

**POLITICAL RESISTANCE AND HUMAN EXISTENCE IN
POST-ELECTION NIGERIA: A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF DR.
YUSUF DATTI BABA AHMED'S TELEVISED REJOINDER**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a pragmatic assessment that focuses on how language functions as a tool for political resistance and human existence. Data is drawn from Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed's post-election televised rejoinder following Nigeria's 2023 presidential election and the issuance of the certificate of return to President Bola Ahmed Tinubu by Professor Yakubu Mahmood, the then INEC Chairman. The objectives of the study among others are to: investigate how speech acts are used to perform political resistance and warn against perceived constitutional violations; explore what implicatures and inferences are embedded in the speaker's utterances and how they contribute to the persuasive force of the message; and examine how the socio-political context of post-election Nigeria affects the interpretation of this rejoinder within Relevance Theory. Drawing on Speech Act Theory, Relevance Theory, and Politeness Theory, the study reveals how the speaker strategically uses directives, assertives, commissives, declaratives, implicatures, and face-threatening acts to challenge perceived constitutional violations while asserting ethical and legal authority. The study integrates concepts from three theories into a theoretical framework to underscore the value of a multi-theoretical pragmatic framework in interpreting political texts, especially in contexts marked by political resistance, human existence, and heightened public emotion. The findings from a multifaceted assessment of illocutionary force, contextual inference, politeness, and deixis contribute to existing research on political pragmatics within Nigeria, thereby

illustrating how language both reflects and reshapes democratic struggle in transitional electoral societies.

KEYWORDS: Political Discourse, Implicature, Speech Act, Relevance Theory, Politeness Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Political discourse in Nigeria has increasingly become a bank of rich data for robust pragmatic engagement, especially before, during, and after periods of electoral transition. The rich source of data regularly available in the political climate cannot be overestimated. At the time of writing this research, the Nigerian political landscape was experiencing chaos. For example, Ushie Rita Uguamaye's popular hashtag "30-day rant challenge," which started on the 16th of March, 2025, and surged on social media (labelling the President as a "terrible leader" over the high cost of living), sparked controversy. There was also the public feud between Senator Natasha and the Senate President over sexual harassment claims. Again, the declaration of the state of emergency in Rivers State on March 18th sent anxiety across the nation, and it generated a lot of reactions. Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed's televised fiery interview that was aired on national TV in May, 2023 was widely circulated again. This interview once again went viral as if to remind the populace that Dr. Ahmed had said, "if President Tinubu is sworn in, democracy has ended in Nigeria." It is glaring that those who circulated the clip once again did so to remind the nation that the President has disrupted the tenure of a democratically elected governor of Rivers State by imposing a state of emergency and a military administrator. This powerful and politically charged clip that went viral once again on social media in March 2025 when the state of emergency was declared in Rivers State, offers a rich ground for pragmatic analysis.

Language does much more than simply conveying information, as Trudgill (13-15) claims. Actions are performed, identities are constructed, and power is negotiated using language. The statement made by Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed in the aftermath of the 2023 presidential election, recirculated in March 2025, presents a superb site for pragmatic inquiry. The content of the clip is outlined as a warning, a declaration, and a personal vow, with the speech simultaneously serving as a political act and a legal plea. This study investigates the pragmatic mechanisms in Ahmed's televised speech, focusing on how he uses language to perform political resistance and foreground constitutional legitimacy. The analysis is grounded in Speech Act Theory (Austin; Searle), Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson), and

selected concepts from politeness theory (Brown and Levinson). These frameworks are applied to examine how meaning is shaped not only by what is said but by how it is said, what is implied, and what contextual assumptions are activated in the minds of the hearers.

The objectives of the study are to: examine how speech acts are used to perform political resistance and warn against perceived constitutional violations; investigate the implicatures and contextual inferences embedded in the speaker's utterances and how they contribute to the persuasive force of the message; and explore how the socio-political context of post-election Nigeria affects the interpretation of this speech in light of Deixis and Face-Threatening Acts. This study is significant because it offers an opportunity to apply theoretical pragmatics to real-world communication on the ongoing discourse about democracy, rule of law, and political legitimacy in Nigeria, thereby highlighting the intersection of language and power as it relates to human existence in post-election Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing textual analysis as the main method. The data is drawn from a televised statement captured in an interview by Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed, which was widely circulated in March 2023, shortly after the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) declared Bola Ahmed Tinubu as the winner of Nigeria's presidential election. This was also widely circulated in March 2025 on TikTok and WhatsApp after the declaration of the state of emergency in Rivers State by President Tinubu. The video was downloaded using an Android phone. The researchers played the downloaded video repeatedly and transcribed it into text for analysis. The analysis is done in three stages. The first stage delves into Speech Act Analysis using Searle's taxonomy, with each segment analysed to identify the illocutionary acts (e.g., commissives, directives, expressives) and the force with which they are delivered. The next stage involves Relevance-Theoretic Analysis to examine how implicatures and contextual assumptions are managed in the speaker's communication, paying special attention to how Ahmed relies on shared knowledge, appeals to constitutional authority, and manages risk and credibility. The last stage covers contextual anchoring and Politeness while observing Deictic references and face-threatening acts to explore how Ahmed positions himself about the Nigerian public, government institutions, and perceived threats.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Taguchi and Kadar define Pragmatics as “a field of linguistics concerning linguistic forms and the meaning they produce in a social context” (1). The place of contextual meaning in pragmatics, whether in political climes or otherwise, cannot be contested. The operational definition of Pragmatics adopted for this paper is “the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding” (Levinson 21). This suggests that language is intricately tied to context for meaning negotiation.

The study of political discourse in pragmatics often investigates how language functions not just as a tool for information sharing (as observed by Trudgill and other scholars who have written about the functions of language) but as a means for performing power, ideology, and resistance. Chilton and Schaffner argue that political language operates “strategically,” with speakers seeking to position themselves advantageously within ideological and institutional frameworks (206). In unpredictable political settings like Nigeria’s, the premeditated use of language acquires even greater significance because utterances may bear both legal and existential consequences for their speakers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on three interrelated theories in pragmatics to frame its analysis. The Speech Act Theory, Relevance Theory, and Politeness Theory, with each providing insight into the communicative strategies and force of Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed’s political discourse, are employed in the study.

Speech Act Theory, introduced by Austin and later expanded by Searle, has been widely used to analyse how utterances function performatively in political contexts. Austin’s concept of illocutionary force, that is, what speakers do in saying something, is relevant in analysing declarations, threats, and warnings in political speech (Austin 94). Searle advanced the theory by categorising these acts, thus distinguishing among assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives (Searle 12). Adegaju’s study on Nigerian political discourse reveals that speech acts often function at parallels in multiple levels, thereby conveying both direct and indirect intentions (Adegaju 184).

Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson, modifies the focal point from linguistic form to inferential processes, thereby emphasising the role of context and cognitive processing in communication. Relevance Theory accounts for how listeners derive implicatures based on minimal processing effort and maximal

contextual effect (Sperber and Wilson 125). This theory is relevant in analysing political discourse because speakers frequently rely on implicatures, inferences, and unspoken cultural knowledge to strengthen ideological positions. This explains why Wilson and Sperber argue that political speakers may frame controversial ideas as obvious inferences, thereby shielding themselves from direct accountability (Wilson and Sperber 619). Political discourse, especially when emotionally or ideologically charged, relies heavily on implicatures, that is, meanings not explicitly stated but inferred through shared contextual knowledge. Ahmed's use of emotionally intense language and repeated deictic references (for example, "this man," "our country") invites hearers to fill in contextual gaps with socio-political assumptions. Relevance Theory thus provides a framework for understanding how these inferential meanings function to enhance the persuasive force of his message.

Elements of Politeness and Face Theory, propounded by Brown and Levinson, are relevant in this study, given Ahmed's speech marked by its confrontational tone, particularly in the context of face-threatening acts (FTAs). For instance, the speaker repeatedly challenges institutional authority, such as the President, the Chief Justice, and Professor Yakubu Mahmood, the then INEC Chairman, potentially threatening their positive face (desire to be appreciated) and negative face (desire to be unimpeded) (Brown and Levinson 61). However, the speech also contains strategic facework in the form of self-legitimation ("I am taking this risk for the sake of my country"), which serves to mitigate the speaker's vulnerability while reinforcing his moral authority.

These theoretical frameworks put together expose the complex ways in which language is used to perform resistance, assert truth, and negotiate power in a charged political context. The blend of these theories allows for a multi-layered analysis that reveals what is said, what is implied, inferred, and socially activated in the minds of the speaker and the listeners.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

In the context of Nigeria's democratic struggles, scholars like Opeibi have explored how political personalities manipulate language to construct identities and influence public perception. Opeibi's corpus-based study highlights the use of repetition, intensification, and emotional appeal in the rhetoric of Nigerian political figures (Opeibi 133). The emphasis on linguistic strategies of persuasion by Opeibi aligns with the findings of this study, which examines how Ahmed's use of illocutionary acts, such as directives and assertives, operates similarly, urging political change while maintaining personal and moral integrity. Likewise, Osisanwo's work on Nigerian media discourse highlights the use of deictic

expressions in political speech, demonstrating how speakers anchor their messages to specific sociopolitical realities using references to time, place, and individuals (62). In Ahmed's speech, deixis serves to tie the discourse to a specific political context, emphasising the national importance of the speech and the controversial nature of the claims being made.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory has been widely applied in empirical studies examining face-threatening acts (FTAs) in political speech. In their analysis of US presidential debates, Kádár and Haugh discovered that politicians often use face-threatening strategies, mostly through hostile attacks or challenges to opposing sides (179). This finding aligns with the face-threatening nature of Ahmed's speech, particularly in his repeated accusations of constitutional violations and his warnings to political figures.

However, most of the existing literature focuses on campaign speeches, acceptance speeches, inauguration speeches, and policy rhetoric, with less attention given to warring and opposing sides' post-election discourse, especially in moments of constitutional crisis. The speech by Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed presents a unique opportunity to examine how language is used not only to oppose perceived illegality but also to frame resistance as a moral, legitimate, and constitutional obligation. This study fills this gap in the literature by applying a multi-layered pragmatic approach to the selected speech, hence offering insights into how democratic values are linguistically constructed and defended in times of political uncertainty of human existence.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Data

It has been signed into law by the President, Commander-in-Chief, Federal Republic of Nigeria. I believe in this document. That is why I am so lawful. That is why I am so confident. And that is why however extreme it is, I am saying it on national TV. I am not taking any risks. Swearing in a ticket that has not met the constitutional requirements of the constitution is ending democracy. And I am repeating it, whoever that does not meet the constitutional requirement must not, must never be sworn in. If you like I can say it again. I am Datti Baba Ahmed. I am not taking risks with my safety and with my life. But I am repeating, swear in anybody who does not meet the constitutional requirements of our country, you are engaging in an unconstitutional act. Mr President, do not hold that inauguration. CJN your lordship, do not partake in unconstitutionality. I am taking these risks for the sake of my country. Yes it is extreme and I am saying it. It was more extreme for Yakubu to issue that certificate, it was reckless, that was – he is putting all our lives

in danger. All of us, we are already at risk so what is there again in me taking risks again? What have they not done against Nigeria? What have they not abused in Nigeria? Now they will take the constitution, they are going to swear this man in and I should be afraid? I will not be. I am telling you that on the 29th of May, 2023, swear in Tinubu as this result is, you will have ended democracy whoever you are. (Dr Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed's televised interview on Channels Television).

This speech by Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed is a compelling example of how political actors employ pragmatic strategies to perform resistance, assert legitimacy, and challenge constitutional anomalies. Using Speech Act Theory, Relevance Theory, and aspects of Politeness Theory, this section reveals the multiple layers of meaning encoded from the data.

Speech Acts and Illocutionary Force

The speech performs several overlapping illocutionary acts as supported by Adegoju's study on Nigerian political discourse, which reveals that speech acts often function in parallel on multiple levels, thereby conveying both direct and indirect intentions (184). Primarily, it functions as a directive, instructing and warning institutional authorities, like the President and the Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN), not to proceed with the inauguration. He says, "Mr President, do not hold that inauguration. CJN your lordship, do not partake in unconstitutionality." Again, the speaker says: "And I am repeating it, whoever that does not meet the constitutional requirement must not, must never be sworn in." These forceful imperatives or commands from the data stress the performative use of language meant to interrupt the intended political action. Beyond the literal interpretations, these excerpts identified overlap in that they are expressives as well as directives. The excerpts perform expressive functions in that Ahmed's heightened emotion about the unconstitutionality about to take place is expressed with immense firmness, especially since the certificate of return has been issued already.

There is also a potent commissive force in Ahmed's repeated statements of personal risk: "I am not taking any risks," "I am not taking risks with my safety and with my life." He declares right at the beginning that he is lawful. He says: "that is why I am so lawful." Here, Ahmed binds himself to a position of moral accountability, signalling a personal pledge in national justice. These declarations underpin his credibility and aim to garner public support, as described in Searle's analysis of commitment-inducing speech acts (Searle 60). However, the illocutionary force of Ahmed's most plausible declaration of taking risks lies in the populace being in danger, as he states that: "Yakubu...is putting all our lives in danger." And so "all of us, we are already at risk so what is there again in me taking risks again?"

This is an audacious declaration that the populace is all at risk and in danger, meaning that human existence is threatened if ‘this man’ is sworn in. The statement further asserts that the speaker is not taking risks because he is already at risk since our existence as a people is already condemned so there are no risks to be taken: “I am not taking any risks,” “I am not taking risks with my safety and with my life.” “All of us, we are already at risk so what is there again in me taking risks again?”

The speech simultaneously functions as assertive and declarative, as in: “Swearing in a ticket that has not met the constitutional requirements of the constitution is ending democracy.” The reiteration and parallelism in this sentence echo a deliberate attempt to encode his assertion and declare with the certainty of truth and predictability. This explains why the recorded video went viral a second time just after the state of emergency declaration in Rivers State, as if to say that this was foreseen and foretold right at the beginning of the change in dispensation that democracy would end.

Implicature and Contextual Inference

Relevance Theory offers insight into how Ahmed relies on the audience’s background knowledge and shared socio-political assumptions to derive deeper meaning from his speech. For instance, his assertive act that: “Swear in anybody who does not meet the constitutional requirements... you are engaging in an unconstitutional act,” depends on an unstated assumption that the winner of the 2023 election did not meet said requirements. Also, the person they want to swear in as the president of the country is not the winner of the election, given the circumstances. This implicature is not made explicit, at least from the choice of words, but it activates contextual assumptions about legal disputes over electoral legitimacy.

Ahmed also frames his speech as a form of national service: “I am taking this risk for the sake of my country.” This triggers an implicature that the current political process threatens the nation’s integrity, thereby positioning his warning as a patriotic act. The expressive force of his delivery enhances the contextual effects by aligning his personal safety with the fate of the nation, which is what Sperber and Wilson phrase as “cognitive effects” (Sperber and Wilson 132). Another possible implicature, and the popular implicature among the Nigerian populace arising from this expression, will be that there is no freedom of speech or expression in Nigeria, given that when someone speaks up in Nigeria, his life is at risk. This most plausible implicature will also arise because of precedents surrounding the political climate in the country. Ushie Rita Uguamaye’s popular hashtag “30-day rant challenge,” for example, earned her extra 2 months extension of her service year for daring to speak up in that manner. Channels Television was also fined five million naira by the

country's broadcasting commission (NBC) for airing this sensitive interview. Ahmed introduces himself and mentions his name to further imply that he is not afraid of any impending danger that may arise as a result of his public approach to attacking the ills carried out in society. He says: "And I am repeating it, whoever that does not meet the constitutional requirement must not, must never be sworn in. if you like I can say it again. I am Datti Baba Ahmed." He additionally implies that *they* have abused and destroyed Nigeria. He says, "What have they not done against Nigeria? What have they not abused in Nigeria?" He, however, does so without naming who abused Nigeria. Is it the first figure mentioned at the beginning of the televised statement: "the President, Commander in Chief, Federal Republic of Nigeria?" Or the second figure mentioned: "I am Datti Baba Ahmed." Certainly, he could not have been referring to himself. On the contrary, he sees himself as someone coming to salvage Nigeria from the societal ills meted by the ruling class, and not to abuse it. Or is it the third figure mentioned: "CJN your lordship, do not partake in unconstitutionality?" And finally, could the use of *they* be referring to the named figure Yakubu? Ahmed says: "Yes it is extreme and I am saying it. It was more extreme for Yakubu to issue that certificate, it was reckless, that was – he is putting all our lives in danger." But that Yakubu is putting all our lives in danger according to the excerpt, does not necessarily mean that Yakubu is responsible for abusing Nigeria and other unnamed abuses done to Nigeria, as stated in the text. However, the background and situational knowledge of the political landscape of Nigeria is capable of explicating who *they* refers to in that utterance. Adedimeji and Omolabi claim that "the background and situational knowledge are important factors in understanding political speeches" (132).

Deixis and Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs)

Ahmed's speech is marked by its confrontational tone, particularly in the context of face-threatening acts. Deixis is the use of words or phrases to refer to a particular time, place, or person, often related to the context of the utterance (Xiang et al. 7). Deictic expressions such as "this man," "our country," and "you are engaging..." anchor the speech within a politically sensitive moment. The lack of naming in "this man" implicitly refers to President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a tactful strategy that introduces plausible deniability while still targeting a specific political figure. Such indirectness carries what Brown and Levinson identify as a face-threatening potential, particularly towards those in positions of power (Brown and Levinson 66). Referring to Tinubu as "this man" in the tone used, given the circumstances surrounding the outburst, in addition carries some kind of derogatory inference to imply that 'this man' is not the winner and consequently not capable.

Ahmed further claims that “they” have abused Nigeria without naming who directly abused Nigeria. He says, “What have they not done against Nigeria? What have they not abused in Nigeria?” Again, like the previous deictic expression, a tactful strategy that introduces plausible deniability while still targeting a specific political figure(s) is achieved here.

The speech performs several FTAs by directly accusing the electoral body and the judiciary of “recklessness and illegality.” The reference to INEC’s chairman, Mahmood Yakubu, as having acted “recklessly” and putting “all our lives in danger,” exemplifies a direct attack on institutional face. However, Ahmed mitigates his own exposure by grounding his statements in legality (“constitutional requirements”) and by repeatedly affirming his identity and motives: “I am Datti Baba Ahmed... I am repeating....” These acts of self-naming and repetition work as a face-saving strategy, thereby aligning with what Goffman describes as the “presentation of self” in public discourse (Goffman 251). Ahmed’s identity as a law-abiding citizen willing to risk his life functions rhetorically to contrast the ethical position he claims with the supposed illegitimacy of those he opposes.

The use of outright imperatives on constituted authority is also face-threatening, especially since Ahmed, as an individual, has no legal rights to command or warn an authority where he has no official authorisation. He says, “Mr President, do not hold that inauguration. CJN your lordship, do not partake in unconstitutionality.” This is perceived as a call by a patriotic citizen for the sake of human existence.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings are discussed in relation to the wider political setting in Nigeria, particularly the tensions surrounding the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and the call on constitutional authority. The analysis of Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed’s speech reveals a premeditated utilisation of pragmatic strategies aimed at challenging political legitimacy while protecting personal face. Through the eclectic approach of Speech Act Theory, Relevance Theory, and Politeness Theory, it is obvious that the speech functions not merely as an emotional outburst but as a performative political act created to attain maximum pragmatic and rhetorical effect.

At the centre of Ahmed’s discourse is an intentional use of illocutionary force to assert authority and give commands and warnings. His repeated use of directives and commissives reflects a speech act that goes beyond the regular political remarks to constitutive acts, which are language meant to shape political reality. As Austin suggests, certain utterances do not just describe the world but act upon it (101). In this sense, Ahmed’s speech does not simply mirror the democratic crisis; it attempts

to intervene in it. The interaction of speech acts with contextual inference further reveals how political actors rely on the audience's background knowledge and shared assumptions. Ahmed's implicatures, particularly those implying that the elected president is not qualified, function within an extremely charged sociopolitical environment where legal battles and a section of the public's dissatisfaction had already positioned the audiences to construe such utterances as plausible and even audacious. Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory helps explain how such meanings that are generated using covert declaration, with the expectant meaning generated through inferential communication guided by expectations of relevance, are achievable (125).

Additionally, the speech illustrates how deixis and facework can function as tools of both confrontation and credibility strategy. The deliberate vagueness in expressions like "this man" allows Ahmed to criticise without direct naming, with the resultant effect of being tactful by using a form of pragmatic shielding. Meanwhile, the repeated use of "I" in "I believe," "I am Datti Baba Ahmed," and "I am taking this risk" constructs some kind of inference of personal sacrifice. This is in tandem with Brown and Levinson's view that face-threatening acts can be balanced or justified through appeals to sincerity and shared moral codes (70). What appears at face value is a discourse that is not only politically revolutionary but also strategically self-preserving to garner public support. Ahmed construes uncertainty on the integrity of state institutions while at the same time placing himself as a constitutional conformist and patriotic citizen whose goal is to ensure justice and fairness. This double positioning boosts the expressiveness of his message by reinforcing his legitimacy and downplaying that of his opponents.

More significantly, this analysis contributes to discussions in political pragmatics, primarily in contexts where democratic institutions are contested. The study suggests that political discourse in such environments is marked not by unbiased consideration but by linguistic contestation, a struggle over meaning, legitimacy, and power. Language, therefore, both reflects and reshapes democratic struggle in transitional electoral societies. As Opeibi and Osisanwo have shown in other Nigerian contexts, political language is rarely denotative; it is almost always loaded, coded, and context-dependent (Opeibi 141; Osisanwo 67). Ahmed's speech confirms this view, showcasing a clear case of how resistance is enacted through language in moments of democratic uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the pragmatic underpinnings of Dr. Yusuf Datti Baba Ahmed's post-election televised interview through the lens of Speech Act Theory,

Relevance Theory, and aspects of Politeness Theory. The analyses revealed a layered discourse in which language is deployed both as a tool of resistance for human existence and as a medium for personal legitimisation. Beyond plain expressives, Ahmed's utterances are performatives that seek to change the events surrounding the aftermath of the election by appealing to constitutional authority, ethical urgency, and personal sacrifice for the struggle.

The study showed that Ahmed takes the lawful and moral advantageous position and challenges the perceived illegitimacy of Nigeria's 2023 electoral process by engaging in assertives, commissives, and directives, while shielding himself from accusations of defamation. It can be observed that Ahmed's strategic use of implicature, deixis, and facework made it possible for him to communicate sensitive political claims while maintaining plausible deniability and an ethical stance.

This study contributes to the extensive and evolving literature on political pragmatics in African democracies by showing how language functions not only to inform and persuade but also to contest and resist authority. The work underscores the value of an eclectic theoretical pragmatic framework in interpreting political texts, especially in contexts marked by legal ambiguities, institutional doubt, and fragile public sentiments.

Ultimately, this study established that political discourse, particularly in transitional periods of contested democracies, is best understood not simply by what is said, but by how it is said, why it is said, what is inferred from what is said, and what is left unsaid. While Nigeria continues to navigate the intricacies and complexities involved in democratic governance, the language of its political players will continue to remain a compelling source of both conflict and hope. The study suggests that further research should be carried out on a variety of political discourses across all the players, be it the main contestants or running mates, victors or losers, and the like.

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