France in 1968, known as May 1968; the Soweto uprising in 1976 against the apartheid regime in South Africa; the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 in China; and recently the so-called Arab Spring

revolution which still reverberates around the world. Each has generated its own unique pragmatic elements.

According to Amnesty International (right to protest), protest is an invaluable way to speak verity to power. The protest has been the driving force behind some of the most important social movements, exposing injustice and abuse, demanding responsibility, and people to keep hoping for a better future. Unfortunately, these precious rights are under attack and must be defended from those who are hysterical about change and want to keep us divided. Governments and others with power are constantly changing new ways to suppress protesters and silence critical voices. Global trends towards the demilitarization of police, the increase in the abuse of force by police on the protesters and shrinking communal space mean that it's getting more delicate to stay safe while making your voice heard.

### **Language of protest**

Protest can be described as cooperative act which involves numerous people to publicly express their views against an idea or policy to enact a desired change. Protests are mostly against government policy (political protest), however, there can be social protests, religious protests, and occupational protests among others. Eesuola (2015) sees protest demonstration as a means of holding dissents or expressing discontent through public marches. Protest otherwise called demonstration or dissent in a public objection or disapproval towards a particular idea, policy, or action. The main aim of any protest s to systematically campaign to achieve a particular objective through peaceful and non-violence means.

Over the century, protest has become a tool of the public to express their dissatisfaction and kick against policies all over the world. Just like every concept, protest has its own language that is communicative structure used in expressing the protest objectives. This could be verbal and non-verbal. Verbal in terms of chants, songs, in

banners and placards, and non-verbal such as the pitch invasion of the 2018 FIFA world cup by the Pussy Riot members. For this study, we shall focus on the verbal language of protest. Pressure and persuasion method are often employed in peaceful non-violent protest. However, it is essential to note that protest can turn out to be violent and nonviolent as it shall be examined below. Protest can take several forms, its demonstration and language varies according to its form, some of the forms of protest according to the Dynamics of collective action project includes rally, march (moving from one location to another), picket (the holding of banners or placards and walking in a circular route), most vigils have banners and placards that informs passers-by the purpose of the protest, civil disobedience, not mob, strike (mostly used among employee of an organization) and attack among others. Protests take place in different forms depending on the situation. Strike would be more appropriate among workers/employees of an organization, whereas civil disobedience might be more appropriate in kicking against laws considered unjust by the protesters.

Protest is dialogical in nature; it is a two-way interaction between the protesters and the target body. It involves the protesters kicking against some laws or policies or making demands in expectant of some responses or positive outcome. Appropriate interaction is necessary in meeting the demands of a protest that is, demands highlighted in clear terms, and responses from the appropriate bodies should be related to the demands. Searle (1975, p. 368) acknowledges that "a protest involves both expression of disapproval and a petition for change". As previously stated, the communicative elements of a demonstration are separate from one another as well as from how an individual chooses to demonstrate. "One is against something - the object, one prescribes something - the demand, and there is a way of communicating these connected stances - the means" are the three things that one is against when they protest (Mathew Chrisman and Graham Hubbs, 2018).

## Characteristics of Language of Protest

Chrisman (2021) argues that “there are 3 constitutive norms of the speech act of protest. Firstly, the act must aim at expressing disapproval of something, secondly, it must aim at demanding for changes in response to this disapproval. Thirdly, it must do both things by appealing to some presumed shared conception of what is fair”. A protest should generally exhibit these three characteristics. These characteristics are what distinguished a protest from other similar speech acts such as complains.

## Theoretical Framework

Speech Act Theory J.L. Austin, an Oxford philosopher, introduced the Speech Act Theory, and J.R. Searle, an American philosopher, expanded on it. According to the speech act hypothesis, language is more of an activity than a means of expressing one's feelings. The theory highlights that utterances have meanings that are distinct or different from language meanings for the speaker and listener. The theory also distinguished between two categories of utterances: performative and constative utterances.

The differences between constative and performative statements are discussed by Austin (1962). A constative statement is one that indicates or characterizes the circumstances in connection to a true or untrue fact. An utterance that is performative cannot be true or false, nor does it describe anything at all. Here, the primary unit of analysis is largely the performer's moods, attitudes, emotions, and thoughts during the language act. As stated by Austin (1975), linguistic acts can be divided into three different categories, and they are:

**Locutionary act:** This is the act of saying something. In other words, it means the act of producing a series of sounds which means something. This is the aspect of language which has been the traditional concern of linguistics. It is the formal

meaning of an utterance without reference to its function within a discourse.

**Illocutionary act:** This is the intended meaning of what the speaker wants to achieve by using a particular utterance. According to Austin (1962), it is an act performed in saying something i.e saying is doing. Locutionary act says something while illocutionary act uses the location for a particular purpose such as betting, promising, ordering, suggesting, accusing, asking, admitting, apologizing, challenging, condoling, surrendering, offering etc. according to Akinajian et al, (2001) “illocutionary act can often be successfully performed simply by uttering the right explicit performative sentence with the right intentions and beliefs and under the right circumstance”.

Perlocutionary act: Austin (1962, p. 119) coined “perlocutionary act” when he argues that saying something will often or even normally produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, of the speakers or of the other persons. In other words, it normally creates a sense of consequential effects on the audience, the effect upon the addressee is the main character of precautionary utterances. Speech act theory was further developed by American philosopher Searle. It considers the degree to which utterances are said to perform locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and or perlocutionary acts.

Searle is responsible for devising a system of speech act categorization from this view, there are only five illocutionary points that speakers can achieve on propositions in an utterance, namely, the assertive, commissive, directive and declaratory and expressive illocutionary points. We tell people how things are (Assertive), we try to get them to do things (Directives), we commit ourselves to doing things (commissives), we express our feelings and attitude (Expressives),

and we bring about changes in the world through our utterances (Declarations).

Searle's Classification of Speech Acts (1976, 1979) Searle (1976), in developing Austin's concept of speech acts, gave a categorization of speech Acts. They are:

1. **Assertives:** These are acts that commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition, and thus carry a truth value. They express the speaker's belief, sentiment, view, paradigmatic cases which includes asserting, claiming, concluding, reporting and stating.
2. **Directives:** These are acts that represent attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something. They express the speaker's desire/wish for the addressee to do something.
3. **Commissives:** These are acts that commit the speaker to some further course of action. They express the speaker's intention to do something. Cases are offers, pledges, promises, threats, vows and refusals.
- iv.
4. **Expressives:** Expressive express a psychological attitude or state in the speaker such as joy, sorrow, likes and dislikes. Instances are apologies, blames, praise, thanks, pardon, and condolences.
5. **Declarations:** They are those acts that effect immediate change in some current state of affairs because they tend to rely on extra-linguistic institutions for successful performance. They may be called institutionalized performatives. Instances are dismissing, bidding, declaring, pardoning, christening, baptizing, appointing, judging.

In conclusion, the concept of Speech Act is in the context of situation. The speech Act borrows its ideals from structuralism. Austin admits that his three components of speech act are not altogether separable. "We must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued – the total speech act. If we are to see the parallel between

statements and performances and how they can go wrong. Perhaps indeed, there is no great distinction between statements and performative utterance”, Austin. The basic unit of linguistic communication as suggested by Searle Speech Act. It can be a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a sound. It should fulfil the task of expressing the intention of the user. Understanding the user’s intention can lead to complete understanding of the speech act.

The research methodology presents the style and approach used for data collection, the research design, area of study, sampling and sampling techniques, justification of data, and the method of data analysis. The data used in carrying out the research is a secondary research method. The data is extracted from articles, social media post, and press release. Excerpts from the protests are analysed using related literatures. The reason for this choice lies in the fact that the #EndBadGovernance protest is unarguably the largest protest which got international attention since independence of Nigeria. Protest is a form of political participation and political apathy is a trend in Nigeria. However, millions (including those in diaspora) took to the protest, breaking the existing political apathy in Nigeria. Besides, the role of language use in protest and other forms of speech act is significant. Analysing the language used by the parties involved in the protest and how the language filled the protest would help readers, protesters, and other interested parties in the field of protest to understand the role of language in the speech act.

The qualitative methods of analysis that identified features of language of protest proposed in the speech act theories as discussed in the literature review chapter of this work will be employed. The qualitative analysis focuses on the meanings of the statements made. It also seeks to answer “why and “how” these protesters used the language. It further explains the intention of the protesters and interprets the language the employed. Common data will also be grouped together to as to fit the demand. Appeal, claim, threat or dissatisfaction speech acts.

The analysis was done using qualitative methods of analysis. A greater part of this data was extracted from the internet where pictures and posts from the protest went viral. The characteristics of speech acts such as demands, appeals, claims, threats and dissatisfactions will also be analysed.

This section analyses the gathered 2024 #EndBadGovernance protest data using qualitative analysis method. The analysis is carried out under five speech act labels, demand, appeal, claims, threat and dissatisfaction. These acts will be thoroughly explained under each section. However, it is also important to observe that some of the statements analysed consist of more than one acts.

## Research Results and Discussion

### Acts that portray Demand

1. ADEQUATE PROVISION AND FUNDING OF PUBLIC EDUCATION AND HEALTHCARE
2. AGGRESSIVELY PURSUE FREE AND COMPULSORY EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN ACROSS NIGERIA.
3. ALL OUR REFINERIES MUST WORK TO REVERT FUEL PRICES TO PRE-MAYY 29TH 2023 PRICE.
4. WE WANT FOOD PRICE CONTROL,
5. END FOOD HIKE NOW
6. OPEN BORDER END HARDSHIP
7. WE NEED STUDY GRANTS NOT LOANS

The above highlighted data are demand acts exercised by the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protesters. Statements (i and ii) expresses the demand of the protesters to the government of the day. The words used “adequate provision...” is a demand to those in authority to provide those things as needed by the society.

Statement (ii) is also a demand to “aggressively pursue free and compulsory education for children in Nigeria” it simply means that the

children that are schooling in Nigeria go through a lot to pay their school fees. There are demanding from government to make education free as soon as possible.

Statement (iii) consist of acts of demand too. These statements are intended to evoke changes in the oil sector. The are not only demanding that the refineries must work but demanding the reversal of the pump price. Statement (iv) “we need food price control”, states the obligation of the government to control prices of food and services, demanding that they carry out their primary assignment- which is welfare of citizens. Statement (v) “end food hike now’ is also a demand made by the protesters to the government on the need to end food hike ravaging the country here and then, the same thing is applicable to the other demands on the placards used by the protesters.

### Appeal

To appeal is to make a serious, hones, urgent and heartfelt request to someone or for something. It is used to make an urgent request for something that is necessary or desired. Appeal, which is a heartfelt request in a solemn tone was used by some of the protesters in airing their plea to the government. A major characteristic of an appeal act is that the act must first, be a heartfelt request and second, it must be directed to someone in authority.

Acts that portray appeal

- i. TINUBU LET NIGERIANS BREATHE
- ii. THIS SUFFERING IS TOO MUCH
- iii. LET THE POOR BREATH REMOVE TASK

The above data shows appeal acts used by some protesters during the #EndBadGovernance protest. The data consists of language features of appeal. “Let” as used in statement xv and xvi respectively denotes an

appeal act. The acts are heartfelt request to the Nigerian government and certain people in authority to let them leave as humans again.

### Claims

Claim is an assertive speech act. It states that something is true or is a fact. To make a claim is to say that something is true or is a fact. To make a claim is to say that something is true or is a fact, although you cannot prove it and other people might not believe it. It is to assert in the face of possible contradiction. One major characteristic of claims according to Searle (1979) is that it is assessable on the dimension of assessment which includes true and false. A claim should be debatable, though specific, and focused, a claim should also be logical.

Acts that portray claims

- i. WE SAY NO TO INJUSTICE
- ii. WHERE IS THE HOPE YOU PROMISED?
- iii. WHERE ARE THE PALLIATIVES?

The claim highlighted above are used by the protesters in various ways. The statement, “we say no to injustice” is a situation in Nigeria been demonstrated that there is injustice in the land and the claim is truthful and verifiable.

In the second statement, it is a rhetorical question but has a linguistic import in that, the protesters are asking the government the “HOPE” that was given to them as promised during their campaigns. In the last statement here, the government kept talking about palliatives several times and it is not getting the people. So, the protesters are asking to see the palliatives the government is promising them.

### Threat

Threat acts, often, suggest that something unpleasant or violent will happen especially if a particular action or order is not followed.

Threat act in protest denotes that the protesters might use force and violence to resolve their demands if the demands are not being met. Threats are intentional acts performed by a speaker/speakers to make s hearer do something, which may cause some harm, trouble, danger and fear to him as required by the speaker (Brauch, 2011). A treat is a commissive speech act whose illocutionary purpose is to express a future consequence for the recipient under a certain condition to encourage the hearer not to make the condition true (Searle, 1969, Blanco Salgueiro, 2010). One characteristics of threat acts is the use of force and violence.

#### Acts that portray threat

- i. SCRAP THE SENATE #REVOLUTIONNOW
- ii. A CORRUPT JUDICIARY IS A THREAT TO ALL MEN OF GOOD CONSCIENCE LET SANITY IN NIGERIA CONTINUE
- iii. PREPARE FOR A GENERAL STRIKE/MASS ACTIONS NOW!
- iv. REJECT THE HANDOVER PHCN TO PROFITEERS & LOOTERS SO CALLED INVESTORS!
- v. REJECT & DEFEAT THE PLANNED INCREASES IN FUEL PRICES!
- vi. WARNING: IF ANY PROTESTER GETS ARRESTED, HURT OR KILLED, OUR DEMANDS WILL CHANGE TO #TINUBUMUSTGO!
- vii. TINUBU YOU MUST WORK 4 THE MASSES NOT FOR THE CABALS

From the statements above, “SCRAP THE SENATE #REVOLUTIONNOW” shows that protesters are tired of the situation in Nigeria and demand something better. The use of “#Revolution Now” is a very strong phrase which can result to a change of government without election. The same thing goes to the second statement here, “A Corrupt judiciary is a threat to all men of good conscience let sanity in Nigeria continue” the protesters by this

statement are also extending their protest to the judiciary seeking for the right thing to be done even at their own level. The nature of demands the protesters are seeking makes most of their linguistic items look like a threat to the government. It is like giving a last warning.

The statement, “TINUBU YOU MUST WORK 4 THE MASSES NOT FOR THE CABALS” is more of a threat to the government telling him what to do for the masses.

### **Dissatisfaction**

Dissatisfaction is an expressive speech act that shows lack of satisfaction. Dissatisfaction shows discontent. One characteristic of dissatisfaction is that it shows rejection to a current state.

Acts that portray dissatisfaction

- i. END INSECURITY POLICE BRUTALITY AND KIDNAPPING
- ii. ALLOW PEOPLE'S CHOICE SAY NOT TO GODFATHERISM
- iii. SAY NO TO MULTIPLE TAXATION IN LAGOS
- iv. STOP IMPORT DUTIES
- v. OPEN BORDERS FOR FOODS
- vi. EXTORTION IS KILLING PEOPLE ETC

The above highlighted acts are dissatisfaction acts as expressed by the #EndBadGovernance protesters. The first statement here says “END INSECURITY POLICE BRUTALITY AND KIDNAPPING” people are tired and dissatisfied with the current state of things in the country. It was the police brutality that paved way for the 2020 protest and now we are here with it again.

The second statement expresses discontent and sadness on the level at which certain people who call themselves Godfathers behave in Nigeria. Stop multiple taxation, import duties and open borders are all examples of what informed the earlier protest in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

From the result above, the analysis shows that all the linguistics characteristic demand, appeal, claim, threat and dissatisfaction are found in the language of protest used by the #EndBadGovernance protesters. The demand act was used more than other acts. After demand, claim, appeal, threats, and dissatisfaction were used by the protesters. The research is a detailed study of the language of protest using the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protest in Nigeria as a case study, it reveals three features that distinguishes a protest from other forms of similar acts; the act must aim at expressing disapproval of something. Second, it must aim at demanding a change in response to the disapproval; third, it must do both things by appealing to some presumed shared conception of what is fair.

Also, a qualitative analysis of the data gathered discussed the language features of the #EndBadGovernance protest under 5 headings: demand, appeal, claim, threat and dissatisfaction. Several works have been written on the language of protest, but the current study is based on the language of protest used by Nigerians in the August 1-10 protest.

## References

- Ayres, Jeffery (2011), *The limits of powers and protest: civil society mobilization against North American Integration: In power and Transactional Activism (Rethinking globalization)*. Edited by Thomas Olesen, 75 -90, London: Routledge.
- Claim Cambridge Dictionary (nd.) retrieved June 15, 2020, from <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/English/claim>
- Communication, in T. (2014, July 10) speech act theory: communication theory. Retrieved December 5, 2021.
- Cyprian Chidozie Eze1, Emmanuel Eziaku Chukwuezi, Ngozi Jovita N. Umelo, Ifeyinwa J. Umeh. (2024). A Speech Act Analysis of the

Language of Protest in 2020 EndSars Protest in Nigeria. *Journal of Legal and Cultural Analytics (JLCA)* Vol. 3, No. 2, 2024: 239 – 256.

- Elcomblus (2022, March 6). What is a claim? What are its characteristics? Elcomblus, from <https://www.elcomblus.com/defining-claim>
- Grice, H.P. ((1975) *logic and conversation* (p.23) London, England: Harvard University Press Cambridge
- Khoo, J. Sterken, R. (2021). *The Routledge handbook of social and political philosophy of language* (pp. 179-192). New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
- Klandermans, B & Van Stekelenbury, J. (2013). Social movements and the dynamics of collective action. L. H Ddy, D. O. Sears, and J. S. Levy (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of political psychology* (p. 245).
- Kronen Wetter, m. 91996). *Protest* (p.13). New York, NY; Twenty first century books
- Lynne, G. (2019) *Language of protest: Acts of performance, identity and Legitima Cy*. Texas, US; Palgrave Macmillan
- Norrdquist, R. (2020, January 25) *Speech act theory: definition and examples*. Thoughtco, retrieved December 2021, from <https://www.thoughtco.com/speech-act-theory-1691986>.
- Porta, D.D. (2016). *Protest in social movements*. In *Protest Cultures: Companion*. New York; Berghahn Books.
- Searle, J. R. (1986). In *expression and meaning: studies in the theory of speech acts* (p.368). Cambridge, England Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Searle, J. R. (2010). *Expression and meaning: studies in the theory of speech acts* (pp. viii). Cambridge, England: Cambridge Univ.pr
- Trottier, D. and Fuchs, C. (2015). *Social media, politics, and the state; protest, revolutions, riots, crime, and policing in the age of*

facebook, Twitter and Youtube. Routledge. New york NY;  
Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group.