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A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF GUBERNATORIAL INAUGURAL SPEECHES BY

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Abstract

This study examines the inaugural speeches of Governor Abdulrahman Abdulrazaq of Kwara State (2019 and 2023) through the lens of Searle's Speech Act Theory. Gubernatorial inaugurals of governors in north-central Nigeria remain under-researched through the lens of Searle's Speech Act Theory, and this study aims to bridge this gap. Using a quantitative, text-based methodology, the research identifies the dominant locutionary and illocutionary acts, explores their communicative functions, and compares the pragmatic strategies deployed across the two inaugurals. The analysis reveals a shift from commissives and assertives in the first-term address, reflecting promises and problem diagnoses, to directives and declarations in the second-term speech, emphasising consolidation and policy implementation. The study contributes to scholarship on Nigerian political discourse by offering the first diachronic pragmatic comparison of gubernatorial inaugural addresses, highlighting the role of speech acts in constructing legitimacy, mobilising support, and sustaining governance. The findings underscore the importance of pragmatics in political communication, providing insights for scholars, students, and practitioners of rhetoric.

Keywords: pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, Inaugural Speeches, Political Discourse, and Gubernatorial communication.

Introduction

Language is a powerful instrument for shaping reality, mobilising people, and legitimising authority. In political contexts, language transcends its semantic functions, serving as a performative tool for governance and shaping the way people perceive and interact with one another. Inaugural speeches, in particular, are ritualised discourses that allow politicians to outline visions, make promises, and construct legitimacy. Within this genre, speech act theory provides a valuable framework for analysing how utterances function as actions.

While several studies have explored presidential inaugurals in Nigeria and beyond (Ayeomoni & Akinkuolere; Adegbite; Sharndama; Liu), gubernatorial inaugurals remain under-researched. Even fewer works systematically apply Searle's classification of speech acts to subnational contexts. Moreover, the evolution of pragmatic strategies between a leader's first and second inaugural speeches has not been examined in North-Central Nigerian discourse using Searle's Speech Act Theory. Against this backdrop, the present study sets out to bridge this gap.

Aim and Objectives

Specifically, this study aims to identify the locutionary and illocutionary acts in Abdulrazaq's inaugural speeches. The objectives are to examine the communicative effects of these acts, compare the pragmatic strategies employed in the two speeches, and highlight the devices that support his rhetorical goals. By linking these objectives, the paper underscores the significance of pragmatics in understanding the dynamic interplay between political language, authority, and governance.

Literature Review

Political speeches are quintessential pragmatic events. According to Austin and Searle, utterances can perform actions such as asserting, promising, declaring, or directing. Inaugural addresses often

combine assertives (i.e., diagnosing the state of affairs), commissives (i.e., pledging reforms), directives (i.e., calling for cooperation), expressives (i.e., expressing gratitude or solidarity), and declarations (i.e., enacting authority). Therefore, examining political speeches through speech act theory provides insight into how language is both performative and persuasive.

In addition, several scholars have shown that inaugural speeches worldwide rely heavily on commissives and assertives. For instance, Liu highlights that U.S. presidential inaugurals foreground promises and problem diagnoses, while Mufiah and Rahman demonstrate similar tendencies in Trump's inaugural address. Likewise, Botchwey's analysis of Ghanaian inaugurals identifies commissives and directives as the dominant types. Thus, the literature consistently suggests that inaugural speeches are ritualised performances where leaders pledge, persuade, and legitimise.

However, in the Nigerian context, much of the research has centred on presidential inaugurals. Ayeomoni and Akinkuolere studied Yar'Adua's inaugural speech, Adegbite analysed Jonathan's, and Sharndama explored Buhari's, each revealing the prevalence of promises and legitimacy rhetoric. Yet, comparatively fewer studies have addressed state-level inaugurals. Even when examined, as in the works of Akinwotun, Osisanwo *et al.*, and Adebayo *et al.*, the emphasis has been more on stylistics and rhetoric than on systematic application of Searle's classification of illocutionary acts. Consequently, gubernatorial discourse remains an underexplored domain in the field of pragmatics.

Moreover, empirical studies within and outside Africa further affirm the centrality of speech acts in political discourse. For example, Waya and Miracle's analysis of Jonathan's speeches revealed a dominance of assertives and commissives, while Kwasau and Abdulrasheed quantified campaign speeches of Tinubu and Obi to show the predominance of commissives. Similarly, Fafiyebi and

Dada demonstrated that military leaders in Nigeria strategically deployed pragmatic acts to legitimise authority. These works, while valuable, either focus on presidential or military discourse or examine campaign speeches, leaving a gap in systematic analysis of gubernatorial discourse.

Furthermore, international research enriches this perspective. Kubat and Čech, Wiratama, and Liu all demonstrate that commissives and assertives predominate in U.S. presidential inaugurations.

At the same time, Ghanaian studies by Botchwey and Akufo-Addo confirm a similar trend of promises and solidarity appeals. Yet, these studies rarely consider consecutive inaugurals by the same leader. As such, the diachronic evolution of pragmatic strategies—how they shift between first-term promises and second-term consolidation—remains largely unexplored.

Taken together, the reviewed literature shows that inaugural speeches are fertile ground for pragmatic study, with assertives and commissives recurrent across contexts. Nonetheless, a clear research gap exists: Nigerian gubernatorial inaugurals, particularly consecutive speeches by the same governor, have not been systematically analysed using Searle's taxonomy. This study, therefore, fills that gap by examining Governor Abdulrahman Abdulrazaq's 2019 and 2023 inaugural addresses, providing a diachronic, speech act-based perspective on subnational political discourse in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This article adopts Searle's Speech Act Theory, which categorises illocutionary acts into five classes: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. These acts are evaluated by felicity conditions—propositional contents, preparatory conditions, sincerity, and essential conditions. This framework enables a systematic analysis of how Abdulrazaq's utterances are strategically deployed to perform political functions beyond their literal meanings.

Research Methodology

The methodology of this study encompasses the research design, data source, sample, sampling technique, data collection instrument, and analytical framework and procedure, which detail the data analysis methods.

This study adopts a qualitative research design anchored in pragmatic analysis. The approach is interpretive and text-based, seeking to uncover how language functions as a form of social action within Abdulrazaq's inaugural speeches. Rather than focusing solely on frequency, the design prioritises depth of interpretation, ensuring that the illocutionary force of selected utterances is foregrounded.

The data for this study are drawn from Governor Abdulrahman Abdulrazaq's inaugural speeches delivered in May 2019 and May 2023. Both texts were accessed from official government records and transcribed in full. Inaugural speeches were chosen because they are ritualised, genre-specific events that allow leaders to set agendas, legitimise their authority, and articulate their commitments.

Purposive sampling was employed, selecting only inaugural speeches because of their relevance to the study objectives. Each speech was segmented into discrete clauses and sentences to facilitate a granular analysis of the speech acts contained within them.

Searle's classification of illocutionary acts provided the analytical lens. Each clause was coded into one of the five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. To enhance robustness, the researcher undertook a two-stage process: (1) categorisation of each clause by its primary illocutionary force, and (2) interpretation of its pragmatic function within the socio-political context of Kwara State. Frequency tables were generated to highlight patterns, while representative extracts were qualitatively analysed to demonstrate meaning and rhetorical

intent. Reliability was strengthened by cross-checking with secondary literature on inaugural speeches.

Data Analysis

The 2019 inaugural speech contained a high proportion of assertives (32.1%) and expressive (21%) as contained in Table 1.

Table 1: Speech Act Distribution of the 2019 Inaugural Speech

Speech Act	2019 Count	2019 %
Assertive	18	32%
Directive	9	16%
Expressive	12	21%
Verdictive	5	9%
Commissive	8	14%
Declarative	4	7%
TOTAL	56	100%

Expressives reflected promises to improve social welfare, education, and infrastructure, while assertives diagnosed the state's challenges, such as corruption, debt, and infrastructural decay. This suggests that the speech primarily focused on affirming historical events, expressing

gratitude, and emotionally aligning with the electorate. Together, these acts painted a picture of renewal and reform.

By contrast, the 2023 inaugural speech demonstrated a shift toward assertives (41%) and commissives (18%) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Speech Act Distribution of the 2023 Inaugural Speech

Speech Act	2023 Count	2023 %
Assertive	23	41%
Directive	7	13%
Expressive	6	11%
Verdictive	8	14%
Commissive	10	18%
Declarative	2	4%
TOTAL	56	100%

This indicates a shift toward self-legitimation and evaluation of past performance. Expressives drop to 11%, suggesting less emphasis on emotional appeal and more on administrative posture in the second inaugural speech. The increase in commissives (18%) indicates an effort to promise continuity and development. However, this is counterbalanced by the drop in directives (13%), which could reflect diminished urgency or a waning participatory tone. Declaratives fall slightly

to 4%, reinforcing the idea that the second speech focused more on consolidating authority than symbolically assuming it. Directives appeared in appeals for collective responsibility and calls for citizens' cooperation. At the same time, declarations emphasised the institutionalisation of reforms already initiated in the first term. Expressives (11%), though fewer in number than in the first inaugural speech, were used to thank supporters and reassure stakeholders.

Comparative Patterns

2019 Speech: Future-oriented, promise-laden, and reform-focused.

2023 Speech: Consolidation-oriented, directive-heavy, and authority-focused.

Overall Trend: A pragmatic evolution from aspirational promises to authoritative directives, signalling the governor's transition from seeking legitimacy to exercising institutional authority.

Pragmatic Devices

Several pragmatic devices supported the speech acts:

Deixis reinforced inclusivity (e.g., “we,” “our state,” “together”).

Politeness strategies softened directives, making appeals more acceptable.

Implicatures conveyed indirect appeals for patience and sacrifice, avoiding overt confrontation.

Parallelism and repetition emphasised policy priorities and created rhetorical rhythm.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that Abdulrazaq's rhetorical strategies align with broader international patterns of inaugural discourse, where first-term leaders (such as Jonathan and Buhari) foreground assertives and expressives to project hope and reform, while second-term leaders rely more on assertives and commissives to consolidate gains (Charteris-Black; Chilton). This shift illustrates how political language adapts to different stages of leadership: the first inaugural seeks to

legitimise authority through promises. In contrast, the second aims to sustain authority through institutional directives.

Furthermore, the deployment of deixis and politeness strategies underscores the importance of inclusivity in Nigerian political discourse. By invoking collective pronouns, Abdulrazaq constructs a shared identity with citizens, thereby strengthening solidarity. Similarly, his reliance on implicatures reflects a culturally grounded preference for indirectness in addressing sensitive issues such as economic sacrifice.

In comparison with existing Nigerian scholarship, this study extends the literature by providing a diachronic perspective. Whereas earlier works on Yar'Adua, Jonathan, and Buhari emphasised commissives and assertives, this study shows how gubernatorial discourse evolves across tenures. It therefore contributes to the understanding of subnational political communication in Nigeria, highlighting the pragmatic dynamics of continuity and change.

Overall, the analysis confirms that inaugural speeches are not mere ceremonial texts but are pragmatic instruments of governance. They create expectations, direct citizen behaviour, and legitimise authority. Abdulrazaq's speeches exemplify how a leader's linguistic strategies can evolve from reformist promises to consolidatory directives, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities of democratic governance in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study analysed the inaugural speeches of Governor Abdulrahman Abdulrazaq (2019 and 2023) using Searle's Speech Act Theory. The analysis revealed that the 2019 speech was dominated by commissives and assertives, reflecting promises and diagnoses of socio-political challenges. In contrast, the 2023 speech shifted toward directives and declarations, reflecting the consolidation and implementation of these efforts. Pragmatic devices, such as deixis, implicatures,

and politeness strategies, supported these acts and enhanced their rhetorical force. The comparative analysis demonstrated a pragmatic evolution from visionary pledges to authoritative governance, highlighting how language performs governance beyond its literal meaning.

Abdulrazaq's inaugural speeches exemplify the pragmatic power of political discourse. The first address foregrounded promises and diagnoses that secured legitimacy, while the second consolidated authority through directives and declarations. This evolution affirms that inaugural speeches are more than ceremonial texts—they are performative acts of governance that shape political culture, mobilise citizens, and legitimise authority. By filling a gap in Nigerian discourse studies, this article demonstrates how subnational inaugurals contribute to the broader understanding of political pragmatics. Future studies should continue to explore the diachronic dimensions of political language, offering richer insights into the intersection of linguistics and governance.

Recommendations

1. For Politicians: Leaders should balance commissives and directives across tenures, ensuring actionable directives match promises to maintain credibility.
2. For Speechwriters: Incorporating inclusive deixis and politeness strategies can strengthen solidarity and mitigate resistance to directives.
3. For Scholars: Further research should expand pragmatic analysis to other Nigerian governors, enabling comparative studies across states and parties.
4. For Educators: Findings can be integrated into pragmatics and discourse analysis curricula to illustrate real-life applications of speech act theory.

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