

A Pragmatic Analysis of Speech Acts in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's First Inaugural Address in 2023

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Abstract

Inaugural addresses are strategic political discourses that function beyond ceremonial purposes; they serve as tools for legitimizing authority, mobilizing citizens, and articulating governance priorities. This study examines the pragmatic use of speech acts in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's First Inaugural Address delivered on May 29, 2023, at Eagle Square, Abuja. Anchored in Speech Act Theory as developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), the study employs a qualitative descriptive design to identify, classify, and interpret the illocutionary forces and perlocutionary effects of speech acts in the address. The findings reveal that Tinubu's speech contains a strategic blend of assertives (to affirm national unity and resilience), directives (to urge collective action), commissives (to pledge reforms and governance commitments), expressives (to convey gratitude and solidarity), and declaratives (to assert Nigeria's democratic permanence). The analysis demonstrates that the speech acts are not merely rhetorical but performative, shaping audience perception and reinforcing political legitimacy. This study concludes that pragmatic strategies in Nigerian political discourse, as exemplified in Tinubu's inaugural speech, are vital in promoting cohesion, inspiring confidence, and projecting democratic ideals.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Inaugural Address, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Nigerian Politics

Introduction

Political speeches are powerful instruments through which leaders communicate ideologies, mobilize citizens, and legitimize authority. Inaugural addresses, in particular, occupy a unique position in political discourse because they serve both ceremonial and pragmatic purposes: they celebrate democratic continuity while also setting the agenda for governance. According to Beard (2000), political language is “not merely a vehicle for conveying information but a tool for persuasion and control.” Thus, the study of inaugural speeches through the lens of pragmatics provides insight into how leaders strategically deploy language to achieve political goals.

Pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics, focuses on the relationship between language and its users, emphasizing meaning as derived from context (Levinson, 1983). One of its most influential theories is Speech Act Theory, pioneered by Austin (1962) and developed by Searle (1969), which posits that utterances perform actions beyond mere description. In political discourse, speech acts are particularly significant because they not only express

thoughts but also enact commitments, promises, declarations, and mobilizations (Chilton, 2004). Inaugural addresses, therefore, can be understood as sites where linguistic choices intersect with social and political realities.

Nigeria’s democratic experience since 1999 has been marked by successive transitions that highlight the resilience of its political system. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s First Inaugural Address, delivered on May 29, 2023 at Eagle Square, Abuja, is an important text for pragmatic study. The speech is rich in rhetorical strategies and pragmatic elements, employing assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives to inspire confidence, promote unity, and legitimize authority. Such linguistic features reflect not only the speaker’s intentions but also the socio-political expectations of the Nigerian audience at a time of economic and political challenges.

This study, therefore, aims to undertake a pragmatic analysis of speech acts in President Tinubu’s First Inaugural Address. Specifically, it seeks to (i) identify and classify the speech acts used in the address, (ii) examine the functions of the

illocutionary acts within the political context, and (iii) evaluate the perlocutionary effects intended by the speaker. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how pragmatic strategies are employed in Nigerian political discourse to foster legitimacy, solidarity, and national identity.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Speech Act Theory and Core Pragmatics

Speech Act Theory provides the foundational framework for pragmatic analyses of political discourse. J. L. Austin (1962) introduced the distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, arguing that utterances do not merely convey information but perform actions (e.g., promising, ordering, declaring). Searle (1969) refined this approach by classifying speech acts into categories such as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives, and by explicating conditions for their felicity and force. These classical formulations remain central to pragmatic analyses that seek to link linguistic form to speaker intent and social effect (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Levinson's (1983) broader account of pragmatics—which

situates utterance meaning in context and implicature—further complements speech act theory by showing how inference, presupposition, and context shape how political messages are received.

Scholarly interest in political speeches has long emphasized how leaders use linguistic choices to perform social actions such as legitimizing power, mobilizing support, and constructing national identity. Early systemic and pragmatic approaches show that modality, speech acts, and rhetorical tropes are core resources in political oratory (Halliday, as applied in Hallidian studies; see Alvi & Baseer, 2011). Analyses of U.S. presidential rhetoric (e.g., Obama, Kennedy) demonstrate that rhetorical figures—parallelism, metaphor, nominalization—and modal choices work together to persuade audiences and construct favorable leader images (Harandi & Jahantigh, 2014; Kazemian & Hashemi, 2014). These studies indicate that political persuasion is not accidental but systematically encoded in grammar and rhetoric (Harandi & Jahantigh, 2014; Kazemian & Hashemi, 2014).

Pragmatics and Political Discourse

Pragmatic approaches have become widely used in political discourse analysis because politics depends on language to perform

social actions: legitimizing power, mobilizing followers, reconciling opponents, and framing policy (Chilton, 2004). Chilton's work links speech act theory and cognitive-linguistic perspectives to show how political actors use pragmatic devices (e.g., presupposition, metaphor, implicature) to construct ideological meanings and manage public sentiment. Pragmatics helps explain not only what is said by political leaders but what those utterances do in social terms (e.g., build trust, create obligations, or delegitimize rivals). Studies in political pragmatics therefore often combine speech act analysis with discourse-analytic tools to capture both micro-level illocutionary forces and macro-level ideological effects.

Within the African and Nigerian context, pragmatic and pragma-stylistic approaches have been used to investigate how modality and modal auxiliaries (e.g., will, must, can) convey intentions, obligations, and abilities in political speeches. Uduma's (2012) study of President Goodluck Jonathan's 50th independence speech shows how modal verbs were deployed to signal leadership intent, obligation, and popular agency—framing the speech as an exhortation for unity and collective action rather than a mere congratulatory address. This focus on

modality aligns with later Nigerian studies that foreground grammatical choices (e.g., modality, deixis) as central to political meaning-making (Ezeifeka, 2016).

Speech Acts in Inaugural Addresses: Comparative Findings

Inaugural addresses are a distinct genre of political speech: ceremonial, legitimizing, and agenda-setting all at once. Pragmatic studies of inaugural speeches across different contexts consistently report recurrent speech-act patterns. These include: (1) high frequency of commissives (promises about future action), (2) use of directives and hortatives (e.g., “let us...”, “we must...”) to mobilize citizens, (3) expressives to create rapport and humility, and (4) declaratives to assert legitimacy and national identity, often by declaring a new era or affirming democratic status (Biria, 2012; Marklund, 2023; Safwat, 2015).

Specific to Nigerian inaugurals, a number of studies apply speech-act theory and related pragmatic frameworks to analyze how presidents perform commissives (promises), directives (calls to action), expressives (gratitude and reconciliation), and declaratives (acts of institutional legitimation). Ibrahim's (2020) pragmatic analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's

2015 inaugural speech found a predominance of commissive acts—promises that attempt to bind the administration to future policies—and argued that such acts are instrumental in constructing power and shared responsibility. Similarly, Jegede and Lawal (2023) examine Buhari’s address and identify pragmatic functions such as promise-making, appeals, and acknowledgements that are used to establish authority and mobilize support.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) have also been applied to inaugurals to reveal interpersonal meaning and power relations. The UJAH study comparing Obasanjo (1999) and Shagari (1979) shows deliberate shifts between singular and plural subjects (“I” vs. “we”) and strategic vocatives that assert solidarity and legitimize authority (Ezeifeka, 2014). Ezeifeka’s (2014) analysis of tentativeness and subjectivity in Obasanjo’s and Shagari’s speeches found heavy reliance on modal choices that obscure commitment, raising questions about enactment versus mere propositionality in political promises. These SFL/CDA studies highlight how grammatical systems (mood, modality,

transitivity) shape the interpersonal and ideational work of inaugural rhetoric.

Comparative work on U.S. presidents further supports these observations. Obama’s speeches, for instance, show extensive use of nominalization, modality, and parallelism to create coherence and mobilize audiences (Alvi & Baseer, 2011; Kazemian & Hashemi, 2014). Similarly, Kennedy and Obama’s rhetoric relies heavily on persuasive language, euphemism, and metaphor to reinforce values such as unity and nationalism (Harandi & Jahantigh, 2014). Such cross-cultural studies demonstrate the usefulness of combining speech-act theory with SFL and rhetorical analysis to capture both illocutionary force and broader ideological effects.

Gaps in the Literature and the Present Study’s Contribution

Taken together, these studies point to three methodological and interpretive strengths relevant to the present work. First, modal and speech-act analyses reveal how leaders encode intentions, obligations, and commitments into grammatical choices (Uduma, 2012; Ezeifeka, 2016). Second, SFL/CDA perspectives illuminate how clause structure and interpersonal choices (e.g., subject selection, vocatives, mood)

distribute responsibility and construct solidarity (Unizik Journal, 2014). Third, comparative and corpus-informed studies suggest that mixed-methods designs (qualitative coding plus quantitative counting) are useful for identifying which act types dominate inaugurals and how these vary across contexts (Biria, 2012; Marklund, 2023).

However, the literature also reveals gaps: several Nigerian studies identify act types and modal patterns but do not systematically link illocutionary functions to perlocutionary outcomes (i.e., how audiences actually responded or how promises translated into policy expectations), and few studies combine fine-grained speech-act coding with contextual analysis of contemporaneous political debates (e.g., subsidy removal, insecurity) that shape reception. The present study builds on the strengths above—modal, speech-act, and SFL/CDA tools—while seeking to fill those gaps by mapping speech acts to illocutionary function and evaluating likely perlocutionary effects in relation to Nigeria's 2023 political context.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design anchored in pragmatic analysis. The design is appropriate because the objective is not to measure numerical patterns alone but to interpret the communicative functions of speech acts as used in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's First Inaugural Address. Qualitative description allows for a detailed account of the ways in which linguistic forms realize illocutionary forces within the socio-political context of Nigeria.

Data Source

The primary data for the study is the official transcript of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's First Inaugural Address, delivered on May 29, 2023, at Eagle Square, Abuja. The transcript was obtained from the official website of the Presidency of Nigeria and corroborated with verified media outlets to ensure textual accuracy. The choice of this speech is informed by its status as a landmark political discourse, setting the tone for Tinubu's administration and reflecting the socio-political priorities of Nigeria at the time.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is grounded in Speech Act Theory, as developed by Austin (1962) and refined by Searle (1969). Searle's taxonomy of speech acts—assertives, directives,

commissives, expressives, and declaratives—provides the main classificatory framework. This framework has been widely used in political discourse studies (Chilton, 2004; Biria, 2012) and is particularly useful for identifying the illocutionary forces and intended perlocutionary effects embedded in political communication.

Procedure of Analysis

The analysis followed a systematic procedure:

- a. **Segmentation of the Text:** The transcript of the address was divided into clauses and sentences that represent complete speech acts.
- b. **Identification of Speech Acts:** Each clause was coded according to Searle's five categories of speech acts. For instance, statements of fact were coded as assertives, pledges as commissives, and declarations of unity as declaratives.
- c. **Contextual Interpretation:** Each identified speech act was examined in relation to its illocutionary force (speaker's intention) and potential perlocutionary effect (intended impact on the audience).

d. **Categorization and Analysis:** Instances of speech acts were grouped into categories, and their frequency and pragmatic functions were analyzed. Qualitative examples were extracted to illustrate how the speech acts operate within the socio-political context.

e. **Thematic Analysis:** Beyond classification, thematic interpretation was applied to highlight broader patterns, such as the prominence of unity appeals, promises of reform, and legitimizing declarations.

Reliability and Validity

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, coding was conducted twice at different intervals to ensure consistency in the classification of speech acts. Ambiguous cases were resolved by consulting existing pragmatic studies of political speeches (e.g., Safwat, 2015; Marklund, 2023). The study's validity was strengthened by situating the analysis within the socio-political context of Nigeria, ensuring that interpretations reflect not only linguistic form but also communicative intention and political realities.

Result

Table 1: Pragmatic Analysis of Speech Acts in Tinubu's Inaugural Address

Speech Excerpt	Speech Act Type	Illocutionary Function	Perlocutionary Effect
“My love for this nation is abiding. My confidence in its people, unwavering. And my faith in God Almighty, absolute.”	Assertive	To affirm patriotism, faith, and commitment	Inspires trust and strengthens citizens' confidence in his leadership
“As a nation, we have long ago decided to march beyond the dimness of night into the open day of renewed national hope.”	Assertive	To assert national progress and resilience	Motivates optimism and hope for national renewal
“The peaceful transition from one government to another is now our political tradition.”	Assertive	To highlight democratic stability	Reassures citizens of political continuity
“Let us recommit our very selves to placing Nigeria in our hearts as the indispensable home for each and every one of us.”	Directive	To urge citizens toward unity and patriotism	Encourages solidarity and civic responsibility
“Let us develop a shared sense of fairness and equity.”	Directive	To call for justice and inclusiveness	Promotes national cohesion
“I ask you to join me in making Nigeria a more perfect nation and democracy.”	Directive	To request collective action for national development	Fosters citizen participation and cooperation
“Our administration shall govern on your behalf but never rule over you.”	Commissive	To promise democratic leadership and accountability	Builds trust and reassures citizens of freedom
“We shall defend the nation from	Commissive	To pledge	Reassures safety

terror and all forms of criminality.”		protection and security	and confidence in government
“We shall remodel our economy to bring about growth and development.”	Commissive	To promise economic reforms	Creates expectations of prosperity
“We shall honour our campaign commitment of one million new jobs in the digital economy.”	Commissive	To commit to job creation	Reassures youths of opportunities
“My Fellow Citizens, I stand before you honoured to assume the sacred mandate you have given me.”	Expressive	To express gratitude and humility	Builds rapport and strengthens legitimacy
“Mr President, you have been an honest, patriotic leader who has done his best for the nation you love.”	Expressive	To appreciate and commend Buhari	Promotes continuity and goodwill
“My supporters, I thank you. To those who voted otherwise, I extend my hand across the political divide.”	Expressive	To acknowledge supporters and opponents	Promotes reconciliation and national unity
“This is the proudest day of my life. But this day does not belong to me. It belongs to you, the people of Nigeria.”	Expressive	To express joy and national solidarity	Engenders pride and collective ownership
“As citizens, we declare as one unified people... that as long as this world exists, NIGERIA SHALL EXIST.”	Declarative	To affirm Nigeria’s permanence and unity	Strengthens national identity and patriotism
“On this day, Nigeria affirms its rightful place among the world’s great democracies.”	Declarative	To proclaim Nigeria’s democratic status	Enhances legitimacy and global recognition
“With full confidence in our ability,	Declarative	To assert his	Reinforces

I declare that these things are within our proximate reach because my name is Bola Ahmed Tinubu, and I am the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.”		authority and commitment	legitimacy and inspires confidence
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Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a pragmatic analysis of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s First Inaugural Address delivered on May 29, 2023, using Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) as the analytical framework. The focus is on identifying, classifying, and interpreting the illocutionary functions of the speech acts while evaluating their intended perlocutionary effects within the Nigerian political context. The findings reveal that Tinubu’s speech is particularly rich in assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives, each serving distinct pragmatic purposes.

Assertives: Constructing National Identity and Legitimacy

Assertives are speech acts in which the speaker commits to the truth of the expressed proposition (Searle, 1969). Tinubu frequently employs assertives to establish credibility, affirm Nigeria’s

resilience, and highlight the stability of democratic governance. For example, “The peaceful transition from one government to another is now our political tradition” asserts Nigeria’s democratic maturity. The illocutionary force here is reassurance, while the perlocutionary effect is to strengthen citizens’ and international observers’ confidence in Nigeria’s democracy.

Similarly, “We have stumbled at times, but our resilience and diversity have kept us going” affirms national strength. This echoes Chilton’s (2004) observation that assertives in political discourse often construct narratives of endurance and shared struggle to legitimize leadership. In line with Beard (2000), such assertives are deliberately framed to persuade citizens of continuity and stability.

Directives: Mobilizing Citizens for Collective Action

Directives are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something (Searle, 1969). In

the address, Tinubu relies heavily on inclusive directives expressed through “let us,” encouraging solidarity and shared responsibility. For instance, “Let us recommit our very selves to placing Nigeria in our hearts as the indispensable home for each and every one of us” functions as a call to patriotism. The perlocutionary effect is mobilization, urging Nigerians to transcend ethnic and religious divides.

Similarly, “I ask you to join me in making Nigeria a more perfect nation and democracy” illustrates a persuasive directive that mobilizes citizens to embrace reform. This supports Safwat’s (2015) claim that directives in political speeches function as mobilizing acts, designed to unify people toward common goals during transitional governance.

Commissives: Promising Democratic Governance and Reform

Commissives commit the speaker to a future course of action (Searle, 1969). Tinubu uses commissives to outline his government’s commitments on security, governance, and the economy. For instance, “Our administration shall govern on your behalf but never rule over you” assures Nigerians of democratic accountability. Likewise, “We shall defend the nation from terror and all

forms of criminality” commits the government to national security.

A particularly notable pledge is: “We shall honour our campaign commitment of one million new jobs in the digital economy.” The illocutionary force here is one of promise, while the perlocutionary effect is to instill confidence in the administration’s capacity to deliver. Biria (2012) highlights that commissives are vital in political speeches because they bind leaders to their agendas, building trust between citizens and government. Marklund’s (2023) findings on commissive acts in 21st-century inaugurals similarly reinforce this interpretation.

Expressives: Building Solidarity and Reconciliation

Expressives communicate the speaker’s psychological state (Searle, 1969). Tinubu uses expressives to show gratitude, humility, and reconciliation. For instance, “My Fellow Citizens, I stand before you honoured to assume the sacred mandate you have given me” expresses humility and gratitude, reinforcing his legitimacy as a servant-leader.

His tribute to his predecessor—“Mr President, you have been an honest, patriotic leader who has done his best for the nation you love”—conveys appreciation while

maintaining institutional respect. Similarly, “To those who voted otherwise, I extend my hand across the political divide” functions as an expressive of reconciliation, aiming to reduce polarization. As Wilson (1990) observes, expressives humanize political leaders and foster empathy, which is critical in divided societies.

Declaratives: Affirming Authority and Democratic Continuity

Declaratives bring about changes in external reality by the act of utterance (Austin, 1962). Tinubu strategically deploys declaratives to consolidate his presidential authority and affirm Nigeria’s unity. For example, “As citizens, we declare as one unified people... that as long as this world exists, NIGERIA SHALL EXIST” enacts unity and permanence. The perlocutionary effect is to strengthen patriotic resolve and project Nigeria’s stability.

Similarly, “On this day, Nigeria affirms its rightful place among the world’s great democracies” elevates Nigeria’s international image. As Chilton (2004) notes, declaratives institutionalize power in political discourse, signaling legitimacy both domestically and globally.

Pragmatics and the Socio-Political Context

The speech, when situated within Nigeria’s socio-political realities of insecurity, economic hardship, and electoral contestation, demonstrates the strategic role of pragmatics in political communication. Levinson (1983) emphasizes that meaning is inseparable from context, and Tinubu’s speech exemplifies this: assertives and commissives address citizens’ anxieties; directives mobilize for collective effort; expressives foster reconciliation; and declaratives affirm authority.

Discussion in Relation to Literature

The findings align with Austin’s (1962) and Searle’s (1969) foundational view that political speeches are performative acts. They confirm Beard’s (2000) assertion that political language is designed to persuade and consolidate power, and support Chilton’s (2004) framework that political discourse combines persuasion with legitimization. Furthermore, they echo Biria’s (2012) observation on the importance of commissives for political credibility and Safwat’s (2015) findings that directives serve as mobilizing tools. In the Nigerian context, Tinubu’s inaugural address exemplifies what Marklund (2023)

describes as the dual function of inaugural speeches: ceremonial affirmation of democracy and pragmatic articulation of governance priorities.

Conclusion

This study set out to analyze the pragmatic use of speech acts in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's First Inaugural Address with the objectives of identifying and classifying the speech acts, examining their illocutionary functions, and evaluating their perlocutionary effects within the Nigerian political context. Drawing on Speech Act Theory, the analysis revealed that the speech is characterized by a rich interplay of assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. Each category functions strategically: assertives establish credibility and affirm Nigeria's resilience; directives mobilize citizens toward unity and national development; commissives project promises of reform and accountability; expressives cultivate solidarity and reconciliation; while declaratives legitimize authority and reinforce democratic continuity.

The findings demonstrate that inaugural addresses in Nigeria, like elsewhere, are not neutral texts but highly performative acts of governance. Tinubu's speech illustrates how

language is employed as a pragmatic tool to secure legitimacy, foster unity, and shape collective aspirations. More broadly, the study underscores the significance of pragmatics in political discourse analysis, showing that meaning in such contexts extends beyond linguistic form to encompass socio-political functions and audience reception. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing multiple Nigerian inaugural speeches to highlight diachronic shifts in political pragmatics or by exploring cross-cultural dimensions of inaugural rhetoric in African democracies.

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