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Beyond the Literal: Pragmatic Modulation in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Campaign Speeches of Peter Obi of Labour Party

Chinwe Ezeifeka
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
cr.ezeifeka@unizik.edu.ng

&

Oluchukwu Mary Nwadei
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
nwadeioluchi@gmail.com

Abstract

Political campaign discourse extends beyond literal meanings, relying on pragmatic strategies to shape public perception and influence voter behaviour. This study examines pragmatic modulation in the 2023 Nigerian presidential campaign speeches of Mr. Peter Obi, focusing on how linguistic strategies such as implicature, presupposition, metaphor, euphemism, and lexical pragmatics were employed to construct political narratives. The research adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic approach within the framework of Speech Act Theory and Relevance Theory in analyzing two purposively selected speeches: Obi's pre-election address at Chatham House and his post-election speech following the Supreme Court judgment. The study identifies how Obi strategically adjusted his language to maximize contextual relevance, minimize cognitive effort, and enhance audience engagement. His pre-election speech emphasized reformist ideals, employing presuppositions and metaphors to frame governance challenges and solutions. His post-election speech, in contrast, modulated tone and implicature to manage political

disappointment while reinforcing a continued political movement. By examining these shifts, the study highlights how pragmatic modulation is instrumental in shaping campaign rhetoric and post-election discourse. Findings contribute to political discourse and Nigerian political communication studies, offering insights into how candidates navigate sociopolitical realities, voter expectations, and electoral outcomes through language. The study underscores the need for further research into pragmatic strategies in African political discourse and their broader implications for democratic engagement.

Keywords: Pragmatic Modulation, Political, Context, Lexical Processes

Introduction

Political campaign discourse is a strategic communicative act that extends beyond the literal meanings of words. It is a complex interplay of language, ideology, and persuasion, where politicians seek to shape public opinion, mobilize supporters, and construct compelling narratives. In this context, linguistic choices are rarely neutral; they are carefully modulated to enhance credibility, reinforce ideological positions, and maximize electoral appeal. This study investigates the use of pragmatic modulation in the 2023 presidential campaign speeches of Peter Obi, the candidate of the Labour Party (LP), to uncover how he employed linguistic strategies to construct meaning, negotiate political realities, and influence voter perception.

Pragmatic modulation refers to the intentional adaptation of language to achieve specific communicative effects in discourse (Rahardi, Firdaus and Affandi, 2024). This process involves various pragmatic phenomena, including implicature, presupposition, metaphor, euphemism, vagueness, and speech acts, among others (Chinturu-Adindu and Ogbonnaya, 2020). Within political communication, these strategies function as tools for

persuasion, allowing candidates to frame issues, highlight contrasts with opponents, and appeal to voters' emotions and cognitive expectations. A central question in this study is: How did Peter Obi modulate his political discourse to convey meaning beyond the literal content of his statements?

Political campaign speeches are inherently pragmatic, as they involve intentional meaning construction tailored to diverse audiences (Powell and Cowart, 2015, Bossan, 2017, Wodak, 2013, Souza, 2023). Implicature, for instance, enables candidates to convey critical messages indirectly, making their speech both persuasive and adaptable. Presuppositions embed unstated assumptions within discourse, positioning candidates as credible agents of change while subtly critiquing the status quo (Ounis, 2021). Metaphors function as cognitive shortcuts, framing political issues in ways that resonate with voters' experiences and expectations (Flusberg et al 2024). Additionally, euphemism and vagueness help politicians navigate controversial topics while maintaining broad appeal. Pronouns and code-switching further serve as identity-marking tools, reinforcing solidarity with specific voter demographics.

In Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, the socio-political context was particularly significant in shaping campaign rhetoric. Issues such as economic decline, insecurity, corruption, and ethno-religious tensions required candidates to carefully modulate their discourse to balance assertiveness with sensitivity. Peter Obi, who emerged as a formidable challenger to the two dominant political parties, relied on rhetorical strategies that distinguished his campaign from conventional political messaging. As an opposition candidate advocating a "New Nigeria," his speeches were expected to resonate with the electorate by signaling transformation and inspiring collective action. However, the mechanisms through which he achieved this resonance remain an area of inquiry.

Statement of the Problem

The strategic use of language in political campaigns extends beyond rhetoric to include pragmatic modulation, where politicians adapt their speech to shape narratives, connect with voters, and influence political outcomes. Despite extensive researches on political discourse such as Furko, (2017), Chinturu-Adindu and Ogbonnaya, (2020), de Oliveira Fernandes, D., and Oswald, S. (2022), there is a significant gap in understanding how Peter Obi's 2023 presidential campaign speeches employed pragmatic strategies such as implicature, presupposition, metaphor, euphemism, vagueness, code-switching, and politeness strategies to navigate the country's complex sociopolitical and linguistic landscape. Existing studies such as Okolie, Enyiazu, and Nnamani, (2021), Gbadegesin, and Onanuga, (2019), Ukaegbu, and Okpoko (2023) have largely focused on campaign promises, political ideology, and media framing, often overlooking the subtleties of Obi's linguistic choices in engaging Nigeria's multilingual and ethnically diverse electorate.

Furthermore, while international research has explored pragmatic modulation in Western political contexts, little attention has been given to how Nigerian politicians, particularly opposition figures like Obi, strategically balance directness with diplomacy, assertiveness with inclusivity, and ideological clarity with strategic ambiguity. Additionally, most studies on Nigerian campaign discourse focus on prepared speeches, neglecting the more dynamic and spontaneous aspects of political communication, such as off-the-cuff remarks, media interviews, and debates, where pragmatic modulation is most evident. To address these gaps, this study critically examines Peter Obi's campaign discourse, exploring how his pragmatic strategies shaped his political messaging, resonated with diverse voter demographics, and positioned him as a viable alternative to traditional political elites.

Research Objectives

The following objectives were formulated to guide the study:

1. To identify the linguistic choices that are pragmatically modulated in the campaign speeches of Peter Obi
2. To explain the lexical pragmatic processes that give rise to these pragmatic modulation
3. To interpret the ad hoc concepts derived from these pragmatic modulations to persuade the voters.
4. To explain the political and cultural contexts that influenced these linguistic choices

Research Questions

In line with the objectives, this study seeks to examine:

1. What are the linguistic choices that are pragmatically modulated in the campaign speeches of Peter Obi
2. What are lexical pragmatic processes that give rise to these pragmatic modulation
3. How do the ad hoc concepts derived from these pragmatic modulations to persuade the voters.
4. What are the political and cultural contexts that influenced these linguistic choices

Significance of the Study

The primary stakeholders who will benefit from this study include political candidates, communication strategists, linguists, policymakers, and researchers in political communication and discourse analysis. Political candidates will gain insights into how linguistic choices shape voter perception and engagement, enabling them to craft more effective campaign messages in future elections. This study will help them understand how pragmatic modulation influences public reception and can provide a strategic advantage in political communication.

Communication strategists will benefit from a deeper understanding of pragmatic modulation, helping them design

persuasive and audience-specific political discourse. Strategists can create targeted messaging that appeal to a range of voter categories by evaluating the efficacy of different language techniques. The study's findings will also guide the structuring of political narratives that align with cultural and regional sensibilities.

Linguists will find this study valuable for expanding research in political pragmatics and discourse analysis within the Nigerian socio-political context. The research will contribute to the understanding of how pragmatic strategies function in campaign speeches and enrich the academic discourse on political language. Additionally, it will provide empirical data that can be used for comparative linguistic studies across different political systems.

Policymakers can use the findings to develop guidelines for ethical political communication, promoting transparency and accountability in campaign rhetoric. This will be achieved by understanding how language is used to shape public opinion, policymakers can advocate for fair and responsible political discourse in the study. This can lead to more informed regulatory policies that ensure political messages are not misleading or manipulative.

Researchers will benefit from an enriched theoretical and empirical foundation for further studies on pragmatics in political discourse. The study will serve as a reference for future academic inquiries into political communication, providing a framework for examining the interaction between language, politics, and society.

Literature Review

Context plays a crucial role in shaping meaning in political discourse, as it influences how utterances are produced and interpreted. According to van Dijk (2008), context encompasses situational, social, and cognitive elements that frame discourse and determine pragmatic choices. In political communication, context includes factors such as historical events, cultural expectations, and socio-political dynamics that shape voter perception (Stanyer, 2007). Nigerian presidential campaign speeches, for instance, are embedded within a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual context, where candidates must carefully navigate sensitive topics such as regionalism and national unity. Sperber and Wilson's (1986) Relevance Theory highlights that speakers rely on contextual cues to optimize meaning and guide listener interpretation. This means that the same statement may carry different implications depending on the socio-political climate and audience expectations, making context a crucial determinant of pragmatic modulation in political discourse.

Meaning modulation refers to the linguistic mechanisms that allow speakers to adjust meaning based on context, communicative intent, and audience reception. Traugott (2010) explain that meaning modulation occurs through semantic shifts, implicature, and pragmatic inference, enabling speakers to align their messages with strategic goals. In political speeches, this modulation is evident in the use of metaphors, euphemisms, and vagueness to persuade or obscure specific meanings. For example, candidates may use broad terms such as *"economic transformation"* to imply progress without committing to concrete policies. Carston (2002) extends this idea by emphasizing that pragmatic modulation often

involves a trade-off between precision and ambiguity, allowing political figures to appeal to diverse voter groups without alienating any particular constituency. In Nigeria's 2023 election, meaning modulation was particularly evident as candidates sought to frame their narratives in ways that resonated with different socio-economic and regional blocs.

Lexical pragmatic processes, a subfield of meaning modulation, involve the ways in which word meanings are dynamically adjusted in discourse. Wilson and Carston (2006) identify key processes such as broadening (where words are used more generally than their conventional meanings), narrowing (where meanings become more specific), and metaphorical extension (where words acquire figurative meanings). Political candidates employ these processes to frame ideologies, rebrand identities, and evoke emotional responses from voters. Similarly, opposition candidates often employ narrowing to critique ruling parties, defining governance failures in precise terms to contrast their own leadership promises. Pragmatic modulation through lexical adjustments, therefore, serves as a powerful rhetorical tool in political discourse, reinforcing ideological positions while maintaining flexibility in interpretation.

Theoretical Framework

a. Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory, developed by J.L. Austin and later refined by John Searle, offers a powerful lens through which political discourse can be analysed. The theory posits that language is not merely a tool for conveying information but a means of performing actions. In political contexts, particularly in campaign speeches, language is employed not just to inform but to influence, promise,

criticize, and mobilize. This perspective foregrounds the notion that utterances carry force beyond their literal meaning and that understanding political rhetoric requires attention to the pragmatic functions embedded in the speaker's words.

At the heart of Speech Act Theory lies the distinction among locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. The locutionary act pertains to the actual utterance and its propositional content. The illocutionary act captures the speaker's intention—what is being done in saying something—while the perlocutionary act refers to the effect of the utterance on the audience. In campaign speeches, the illocutionary force of an utterance is particularly critical, as it reveals how politicians employ language to perform actions such as persuading voters, committing to policies, criticizing opponents, or rallying national sentiment.

Austin identifies five categories of illocutionary acts: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives. Each category plays a unique role in shaping political communication. Verdictives involve assessments or judgments, allowing a politician to evaluate events or institutions, thereby establishing credibility and authority. Exercitives are concerned with decisions and directives, such as making policy proposals or issuing calls to action, which are central to campaign rhetoric. Commissives include promises or pledges, which are crucial for projecting future commitments and building trust with the electorate.

Behabitives express social attitudes, such as congratulating or sympathizing, often serving to align the speaker with public sentiment and project empathy or moral integrity. Expositives deal with the explanation or clarification of ideas, enabling politicians to frame ideologies, justify decisions, or manage public perceptions. These illocutionary acts are not isolated; they work together to modulate meaning, strategically shaping how political messages are received and interpreted by diverse audiences.

For a study titled *"Beyond the Literal: Pragmatic Modulation in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Campaign Speeches of Peter Obi,"* Speech Act Theory provides a fitting theoretical framework. It emphasizes the intentionality behind speech and the performative nature of political language. By focusing on how meaning is constructed and conveyed through different illocutionary forces, the theory enables a deeper understanding of how Peter Obi's speeches function pragmatically. It reveals how linguistic choices transcend literal meanings to perform socially and politically significant acts, which are instrumental in shaping public perception, managing ideologies, and influencing electoral outcomes.

b. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory, developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986, is a cognitive approach to pragmatics that explains how individuals process and interpret communicated information. It builds on Paul Grice's theory of implicature but refines it by emphasizing the role of cognition in communication. The central premise of Relevance Theory is that human cognition is geared towards maximizing relevance, meaning that individuals naturally seek to process information that provides the greatest cognitive effect with the least effort. This principle underlies all forms of communication, where speakers provide information they assume to be optimally relevant, and listeners interpret it by inferring the speaker's intended meaning through contextual cues and background knowledge.

The theory is based on two fundamental principles: the Cognitive Principle of Relevance and the Communicative Principle of Relevance. The Cognitive Principle states that human cognition is inherently oriented toward relevance, meaning that individuals

unconsciously prioritize information that yields significant contextual effects with minimal processing effort. This explains why certain pieces of information capture attention more than others. The Communicative Principle extends this idea to verbal exchanges, asserting that every act of ostensive communication (i.e., communication that makes its informative intention explicit) carries a presumption of optimal relevance. In other words, when someone speaks, they do so under the assumption that their message is sufficiently relevant for the listener to expend the effort required to interpret it.

Another key tenet of Relevance Theory is the notion of contextual effects, which refers to the ways in which new information interacts with existing knowledge. Contextual effects occur when new information strengthens, contradicts, or combines with known facts to yield new conclusions. A statement is considered relevant if it produces significant contextual effects without requiring excessive cognitive effort. This balance between cognitive effort and effect determines the efficiency of communication. Thus, in everyday interactions, speakers naturally strive to make their utterances clear and useful, while listeners apply inferential reasoning to extract the intended meaning.

Additionally, Relevance Theory differentiates between explicit and implicit communication**.** Explicit communication involves the direct content of an utterance, while implicit communication refers to inferred meanings or implicatures. Unlike Gricean implicature, which relies on conversational maxims, Sperber and Wilson argue that implicatures emerge naturally from the search for relevance rather than adherence to specific rules. This explains why listeners

often grasp intended meanings even when speakers are indirect or vague—because they assume the speaker's words are optimally relevant and use inferential reasoning to interpret them.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a discourse-analytic approach, to examine pragmatic modulation in Peter Obi's 2023 Nigerian presidential campaign speeches. A descriptive research design is appropriate as it enables an in-depth exploration of how Obi employs pragmatic strategies such as implicature, presupposition, metaphor, euphemism, vagueness, to influence voter perception. The study will employ Relevance Theory as an analytical lens to interpret the linguistic and contextual choices made by Obi in shaping his political narrative, engaging diverse voter demographics, and constructing his political identity as a reformist candidate.

The study focuses on Nigeria, a multilingual and multi-ethnic nation where political discourse is shaped by sociocultural diversity, economic challenges, and regional dynamics. Given Peter Obi's widespread appeal across different geopolitical zones, the study considers campaign speeches, debates, interviews, and media engagements where he addressed national issues such as governance, economic reforms, security, and youth participation in politics. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select two key speeches by Mr. Peter Obi for analysis. The first is his pre-election address at Chatham House January 16, 2023 which articulated his policy vision and campaign objectives. The second is his post-election speech following the Supreme Court judgment November 6, 2023 where he responded to the court's verdict and addressed his supporters. These speeches provide a rich dataset for examining how pragmatic modulation shaped his political messaging before and after the election. The study will rely on secondary data collection methods by sourcing Peter Obi's

campaign speeches from official transcripts and recordings from his campaign team and political party. Publicly available videos and transcripts from media houses, political debates, and campaign events. The study will employ discourse analysis within the framework of Relevance Theory to examine how pragmatic modulation is used in Peter Obi's campaign speeches.

Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the linguistic choices that are pragmatically modulated in the campaign speeches of Peter Obi?

Text 1:

Data No.	Excerpt	Type of Speech Act	Pragmatic Modulation
1	"...begin today with words of gratitude."	Expressive	Politeness strategy used to build rapport.
2	"...alarming insecurity…"	Assertive	Intensification to draw attention to urgency.
3	"...state is captive to an elite gang-up…"	Assertive	Use of metaphor to criticize indirectly.
4	"...political fraud...failing state…"	Assertive	Condensed implicature to express critique.
5	"...demography is driving the change..."	Assertive	Generalization to inspire and connect.
6	"...from predators to creators of value."	Assertive	Lexical contrast (modulation through opposition).
7	"...assemble competent Nigerians..."	Commissive	Promise + inclusivity as a social alignment cue.
8	"...secure Nigeria...unite our dear nation…"	Commissive/ Directive	Foregrounding existential threats to justify plan.
9	"...shift emphasis from consumption to production…"	Directive	Lexical narrowing for economic appeal.
10	"...black-hole in government finances."	Assertive	Use of metaphor to communicate urgency.
11	"...monitoring and evaluation…"	Commissive	Modulated emphasis on reform through technocratic vocabulary.

12	"...4th Industrial Revolution…"	Assertive	Use of buzzword to modulate urgency and modernization.
13	"...Marshall plan-type programme..."	Assertive	Allusion modulates scale of ambition.
14	"...afro-centric diplomacy…"	Commissive	Expansion of foreign policy commitment through cultural lens.
15	"The trouble with Nigeria..."	Assertive (echoic)	Quoting Achebe adds rhetorical weight and alignment.

Table 1: Summary of the excerpts of Peter Obi's pre-election speech at Chatham House

In Data 1, Peter Obi begins with the expressive speech act: *"...begin today with words of gratitude."* This is a deliberate linguistic choice using a politeness strategy to show respect and appreciation. By doing this, he builds a friendly relationship with his listeners, which makes them more open to his message. This use of polite language is not accidental; it is pragmatically modulated to gain audience trust from the very beginning. Similarly, in Data 2, the phrase *"...alarming insecurity…"* is an assertive act where Obi uses intensification to make the issue of national security sound more urgent and serious. This modulation helps his audience feel the weight of the problem.

Also in Data 3 and Data 4, Peter Obi uses metaphors like *"...state is captive to an elite gang-up…"* and *"...political fraud...failing state…"* These are assertive speech acts that are pragmatically modulated through indirect criticism and condensed implicature. Instead of saying directly that the government has failed, he uses powerful images that make his message stronger and harder to ignore. In Data 6, the phrase *"...from predators to creators of value."* is another example of a lexical contrast. Here, Obi contrasts two ideas to show transformation—from bad leadership to good leadership. This helps the audience easily understand what kind of change he is promising.

In Data 7, Data 8, and Data 9, Obi uses commissive and directive speech acts to show commitment and call for action. In *"...assemble competent Nigerians..."* (Data 7), he makes a promise to include capable people, which also builds social alignment—he shows that he is for everyone. In Data 8, *"...secure Nigeria...unite our dear nation…"* uses emotional and nationalistic language to show what is at stake, while in Data 9, *"...shift emphasis from consumption to production…"* is a directive that uses lexical narrowing to simplify his economic message.

Text 2

Data NO	Excerpt	Pragmatically Modulated Expression	Type of Speech Act	Function
16	"Our young democracy is ultimately the main victim and casualty of the courtroom drama."	"young democracy is... victim"	Assertive	Emphasizes institutional fragility and judicial failure.
17	"This judgment amounts to a total breach of the confidence the Nigerian people have in our judiciary."	"total breach of the confidence"	Expressive	Indicates disapproval and disappointment.
18	"We were taught values... to always choose the harder right, instead of the easier wrong."	"harder right... easier wrong"	Directive	Urges the public and leaders to act with integrity.
19	"This is not the end of our journey; but in fact, the beginning."	"not the end... the beginning"	Commissive	Promises sustained political engagement.
20	"We shall endure, persist, until we get to our destination because a new Nigeria is our destination."	"new Nigeria is our destination"	Declarative	Reaffirms political commitment and vision.

Table 2: Summary of the excerpts of Peter Obi's post-election speech our democracy is the victim

In Data 16, the phrase *"Our young democracy is ultimately the main victim and casualty of the courtroom drama"* is an assertive speech act that uses a metaphorical expression to emphasize the fragility of Nigeria's democracy. Here, Peter Obi does not directly blame individuals but instead points to systemic failure, which makes the message more diplomatic yet critical. The pragmatic modulation lies in framing the judiciary's failure as a national tragedy rather than a personal loss, increasing the moral weight of his argument while engaging national sentiment. This aligns with Relevance Theory, as it helps the audience infer deeper concerns about institutional decay.

Looking at Data 17, Obi says, *"This judgment amounts to a total breach of the confidence the Nigerian people have in our judiciary."* This expressive speech act reveals his disappointment. The phrase *"total breach of confidence"* is pragmatically modulated to show both emotional weight and political disapproval. Instead of simply saying "people don't trust the judiciary," Obi uses more forceful language that evokes betrayal. This modulation enhances the emotional impact of the message, encouraging the audience to share in the sense of injustice. It reflects the use of affective language to reinforce shared values between speaker and audience.

In Data 18 to Data 20, Obi shifts toward motivation and reassurance. Data 18, *"choose the harder right, instead of the easier wrong,"* uses a directive act based on a moral lesson. The pragmatic modulation here uses contrastive phrasing to inspire ethical behavior. In Data 19, *"not the end… the beginning,"* is a commissive act that reassures his followers of continued engagement; the modulation expresses renewal rather than defeat. Finally, in Data 20, *"a new Nigeria is our destination,"* uses a

declarative form to reaffirm vision. This metaphoric modulation emphasizes the journey metaphor and anchors his political mission. These modulated linguistic choices are persuasive, emotionally resonant, and designed to reinforce trust and long-term commitment among supporters.

Research Question 2: What are lexical pragmatic processes that give rise to these pragmatic modulations?

Text 1:

Data No.	Excerpt	Lexical Pragmatic Process	Effect on Audience Interpretation
21	"...words of gratitude."	Lexical narrowing	Gratitude reinterpreted as ethical positioning.
22	"...alarming insecurity…"	Lexical enrichment	"Insecurity" intensified to highlight urgency.
23	"...elite gang-up…"	Lexical broadening	"Gang-up" expands to capture elite collusion.
24	"...failing state…"	Enrichment + metaphor	"Failing" evokes systemic breakdown.
25	"...demography driving change…"	Lexical narrowing	"Demography" redefined as youth power.
26	"...predators to creators…"	Lexical opposition	Binary reinforces moral judgment.
27	"...competent Nigerians…"	Lexical narrowing	"Competence" tied to national inclusion.
28	"...secure Nigeria..."	Lexical broadening	"Secure" implies both physical and symbolic safety.
29	"...production..."	Lexical enrichment	"Production" becomes a symbol of national reform.
30	"...black-hole..."	Metaphorical enrichment	Creates a vivid fiscal imagery.
31	"...institutionalize monitoring…"	Broadening	"Institutionalize" implies transformation beyond policy.
32	"...leapfrog Nigeria…"	Metaphorical enrichment	Innovation depicted as urgent jump.
33	"...Marshall plan-type	Allusion	Signifies large-scale restoration.

	programme...”		
34	“...afro-centric diplomacy…”	Lexical enrichment	“Afro-centric” invokes cultural pride and independence.
35	“...trouble with Nigeria...”	Echoic/quotation	Achebe’s phrase reinterpreted as diagnosis.

Table 3: **Summary of the excerpts of Peter Obi’s pre-election speech at Chatham House**

In *Data 21*, the phrase *“words of gratitude”* is an instance of lexical narrowing, where the term “gratitude” is interpreted beyond politeness, projecting Peter Obi’s humility and moral disposition. This narrowing helps reframe political ambition as service-oriented. Similarly, *Data 22* uses the phrase *“alarming insecurity”* through lexical enrichment—the word “insecurity” is intensified with “alarming” to heighten the urgency and seriousness of the issue. According to Relevance Theory, such enrichment triggers contextual effects by guiding the audience to infer a heightened level of national crisis. In *Data 23*, *“elite gang-up”* applies lexical broadening, where “gang-up” shifts from its criminal connotation to represent elite political collusion, thereby provoking distrust and amplifying public resentment.

Likewise, *Data 24* involves a blend of enrichment and metaphor, as the phrase *“failing state”* portrays a vivid image of national collapse. The audience interprets this not just as inefficiency, but as a sign of deeper systemic breakdown. In *Data 25*, the line *“demography driving change”* employs lexical narrowing, where “demography” is not used in its broad statistical sense, but reinterpreted to mean the youth population. This aligns with relevance-driven communication by creating an ad hoc concept that resonates with a younger audience, enhancing the speaker's relatability and forward-looking image. The binary contrast in *Data 26*, *“from predators to creators,”* exemplifies lexical opposition—a process that simplifies complex economic roles into

moral categories, making the audience's interpretation more emotive and persuasive.

In *Data 27*, the phrase *"competent Nigerians"* undergoes lexical narrowing to emphasize merit and inclusion. The word "competent" is contextually enriched to oppose nepotism, subtly aligning Obi's leadership with fairness. Similarly, *Data 28* applies broadening to the term *"secure"*, which is extended to mean more than physical safety—it also includes economic, psychological, and national stability. *Data 29* presents *"production"* as a case of lexical enrichment. Rather than a technical term, "production" is emotionally recharged to symbolize national revival and self-reliance. In *Data 30*, the metaphor *"black-hole in government finances"* involves metaphorical enrichment, producing a strong visual image of fiscal loss and waste, guiding the audience toward feelings of concern and urgency.

Further metaphors and allusions continue this trend. *Data 31* uses broadening in *"institutionalize monitoring"*, which stretches "institutionalize" beyond policy to imply a deep cultural or systemic reform. *Data 32*, with *"leapfrog Nigeria"*, employs metaphorical enrichment, suggesting a sudden, transformative advancement—again capturing the imagination of the electorate. In *Data 33*, Obi invokes a *"Marshall plan-type programme"*, a classic case of allusion, evoking post-WWII recovery to modulate scale and seriousness. *Data 34* enriches *"Afro-centric diplomacy"*, tapping into cultural pride and independence, while *Data 35* presents an echoic/quotation from Chinua Achebe—*"the trouble with Nigeria"*—reused here as a political diagnosis. This process leverages prior knowledge and cultural familiarity to enhance rhetorical weight.

Research Question 3: How do the ad hoc concepts derived from these pragmatic modulations to persuade the voters.

Text 1

Data No.	Excerpt	Ad Hoc Concept	Inference from Context
36	"...words of gratitude."	Gratitude = moral foundation	Implies ethical leadership.
37	"...alarming insecurity…"	Insecurity = existential threat	Demands immediate action.
38	"...elite gang-up…"	Elite = selfish ruling clique	Delegitimizes old leadership.
39	"...failing state…"	State failure = governance collapse	Justifies systemic change.
40	"...demography driving change…"	Youth = hope and agents of change	Appeals to youth voters.
41	"...from predators to creators…"	Good leaders = value creators	Moral contrast to old guard.
42	"...competent Nigerians…"	Competence = national representation	Unity through excellence.
43	"...secure Nigeria..."	Security = unification and development	National healing starts with safety.
44	"...production..."	Production = economic dignity	Reflects self-reliance ideology.
45	"...black-hole..."	Subsidy = wasteful drain	Advocates fiscal reform.
46	"...institutionalize monitoring…"	Reform = embedded accountability	Signals anti-corruption.
47	"...4th Industrial Revolution…"	Innovation = national survival	Modernization urgency.
48	"...Marshall plan-type programme..."	Education = catalyst for national revival	Large-scale capacity building.
49	"...afro-centric diplomacy…"	Foreign policy = protection + pride	Resonates with diasporic concerns.
50	"...trouble with Nigeria..."	Leadership = root of national decay	Echoes Achebe's cultural warning.

Table 4: **Summary of the excerpts of Peter Obi's pre-election speech at Chatham House**

In *Data 36*, the phrase *"words of gratitude"* generates an ad hoc concept in which gratitude is reinterpreted as a moral foundation, implying that Peter Obi's leadership is rooted in humility and ethical values. This use of affective language fosters trust and likability. Similarly, in *Data 37*, the expression *"alarming insecurity"* creates an ad hoc concept where insecurity becomes an existential threat, not just a policy challenge. This reframing aims to stir voter anxiety and demand urgency, making Obi's security agenda appear both timely and necessary. In *Data 38*, the term *"elite gang-up"* gives rise to a concept where the elite are seen as a selfish ruling clique. This mobilizes anti-establishment sentiment by constructing an 'us-versus-them' narrative to delegitimize previous administrations.

Continuing this trend, *Data 39* presents the idea of a *"failing state"*, which leads to the ad hoc concept of governance collapse. This dire imagery primes voters to accept the need for radical and systemic reform. In *Data 40*, the phrase *"demography driving change"* reframes youth as symbols of hope and agents of transformation. By linking political change to generational energy, Obi's speech appeals directly to younger voters who seek inclusion and relevance. In *Data 41*, the shift from *"predators to creators"* frames good leaders as value creators—a contrast that morally condemns past exploitative rulers while aligning Obi with a productive, visionary future.

In *Data 42*, *"competent Nigerians"* introduces an ad hoc concept that equates competence with national representation, suggesting that appointments under Obi would reflect excellence across regions, faiths, and ethnicities. This encourages voters to see inclusivity and fairness in his government. In *Data 43*, the line *"secure Nigeria"* broadens to mean national unity and development, making security more than just protection—it's the bedrock of healing and rebuilding. *Data 44*, with the word *"production"*, generates a concept of economic dignity, appealing to voters' aspirations for jobs, local industries, and financial self-

sufficiency. This language motivates support from working-class and unemployed populations.

In *Data 45*, the metaphor *"black-hole"* introduces the ad hoc concept of subsidy as a wasteful drain, allowing Obi to frame subsidy reform not as punishment, but as a necessary step for economic survival. Likewise, *Data 46* speaks of *"institutionalising monitoring"* which equates reform with embedded accountability. This communicates an anti-corruption stance and portrays Obi's governance as data-driven and transparent. *Data 47* refers to the *"4th Industrial Revolution"*, constructing the idea of innovation as a survival tool, thus pushing modernization as essential, not optional. This resonates with educated and urban voters invested in technology and progress.

Finally, *Data 48* uses *"Marshall plan-type programme"* to frame education as the catalyst for national revival, appealing to voters who view knowledge as empowerment. *Data 49* offers *"afro-centric diplomacy"*, with the ad hoc concept that foreign policy should promote protection and pride, particularly for Nigerians in the diaspora or those focused on national sovereignty. In *Data 50*, Obi quotes Achebe in *"the trouble with Nigeria"*, prompting an ad hoc concept of leadership as the root of decay. This echoic reference appeals to culturally literate voters and reinforces the idea that changing leadership will correct the national course. Across these data points, the pragmatic modulations create rich, context-driven meanings that strengthen persuasion and voter alignment.

Research Question 4: What are the political and cultural contexts that influenced these linguistic choices?

Text 1:

Data No.	Excerpt	Contextual Influence	Sociopolitical Significance
51	"...words of gratitude."	Nigerian cultural emphasis on courtesy	Builds ethos with international audience.
52	"...alarming	Nationwide violence	Public demand for law and

	insecurity…"	and insurgency	order.
53	"...elite gang-up…"	Longstanding elite capture of resources	Class-based political resentment.
54	"...failing state…"	Institutional decay	Common public rhetoric since 2015.
55	"...demography driving change…"	High youth population	Appeals to youth electoral base.
56	"...from predators to creators…"	Corruption fatigue	Moral framing resonates with citizens.
57	"...competent Nigerians..."	Ethno-regional divides	National integration agenda.
58	"...secure Nigeria..."	Military and civilian security breakdown	Links peace with national unity.
59	"...production..."	Import dependence and economic crisis	Encourages self-sufficiency.
60	"...black-hole..."	Oil subsidy debates	Reflects IMF/World Bank-influenced discourse.
61	"...monitoring and evaluation…"	Lack of public service delivery	Bureaucratic reform promise.
62	"...4th Industrial Revolution…"	Digital divide	Push for tech-infrastructure policy.
63	"...Marshall plan-type programme..."	Failing education sector	Historic scale of intervention implied.
64	"...afro-centric diplomacy…"	Xenophobia and diaspora discrimination	National pride and diaspora safety.
65	"...trouble with Nigeria..."	Literary and cultural memory	Quoting Achebe validates criticism.

Table 5: **Summary of the excerpts of Peter Obi's pre-election speech at Chatham House**

In *Data 51*, Peter Obi's use of *"words of gratitude"* is shaped by Nigerian cultural norms where public figures are expected to show courtesy, especially in formal or international settings. This aligns with the cultural value of respect and hospitality, reinforcing his ethos as a responsible statesman. Likewise, *Data 52* reflects the national trauma caused by widespread violence, insurgency, and banditry. The phrase *"alarming insecurity"* responds directly to

the public's demand for law and order, especially in northern and middle-belt Nigeria, where daily life has been disrupted. This intensification of threat in speech acts increases the relevance of Obi's proposed security agenda to the affected audience.

Data 53 and *Data 54* are rooted in deep political frustrations. The phrase *"elite gang-up"* in *Data 53* references the popular narrative of elite conspiracy, which has historically dominated Nigerian political commentary. This linguistic choice taps into class-based resentment and distrust of oligarchic power structures. In *Data 54*, the description of Nigeria as a *"failing state"* echoes a term commonly used in public discourse since the Buhari administration, reflecting institutional collapse in education, health, and infrastructure. These expressions exploit existing sociopolitical dissatisfaction, making Obi's critique resonate with citizens who feel disillusioned by the status quo.

In *Data 55* and *Data 56*, demographic and moral themes dominate. Obi's statement that *"demography is driving change"* in *Data 55* is influenced by Nigeria's youthful population (over 60% under 30), especially in the wake of the #EndSARS protests and the Obidient movement. This rhetorical focus energizes the youth base. Similarly, *Data 56*'s metaphor *"from predators to creators"* is grounded in public fatigue with corrupt leadership. It draws on cultural narratives of moral renewal and positions Obi as a reformist offering a clean break from Nigeria's past. This moral dualism effectively appeals to voters' desire for ethical governance.

Themes of unity and economic hardship also shape Obi's linguistic strategy. *Data 57* references *"competent Nigerians"*, a phrase framed within the context of ethno-regional tensions. Here, Obi attempts to project national unity by emphasizing merit over identity, an important political move in Nigeria's fragmented polity. In *Data 58*, *"secure Nigeria"* responds to both the physical

violence in society and the psychological fragmentation of national identity. The emphasis on *security as a unifying factor* connects with the electorate's longing for safety and cohesion. Meanwhile, *Data 59* and *Data 60* reflect economic grievances: *"production"* emerges from Nigeria's dependence on imports and rising inflation, while *"black-hole"* aligns with global economic discourse on subsidy waste and fiscal inefficiency, reflecting influence from institutions like the IMF and World Bank.

The final set of examples foreground policy and national pride. *Data 61* emphasizes *"monitoring and evaluation"*, a bureaucratic phrase prompted by poor public service delivery. This positions Obi as a technocrat concerned with accountability. In *Data 62*, the reference to the *"4th Industrial Revolution"* speaks to Nigeria's digital divide, highlighting a campaign priority to modernize technology infrastructure. *Data 63* draws from the decaying education sector, and the *"Marshall plan-type programme"* implies large-scale revival efforts. In *Data 64*, *"afro-centric diplomacy"* reflects increasing concerns around diaspora safety and xenophobia, aligning foreign policy with cultural pride. Finally, *Data 65* references Achebe's *"The trouble with Nigeria"*, embedding Obi's critique within literary and cultural memory. This elevates his argument with intellectual weight and echoes collective frustrations with leadership failure.

Conclusion

This study has examined the campaign speeches of Peter Obi through the lenses of Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory, with a focus on pragmatic modulation, lexical pragmatic processes, ad hoc concept formation, and sociopolitical context. The findings demonstrate that Obi's linguistic choices were not arbitrary but were carefully modulated to achieve communicative relevance and persuasive force. Expressive, assertive, commissive, and directive acts were strategically employed to construct political identity, foster emotional resonance, and signal competence and reformist

ideals. These choices were further supported by lexical pragmatic processes such as narrowing, enrichment, metaphorical extension, and allusion, which allowed Obi to compress complex messages into contextually powerful expressions. Ad hoc concepts derived from these modulations such as redefining "gratitude" as a moral foundation or "security" as national unity helped frame his message in a manner that aligned with voters' expectations, values, and grievances. Finally, the analysis confirms that his language was deeply influenced by Nigeria's cultural emphasis on courtesy, frustrations with elite dominance, demographic realities, and the failures of governance, making his message contextually grounded and politically strategic.

Recommendations

This study recommends that:

1. Future political candidates and speechwriters should adopt a more nuanced approach to speech acts by consciously incorporating pragmatically modulated language, especially expressive and assertive acts, which can build rapport and signal urgency without alienating any demographic.
2. Lexical pragmatic processes should be systematically integrated into political communication strategies. Campaign teams should prioritize training in semantic flexibility, such as metaphorical enrichment and lexical narrowing, to enable concise and powerful delivery of key political ideas.
3. Political communicators should invest in constructing persuasive ad hoc concepts that align campaign rhetoric with voters' lived realities. By contextually redefining familiar terms—like "production," "security," or "youth" candidates can forge deeper emotional and intellectual connections with the electorate.
4. Politicians should ground their rhetorical strategies in the socio-cultural and political contexts of their audience. Messages that reflect the nation's shared experiences,

values, and historical narratives (e.g., Achebe's literary legacy or popular proverbs) are more likely to resonate and gain credibility.

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