

Pragmatics of Identity and Linguistic Framing of Protest and Counter-Protest in Nigeria Digital Resistance

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Abstract

This paper investigates the pragmatics of identity and linguistic framing in Nigeria's digital resistance, with a focus on protest and counter-protest discourses circulating across placards, tweets, and Instablogs during the End Bad Governance campaigns of August 1-10, 2024. Anchored in Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act Theory, particularly the strategic deployment of pragmemes and practs, and informed by Snow and Benford's (1988) Framing Theory, the study adopts a qualitative, descriptive design to comparatively analyse twenty (20) purposively sampled extracts from online protests and counter-protests discourses mobilized to construct collective identities, legitimize resistance, and counter-frame dissenting voices. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the data are systematically tabulated to reveal recurring pragmatic strategies and framing devices that underpin online resistance. Findings highlight how protesters utilize irony, presuppositions, implicatures, and intertextual cues to foreground narratives of injustice and solidarity, while counter-protesters and pro-government actors reframe resistance through delegitimization, ridicule, and appeals to order. By situating these communicative acts within Nigeria's socio-political context, the study demonstrates that digital platforms function simultaneously as sites of solidarity and contestation, where identities and ideologies are pragmatically negotiated. The article contributes to scholarship on digital activism by showing how the intersection of pragmemes, linguistic framing, and digital affordances reveals the complexity of protest-counter-protest dynamics in contemporary Nigeria.

Keywords: Pragmatics, identity, linguistic framing, protest and counter-protest, digital resistance,

Introduction

The rise of digital media has altered the landscape of political participation, transforming the ways in which citizens express dissent and how governments respond to it. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become significant sites where activism, identity negotiation, and ideological battles unfold. In contexts like Nigeria, where democratic practices are contested and traditional media is often constrained, digital platforms have served as alternative arenas for political communication, protest, and resistance (Ojebode, 2021). Yet these spaces are also battlegrounds, where counter-protest narratives are launched to delegitimize dissent and reinforce state power. In this contested terrain, language assumes a central role, not simply as a medium of communication but as a pragmatic tool for performing identity, negotiating meaning, and framing ideological positions.

Digital resistance in Nigeria has become particularly visible in recent years. Movements such as #BringBackOurGirls in 2014, #EndSARS in 2020, and more recent governance-related hashtags demonstrate how digital platforms amplify grievances and connect local struggles to

global audiences (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015; Ojebode, 2021). Protesters mobilize language and symbols to construct collective identities, dramatize injustices, and call for reform. At the same time, counter-protest discourses; often advanced by state actors, government supporters, and pro-regime influencers, deploy competing frames to delegitimize movements, portray activists as threats to security, or reframe demands as unreasonable (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2020).

This duality underscores what Mey (2001) identifies as the pragmatic nature of language; meaning is not fixed but contingent on context, social roles, and interactional goals. Protesters' descriptions of themselves as "youth," "citizens," or "victims of oppression" are pragmatic acts that project identities of legitimacy and moral authority. In contrast, counter-protest framings of protesters as "miscreants," "tools of foreign elements," or "hoodlums" are practices designed to delegitimize identities and reshape public perception. These examples illustrate that protest discourse is not merely expressive but pragmatically constitutive of identity and ideology.

This paper thus, investigates how protest and counter-protest discourse on social

media reflect the pragmatics of identity construction and linguistic framing of social injustice in Nigeria's digital resistance movements. Drawing on a corpus of tweets, placards, and protest chants from the End Bad Governance campaigns, the study demonstrates how marginalized voices, burdened by systemic hardship, deploy strategic language to reclaim agency and visibility in online spaces. At the same time, counter-protest narratives emerge as attempts to delegitimize or reframe dissent, illustrating a complex struggle over meaning, power, and public perception. By exploring these dynamics, this study contributes to broader conversations in linguistic pragmatics, discourse studies, and digital activism, offering insights into how language performs both as a tool of resistance and as a marker of identity and ideological contestation in contexts of inequity (van Dijk, 1998; Mey, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

Scholarship on digital activism in Nigeria has illuminated mobilization strategies, technological affordances, and the political impacts of online resistance (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013; Ojebode, 2021; Tufekci, 2017). However, less attention has been

paid to the pragmatic mechanisms of identity construction and the linguistic framing of counter-protests in Nigeria's digital sphere. While Chilwa and Ifukor (2015) highlight discourse strategies in digital campaigns, and van Dijk (2006) underscores the ideological role of discourse, the integration of Pragmatic Act Theory with Framing Theory in the Nigerian context remains underexplored.

This study fills this gap by analyzing how pragmatic acts (practs) instantiate protest and counter-protest frames, and how these acts construct or contest identities in digital resistance. By bringing together PAT and Framing Theory, the article contributes a nuanced approach that links micro-level pragmatic acts to macro-level ideological frames.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to investigate the pragmatics of identity and linguistic framing of protest and counter-protest in Nigeria digital resistance, while the objectives are to:

1. Analyze how protesters and counter-protesters in Nigeria's digital space construct identities and negotiate power through pragmatic acts and linguistic framing strategies.

2. Examine the intersection of pragmatic acts and framing in sustaining or contesting ideological positions within Nigeria's protest and counter-protest discourses.

Literature Review

Identity Negotiation and Pragmatic Acts in End Bad Governance Campaigns

In Nigeria's End Bad Governance campaigns, protesters construct digital identities through pragmatic acts that embody frustration, solidarity, and defiance. Hashtags such as #EndBadGovernance, #OccupyAbuja, and #SoroSoke do not merely label discourse but function as identity markers, signalling generational agency and dissatisfaction with state performance (Oyededeji & Nmadu, 2025, pp. 35-36). Through captions, memes, and slogans, protesters linguistically negotiate a shared identity of resistance, positioning themselves as defenders of democracy and accountability. The pragmatic force of these utterances lies in their dual function: they demand immediate change while also enacting a community of belonging.

Counter-protesters, however, employ pragmatic strategies that reframe the same discourse. Pro-government voices circulate hashtags such as

#SayNoToViolenceProtest, or #YesToDialogue casting themselves as custodians of peace and responsible citizenship. These counter-acts pragmatically construct an alternative identity; one aligned with stability, patriotism, and obedience to authority. Mey's (2001) *pragmeme* framework helps explain this tug-of-war: protesters and counter-protesters deploy context-dependent acts to claim legitimacy, one through resistance and the other through compliance. The result is a contested identity negotiation where both sides articulate what it means to be a "good citizen" in Nigeria's fragile democracy.

Framing Strategies in Protest and Counter-Protest Discourses

Framing is a central mechanism in how End Bad Governance protests and counter-protests gain traction in Nigeria's digital space. Protesters engage in diagnostic framing by attributing poverty, unemployment, and corruption to systemic governance failures. Their prognostic frames often demand structural reforms, leadership accountability, or regime change, while motivational frames invoke urgency through emotionally charged hashtags and imagery (Alugbin & Iyoha, 2024, pp. 110-115). The viral circulation of protest posters and chants such as "Enough

is Enough” highlight how framing links grievances with calls to action.

Counter-protesters, however, deploy counter-framing strategies that emphasize chaos, disunity, and potential economic collapse if protests persist. By framing protesters as “political pawns,” or “troublemakers,” counter-protest narratives undermine the legitimacy of the movement. They often propose incremental reform or obedience to due process as alternative prognoses, while motivational frames appeal to national unity and peace. As Snow and Benford (1988) argue, counter-framing is not passive; it actively delegitimizes protest claims while constructing rival narratives. In the Nigerian context, this framing battle highlights the ways digital platforms serve as ideological battlegrounds where both protesters and counter-protesters fight to define national reality.

End Bad Governance Campaigns as a Site of Discursive Contestation

Nigeria’s End Bad Governance campaigns reveal digital activism as a contested arena where protest and counter-protest discourses clash in real time. Protesters employ multimodal strategies such as memes mocking politicians, satirical cartoons, and viral videos of police repression; to build narratives of injustice

and inspire civic outrage (Patrick, 2025). Counter-protesters, in turn, contest these narratives by labelling protest content as reframing images of vandalism and looting as the true face of the movement. Thus, the digital public sphere functions as a site of discursive contestation, where truth, identity, and legitimacy are constantly in dispute.

This contestation underscores the ambivalent nature of digital resistance. While protesters mobilize through hashtags and shared grievances, counter-protesters mobilize through appeals to order and fear of instability. Campos and Simões (2024), note that in contexts like Nigeria, art, memes, and multimodal texts serve not only as resistant expressions but also as tools re-appropriated by state sympathizers to delegitimize activism. Hence, End Bad Governance campaigns demonstrate that digital resistance is not a unidirectional struggle but a dialogic process of resistance and rebuttal; an arena where the people and the state negotiate, through language and imagery, the very meaning of governance.

Identity Negotiation and Pragmatic Acts in Digital Resistance

In the digital landscape, identity is both performed and constructed through pragmatic acts that subtly signal

belonging, position, and purpose. In the case of Nigeria's End Bad Governance movement, hashtags like #OccupyAbuja and #RevolutionNow, evolved into powerful identity markers, which became a rallying cry that encapsulates both frustration and urgency. These pragmatic tools shaped a collective identity rooted in resistance: digital users were not merely posting; they were asserting a shared subjectivity informed by outrage, solidarity, and embodied experience.

Moreover, social media activism in Nigeria has leaned heavily on strategic speech acts embedded in captions, metaphors, and hashtags to build solidarity and urgency. A pragmatic stylistic study of protest captions during the End Bad Governance protests reveals that confrontational and directive speech acts, coupled with rhetorical devices like repetition and metaphor, were instrumental in fostering cohesion and mobilising action (Oyedeji & Nmadu, 2025, pp. 35-36). These linguistic moves demonstrate that pragmatics in digital activism is not just about what is said, but how utterances create implicit commitments, shared understanding, and communal identity; even across dispersed online spaces.

Nigeria's Digital Resistance as a Site of Identity Construction

The Nigerian digital sphere is uniquely vibrant due to its youthful population, increasing internet penetration, and the symbolic power of social media in amplifying marginalized voices. Hashtags, memes, and viral posts provide platforms for individuals to align with protest identities, even when physically absent from the streets. As Bennett and Segerberg (2013) argue, such practices reflect connective action, where personalized communication sustains collective movements without hierarchical structures.

Yet, the same space is fertile ground for counter-protest. Government spokespersons, pro-regime influencers, and ordinary citizens deploy alternative frames, often supported by state-controlled media, to challenge protest narratives. For example, during #EndSARS, online campaigns such as #ReformNotEndSARS emerged, reframing protesters' demands as excessive and unpatriotic (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2020). These competing discourses illustrate how Nigeria's digital sphere is not only a platform for activism but also a contested site of identity negotiation and

Theoretical Framework

This article examines the pragmatics of identity and the linguistic framing of protest and counter-protest in Nigeria's

digital resistance. Specifically, it draws on Mey's (2001, 2016) Pragmatic Act Theory (PAT), with its notions of pragmemes and practs, and Snow and Benford's (1988, 2000) Framing Theory to analyze how protesters and counter-protesters use discourse to enact identities and advance ideological positions in Nigeria's digital sphere.

Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act Theory (PAT)

Pragmatic Act Theory offers a useful framework for understanding pragmatic phenomenon. Mey (2001, 2016) distinguishes between pragmemes, which are generalizable pragmatic acts tied to social institutions, and practs, which are specific, contextually realized instances of these acts. For example, the use of the hashtag #EndSARS functions as a pragmeme of collective resistance, while an individual tweet using the hashtag with a personal testimony of police brutality represents a pract. Together, these acts contribute to the discursive construction of protest identities and solidarity.

PAT also emphasizes that pragmatic meaning arises from contextual constraints, such as societal norms, participant roles, and communicative goals. In Nigeria's digital protests, practs such as sarcasm, meme-making, or

metaphorical language perform more than aesthetic functions, they enact identities of defiance, resilience, or moral indignation. Counter-protest practs, in turn, may invoke nationalism, appeals to law and order, or delegitimizing labels, thereby constructing alternative identities aligned with authority. Through such acts, digital resistance becomes a struggle over identity performance and ideological legitimacy.

Snow and Benford's (1988) Framing Theory

Framing Theory complements PAT by explaining how collective actors package issues in ways that resonate with audiences. Snow and Benford (1988) outline three core tasks of collective action frames:

1. Diagnostic framing (identifying the problem),
2. Prognostic framing (proposing solutions), and
3. Motivational framing (providing rationales for action).

In Nigeria's digital resistance, protesters have used diagnostic frames to highlight systemic government oppression, prognostic frames to demand reform, and motivational frames to inspire participation through slogans like "We are tired of hunger". Counter-protesters, however, engage in counter-framing by reframing

the same issues: portraying protesters as hoodlums and looters (diagnostic), advocating dialogue rather than violent protest (prognostic), and warning against chaos or foreign interference (motivational).

These frames are realized linguistically through pragmatic acts. For instance, protesters' recurring speech acts of accusation e.g., "we are suffering, your reforms are scam") serve diagnostic framing, while counter-protesters' denials or recharacterizations e.g., "bad elements hide among peaceful citizens" function as counter-framing practs. By combining pragmatics and framing, the study foregrounds how contextualized language use (practs) both reflects and shapes collective meaning-making (frames) in digital activism. Thus, highlights how pragmatic choices instantiate and sustain ideological frames in digital resistance.

The contribution is twofold. First, it advances pragmatic studies by demonstrating how Mey's notions of pragmemes and practs illuminate identity construction in digital activism. Second, it enriches framing scholarship by showing how frames are instantiated in pragmatic acts within contested African digital spaces. More broadly, the study highlights the role of language in mediating power, resistance, and legitimacy in Nigeria,

offering insights relevant to sociolinguistics, discourse studies, and political communication.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative discourse analysis to examine how protesters and counter-protesters in Nigeria's End Bad Governance campaigns of 1st-10th August, 2024, construct identities and negotiate power. The approach emphasizes side-by-side comparison of discursive strategies, rather than isolated thematic interpretation. Twenty (20) textual extracts were purposively sampled from protesters' discourse. Of these, ten (10) extracts were drawn from protesters' communicative outputs, tweets, placard inscriptions, Instagram blogs, and online commentaries; while the remaining ten (10) were sourced from official government statements and verified social media accounts of state actors. The purposive sampling strategy was guided by the ideological salience of the texts and their frequency within the protest and counter-protest discourse. While, a qualitative approach is particularly suited to uncovering the pragmatic strategies and ideological framing embedded in online texts, as it prioritizes depth of interpretation over numerical generalization (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The analysis was guided by Mey's (2001) PAT, focusing on the identification of practs and pragmemes (e.g. assertives, commissives, directives and expressives) and by Snow and Benford's (1988) Framing Theory which examines

diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames. The extracts were systematically compared across these lenses to reveal the similarities and differences in pragmatic acts and framing devices.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Protesters' and Counter-Protesters' Extracts

S/N	Protesters Extracts	Counter-Protesters Extracts	Pragmeme/Pract (Mey 2001)	Framing (Snow & Benford & Interpretation)
1	We're hungry, eradicate hunger and poverty.	#570 billion has been released to states to help increase the welfare of the citizens.	Protesters: Pragmeme/Pract: Directive; Demand for survival needs. Expressive Counter-Protest: Pragmeme/Pract Assertive; Legitimising state intervention	Protesters use a diagnostic frame, naming hunger as the problem. Counter frame redefines it with prognostic frame; solution already provided. Highlights tension between urgency vs. reassurance
2	The democrats are hell-bent on destroying this country.	We reduced debt to 68% in 13 months.	Protesters: Pragmeme/Pract: Assertive; Accusation; blame, influencing listeners' emotion. Counter-Protest: Pragmeme/Pract: Assertive/Informative; Justification and credibility building, achievement claim.	Protesters' diagnostic frame assigns blame to political elites. Counter-protesters' prognostic frame portrays government as responsible, shifting attention away from corruption to fiscal stability.
3	We cannot	We cleared	Protesters: Pragmeme/	Protesters' diagnose Nigeria's

	change the past, but we can reshape the future	all outstanding foreign exchange obligations of about \$5billion dollar without any adverse impacts on our programmes.	Pract Commissive/Expressive. Hopeful and resilience. Counter-Protesters: Assertive, Expressive Boasting, Legitimising, Face-saving, Self-praise and Assurance.	past problem and, prognosis of hope and reformation in the policies and motivational frame of mobilizing appeal and call for action. Counter-protesters frame debt as challenge, gives proactive solution to affirm competence and encourage trust and support as motivation
4	Government cares about criminals, than citizens, it's despicable.	Let's choose hope over fear, unity over division.	Protesters: Pragmeme/ Pract-Assertive; Expressive, Shaming, Accusation, Condemnation, Delegitimization to express outrage. Counter-protesters: Directive; Expressive Encouraging, Pacifying, Legitimizing, Reframing conflict, Moral positioning	Protesters diagnosis government negligence and injustice. Prognostic: implies the need for leadership accountability. Motivate public outrage and protest participation. Counter-protesters frame unrest and division as problems to avoid. Prognostic: urges citizens to choose hope and unity. Motivation: Moral persuasion for citizens to support peace and stability. Motivational: Moral appeal to support peace and unity.
5	Government must arrest oil cabals	Peace in the Niger Delta	Protesters Pragmemes/ Pract- Directive Demand Accountability,	Protesters frame corruption from oil cabal as the root cause of Nigeria's problem

			Accusation, Delegitimizing, and Condemnation of injustice. Counter-protesters: Expressive; Pacification, Stability seeking, Legitimizing authority, reframing dissent, and advocating stability	Prognostic: Prescribes punishment of arrest and prosecution Motivational: urgent demand of call for justice. Counter-protesters diagnosis conflict and unrest in the Niger Delta as one of the major problems Prognostic: Suggest peace rather than unrest. Motivational: Moral appeal to support peace and unity.
6	Reduce cost of governance now	Development is imperative	Protesters: Directive, Accusatory, Demand reform, accusing government of waste, delegitimizing excess spending, pressuring leadership. Counter-Protesters: Assertive, Declarative, Directive; assurance and justification; Legitimizing authority, reframing criticism, justifying action.	Protesters: diagnosis excessive cost of governance as one of the root economic problems. Prognostic: suggest the reduction of government spending Motivation: demands immediate reform (“now”). Counter-protesters diagnosis under-development as a serious national problem Prognostic: Developmental project as solution. Motivational: Inspires patience and confidence in leadership decision.
7	Stop the looting	Stop sabotaging good governance	Protesters: Pragmeme/ Pract- Directive- command to end corruption, accusatory, resistance and shaming leaders, delegitimizing	Protesters diagnose corruption and elite looting as the core problem. Prognostic: Halting looting and demand transparency Motivational: moral urgency to

			authority, issuing moral demand. Counter-protesters: Pragmeme/Pract: Directive; warning against protest, defence and delegitimization. justifying leadership, discrediting the protesters and reframing criticism as sabotage	rally citizens against corrupt leaders Counter-protesters diagnose protesters as sabotag against governance rather than civic engagement. Prognostic: Urging citizens to reject protests and support good governance Motivational: Loyalty to nation, clash of identity construction
8	Nigerians are ready for new Naija	Defend Nigeria	Protesters: Pragmeme/Pract- Commissive, Expressive- aspiration and mobilization; rallying collective identity. Counter-protesters: Pragmeme/Pract Commissive, Expressive, patriotism and legitimization. Rallying loyalty, reinforcing national stability	Protesters diagnose Nigeria's current governance as inadequate. Prognostic: Systemic reform and transformation (New Naija). Motivation: Calls for action and readiness; energizes citizens to demand change. Counter-protesters implying protesters to be a national threat as diagnosis. Prognostic: Citizens must defend Nigeria's integrity and government policies Motivational: Calls for patriotism and loyalty
9	The poor will have nothing else to eat, but the rich oppressors	Do not harm anyone	Protesters: Pragmeme/Pract- Expressive, metaphorical anger and Resistance in figurative revolt; condemning oppression, warning	Protesters diagnose unjust society, elites' oppression and exploitation of the poor. Prognostic: Radical change or uprising is implied as a solution. Motivational: A call to action; as

			elites and symbolizing readiness for rebellion Counter-protesters: Pragmeme/ Pract-Directive. Peace advocacy and De-escalation. Pacifying, appealing to peace, discouraging unrest and promote state legitimacy.	the oppressed are justified in resisting. Counter-protesters diagnose that protest actions risk escalating into violence. Prognostic: citizens must avoid harm. Motivational: Peace and safety are morally crucial.
10	If we die, we die for freedom	Do not attack the police	Protesters: Pragmeme/ Pract- Commisive, Expressive; sacrifice and defiant; positioning the protesters as freedom fighters. Counter-protesters: Pragmeme/ Pract-Directive, appeal for caution and authority preservation.	Protesters diagnose systemic oppression that threatens life and liberty Prognostic: Resistance is necessary, even at personal risk. Motivational: Sacrifice is a noble duty; and moral obligation to fight for change. Legitimizes martyrdom Counter-protesters diagnose that violence is a threat for stability. Prognostic: Citizens should respect law and order. Delegitimizes resistance. Motivational: Peace and obedience are morally right

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that protesters and counter-protesters in Nigeria's digital space construct contrasting identities and negotiate power through pragmatic acts

and framing. Protesters project themselves as oppressed citizens, mostly employing directives, expressives, and commissives to express suffering, demand for change, for change, and pledge sacrifice (Mey,

2001). Statements such as “We’re hungry, eradicate poverty” and “If we die, we die freedom” combine diagnostic frames that blame government corruption and inequality, with motivational frames that mobilize solidarity (Snow & Benford, 1988; Chilwa, 2012).

By contrast, counter-protesters, construct the state as a responsible guardian of order and development. Their discourse relies on assertives, declaratives and directives to justify state action, reassure citizens, and restrict protest. Claims like “#570 billion has been released to states” and “Do not attack police” exemplify prognostic and motivational frames, which project government credibility and reframe protests as threats to peace ((Snow & Benford, (1988; Uwalaka, 2023). As Olorunnisola (2020) notes, such counter-framing illustrates how digital platforms serve both as tools of resistance and as instruments of control.

In summary, the intersection of pragmatic acts and ideological positions are sustained or contested in Nigeria’s digital resistance. Protesters use diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames to sustain counter-hegemonic identities, while counter-protesters employ prognostic frames to defend institutional legitimacy. This reflects the struggle over meaning-making in Nigeria’s mediated public.

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