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Lexical Pragmatic Processes in Meaning Modulation: The Role of Context in Bola Ahmed Tinubu's 2023 Presidential Campaign Rhetoric

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Abstract

This study examines the role of context in meaning modulation within Nigerian presidential campaign rhetoric, focusing on Bola Ahmed Tinubu's pre- and post-election speeches. Using lexical pragmatic processes such as broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and meaning transfer, the study analyses how Tinubu's language adapts to different political contexts, influencing audience interpretation and political credibility. Drawing on relevance theory and cognitive pragmatics, the research explores how meaning shifts occur in response to rhetorical objectives, strategic ambiguity, and ideological positioning. The study also investigates linguistic inconsistencies in Tinubu's speeches, assessing whether they reflect deliberate rhetorical strategies or cognitive/health-related limitations. Instances of redundancy, contradiction, and vague assertions are examined to determine whether they serve persuasive functions or indicate cognitive strain. Furthermore, the research evaluates the pragmatic consequences of meaning modulation, considering its impact on public perception, political trust, and campaign effectiveness. Data for this study consists of selected excerpts from Tinubu's speeches,

analyzed using qualitative discourse analysis. By situating these linguistic features within their socio-political context, the study contributes to the broader understanding of how Nigerian political figures employ language to navigate electoral campaigns and governance transitions. Findings suggest that meaning modulation in Tinubu's rhetoric is shaped by both pragmatic strategies and contextual demands, with implications for political discourse, voter engagement, and leadership communication. The study underscores the need for a nuanced approach to interpreting political language, particularly in a highly contested and dynamic electoral environment like Nigeria.

Keywords: Context, Meaning Modulation, Lexical Pragmatic Processes, Political Rhetoric, Cooperative Principle

Introduction

Language is a powerful tool in political communication, shaping public perception, influencing voter decisions, and reinforcing ideological positions. Political actors carefully craft their rhetoric to persuade audiences, establish authority, and respond to shifting socio-political realities. However, the meaning of political discourse is rarely fixed; rather, it is modulated by contextual factors that determine how messages are interpreted. The role of context in meaning modulation is crucial, as it enables speakers to broaden, narrow, or shift meanings to suit strategic objectives (Hassan, 2024). In electoral campaigns, where persuasion is paramount, the ability to manipulate meaning through language becomes an essential tool for politicians. This dynamic process, in which words and expressions take on new or adjusted meanings based on the communicative situation, is a key concern in lexical pragmatics.

Cabezas-García (2024) posits that lexical pragmatics examines how words and expressions acquire context-dependent meanings beyond their conventional definitions. It involves processes such as broadening, where a word takes on an extended meaning;

narrowing, where meaning becomes more restricted; metaphorical extension, where figurative meanings are applied; and meaning transfer, where words shift their semantic properties based on contextual cues. Political discourse frequently employs these processes to reframe narratives, create persuasive effects, and manage political image (Khramchenko, 2025). Meaning shifts allow politicians to align their language with public sentiment, mitigate controversy, or strengthen their authority. However, these same shifts can create ambiguities, contradictions, or inconsistencies in messaging, raising questions about whether such variations are deliberate rhetorical strategies or indicative of linguistic instability. (Hassan, 2024)

The Nigerian political scene presents a fertile ground for examining meaning modulation in campaign rhetoric. Nigerian presidential campaigns are characterized by high-stakes competition, ethnic and regional diversity, and intense public scrutiny. Politicians must navigate these complexities by using language that resonates with multiple audiences, often leading to rhetorical shifts aimed at appealing to different voter segments. As a result, campaign speeches frequently display instances of lexical meaning modulation, where the same terms or expressions acquire new interpretations depending on the political climate. Such shifts may serve strategic functions, such as reframing a candidate's image, responding to political opponents, or addressing national concerns (Jesudas, & Mohammed, 2025). However, they also introduce the risk of inconsistency, which may affect the credibility of the speaker. Understanding how lexical pragmatic processes function in Nigerian political discourse can provide insights into the effectiveness and potential pitfalls of political messaging. (Bednarska, Cich & Urzędowska, 2024)

In this regard, the campaign rhetoric of Bola Ahmed Tinubu offers a compelling case study for examining meaning modulation in political discourse. As a veteran politician who played a central

role in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, Tinubu's speeches reveal notable shifts in tone, emphasis, and interpretation, reflecting both strategic adaptation to changing political contexts and possible communicative constraints. Research in political representation and cognitive health suggests that advancing age, health-related conditions, physical fatigue, and the cognitive demands associated with intensive political activities can affect processing speed, lexical retrieval, working memory, and executive functioning, thereby influencing a speaker's ability to maintain semantic consistency and select contextually appropriate expressions (Evans & Reher, 2022; Gong et al., 2024).

Such constraints may manifest in hesitations, ambiguities, unintended semantic shifts, or variations in rhetorical style, particularly during prolonged election campaigns. Although these influences cannot be definitively established from public speeches alone without clinical evidence, they remain relevant considerations in discourse analysis. Tinubu's campaign discourse, for instance, appears to move from a predominantly assertive pre-election stance, emphasizing political entitlement and leadership experience, to a more conciliatory post-election rhetoric centred on national unity and reconciliation. These shifts raise important questions about the extent to which political meaning is shaped by contextual exigencies, strategic rhetorical calculations, and the communicative effects of age- and health-related factors.

Context plays a crucial role in determining how political messages are received and interpreted by audiences. Voters do not interpret campaign speeches in isolation; their understanding is shaped by prior knowledge, socio-political events, and ideological biases. Meaning modulation in political rhetoric is, therefore, not a one-way process but an interaction between the speaker’s intended meaning and the audience’s interpretation. When politicians shift meaning through lexical pragmatic processes, they influence public perception, either reinforcing their credibility or creating

doubts about their consistency. If meaning shifts are perceived as strategic, they may enhance a candidate's rhetorical appeal. However, if they appear erratic or contradictory, they may weaken public trust. This highlights the pragmatic consequences of meaning shifts in campaign rhetoric, as they directly impact political credibility and voter confidence.

Despite the significance of meaning modulation in political communication, scholarly attention to the intersection between lexical pragmatics and campaign rhetoric remains relatively limited, particularly within the Nigerian context. Although existing studies have examined political discourse, persuasive strategies, ideological framing, and campaign promises, comparatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how contextual factors influence lexical meaning shifts in political speeches and how such shifts shape audience interpretation. Meaning in political discourse is inherently dynamic, undergoing continuous modulation in response to contextual variables, audience expectations, and speakers' communicative intentions. In Nigerian presidential campaigns, lexical pragmatic processes such as broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and meaning transfer often determine how political messages are framed, negotiated, and interpreted. These processes enable politicians to adapt their rhetoric to evolving political realities, appeal to diverse constituencies, and manage public perceptions. However, they may also generate ambiguities, inconsistencies, and contradictions that potentially affect perceptions of competence, sincerity, and leadership credibility.

Bola Ahmed Tinubu's pre-election and post-election speeches during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election present a particularly compelling site for examining these issues. His rhetoric is characterised by strategic ambiguities, shifts in tone, and changing meaning frameworks that appear to reflect attempts at persuasion and political adaptation. Nevertheless, some of these

meaning shifts seem disjointed or contradictory, raising questions as to whether they constitute deliberate rhetorical manoeuvres rooted in political pragmatism or manifestations of cognitive or health-related constraints in meaning construction. Despite the potential implications of such shifts for public trust, voter confidence, and leadership perception, linguistic inconsistencies in Nigerian political discourse have rarely been investigated from the dual perspectives of pragmatic intentionality and cognitive limitations. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by examining how context shapes meaning modulation in Tinubu's speeches, investigating the extent to which rhetorical inconsistencies are deliberate or unintentional, and evaluating the pragmatic consequences of these shifts for audience interpretation and political credibility.

Literature Review

Context

Context plays a fundamental role in meaning construction and interpretation in communication. Scholars have defined context in various ways, emphasizing its influence on discourse and meaning negotiation. Afzaal, Hu, Chishti, and Imran (2019) describe context as the total environment in which a text unfolds, including linguistic, social, and situational factors. Similarly, Van Dijk (2008) argues that context is not just the immediate physical or social setting but also includes cognitive representations that speakers and listeners rely on to make sense of discourse. This position aligns with Van Dijk's earlier conception of discourse as a socially and cognitively situated activity mediated by shared knowledge structures and mental models (Van Dijk, 1997). I

n the realm of pragmatics, context is often divided into linguistic context (co-text), situational context, and cultural context (Levinson, 2000). The linguistic context refers to the surrounding words and sentences that influence meaning, while the situational context includes factors such as speaker identity, location, and

time. Cultural context, on the other hand, encompasses shared knowledge, beliefs, and ideologies that shape how messages are interpreted. Barsalou (2008) further argues that concepts are inherently situated and are dynamically activated within particular experiential and contextual settings rather than existing as fixed abstract entities. These contextual elements are particularly significant in political discourse, where meaning is often modulated based on the audience, the political climate, and rhetorical goals. Fairclough (2003) similarly maintains that discourse both reflects and reproduces social structures, power relations, and ideological assumptions, thereby making context indispensable for understanding political communication.

In political rhetoric, context is dynamic and multidimensional, as it evolves in response to different communicative situations. According to Chilton (2004), political speeches operate within a complex network of contextual variables, including the speaker's intended message, audience expectations, and historical or ideological backgrounds. Politicians strategically manipulate context to frame narratives, shift public perception, and align their rhetoric with prevailing socio-political conditions. In the case of Bola Ahmed Tinubu's campaign rhetoric, the pre-election context may emphasize persuasive and mobilizing language, while the post-election context may shift toward reconciliation and governance. Thus, understanding context is crucial for analyzing how meaning is modulated in political speech.

Meaning Modulation

Meaning modulation refers to the dynamic process through which the interpretation of words and expressions shifts based on contextual factors. Sperber and Wilson (2002) explain meaning modulation through the lens of Relevance Theory, arguing that language is inherently underdetermined and therefore requires contextual enrichment for full interpretation. Their more recent work further emphasizes that communicated meaning extends

beyond the speaker's encoded meaning through inferential processes undertaken by hearers (Sperber & Wilson, 2015). Similarly, Carston (2002) introduces the notion of pragmatic inference, suggesting that meaning is not static but continuously adjusted by listeners based on background knowledge, discourse history, and situational cues. Recanati (2004) supports this position by arguing that literal meaning seldom suffices for successful communication because hearers routinely engage in pragmatic adjustments to arrive at speaker-intended interpretations.

Expanding this argument, Recanati (2010) proposes a truth-conditional pragmatic perspective in which contextual information actively contributes to determining the truth conditions of utterances. Meaning modulation is particularly significant in political discourse, where the same phrase may carry different implications depending on when, where, and how it is used. For instance, the phrase *"It is my turn"* in a political speech could be interpreted as an assertion of democratic rotation, a claim of entitlement, or a rallying cry, depending on the speaker's intent and audience perception. Such interpretive flexibility illustrates how political actors exploit contextual resources to influence public understanding and shape political realities.

Lexical Pragmatic Processes

Lexical pragmatic processes refer to the mechanisms by which word meanings are expanded, restricted, or reinterpreted in discourse. Wilson and Carston (2007) classify these processes into four major types: broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and meaning transfer. Broadening occurs when a word is used in a more inclusive sense than its conventional meaning, such as using *leader* to refer to someone who has not yet assumed office. Narrowing, conversely, restricts meaning to a more specific sense, as seen when *victory* is framed to exclude contested election results. Metaphorical extension involves using a term in a figurative rather than literal sense, such as describing a political

victory as a *rebirth*. Meaning transfer occurs when attributes of one entity are projected onto another, as in the phrase *"Nigeria stands tall,"* where human characteristics are assigned to a nation. These processes are central to political rhetoric because they enable speakers to craft persuasive narratives, influence public interpretation, and maintain semantic flexibility.

The application of lexical pragmatic processes in campaign rhetoric reveals how politicians manipulate meaning to achieve specific communicative goals. Blakemore (1992) argues that these processes provide speakers with discursive flexibility, allowing them to frame issues in ways that resonate with multiple audiences. Eisenberg (1984) further suggests that ambiguity may function strategically in communication, enabling speakers to appeal simultaneously to different constituencies while avoiding explicit commitments. Tinubu's campaign rhetoric provides a rich case study for examining how these processes function in practice. Through the analysis of instances of broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and strategic ambiguity in his speeches, this study seeks to uncover the pragmatic mechanisms underlying political communication and meaning construction.

Campaign Rhetoric

Campaign rhetoric encompasses the strategic use of language by politicians to persuade voters, define policies, and construct public personas. Aristotle (4th century BCE) identified three modes of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—which remain foundational to contemporary political communication. According to Nelson (2024), rhetoric is shaped by situational exigencies, implying that campaign speeches are designed in response to particular political, economic, and social circumstances. Metaphor constitutes one of the most powerful persuasive devices in political discourse because it enables politicians to simplify complex realities, evoke emotions, and construct ideologically meaningful narratives. Charteris-Black (2011) argues that political metaphors perform

important legitimising functions, helping leaders to frame policies, construct identities, and mobilise support.

In Nigerian politics, campaign rhetoric is particularly important due to the country's diverse ethnic, religious, and socio-political landscape. Opeibi (2009) notes that Nigerian political discourse is characterised by code-switching, proverbial expressions, metaphors, and culturally embedded rhetorical devices that facilitate connections with different segments of the electorate. The choice of words in campaign speeches often reflects underlying ideological positions, political alignments, and attempts to negotiate power relations. Examining these rhetorical practices through the lens of lexical pragmatics provides useful insights into how political actors strategically modulate meanings to persuade audiences, maintain political relevance, and influence public perception.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the role of context in meaning modulation through lexical pragmatic processes in Nigerian presidential campaign rhetoric. Specifically, the study examines Bola Ahmed Tinubu's pre-election and post-election speeches delivered during the 2023 presidential election cycle with the aim of identifying how lexical meanings are broadened, narrowed, metaphorically extended, or transferred in response to contextual variables. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study seeks to provide an in-depth interpretation of context-dependent meaning construction rather than generate statistically generalisable findings. The study also seeks to determine whether meaning shifts function as deliberate rhetorical strategies and to assess their pragmatic implications for audience interpretation and perceptions of political credibility.

A qualitative discourse analytical approach is employed to examine the relationship between context and meaning modulation

in Tinubu's campaign rhetoric. Discourse analysis is particularly suitable for investigating political speeches because it facilitates a detailed examination of how language constructs social realities, persuades audiences, negotiates ideological positions, and responds to changing socio-political circumstances. The analytical framework for the study is informed principally by lexical pragmatics, particularly the processes of broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and meaning transfer. Grice's Cooperative Principle is further incorporated to examine the extent to which the selected utterances conform to or flout the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner, thereby contributing to the communicative effects generated by meaning shifts.

The primary data for the study consist of speeches delivered by Bola Ahmed Tinubu between June 2022 and May 2023, covering the pre-election campaign period, election victory declaration, and immediate post-election addresses. The initial corpus comprised twenty-six speeches obtained from publicly accessible sources, including official campaign transcripts, televised broadcasts, media interviews, party rallies, online news platforms, and speeches published on verified media channels. The speeches were purposively selected because they represented major communicative events during the election cycle and provided opportunities to observe contextual variations in meaning construction.

A purposive sampling technique was adopted to identify excerpts that demonstrated evidence of lexical pragmatic modulation. The inclusion criteria required that an excerpt: (i) contain lexical items or expressions whose meanings appeared contextually adjusted; (ii) exhibit broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, or meaning transfer; (iii) occur within politically salient contexts such as campaign rallies, debates, victory speeches, or reconciliation addresses; and (iv) possess sufficient surrounding discourse to facilitate pragmatic interpretation. Statements lacking contextual

information, repetitive utterances, and excerpts that did not display identifiable lexical pragmatic processes were excluded from the analysis. Following these criteria, thirty excerpts were selected from the corpus for detailed analysis. The excerpts were subsequently organised according to the research objectives and classified based on whether they primarily addressed contextual influences on meaning modulation, strategic rhetorical adaptation, or pragmatic consequences for audience interpretation and political credibility.

The coding process was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved open coding in which all potentially relevant utterances were identified and labelled according to preliminary lexical pragmatic categories. The second stage involved focused coding whereby the excerpts were independently revisited and categorised under the four lexical pragmatic processes of broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and meaning transfer. To enhance analytical credibility and reduce researcher bias, the coding framework was reviewed by a colleague with expertise in pragmatics and discourse studies, and areas of disagreement were discussed until consensus was reached. Analyst triangulation was further employed through repeated examination of the data at different intervals to ensure consistency in the interpretation of the identified meaning shifts.

The selected excerpts were analysed in relation to their immediate linguistic environment, broader political circumstances, audience orientation, and communicative purpose. Lexical pragmatic analysis was applied to determine how contextual factors contributed to meaning modulation, while Grice's Cooperative Principle was utilised to assess whether rhetorical shifts served strategic communicative functions. Ethical considerations were minimal because the study relied exclusively on publicly available speeches, transcripts, and media recordings. No human participants

were involved, and the analysis focused solely on texts already available within the public domain.

Data Analysis

Research Question 1: How does context influence the modulation of meaning in Bola Ahmed Tinubu's speeches through lexical pragmatic processes?

Language is inherently dynamic, and its meaning is deeply influenced by context. In political discourse, lexical pragmatic processes such as broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and meaning transfer play crucial roles in shaping how messages are interpreted. Bola Ahmed Tinubu's pre- and post-election speeches illustrate how the same words and phrases can undergo shifts in meaning depending on contextual cues, audience expectations, and rhetorical goals. Through a close analysis of key excerpts, this section explores how context shapes meaning modulation in his rhetoric.

In Excerpt 1, Tinubu's declaration, *"After Buhari, it is my turn,"* is heavily context-dependent. On the surface, it appears to be a simple statement of succession, but its pragmatic significance extends beyond its literal meaning. Within the political hierarchy of the All Progressives Congress (APC), this phrase implicitly draws on the rotational leadership norm and party expectations. "My turn" assumes that the audience understands the unwritten rules of power-sharing within Nigerian politics. This is a clear example of broadening, as the phrase expands to mean more than just a personal ambition. It signifies a claim to legitimacy, entitlement, and continuity. However, in a different context, outside of Nigerian political discourse, "my turn" could simply mean waiting in line rather than asserting a strategic claim to power.

In Excerpt 5, Tinubu states, *"Renewed hope has dawned in Nigeria."* This is an example of metaphorical extension, where an abstract concept ("hope") is given concrete attributes—it is

described as something that can "dawn," much like the rising sun. The metaphor frames political change as a natural and inevitable event, which reinforces optimism among his supporters. By mapping the conceptual domain of daybreak onto the socio-political landscape, Tinubu evokes renewal, progress, and a fresh start. Nevertheless, the persuasive force of this metaphor is contingent upon the audience's predisposition toward political change, as individuals who are skeptical of his leadership may not interpret the expression with the same degree of optimism or positive resonance.

Similarly, in Excerpt 9, he proclaims, *"Today, Nigeria stands tall as the giant of Africa."* Here, personification and metaphor are combined to create a nationalistic appeal. The phrase "stands tall" suggests strength, resilience, and leadership, while "giant of Africa" reinforces Nigeria's historical and geopolitical significance on the continent. This metaphor plays into collective identity and pride, strategically aligning with his post-election vision of unity and progress. However, the interpretation of this phrase shifts based on context—while it is meant to inspire confidence, critics may challenge whether Nigeria's current socio-political standing truly reflects the stature of a "giant."

Research Question 2: To what extent do Tinubu's linguistic inconsistencies reflect deliberate rhetorical strategies or cognitive/health-related limitations in meaning construction?

Language inconsistencies in political speech can arise from deliberate rhetorical strategies—where a speaker employs ambiguity, redundancy, or emphasis to persuade an audience—or from cognitive strain, in which a speaker struggles with coherence, organization, or the maintenance of logical continuity. In Bola Ahmed Tinubu's pre- and post-election speeches, instances of redundancy, contradictions, and vague assertions create opportunities to assess whether these inconsistencies reflect strategic messaging or cognitive/health-related challenges.

One prominent feature of Tinubu's speech is redundancy, which can serve as rhetorical amplification or indicate disorganized speech. In Excerpt 11, Tinubu states: *"I shall be a fair leader to all Nigerians. I will be in tune with your aspirations, charge up your energies and harness your talents to deliver a nation that we can be proud of."* The excessive listing of actions (*tune with aspirations, charge up energies, harness talents*) suggests two possible interpretations.

From a rhetorical perspective, this repetition may be a deliberate attempt to emphasize inclusivity and empowerment, reinforcing his image as a leader committed to uplifting the nation. Politicians frequently use parallel structures and cumulative phrasing to create a sense of momentum and engagement. The structure follows a persuasive pattern, which, despite its redundancy, enhances the rhythm of his speech.

However, from a cognitive perspective, this phrasing could reflect difficulty in organizing thoughts concisely. Repetitive constructions without clear syntactic hierarchy can indicate mental fatigue or age-related processing issues, where speakers struggle to refine their messages into a more coherent, succinct form. Given Tinubu's history of health-related concerns, this possibility warrants consideration.

Tinubu's rhetoric also exhibits contradictions, which may stem from strategic repositioning or cognitive instability. In Excerpt 14, he asserts: *"My aspiration to be President of Nigeria is based on my want to serve the nation and not that I feel some personal entitlement to high office."* This statement directly contradicts his earlier assertion in Excerpt 1, *"After Buhari, it is my turn."*

From a strategic standpoint, this contradiction may be an adaptive rhetorical shift. Before securing his party's nomination, Tinubu's claim of political entitlement ("It is my turn") was designed to

assert legitimacy and mobilize supporters. However, post-election, he distances himself from the notion of entitlement, likely to appeal to a broader audience and frame himself as a servant-leader rather than a power-seeker.

Alternatively, this inconsistency may indicate cognitive instability, reflecting difficulty in maintaining message coherence over time. Public figures with cognitive challenges may struggle with memory lapses or tracking their previous assertions, leading to contradictory statements. This suggests that rather than a deliberate rhetorical maneuver, such discrepancies could stem from fluctuating clarity in discourse production. Another notable feature in Tinubu's speech is the use of implicit references, where statements suggest an underlying reality but fail to explicitly acknowledge it. In Excerpt 18, Tinubu urges: *"Let us begin to heal and bring calm to our nation."* This phrase implies prior turmoil but lacks an explicit acknowledgment of the nature or cause of this unrest.

From a rhetorical perspective, this ambiguity may be a deliberate political evasion tactic. Politicians often employ strategic vagueness to address national discontent without assigning blame or alienating key stakeholders. By calling for healing without specifying the wound, Tinubu can appeal to multiple factions, allowing different audiences to interpret the statement in ways that align with their perspectives.

However, from a cognitive processing standpoint, this lack of specificity may suggest difficulty in articulating or recalling the socio-political grievances leading up to the election. Political leaders are usually expected to diagnose problems before proposing solutions, and the failure to do so might signal memory lapses or difficulties in structuring discourse logically. This raises the question of whether Tinubu's vagueness is a calculated rhetorical choice or an unintentional consequence of cognitive strain.

A similar pattern of strategic vagueness or cognitive imprecision appears in Tinubu's discussion of electoral irregularities. In Excerpt 22, he states: "The lapses that did occur were relatively few in number and were immaterial to the final outcome." This assertion minimizes concerns about election integrity but contains internal instability due to the lack of specificity in the phrases "relatively few" and "immaterial."

From a strategic perspective, this could be a deliberate attempt to control the post-election narrative, portraying the election as fair while acknowledging minor flaws. By using non-committal quantifiers, Tinubu avoids directly confronting allegations of electoral malpractice, maintaining a diplomatic stance without conceding significant ground. This is a common tactic in political discourse, where vague wording allows for flexibility in interpretation while deflecting criticism.

However, from a cognitive perspective, the vagueness and lack of definitive figures may indicate a struggle with exact recall or linguistic precision. Leaders often rely on data-driven rhetoric to reinforce their credibility, and Tinubu's reliance on ambiguous terminology may reflect an inability to recall or articulate specific details under cognitive strain. If such vague expressions become a consistent pattern, they may signal a broader issue with cognitive processing, affecting his ability to engage in detailed, and precise communication.

The inconsistencies in Tinubu's rhetoric can be analysed through the dual lenses of pragmatic political strategy and cognitive function. Elements such as redundancy, contradiction, ambiguity, and vagueness are commonly employed strategically in political discourse to persuade, evade responsibility, and manage public perception. However, when these elements appear with recurrent disorganization, lack of logical continuity, or inability to recall previous statements, they raise concerns about cognitive strain

affecting linguistic coherence. Thus, while Tinubu's rhetorical inconsistencies may partly be intentional, the frequency and nature of these patterns suggest potential cognitive challenges influencing meaning construction in his discourse.

Research Question 3: What are the pragmatic consequences of meaning shifts in Tinubu's campaign rhetoric for audience interpretation and political credibility?

Political rhetoric is central to shaping public perception, influencing voter trust, and reinforcing leadership legitimacy. In the case of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, meaning shifts in his campaign discourse affect how audiences interpret his messages, evaluate his sincerity, and judge his political credibility. These meaning shifts can function as strategic realignments to unify different audience segments or, conversely, create scepticism due to inconsistencies. Analysing these shifts within the framework of pragmatics, particularly in terms of audience expectations, implicature, and speech acts, reveals their broader communicative consequences.

In Excerpt 27, Tinubu states: *"During the election, you may have been my opponent, but you* were never my enemy. In my heart, you are my brothers." This utterance marks a rhetorical transition from competition to unity, a common post-election strategy aimed at fostering national cohesion. From a pragmatic perspective, this statement employs contrastive implicature, distinguishing between "opponent" and "enemy" to reframe political rivalry as a mere contest rather than deep-seated animosity. This aligns with face-saving politeness strategies, presenting Tinubu as a unifying leader capable of bridging political divides. For supporters, this may be interpreted as a genuine call for national reconciliation.

However, skeptics may perceive this shift as political convenience, particularly given the often aggressive tone of campaign rhetoric. Opponents may see this statement as an attempt to erase past hostilities without addressing grievances or acknowledging

previous antagonistic discourse. The lack of explicit reference to concrete reconciliation measures could weaken the statement's credibility, leading some to interpret it as performative rather than substantive.

Table 1: Excerpts from "After Buhari, 'It is My Turn' – Tinubu" (June 3, 2022)

Excerpt No.	Text
Excerpt 1	"After Buhari, it is my turn."
Excerpt 2	"My opponents want to present a narrative that I made comments disrespectful of President Muhammadu Buhari…"
Excerpt 3	"I do not believe he will be taken by the tricks of such people."
Excerpt 4	"Let me also erase any doubt. My respect and regard for President Buhari as Commander-in-Chief of this nation and as a person are high and unfailing."
Excerpt 5	"I shall never denigrate him. I certainly did not do so in Abeokuta."
Excerpt 6	"I believe our party is the best hope for the nation to right itself."
Excerpt 7	"I believe I have a future role larger than the one I now have."
Excerpt 8	"I also believe President Buhari has a continuing and important role to play even after his tenure as president is over."
Excerpt 9	"Indeed, I consistently supported the president and his administration."
Excerpt 10	"The president personally nominated me to coordinate his re-election campaign in 2019."

Table 2: Excerpts from "The Era of Renewed Hope" (March 1, 2023)

Excerpt No.	Text
Excerpt 11	"I am profoundly humbled that you have elected me to serve as the 16th president of our beloved republic."
Excerpt 12	"From my heart, I say thank you."
Excerpt 13	"Renewed hope has dawned in Nigeria."
Excerpt 14	"We commend INEC for running a free and fair election."
Excerpt 15	"The lapses that did occur were relatively few in number and were immaterial to the final outcome."
Excerpt 16	"Today, Nigeria stands tall as the giant of Africa."
Excerpt 17	"I thank all who supported my campaign."

Excerpt 18	"I shall be a fair leader to all Nigerians."
Excerpt 19	"I will be in tune with your aspirations, charge up your energies, and harness your talents to deliver a nation that we can be proud of."
Excerpt 20	"To my fellow candidates, former VP Atiku, former governor Kwankwaso, former governor Obi, and all others, I extend the hand of friendship."
Excerpt 21	"Political competition must now give way to political conciliation and inclusive governance."
Excerpt 22	"During the election, you may have been my opponent but you were never my enemy."
Excerpt 23	"In my heart, you are my brothers."
Excerpt 24	"Still, I know some candidates will be hard put to accept the election results."
Excerpt 25	"It is your right to seek legal recourse."
Excerpt 26	"Any challenge to the electoral outcome should be made in a court of law, and not in the streets."
Excerpt 27	"I also ask my supporters to let peace reign and tensions fade."
Excerpt 28	"Let the better aspects of our humanity step forward at this fateful moment."
Excerpt 29	"Let us begin to heal and bring calm to our nation."
Excerpt 30	"Now, to you, the young people of this country, I hear you loud and clear."

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of context in meaning modulation in Bola Ahmed Tinubu's pre- and post-election speeches, focusing on lexical pragmatic processes, linguistic inconsistencies, and their pragmatic consequences on audience interpretation and political credibility. The analysis reveals that context plays a crucial role in shaping the meaning of Tinubu's statements, with pragmatic devices such as broadening, narrowing, metaphorical extension, and presuppositions influencing how his rhetoric is understood. Additionally, the study highlights how linguistic inconsistencies, contradictions, and vague assertions may function as deliberate rhetorical strategies or as indicators of cognitive and health-related constraints. Finally, meaning shifts in his rhetoric have significant pragmatic implications, affecting

public perception, trust, and political credibility. This study, therefore, underscores the importance of political pragmatics in understanding campaign discourse. While meaning shifts can be strategically employed to engage different audience segments, they also present a credibility risk when inconsistencies arise. The degree to which Tinubu's rhetoric is perceived as persuasive or problematic depends on context, audience interpretation, and the alignment of his words with political actions.

Recommendations

This study recommends that to improve public trust, political leaders should ensure consistency in messaging across different speeches. Avoiding contradictions, vague assertions, and ambiguous rhetoric will help in reinforcing credibility. Clear communication strategies – such as well-structured speechwriting and message alignment across different contexts – will minimize the risk of public scepticism due to perceived inconsistencies.

While political leaders must adjust their rhetoric based on context, they should strike a balance between adaptability and credibility. Employing pragmatic sensitivity—which includes using clear presuppositions, controlled metaphorical extensions, and transparent meaning shifts—will help in ensuring that audience interpretation remains positive rather than suspicious. Speechwriters and political advisors should focus on crafting messages that remain persuasive without appearing deceptive.

Given that linguistic inconsistencies can sometimes indicate cognitive strain or health-related difficulties, political figures should consider structured speaking formats, the use of speech aides, or periodic revisions of their rhetoric to ensure coherence. A more measured and deliberate speaking approach can help mitigate potential concerns about age-related linguistic lapses. Additionally, greater transparency about health status could help preempt speculations that may erode public confidence.

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