

End Bad Governance Protests Utterances in Nigeria-A Pragmatic Act Analysis

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Abstract

This study examined language as social action in the 2024 End Bad Governance protests in Nigeria using Pragmatic Acts Theory (Mey, 2001). Adopting a qualitative approach, twenty purposively selected utterances from protest speeches on YouTube and Instagram were analysed. The study identified key pragmatic acts such as complaining, lamenting, requesting, appealing, warning, and asserting rights. These acts were realised through various practs, including experiential, emotive, directive, rhetorical, and moral-legitimising practs. The findings reveal that protest language is strategically used to express grievances, mobilise support, legitimise demands, and negotiate power within a socio-political context. The study concludes that language functions as a powerful tool for resistance and social change, and it contributes to pragmatic scholarship by demonstrating the relevance of Pragmatic Acts Theory in analysing protest discourse in Nigeria.

Keywords: Pragmatic Acts, Protest Discourse, Language, Social Action, Nigeria

Introduction

Language is a form of social action shaped by context (Mey, 2001) and plays a central

role in constructing social realities, power relations, and collective identities (Fairclough, 1995; Crystal, 2003). Beyond communication, it serves as a tool for

resistance, mobilization, and social change (Tilly, 2004).

The 2024 End Bad Governance protests in Nigeria, driven by economic hardship, insecurity, and dissatisfaction with governance, provide a rich context for examining language use in protest situations. During these protests, various protesters used speeches and public statements to express grievances, mobilize support, and negotiate power.

This study adopted the Pragmatic Acts Theory (Mey, 2001), which views meaning as emerging from context-dependent interaction through pragmemes and practs. Unlike Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), this framework emphasizes situated action and socio-cultural context, making it suitable for analysing protest discourse.

Although protest discourse has been widely studied, little attention has been given to the 2024 protests using Pragmatic Acts Theory. This study addressed this gap by analysing twenty selected utterances from protest speeches sourced from YouTube and Instagram. Using a qualitative approach and purposive sampling, the study examined how language functions as social action in expressing resistance, mobilization, and demand for accountability. Despite the significance of the 2024 End Bad Governance protests, limited research has examined the linguistic strategies used in protest speeches. Existing studies focus largely on general protest discourse or employ Speech Act Theory, often neglecting the broader socio-cultural context of meaning.

It contributed to pragmatic scholarship by applying Pragmatic Acts Theory to protest

discourse in Nigeria. Moreover, it highlighted the importance of context in meaning-making and demonstrated the limitations of Speech Act Theory in analysing politically charged discourse. It also provided a methodological framework for analysing protest language and enhances understanding of how language is used for resistance, mobilization, and political engagement.

Literature Review

Language is central to human communication and social interaction, serving as a medium through which meanings, intentions, and ideologies are expressed. In research, reviewing existing literature is essential for situating a study within ongoing scholarly discourse and identifying gaps (Simpson, 2005). Language is a fundamental tool for communication, expressed verbally and non-verbally (Olateju, 2004). It shapes thought, organizes experience, and enables individuals to express emotions and ideas. In protest contexts, language becomes a strategic tool through which individuals articulate grievances and mobilize collective action. Protest is both a physical and communicative act in which language plays a central role. Through speeches, slogans, and digital discourse, protesters express grievances, mobilize participants, and challenge authority. Van Dijk (2008) views protest discourse as ideological struggle, while Wodak (2015) highlights its reliance on narratives and emotional appeals. Language also legitimizes protest by framing it as moral and necessary (Tilly, 2008). In the digital age, communication technologies further amplify protest messages (Castells, 2012). From a

pragmatic perspective, protest utterances perform actions such as accusing, demanding, and resisting, making them suitable for analysis using Pragmatic Acts Theory (Mey, 2001).

Pragmatics is concerned with meaning in context and how language users interpret utterances beyond their literal sense (Grundy, 2008; Cruse, 2006). It emphasizes that meaning is shaped by situational, social, and cultural factors (Horn & Ward, 2004). Mey (2001) extends this view by defining pragmatics as the study of language use as determined by societal conditions. Pragmatic Acts Theory focuses on language as social action. Unlike Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which classifies utterances into fixed categories, pragmatic acts highlight how meaning emerges from context. According to Mey (2001), pragmatic acts are context-dependent, action-oriented, socially embedded, and user-driven. They are flexible and realised through *practs* such as inferring, referring, and describing. Key features of pragmatic acts include context-dependence, inferential meaning, sensitivity to power and ideology, and discourse orientation. These features make the theory particularly suitable for analysing protest discourse, where meaning is shaped by shared experiences, institutional constraints, and socio-political realities.

Moreover, bad governance refers to the failure of leadership to provide public goods, ensure accountability, and respond to citizens' needs (Hyden, Court & Mease, 2004). The 2024 End Bad Governance protests in Nigeria emerged in response to economic hardship, inflation, unemployment, and insecurity. The

protests, widely circulated through hashtags such as #EndBadGovernance, reflected public dissatisfaction with government policies. Reports by Al Jazeera (2024) and BBC News (2024) describe the situation as a severe economic crisis. In line with Tilly and Tarrow (2015), such hardship often triggers protest, with language serving as a primary tool for expressing resistance and demanding change.

This study is anchored on Pragmatic Acts Theory proposed by Mey (2001). The theory views language as situated action shaped by context, social practices, and cultural norms. It addresses the limitations of Speech Act Theory by emphasizing real-life language use rather than abstract classifications. The core unit of analysis is the *pragmeme*, a generalized pragmatic act realized through *practs*. *Practs* are observable communicative actions such as inferring, referring, and describing. Their effectiveness depends on three conditions: setting up (context preparation), coopting (use of shared conventions), and uptake (recognition by the hearer).

Previous studies have examined language use across various domains. Mekiliuwa (2009) analysed Pentecostal sermons and showed that speech events can be systematically studied using discourse frameworks. Osisanwo (2017) applied Pragmatic Acts Theory to political speech, revealing how pragmatic acts construct political identity. Other studies, such as Uche (2019) and Syakila et al. (2022), used Speech Act Theory to analyse political and leadership discourse, highlighting the persuasive function of language. Similarly, Masruroh et al. (2023) and Oloo et al. (2019) demonstrated the applicability of pragmatic analysis in literary contexts.

In the Nigerian context, Abuh (2024) examined pragmatic acts in protest placards, while Eze et al. (2024) analysed protest language during the EndSARS movement. Non-linguistic studies (Onu, 2024; Udousoro et al., 2024) provide socio-political insights into protest movements.

Although these studies contribute to understanding language and protest, they largely focus on written texts, institutional discourse, or Speech Act Theory. There is limited research on spoken protest utterances from the 2024 End Bad Governance protests using Pragmatic Acts Theory. This gap justifies the present study.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which involves the analysis of non-numerical data such as texts, audio, and video to understand meanings and social actions (Bhandari, 2020). This approach is suitable because the study focuses on how language is used to perform pragmatic acts, express intentions, and mobilise responses during the End Bad Governance protests. It allows for an in-depth interpretation of contextual meaning beyond surface-level analysis. The study is situated within the Nigerian socio-political context, focusing on protest utterances from the End Bad Governance movement. Although the protests occurred nationwide, data were drawn from speeches circulated across media platforms, including recordings from protest grounds, interviews, and social media livestreams on YouTube and Instagram. This context is appropriate as it reflects real-life language use in protest situations.

The purposive sampling was used which allows for the selection of information-rich data relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2002). This method is appropriate because it ensures that only utterances with clear pragmatic features are selected for analysis. A total of twenty utterances were deliberately extracted from selected protest speeches. These utterances were chosen based on their relevance, clarity, and ability to demonstrate pragmatic acts and communicative intentions. Data were analysed using tabular method, guided by Pragmatic Acts Theory (Mey, 2001).

Analysis

This section presented and analysed selected End Bad Governance protest utterances using Pragmatic Acts Theory (Mey, 2001). It focuses on how language is used to express grievances, mobilise support, and negotiate power in the protest context. The analysis highlights how meaning is constructed through pragmatic acts beyond literal expressions using the questions below.

1. What pragmatic acts were manifested in the selected end bad governance protests utterances in Nigeria?
2. How were these pragmatic acts realised through practs in the utterances?

Utterances	Pragmatic Acts	Realisation Through Practs
1.The hike in prices of food, water, electricity, transportation, security, and communication is alarming.	Complaining / Problem highlighting	Experiential pract
2.There is hunger in the land.	Lamenting / Stating hardship	Emotive pract
3.Everyone is frustrated nationwide with justified reasons, and something needs to be done to ease the hearts of the people to avoid further loss of lives and properties.	Complaining / Appealing / Warning	Moral-legitimising pract
4.And our armed forces, please refrain from using excessive force on the people.	Requesting / Warning / Advising	Directive pract
5.Everyone has the right to air their voices and demand for transparency, accountability, and participation.	Asserting rights / Justifying protest	Rights-assertion pract
6.You are here because you want a better Nigeria, is it not?	Rhetorical questioning / Solidarity building	Self-positioning pract
7.I feel your pain, and in our own government, we are doing everything to make life easy for our people.	Empathising/Reassuring	Empathy and future-projection pract
8.I am not against your protests, but we will not support anything that will destroy our state.	Supporting protest / Warning / Boundary setting	Norm-setting pract
9.The youth need your assistance.	Appealing / Requesting support	Directive pract
10.Give us employment, we need job.	Requesting / Demanding employment	Command pract
11.We don't want to fight, we don't want crises, we don't want to cause problems.	Calling for peace / Rejecting violence	Peace-oriented pract
12.Reduce the cost of food.	Demanding economic relief	Directive pract
13.We are tired of sitting down, sitting down in the house, not finding something to eat at will.	Complaining / Expressing exhaustion	Intensity pract

14. Employment is about gender.	Advocating inclusion / Social justice	Ideological assertion pract
15. We are not asking for anything other than an enabling environment where people can do their businesses rightly and profitably.	Justifying demands / Appealing	Justificatory pract
16. And it's so unfortunate that the children who are supposed to be looking after us, they are all at home, sleeping, no work, no employment.	Lamenting / Criticising leadership	Experiential and evaluative pract
17. What do people buy with 70,000 naira in this present dispensation?	Rhetorical questioning / Criticising economic conditions	Rhetorical pract
18. All the utterances, all the activities are these things that are propelling these Nigerian masses to react the way they are reacting.	Explaining / Justifying protest	Causal pract
19. Make things easy for people to thrive.	Appealing / Advising government	Directive pract
20. Our students, our youth, our children, they are learning, studying under very, very bad conditions.	Complaining / Highlighting social injustice	Experiential pract

Conclusion

This work analysed selected protest utterances from the End Bad Governance protests using Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory. The analysis revealed that the selected End Bad Governance protest utterances in Nigeria are rich in diverse pragmatic acts, reflecting the socio-political realities of the protesters. Predominant acts include complaining, lamenting, requesting, appealing, warning, and asserting rights. These acts were systematically realised through different practs such as experiential,

emotive, directive, rhetorical, moral-legitimising, and justificatory practs.

Findings further show that protesters strategically deployed language to express hardship, legitimise their grievances, demand government intervention, and promote peace while resisting oppression. The frequent use of directive and experiential practs indicates a strong orientation toward both expressing lived experiences and calling for immediate action. Additionally, rhetorical and empathy-based practs

were used to build solidarity and persuade both the government and the public.

Government authorities are advised to pay closer attention to protest discourse as it reflects the genuine needs and frustrations of citizens, especially regarding economic hardship and unemployment.

Policymakers on the other hand should adopt dialogue-based approaches to address grievances rather than suppressing protests. Moreover, scholars should further explore protest language using Pragmatic Acts Theory across different socio-political contexts for broader insights. Protest leaders and communicators should continue to employ constructive and peace-oriented language to ensure their messages are effective and socially responsible.

In conclusion, protest utterances during the End Bad Governance movement are not merely expressions of discontent but strategic communicative acts designed to achieve specific socio-political goals. Through the deployment of varied pragmatic acts and praxis, protesters effectively articulated their suffering, justified their actions, and demanded accountability. This underscores the significance of language as a powerful tool for social resistance, advocacy, and transformation in Nigeria.

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