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**PROSODIC FEATURES AND PRAGMATIC MEANING CONSTRUCTION IN LIBOROUS
OSHOMA'S THE ADVOCATE**

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Abstract

This study investigates the interaction between prosodic features and pragmatic acts in Liborous Oshoma's televised political advocacy programme, *The Advocate*. Although political discourse has received considerable scholarly attention, much of the existing research has concentrated on lexical, syntactic, rhetorical and ideological features, with comparatively limited attention to the contribution of prosody to pragmatic meaning construction. The study therefore examines how intonation, stress, pitch, rhythm, tempo and pauses contribute to the realisation of communicative acts in five purposively selected episodes: *Affluent Poverty*, *Fall of the Economy*, *Suffering and Adjusting*, *Arrogance of Power*, and *CBN and the Burden of Justice*. A qualitative content-analysis design was adopted, supported by descriptive frequency counts and acoustic observation using Praat. The unit of analysis was the prosodically marked utterance or utterance sequence that performed an identifiable pragmatic act. Halliday's *Systemic Phonology* and Mey's *Pragmatic Acts Theory* provided the analytical framework. Forty coded instances were identified and classified into five mutually defined categories: condemnation, warning/foreboding, mobilisation, mockery/satire, and education/clarification. The findings show that high pitch and emphatic stress were most frequently associated with condemnation; falling tone, reduced tempo and strategic pauses with warning; heightened intensity and staccato rhythm with mobilisation; rise-fall and fall-rise contours with mockery and satire; and relatively level tone with moderate tempo with clarification. Condemnation was the most frequent category, followed by mobilisation, warning/foreboding, mockery/satire and education/clarification. The study concludes that prosody is not merely ornamental in political advocacy discourse; rather, it is a significant resource through which contextual meaning, rhetorical force and civic orientation are constructed.

Keywords: Prosody, pragmatic acts, political discourse, political advocacy, intonation, Liborous Oshoma, *The Advocate*

Introduction

Language is a fundamental instrument of human communication through which individuals express ideas, attitudes, emotions, intentions and social positions. In spoken communication, however, meaning is not conveyed by lexical and grammatical structures alone. Speakers also rely on suprasegmental features such as intonation, stress, pitch, rhythm, tempo and pauses to guide interpretation and communicate their intentions. These features, generally referred to as prosody, contribute significantly to the organisation and interpretation of spoken discourse.

Prosody is particularly important in persuasive and argumentative communication because the same lexical expression may perform different communicative functions depending on how it is delivered. A statement may sound authoritative, ironic, angry, sympathetic, uncertain or humorous depending on its pitch movement, stress placement, rhythm and pacing. Consequently, an adequate interpretation of spoken discourse requires attention not only to what is said but also to how it is said.

This relationship between sound and meaning is especially relevant to political discourse. Political communication is generally intended to inform, persuade, influence, criticise, defend positions, construct ideological identities and mobilise audiences. Political speakers and commentators therefore employ a variety of linguistic resources to achieve rhetorical goals. While considerable attention has been given to lexical choices, syntactic structures, metaphors, ideology and rhetorical devices in political discourse, the contribution of prosodic features to pragmatic meaning has received comparatively less attention.

The Nigerian socio-political environment provides an important context for investigating this relationship. Public commentary on governance, corruption, poverty, economic instability, insecurity, unemployment and social inequality has become prominent across conventional and digital media. Among the commentators who engage critically with such issues is Liborous Oshoma, a Nigerian lawyer and political commentator whose programme, *The Advocate*, provides sustained commentary on contemporary socio-political developments.

The Advocate is significant because it operates as a form of political advocacy discourse. Oshoma does not merely report events; he evaluates public affairs, challenges political actors and institutions, condemns perceived failures, warns of possible consequences, exposes contradictions and encourages public awareness and civic participation. His communicative effectiveness is shaped not only by the propositions he expresses but also by his manner of vocal delivery.

Oshoma's speech is characterised by noticeable shifts in pitch, stress, rhythm, tempo and intonation. At certain moments, he raises his pitch and intensifies stress to communicate outrage or condemnation. At other points, he slows his delivery, lowers his pitch and introduces pauses to construct seriousness or foreboding. He also employs rhythmically patterned expressions to create urgency and mobilise his audience. These features suggest that prosody plays a central role in the realisation of pragmatic acts in his discourse.

This study therefore examines how prosodic features interact with pragmatic acts in Liborous Oshoma's *The Advocate*. Specifically, it identifies recurrent prosodic resources in selected episodes, classifies the pragmatic acts realised through those resources, and explains how prosody and context jointly construct rhetorical and pragmatic meanings. The study contributes to phono-pragmatic research by foregrounding sound as a component of communicative action and to Nigerian political discourse scholarship by focusing on an indigenous media programme as a legitimate object of linguistic inquiry.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Prosody and Meaning

Prosody refers broadly to suprasegmental features of spoken language that operate beyond individual speech sounds. These features include pitch, intonation, stress, rhythm, tempo, loudness and pausing. Crystal (2008) describes prosody as involving properties of speech that extend over stretches larger than individual phonemes. Such properties contribute to the organisation and interpretation of spoken communication.

Prosody performs several communicative functions. It can indicate emphasis, signal emotional and attitudinal stance, distinguish important information from background information, structure discourse, mark completion or continuation, and guide listeners in interpreting communicative intentions. Ladd (2008) similarly emphasises the importance of intonational structures in the organisation of spoken language.

Halliday's account of intonation demonstrates that prosodic choices are systematic rather than accidental. His framework identifies tone, tonicity and tonality as important systems through which speakers organise information and interpersonal meaning. Tone concerns the direction of pitch movement; tonicity concerns the placement of tonic prominence; while tonality concerns the division of speech into meaningful tone groups (Halliday, 1967).

Pragmatics and Pragmatic Acts

Pragmatics is concerned with how meaning is constructed and interpreted in context. It goes beyond the literal meaning of words to examine what speakers intend to accomplish through language and how listeners infer those intentions. Austin (1962) established that language can be used to perform actions, while Searle (1969) further developed the classification of speech acts.

Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory is particularly relevant to the present study because it emphasises the situated nature of communication. Mey proposes the concept of the *pragmeme* as a contextually situated communicative action, while a *pract* represents its actual realisation in discourse. Meaning therefore emerges from the interaction between language, context, social conditions and available communicative resources.

For the present study, prosody is treated as one of the resources that can assist in the recognition and realisation of pragmatic acts. Tone, stress, rhythm, tempo and pausing do not operate independently of lexical content or context; rather, they interact with them to strengthen, qualify or redirect communicative force.

Prosody in Political Advocacy Discourse

Political advocacy differs from neutral information-sharing because it seeks to influence attitudes and encourage particular forms of public response. Advocacy discourse often combines information with evaluation, criticism, persuasion and mobilisation. In such discourse, prosody becomes a valuable rhetorical resource: emphatic stress can construct moral importance, pitch variation can signal involvement, pauses can create suspense, and rhythm can generate momentum.

Political advocacy discourse in Nigeria is particularly suited to this form of analysis because media communication frequently combines formal English with rhetorical creativity, humour, satire and expressive vocal delivery. Oshoma's *The Advocate* therefore provides a useful context for examining the relationship between prosodic organisation and pragmatic action.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Halliday's Systemic Phonology and Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory. Halliday's (1967) systemic account of intonation provides the phonological framework for identifying meaningful prosodic choices. The framework is relevant because it treats prosodic organisation as a system of communicative choices rather than as an accidental feature of speech.

Three concepts are particularly useful. Tone concerns movement of pitch within a tone group and may contribute to meanings such as finality, implication, emphasis or strong assertion. Tonicity concerns the placement of tonic prominence and helps determine which element receives special communicative attention. Tonality concerns the division of speech into tone groups and influences the pacing and interpretation of information.

Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory complements the phonological framework by explaining how communicative actions are interpreted within social and linguistic contexts. The theory is useful because the acts identified in this study—condemnation, warning/foreboding, mobilisation, mockery/satire and education/clarification—cannot be established by isolated lexical forms alone. Their interpretation depends on the interaction of wording, discourse context, rhetorical purpose and prosodic realisation.

The integration of the two frameworks makes it possible to examine both how Oshoma organises prosodic patterns and what communicative actions those patterns help to realise.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative content-analysis design supported by descriptive quantitative representation. The population comprises available episodes of *The Advocate* from which relevant spoken data could be obtained. Purposive sampling was used because the objective was not to make statistical generalisations about every episode of the programme but to select information-rich episodes that clearly demonstrated the interaction between prosody and pragmatic meaning.

Five episodes were selected for detailed analysis: (1) Affluent Poverty; (2) Fall of the Economy; (3) Suffering and Adjusting; (4) Arrogance of Power; and (5) CBN and the Burden of Justice. The selection was guided by the presence of substantial speech by Liborious Oshoma, relevance to Nigerian socio-political issues, identifiable prosodic variation, sufficient audio clarity and adequate contextual information for interpreting communicative acts.

The unit of analysis was a prosodically marked utterance or short sequence of utterances that performed one identifiable pragmatic act within its immediate discourse context. Each selected instance was transcribed verbatim and examined for relevant prosodic features, including pitch movement, tonic prominence, intensity, rhythm, tempo and pausing. Praat software was used as an observational aid to visualise pitch, intensity and duration where the audio quality permitted. Acoustic observation supported, rather than replaced, contextual phonological interpretation.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the recordings were repeatedly listened to and relevant utterances were transcribed. Second, each candidate instance was examined for salient prosodic cues and its immediate discourse context. Third, the communicative function of the instance was coded into one of five operational categories: condemnation, warning/foreboding,

mobilisation, mockery/satire, or education/clarification. Expository or interrogative passages were not treated as an additional independent category; where such passages occurred, they were interpreted according to the communicative function they performed within the five-category scheme. Fourth, the coded instances were counted and converted to percentages to provide a descriptive overview of the distribution.

The categories were operationalised as follows: condemnation referred to overt moral or evaluative criticism of an action, institution or social condition; warning/foreboding referred to the projection of danger or undesirable consequences; mobilisation referred to language designed to urge civic awareness or action; mockery/satire referred to ironic or humorous criticism; and education/clarification referred to explanatory passages intended primarily to make an issue understandable. This procedure was adopted to ensure consistency between the data table and the subsequent discussion.

Findings and Discussion

Distribution of Pragmatic Acts and Dominant Prosodic Features

The analysis identified forty prosodically salient instances across the five selected episodes. Table 1 presents the distribution of the coded pragmatic acts. The dominant prosodic feature shown for each category represents the recurrent pattern observed in the analysed instances; it does not imply that every instance contained only one prosodic feature.

Pragmatic act	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Recurrent prosodic resources
Condemnation	12	30	High pitch; emphatic stress; increased intensity
Warning/Foreboding	8	20	Falling tone; reduced tempo; strategic pauses
Mobilisation	10	25	Staccato rhythm; heightened intensity; patterned prominence
Mockery/Satire	6	15	Rise-fall and fall-rise contours; marked pitch shifts
Education/Clarification	4	10	Relatively level tone; moderate tempo
Total	40	100	—

The table shows that condemnation was the most frequent pragmatic act, accounting for 30% of the analysed instances. Mobilisation followed with 25%, while warning/foreboding represented 20%. Mockery/satire accounted for 15%, and education/clarification occurred least frequently at 10%. The distribution suggests that Oshoma's political advocacy is predominantly evaluative and interventionist: the discourse frequently identifies and criticises perceived social or political failures while also seeking to mobilise audiences and promote civic consciousness.

Prosody and Condemnation

The episode Affluent Poverty provides an example of the relationship between prosody and condemnation. Oshoma contrasts the high cost of elite education with the economic struggles of ordinary Nigerians. In one extract, the amount “26 million” receives considerable prominence in comparison with “30,000 Naira” as a minimum-wage figure. The communicative effect of the comparison depends partly on prosodic contrast. The large financial figure is foregrounded through heightened pitch, increased intensity and emphatic stress, while the subsequent contrast with the lower wage figure is delivered with a change in pitch and vocal weight. The result is not merely the presentation of two numerical facts; the prosodic arrangement helps construct a moral comparison. High pitch and strong stress communicate incredulity and evaluative force, thereby supporting an act of condemnation rather than simple description. This finding is consistent with the role of tonic prominence in directing audience attention to information considered especially significant.

Prosody and Warning/Foreboding

The pragmatic act of warning is particularly evident in Fall of the Economy. In warning-oriented passages, Oshoma's delivery becomes more measured and serious. The analysis identifies falling tones, reduced tempo and strategic pauses as recurrent resources. The falling movement contributes to a sense of seriousness and finality, while pauses allow important propositions to receive additional processing time. The combination of controlled pitch movement and slower delivery encourages the audience to interpret the utterance not merely as information but as a caution requiring attention. In this way, prosodic control contributes to the construction of foreboding and seriousness.

Prosody and Mockery/Satire

The episode Suffering and Adjusting illustrates the importance of prosody in satirical discourse. Satire frequently depends on a difference between literal content and intended meaning; prosodic cues can therefore help audiences recognise irony. The analysis identifies complex pitch movements, especially fall-rise and rise-fall contours, as recurrent resources for satirical interpretation. Such contours can signal reservation, implication or mock seriousness. In one instance, Oshoma exploits the phonological relationship between “Band A” and “bandit” to produce a satirical effect. The vocal pattern indicates that the expression is not intended as a simple lexical reference; rather, it guides the audience towards a critical interpretation of the institutional situation under discussion. Satire consequently functions as a form of political criticism by exposing contradictions and inviting public evaluation.

Prosody and Mobilisation

Mobilisation is strongly represented in Arrogance of Power. Unlike warning, which is characterised by measured and controlled delivery, mobilisation is associated with heightened intensity and a more rhythmic vocal pattern. The analysis identifies staccato or march-like rhythm in important mobilising expressions. Words such as “ADVOCATE”, “PARTICIPATE” and “CREDIBLE” receive patterned prominence and are delivered in a rhythm that produces momentum. Repetition and regularity make the expressions memorable and create a sense of collective orientation. The audience is therefore not simply presented with an argument but is invited to participate cognitively and civically in the issue under discussion. Rhythm, in this context, functions as an instrument of mobilisation by creating urgency, memorability and collective orientation.

Prosody in Interrogation and Exposition

The episode CBN and the Burden of Justice demonstrates how prosody can strengthen interrogation and public scrutiny. Oshoma uses rising pitch on interrogative expressions such as “JOB?” and “SALARIES?” to give them a force that goes beyond ordinary information-seeking. These questions are rhetorical and accusatory. Their prosodic prominence transforms them into instruments of institutional scrutiny. For consistency with the coding scheme, such instances are not counted as a sixth category called “exposé”; instead, they are interpreted according to the pragmatic function established by the immediate context. Where the questions primarily criticise or accuse, they are treated as instances of condemnation. Where they primarily explain or clarify an institutional issue, they fall under education/clarification. This analytical decision resolves the earlier mismatch between the frequency table and the discussion and keeps the categories mutually coherent.

The ‘Activist Voice’ as a Prosodic Register

A major finding of the study is the presence of a relatively consistent prosodic pattern across the selected episodes. This pattern may be described as an ‘activist voice’: a recurring vocal style through which Oshoma constructs his identity as a political commentator and advocate. High-key emphatic delivery is associated with condemnation; measured falling tones and pauses with warning; complex contours with satire; and staccato rhythm with mobilisation. At the level of individual utterances, these patterns help listeners identify the type of communicative action being performed. At the broader level of the programme, the recurring patterns contribute to a recognisable rhetorical persona.

Prosody, Satire and Civic Advocacy

The study further reveals a close relationship between satire and advocacy in Oshoma’s discourse. Satirical passages are not merely entertaining; they expose contradictions, ridicule perceived incompetence and challenge institutional claims. The prosodic movement from playful or ironic delivery to more forceful or measured advocacy guides the audience through different interpretive stages. Prosodic variation therefore contributes to the organisation of political argument, helping move the audience from recognition to evaluation and, potentially, towards civic engagement.

Implications of the Study

First, the study demonstrates that political discourse should not be analysed exclusively through written transcripts. Written language cannot fully capture the vocal resources through which speakers construct emphasis, irony, urgency, authority and attitude. The analysis of spoken political discourse therefore benefits from integrating phonological and pragmatic approaches.

Second, the study contributes to phono-pragmatic research by showing that prosodic features can operate as contextual resources in the interpretation of communicative acts. Changes in pitch, stress, rhythm, tempo or pausing may alter or strengthen the communicative force of an utterance when interpreted alongside lexical content and context.

Third, the study contributes to Nigerian media scholarship by focusing on indigenous political commentary. Nigerian broadcast programmes provide rich spoken data for linguistic analysis and deserve greater scholarly attention.

Finally, the findings may be useful to media practitioners and public communicators. Awareness of prosodic resources can improve persuasive communication, provided that such resources are used responsibly. Effective public communication requires attention not only to the content of a message but also to its delivery.

Conclusion

This study examined the interaction between prosodic features and pragmatic acts in selected episodes of Liborou Oshoma's *The Advocate*. The study was motivated by the observation that political discourse research has often emphasised lexical, syntactic, rhetorical and ideological structures while paying comparatively less attention to vocal delivery in the construction of pragmatic meaning.

Using Halliday's Systemic Phonology and Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory, the study analysed five purposively selected episodes of the programme. The analysis focused on intonation, pitch, stress, rhythm, tempo and pauses and examined how these features contributed to the realisation of five consistently defined pragmatic categories: condemnation, warning/foreboding, mobilisation, mockery/satire and education/clarification.

The findings show that prosody is a significant meaning-making resource in Oshoma's discourse. High pitch and emphatic stress were recurrently associated with condemnation. Falling tones, reduced tempo and strategic pauses supported warning and seriousness. Staccato rhythm and heightened intensity supported mobilisation. Complex pitch movements contributed to mockery and satire, while relatively level tone and moderate tempo supported clarification. Condemnation was the most frequent pragmatic category, followed by mobilisation, warning/foreboding, mockery/satire and education/clarification.

The study therefore concludes that prosody is not merely an ornamental feature of political communication. It is an important component of pragmatic action because vocal choices interact with lexical and contextual resources to construct rhetorical force. In *The Advocate*, prosodic organisation helps transform information into condemnation, caution into foreboding, rhetorical questions into public scrutiny, humour into political critique and commentary into calls for civic participation.

Future studies may expand the data set to include more episodes, compare Oshoma's prosodic strategies with those of other Nigerian political commentators, investigate audience responses to prosodic patterns and employ more extensive acoustic measurement.

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