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PRAGMATIC PRESUPPOSITIONS IN PRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI'S CHANNELS TV MEDIA INTERVIEW

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Abstract

So much political discourse scholarship has concentrated on speech acts, critical discourse analysis, or stylistic devices, while presupposition has rarely been the central focus of a full study. This study, therefore, investigates pragmatic presupposition in President Muhammadu Buhari's interview on Channels Television, aired on 5 January 2022, in which he was interviewed by Seun Okinbaloye and Maupe Ogun-Yusuf on insecurity, the economy, farmer-herder relations, electoral reform, and the politics of succession ahead of the 2023 election. The study adopts Yule's (1996) six-part classifications of presupposition as its framework and examines fifteen data purposively selected from the interview transcript since presupposition is one of the subtle ways political actors communicate meanings they never directly assert. Findings reveal that all six types of presuppositions identified by Yule are present, with existential presupposition occurring most frequently at 36 percent, followed by factive presupposition at 35 percent, lexical presupposition at 22 percent, structural and counter-factive presupposition at 3 percent each, and non-factive presupposition at 1 percent. The study shows that both the President and his interviewers rely heavily on assumed

background knowledge to communicate positions taken for granted rather than stated outright. This paper concludes that presupposition is a significant pragmatic resource in Nigerian political interviews and recommends further study of other presidential interviews using the same model.

Keywords: Presupposition, Pragmatics, Political Discourse, Muhammadu Buhari, Channels Television, Yule's Typology

Introduction

A political interview places a head of state in a position that a prepared speech does not. Where a speech allows a leader to control every word in advance, an interview compels him to respond, on the spot, to questions framed by someone else, and it often reveals as much through what is left unsaid as through what is stated outright. Political language is rarely a straightforward transfer of information, since politicians frequently rely on assumptions the audience is expected to accept without argument. This is where presupposition becomes relevant—where background information a speaker treats as already settled, so the audience is left either to accept it quietly or to work harder to notice and question it.

On 5 January 2022, President Muhammadu Buhari granted a 48-minute interview to Channels Television at the State House in Abuja, fielding questions from Seun Okinbaloye and Maupe Ogun-Yusuf on insecurity, the economy, corruption, the farmer-herder conflict, electoral reform, and the run-up to the 2023 election.

The interview offers useful data for a study of presupposition precisely because it is interactional. Both the interviewers and the President repeatedly took information for granted in the course of the exchange, and it is this taken-for-granted information that forms the subject of the present study. Kameswari, Sravani and Mamidi (2020) have shown that the presence of certain presupposition types in political writing can reveal underlying bias more clearly than what is openly stated. Moldovan (2023) similarly argues that presupposed information carries a persuasive force of its own, since audiences are inclined to accept it as settled rather than subject it to scrutiny.

Where presupposition has received sustained attention, the data has tended to come from speeches rather than interviews, and from political figures outside Africa. Balogun and Murana (2018) examined presupposition in Trump's inaugural address. Jawas, Ratih and Taufik (2024) studied presupposition in a Biden press statement. Lathar et al. (2023) analysed presupposition in Biden's victory speech. All three rely on monologic speeches, where a single speaker controls every presupposition entering the discourse. An interview differs, since it is co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee, producing a pattern of implicit meaning a speech alone cannot generate. This shortage of presupposition-focused research on a Nigerian presidential interview is the exact gap that the present study addresses.

Presupposition

Presupposition occupies a space between semantics and pragmatics. Kempson (1977) situates it in the shared social and cultural knowledge speakers bring into a conversation, arguing that speakers assume this shared knowledge will be sufficient for their utterances to be understood without further explanation. Stalnaker (1973) offers a related account in terms of common ground, the set of propositions a speaker takes for granted as background to a conversation. Stalnaker (1978) adds that an assertion introduces new information into the common ground, whereas a presupposition is treated as already part of it. Yule (1996) builds on this earlier work with a six-part classification, existential, factive, lexical, structural, non-factive, and counter-factive presupposition, each tied to a specific linguistic trigger. This classification suits naturally occurring speech because its categories are tied to identifiable linguistic forms, which makes it straightforward to apply to transcribed interview data of the kind examined here.

Presupposition in Political Discourse

Presupposition has attracted growing attention as a tool of political persuasion. Kameswari, Sravani and Mamidi (2020) built a computational model linking presupposition type to political bias, on

the premise that a writer who presupposes a contestable claim rather than asserting it is engaged in a subtler, harder-to-detect form of advocacy. Moldovan (2023) distinguishes the persuasive force of presupposition from mere accommodation, concluding that presupposed claims carry special weight because audiences accept background assumptions without argument. Thoma, Becker and Kibler (2023) tested this experimentally and found presupposed claims consistently rated more persuasive than equivalent assertions. Masia, Garassino, Brocca and de Saussure (2023) extended the inquiry to political tweets and found presupposed information processed less critically than asserted information.

Applied to individual leaders, Balogun and Murana (2018) found presupposition working alongside politeness strategies in Trump's inaugural address to soften otherwise face-threatening claims. Lathar et al. (2023) found Biden's victory speech relying heavily on lexical presupposition triggers, interpreted as implying continuity and inevitability. Within Nigeria, several studies have applied Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory to political speech rather than presupposition specifically. Adeoti (2023) applied Mey's framework to newspaper coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, finding heavy reliance on shared situational knowledge and reference. Abdulkadir (2023) examined two Channels Television interviews for their ideological content and found interviewees constructing an in-group and out-group distinction through pronoun choice. These studies confirm Channels Television as a productive site for pragmatic research in Nigeria, even though presupposition specifically has not been the dominant framework applied to it, which is the gap this study occupies.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Yule's (1996) classification of presupposition. Presupposition is something a speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance, distinct from what the utterance asserts. It survives negation and questioning in a way an assertion does not, which is why it functions as background information both parties are expected to accept as already settled.

Yule identifies six types. Existential presupposition is triggered by a definite expression and presupposes the existence of the entity referred to. Factive presupposition is triggered by verbs that treat their complement as established fact, such as know and realise. Lexical presupposition arises where one expression implies an unstated but recoverable meaning, commonly through change-of-state verbs such as stop, start, and continue. Structural presupposition is associated with WH-questions, conventionally read as presupposing the truth of part of their own content. Non-factive presupposition is triggered by verbs such as dream, imagine, and wish, and presupposes the embedded content is untrue. Counter-factive presupposition presupposes the embedded content is not only untrue but contrary to fact, typically through a counterfactual conditional. This framework suits the present study because the interview is unscripted, and these triggers occur readily in spontaneous political speech.

Methodology

This study is both qualitative and quantitative as it provides descriptive count establishing the frequency of each presupposition type across the data. The data is drawn from the full transcript of President Buhari's 5 January 2022 interview with Channels Television. Fifteen extracts, referred to as data, were purposively selected on the basis that each contained at least one identifiable presupposition, whether arising from the interviewers' questions or the President's responses. Each datum was examined for presupposition triggers, and every trigger identified was classified according to Yule's (1996) typology. Where a datum contained more than one presupposition, each instance was counted separately, which is why the total across the fifteen data comes to 55. Occurrences of each type were tallied and converted to percentages to show the distribution across the interview.

Data Presentation and analysis

Datum 1

Seun: In your New Year speech, and in that speech you told Nigerians and I quote, "the persistent insecurity in certain parts of the country

may have threatened to unravel the incremental gains achieved," did you envisage the enormity of the task when you promised to tackle insecurity as President and Commander-in-Chief of our country?

Presupposition types: Existential

In this datum, the expression "in your New Year speech" carries an existential presupposition, as it presupposes the existence of a New Year speech actually delivered by President Muhammadu Buhari. The rest of the utterance carries a structural presupposition. The question "did you envisage the enormity of the task when you promised to tackle insecurity" is built in such a way that it presupposes, first, that the task of tackling insecurity has indeed proven enormous, and second, that the President did in fact make a promise to tackle insecurity. Because the question is framed as a WH-type structure rather than a simple yes-no question, the President is left with no room to dispute either presupposed premise even as he goes on to answer the surface question about his own foresight.

Datum 2

Maupe: Well, the economy and security are two very pressing areas Mr President... You talked about how the militants were unleashed, some people will say President Yar'adua also faced that crisis when he became president... The North West continues to be of concern where we see bandits unleashed in many parts of the North West, sometimes getting to the North-Central of the country. Would you say we fully understand the problems of insecurity that we face in the North West?

Pres. Buhari: In the North West we have the same people with the same culture stealing from each other, killing each other and burning villages... I believe if you go to those constituencies, the North West and North Central, in the last four weeks there are improvement in the security.

Presupposition types: Existential, Lexical, Factive

There are several existential presuppositions in this datum, as the existence of entities such as the economy, security, militants,

President Yar'adua, the amnesty programme, and the regions of the North East, North West and North Central are all presupposed by the speaker, who expects her audience to already understand what she means without further explanation. There is also a lexical presupposition in the expression "the North West continues to be of concern," where the word continues presupposes that concern over insecurity in the North West predates the moment of speaking rather than having just arisen. In the President's response, the claim "I believe if you go to those constituencies, the North West and North Central, in the last four weeks there are improvements in the security" carries a factive presupposition, treating the improvement as an established fact rather than a claim requiring evidence.

Datum 3

> **Maupe:** It is true because the farmers-herders crises was one that was a big challenge a few years back... now that we are entering the peak of the dry season we could see a resurgence again, would you say that we have dealt with that problem once and for all?
> **Pres. Buhari:** We cannot do much about the weather but about the security we have taken steps... Nigeria is very susceptible to climate issues because of our population and the size of the country.
> **Pres. Buhari:** Yes, the ministers of agriculture from Audu Ogbe to Mahmud now, one of the issues I discussed with them personally is to go and get the gazettes of the first republic especially from the Northern states... so that the herders do not stray into people's farms and into the towns.

Presupposition types: Existential, Lexical, Factive

Maupe's reference to the farmers-herders crises carries an existential presupposition, taking the existence of that crisis for granted. The expression "now that we are entering the peak of the dry season" carries a lexical presupposition, implying that Nigerians had not yet entered the dry season peak at the time of the statement. In the President's response, an existential presupposition arises around the mention of God, and the President further presupposes that his audience already understands Nigeria's large population and land size.

A factive presupposition follows in the claim that conditions dry up in the North before they do in the South, which the President treats as settled climatic fact. His reference to successive ministers of agriculture, Audu Ogbe among them, and to the gazettes of the First Republic, carries further existential presuppositions, while his remark about the herders not straying into people's farms carries a lexical presupposition, implying that such straying has in fact been occurring.

Datum 4

> **Seun:** I'll like you to please answer to the concerns of those who have the believe that policing and security issues are majorly local... with Amotekun in the South West and Ebube Agu in the South East, now a lot of people are thinking a reformation of the police system, state policing, do you think this is a possible solution to insecurity in Nigeria?
>
> **Pres. Buhari:** I said, as far as I know, the farmers and herders have been coexisting in Nigeria so they can ask local leadership what went wrong and why there was a break in communication... why are they now extending into the farms of people?

Presupposition types: Lexical, Existential, Factive

Seun's question carries a lexical and existential presupposition. There is a lexical presupposition in the framing of time as a constraint on the interview, and existential presuppositions surrounding the mention of Amotekun, Ebube Agu, and the ongoing debate about state policing, all of which the speaker assumes his audience recognises without introduction. In the President's response, the expression "as far as I know, the farmers and herders have been coexisting in Nigeria" carries a factive presupposition, triggered by the verb know, which treats the coexistence as an established fact. His question, "why are they now extending into the farms of people," carries a lexical presupposition, implying that such extension into farms is a new rather than longstanding development, which subtly shifts the origin of the conflict away from any policy failure on his own government's part.

Datum 5

> **Maupe:** Well, a lot of people said you are going to be winding down for the holidays and we are thinking that perhaps the budget might not be signed again... surprisingly you signed the 2022 Budget into law but you had very strong reservations about it... Do you fear that the budget might not be able to achieve its purpose?
>
> **Pres. Buhari:** No, not at all, I am confident that we can successfully implement the budget, it is because in both Houses our party is leading. The APC party and the leadership, look at the Senate President... Femi Gbajabiamila...

Presupposition types: Existential

This datum is dominated by existential presupposition. Maupe's question presupposes the existence of the Electoral Act, the National Assembly, and the 2022 Budget, along with the existence of the specific objections she goes on to summarise. The President's answer continues this pattern, presupposing the existence of the two legislative houses, the ruling party and its leadership, and named officials such as the Senate President and Femi Gbajabiamila. His remark that "in both Houses our party is leading" also carries the presupposition that other parties exist alongside his own, since the claim of leadership only makes sense against a backdrop of competing parties.

Datum 6

> **Maupe:** You overthrew them because you were able to emerge as the presidential candidate of your party and that was because of the direct primaries?
>
> **Pres. Buhari:** I will expect you to have asked me how "did you overthrow the PDP?" You remember, if you could recall the ACN, APGA, ANPP, CPC and other parties, we came together... but the opposition came together and overthrew them.
>
> **Pres. Buhari:** We must not insist that it has to be direct, it should be consensus and indirect and if they do that I will sign them.

Presupposition types: Factive, Counter-Factive

There is a factive presupposition early in this datum, where the President implies that the executive and legislature are not currently at loggerheads. A further factive presupposition arises around the claim

that his party overthrew the PDP, which presupposes that parties such as ACN, APGA, ANPP and CPC were not previously united. Maupe's follow-up question, linking his emergence as presidential candidate to the direct primaries, carries a factive presupposition of its own, implying a settled causal connection between the two events. The President's closing remark, "if they do that I will sign them," carries a counter-factive presupposition, implying that should the National Assembly fail to meet his stated condition, he will withhold his assent.

Datum 7

> **Seun:** Let me take you back to the issue of the economy and I would like to know, Your Excellency, what kind of economy do you think you want to bequeath to Nigerians?
> **Pres. Buhari:** You have to stop smuggling, you have to stop developed countries from dumping goods into our country...
> **Pres. Buhari:** We found out that Nigeria arable land, only 2.5 percent of Nigerian arable land is being used yet people are shouting about unemployment. If we had invested more in agriculture...

Presupposition types: Lexical, Factive, Existential, Counter-Factive

Seun's opening remark, "let me take you back to the issue of the economy," carries a lexical presupposition, implying that the economy had already been discussed earlier in the conversation. His WH-question about the kind of economy the President envisions carries a factive presupposition, since the question form presumes that the President does hold some economic vision. The President's call to "stop smuggling" and to "stop developed countries from dumping goods" carries a lexical presupposition, implying that both activities have been ongoing. Existential presuppositions follow around the mention of ECOWAS and Africa. His statement that "we found out" only 2.5 percent of Nigeria's arable land is in use carries a factive presupposition, treating this figure as settled fact, while his conditional "if we had invested more in agriculture" carries a counter-factive presupposition, implying that greater investment did not, in fact, take place.

Datum 8

> **Maupe:** We've been told we have 13,000 installed capacity, we've been told TCN, that's the Transmission Company can do about 7,500 but we know that constantly, for a long time now all we've had on the grid is 4,000 megawatts.
> **Pres. Buhari:** TCN is 100 percent government but we inherited what they call Discos... The people that owned them, who are they? They are not electrical engineers.

Presupposition types: Factive, Existential

Maupe's opening question carries a factive presupposition, treating the current inadequacy of electricity supply as settled fact. Her later remark, "we know that constantly, for a long time now, all we've had on the grid is 4,000 megawatts," carries a further factive presupposition, and the phrase we know signals that the claim is beyond doubt while implying scepticism toward the higher figures cited by TCN. Existential presuppositions accompany the mention of named cities and of TCN itself. The President's response carries a factive presupposition of its own, in the contrast he draws between TCN, which he describes as fully government owned, and the Discos, which the framing presupposes are not.

Datum 9

> **Seun:** Still on the economy, you announced an economic projection plan of lifting 100 million Nigerians out of poverty in 10 years. Mr President, where are we on that? How many people have been lifted out of poverty so far?
> **Pres. Buhari:** I can't say tell you offhand now but I'm telling you that in Nigeria's population, 35 years and below are the majority... only 2.5 percent of arable land is being cultivated... in the South there is problem of land ownership, very serious one.
> **Maupe:** How do you intend to encourage people? ... Security has discouraged many from going into farming, how do you intend to assure people that it will be okay for them to go back to the land?

Presupposition types: Lexical, Factive, Existential

Seun's opening remark, "still on the economy," carries a lexical presupposition, implying continuous prior discussion of the economy. The claim that 100 million Nigerians live in poverty carries a factive presupposition, and further existential presuppositions accompany references to Nigerians above the age of 35, to uncultivated arable land, and to the 10-year projection plan itself. The President's mention of land ownership problems in the South carries a factive presupposition, treating the difficulty as an established regional reality. Maupe's later question, asking how the President intends to encourage people to return to farming, carries a lexical presupposition, implying that people are not currently encouraged to do so, and it further presupposes the existence of ongoing insecurity as the cause of that discouragement.

Datum 10

> **Seun:** During the course of your administration, Mr President, the country has taken a significant number of Chinese loans... There are fears though, in many quarters, with these loans that the nation, Nigeria might be plunged into a debt trap? Are we?
> **Pres. Buhari:** If we had turned that down maybe between Lagos and Ibadan now, we'll have to walk.
> **Seun:** Our debt stock at the time was about ₦12 trillion, now it is about ₦32 trillion. Inflation rate was about 9%, it is now over 15%...

Presupposition types: Factive, Existential

Seun's question carries a factive presupposition, treating the necessity of loans for infrastructure as settled, and an existential presupposition around the notions of Chinese loans and a debt trap. The President's response, "if we had turned that down maybe between Lagos and Ibadan now, we'll have to walk," carries a factive presupposition, presupposing that the Lagos-Ibadan Road was previously in deplorable condition. Seun's follow-up, contrasting debt stock, inflation, unemployment and exchange rate figures from 2015 with current figures, carries a factive presupposition of its own, presupposing that the nation was in a comparatively better economic position at the point the President assumed office.

Datum 11

> **Seun:** Recently you told a delegation of South East elders who visited you here in the Villa that you would consider their request for the release of Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the proscribed Indigene of the People of Biafra (IPOB), do I have any update on that?
>
> **Pres. Buhari:** I never thought really he won't voluntarily defend himself on the accusations he has...
>
> **Pres. Buhari:** No, there's a possibility of political solution. If he behaves himself, all well and good...

Presupposition types: Existential, Lexical, Counter-Factive

Seun's question carries existential presuppositions around the South East delegation, the Villa, Nnamdi Kanu, and IPOB's proscription. The President's remark that he "never thought" Kanu would fail to voluntarily defend himself carries a lexical presupposition, implying that Kanu did not, in fact, present himself for a voluntary defence. A further existential presupposition accompanies the mention of "a political solution" later in the exchange. The President's conditional, "if he behaves himself, all well and good," carries a counter-factive presupposition, implying that Kanu's prior conduct was not considered well behaved.

Datum 12

> **Maupe:** When you are thinking and look at where Nigeria is and the way forward, do you fear for this country? Do you fear for our oneness and our unity?
>
> **Pres. Buhari:** No, I don't, because from 15th January 1966, I have witnessed all the trouble in this country, including being in detention for more than three years.

Presupposition types: Factive

Maupe's question carries a factive presupposition, treating Nigeria's difficult current state as an established fact rather than an opinion requiring proof. The President's response carries a further factive presupposition, implying that his long history in national affairs,

dating back to 1966, and his personal experience of detention have equipped him with the discernment to judge the country's condition accurately.

Datum 13

> **Maupe:** Mr President, as we wrap up now... the first one is Nigeria's young people.
>
> **Pres. Buhari:** I wish when they go to school, when they work hard and earn their degree they don't do it thinking the government must give them jobs. You get educated because an educated person is certainly better than an uneducated one...

Presupposition types: Non-Factive

This datum carries a non-factive presupposition. The verb wish, used by the President in reference to Nigerian youth, presupposes that the wished-for state of affairs does not currently hold. In presupposing this, the President implies that Nigerian graduates do, in practice, expect the government to provide them with employment rather than pursuing self-reliant paths after their education, a presupposition that quietly shifts some responsibility for youth unemployment onto the expectations of young people themselves.

Datum 14

> **Seun:** Alright. Another phrase is PDP. What comes to mind when you hear that word?
>
> **Pres. Buhari:** PDP? Failure!

Presupposition types: Existential

This is one of the shortest data in the interview, and it carries a straightforward existential presupposition. Both Seun's question and the President's one-word response presuppose the existence of the PDP as a political party, a presupposition so basic to Nigerian political discourse that neither party finds it necessary to explain further.

Datum 15

Seun: You don't have any favourite for 2023 in your party?
Pres. Buhari: No, I do not have any favourite because he may be eliminated if I mention his name. So I better keep it a secret.

Presupposition types: Existential

Although the President explicitly denies having a favourite candidate for the 2023 election, his own explanation carries an existential presupposition that works against his denial. By stating that "he may be eliminated if I mention his name," the President presupposes the existence of a specific individual he has in mind, which suggests that a favourite does in fact exist even as he denies it on the surface.

Findings

The analysis carried out in this study reveals that all six types of presupposition identified by Yule (1996) are present in President Muhammadu Buhari's Channels Television interview. Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of each type across the fifteen data examined.

Presupposition Type	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Existential	20	34%
Factive	19	33%
Lexical	12	21%
Counter-Factive	3	5%
Non-Factive	1	2%
Total	**55**	**100%**

Existential presupposition occurs most frequently in the data, accounting for 20 occurrences covering 34% identified. This is not surprising, since both the President and his interviewers repeatedly referred to people, places, institutions, and events without pausing to establish them, on the assumption that the Nigerian television audience

already recognised what was being referred to. Factive presupposition follows closely with 19 occurrences, and it was observed that both parties frequently used factive verbs such as know and found out to present contestable claims as though they were beyond dispute. Lexical presupposition occurs 12 times, largely through change-of-state verbs such as stop, start, continue, and now, which allowed the interviewers to imply that certain problems had persisted over time, while allowing the President to imply, in some cases, that the same problems were more recent than his critics suggested. Counter-factive presupposition each occur three times, accounting for 5 percent of the total each. Structural presupposition was tied mainly to WH-questions posed by the interviewers, while counter-factive presupposition arose from conditional statements made by the President, particularly around the subjects of electoral primaries and Nnamdi Kanu. Non-factive presupposition occurs only once in the entire data set, in the President's remark about Nigerian youth, and this scarcity is consistent with the observation that a politician defending his record in a national interview has little occasion to use verbs of wishing or imagining, which by nature presuppose that the wished-for state of affairs is not currently true.

It was also observed that presupposition in this interview did not originate from the President alone. The interviewers, Seun Okinbaloye and Maupe Ogun-Yusuf, presupposed contestable premises through the framing of their own questions almost as often as the President did through his answers. This confirms that presupposition in an interactional setting such as a broadcast interview is a shared resource, drawn upon by both interviewer and interviewee, and not the exclusive property of the politician being interviewed.

Conclusion

This study has examined the types and distribution of presupposition present in President Muhammadu Buhari's 5 January 2022 interview with Channels Television, using Yule's (1996) six-part classification as its analytic tool. Fifty-eight instances of presupposition

were identified across fifteen selected data, with existential and factive presupposition together accounting for the majority of occurrences, followed by lexical, structural, counter-factive, and non-factive presupposition in that order. The study has shown that presupposition served both the interviewers and the President as a means of communicating positions without directly arguing for them, whether by presupposing the existence of institutions and events, treating contestable claims as settled fact, implying continuity or recency in ongoing national problems, or issuing conditional statements that carried an implicit warning beneath a measured surface.

This paper concludes that presupposition is a significant, though frequently overlooked, resource in Nigerian political interviews, and that its study offers useful insight into how much of political meaning is communicated without ever being stated outright. It is recommended that further studies extend this analytic model to other Nigerian presidential interviews, so as to determine whether the presuppositional patterns identified in this study are peculiar to President Buhari's individual style or reflect a broader convention of political interviewing in Nigeria.

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