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**CONTESTING LEGITIMACY AND PUBLIC IMAGE IN CORRUPTION DISCOURSE:
AN ANALYSIS OF IMPOLITENESS STRATEGIES IN THE YAHAYA BELLO-EFCC
MEDIA FACE-OFF**

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Abstract

This study examines the impoliteness strategies deployed in the media confrontation between Yahaya Bello, former Governor of Kogi State, and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) over allegations of financial misconduct. The study examines how both actors utilize impoliteness as a pragmatic resource for undermining credibility, defending institutional and personal identities, and negotiating legitimacy within Nigeria's corruption discourse. Drawing on Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory, Brown and Levinson's Face Theory, and contemporary studies of media discourse, the study adopts a qualitative discourse-pragmatic approach to analyse selected media statements, press releases, and public responses related to the confrontation. Findings reveal the extensive deployment of bald-on-record impoliteness, negative impoliteness, ridicule, condescension, accusations, and associational impoliteness by both parties. The EFCC employs institutional accusations, public naming, and criminal labelling to undermine Bello's public image and reinforce institutional authority. Conversely, Bello and his media representatives deploy counter-accusations, delegitimising descriptions, and victimhood narratives to challenge the anti-corruption agency's credibility and neutrality. The study concludes that impoliteness functions as a strategic communicative tool through which political actors and institutions negotiate power, legitimacy, accountability, and public perception in Nigeria's corruption discourse.

Keywords: Impoliteness, corruption discourse, media discourse, EFCC, Yahaya Bello, pragmatics, face-threatening acts.

1. Introduction

Language serves as a powerful instrument through which individuals and institutions negotiate power, construct identities, and influence public perception. Beyond its communicative function, language performs ideological and strategic roles within public discourse, particularly in contexts characterised by conflict, accusation, and contestation (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). In political and institutional confrontations, language often becomes a site where competing actors struggle for legitimacy, authority, and public support.

Within Nigeria's anti-corruption landscape, corruption allegations frequently transcend legal proceedings and evolve into media spectacles characterised by intense verbal exchanges between accused individuals and investigative agencies. These exchanges often involve accusations, rebuttals, denials, counterclaims, and strategic attacks on public credibility. Consequently, the media becomes an arena where institutional authority and political legitimacy are publicly negotiated.

One of the most prominent corruption-related confrontations in contemporary Nigeria is the media face-off between Yahaya Bello, former Governor of Kogi State, and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). Following allegations of money laundering, financial misappropriation, and abuse of public funds, the EFCC launched investigations and publicly communicated its actions through press releases and media briefings. Bello, through his legal team and media representatives, responded with statements questioning the Commission's credibility, motives, and procedural conduct.

The resulting discourse offers a rich site for examining impoliteness, as both parties engage in communicative practices that threaten face, undermine credibility, and challenge institutional or personal legitimacy. Contemporary pragmatic scholarship recognises that impoliteness extends beyond simple rudeness. Rather, it constitutes a strategic communicative resource through which speakers attack identities, challenge authority, express opposition, and influence audience evaluation (Culpeper, 2011; Bousfield, 2008).

Against this background, this study examines the various impoliteness strategies employed by Yahaya Bello and the EFCC in their media discourses.

2. Statement of the Problem

Existing studies on Nigerian political and institutional discourse have largely focused on persuasion, ideology, media framing, and politeness strategies (Odebunmi, 2009; Chiluwa, 2015; Taiwo, 2018). While significant attention has been devoted to how language is used to project authority and negotiate public image, relatively little scholarly attention has been given to impoliteness strategies within corruption-related media confrontations.

The media exchanges between Yahaya Bello and the EFCC are characterised by intense accusations, denials, criticism, and delegitimising rhetoric. However, the specific impoliteness strategies employed by both actors remain underexplored. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how these linguistic strategies function to attack face, construct authority, and influence public opinion within corruption discourse.

This study addresses this gap by examining the impoliteness strategies deployed by Yahaya Bello and the EFCC in their media exchanges.

3. Aim and Objective

The aim of this study is to examine the deployment of impoliteness strategies in the media face-off between Yahaya Bello and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC).

The specific objective addressed in this article is to identify and discuss the types of impoliteness strategies used by Yahaya Bello and the EFCC in their media discourses.

4. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored primarily on Culpeper's (2011) Impoliteness Theory. Culpeper conceptualises impoliteness as communicative behaviour intended to attack face, create conflict, or damage social relationships. The theory identifies several major impoliteness strategies, including bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withholding politeness.

The study also draws insights from Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face, which explains how individuals seek to maintain positive face (social approval) and negative face (freedom from imposition). In confrontational discourse, these face needs are frequently threatened through strategic linguistic choices.

5. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative discourse-pragmatic approach. Data consist of selected media reports, press releases, interviews, and public statements relating to the confrontation between Yahaya Bello and the EFCC. The analysis focuses on linguistic expressions that reveal face attacks, accusations, ridicule, delegitimisation, condemnation, and other forms of impoliteness. Data are analysed interpretively within the socio-political context of Nigeria's anti-corruption discourse.

6.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Bald-on-Record Impoliteness

Extract 1

"Yahaya Bello remains a wanted person and must submit himself for investigation."

The expression "*wanted person*" constitutes a direct and unmitigated face-attack act directed at Yahaya Bello. The lexical choice immediately places Bello within a discourse of criminality and suspicion. According to Culpeper (2011), bald-on-record impoliteness occurs when a speaker intentionally attacks the hearer's face without any attempt at mitigation. In this instance, the EFCC publicly constructs Bello as an individual associated with alleged criminal conduct, thereby threatening his positive face and public image.

The modal auxiliary "*must*" further reinforces institutional authority and coercive power. It portrays the Commission as possessing legitimate authority while simultaneously reducing Bello's autonomy. This linguistic choice threatens Bello's negative face because it restricts his freedom of action and publicly positions him as subject to institutional control.

At the ideological level, the utterance serves a dual purpose. While damaging Bello's public reputation, it simultaneously reinforces the EFCC's identity as an institution committed to accountability and anti-corruption enforcement. Thus, the statement contributes to a broader narrative in which the Commission represents legality and public interest, whereas Bello is represented as an alleged violator of public trust.

Extract 2

"The EFCC is engaging in a politically motivated witch-hunt against the former governor."

The phrase "*politically motivated witch-hunt*" constitutes a direct attack on the institutional credibility of the EFCC. The lexical item "*witch-hunt*" evokes notions of persecution, injustice, and predetermined guilt. Rather than addressing the substance of the allegations, the statement redirects attention to the Commission's motives.

Through this expression, Bello's media team attempts to delegitimise the EFCC by portraying it as a politically compromised institution. The adjective phrase "*politically motivated*" introduces an alternative interpretive framework that encourages audiences to view the investigation as an act of victimisation rather than one of accountability. The extract therefore functions as a strategic face-restoration mechanism aimed at reconstructing Bello as a victim while simultaneously undermining public confidence in the Commission. This finding supports Bousfield's (2008) argument that impoliteness often functions as a resource for power negotiation and ideological contestation.

6.2 Positive Impoliteness

Extract 3

"The Commission uncovered a massive fraud involving billions of naira belonging to Kogi State."

The expression "*massive fraud*" represents a strong instance of positive impoliteness because it attacks Bello's need for social approval and public respect. The adjective "*massive*" amplifies the gravity of the allegation, while the noun "*fraud*" carries powerful legal and moral implications.

By foregrounding the alleged misconduct, the EFCC constructs Bello as an actor associated with dishonesty and abuse of public trust. This representation threatens his social identity as a former governor and public office holder. The statement, therefore, functions as a mechanism of reputational damage designed to influence public perception.

The repeated emphasis on financial misconduct also contributes to the broader anti-corruption discourse in Nigeria, where public officials are frequently evaluated through moral categories of accountability and transparency.

Extract 4

"The EFCC has become a tool in the hands of political actors."

The metaphorical use of "*tool*" strips the Commission of institutional independence and credibility. The statement implies that the EFCC lacks autonomy and merely serves the interests of political elites. This linguistic choice threatens the Commission's positive face by undermining public perceptions of its professionalism, neutrality, and legitimacy. Through this metaphor, Bello's camp seeks to redefine the institutional identity of the EFCC from an anti-corruption watchdog to a political instrument.

The utterance therefore demonstrates how positive impoliteness can function as a powerful strategy for challenging institutional authority and reshaping public interpretations of political events.

6.3 Negative Impoliteness

Extract 5

"The former governor has consistently evaded arrest despite repeated invitations by the Commission."

The extract illustrates negative impoliteness by portraying Yahaya Bello as an individual who deliberately defies lawful authority. Culpeper (2011) explains that negative impoliteness is designed to damage the hearer's negative face by restricting autonomy, imposing obligations, humiliating the target, or portraying them as socially undesirable. In this extract, the verb phrase "*evaded arrest*" serves a significant face-threatening function by presenting Bello as unwilling to cooperate with due process.

The lexical choice "*evaded*" is particularly important. Unlike neutral alternatives such as "*failed to appear*" or "*did not honour invitations*," the verb implies intentional avoidance and deliberate resistance. Consequently, the utterance does more than report an event; it constructs a negative identity for Bello as someone attempting to escape accountability.

The adverb "*consistently*" further intensifies the accusation. It suggests a repeated pattern of behaviour rather than an isolated occurrence. Through this intensification, the Commission strengthens the negative portrayal and encourages audiences to perceive Bello's actions as habitual rather than accidental.

At the discourse level, the statement contributes to the construction of a moral narrative in which the EFCC appears committed to enforcing accountability while Bello is represented as resisting justice. Such representations are consistent with van Dijk's (2006) ideological square, which emphasises positive representations of in-groups and negative representations of out-groups. The Commission's discourse therefore serves both informational and ideological purposes.

Furthermore, the public dissemination of the statement transforms the alleged act of evasion into a reputational issue. Because the accusation is communicated to a mass audience, the face damage extends beyond the immediate interaction and becomes part of the wider public discourse surrounding Bello's political identity.

Extract 6

"The Commission has chosen intimidation over justice."

This statement constitutes a clear example of negative impoliteness directed at the EFCC. The lexical item "*intimidation*" portrays the Commission as an oppressive institution that relies on coercion rather than fairness. Through this choice of language, Bello's representatives challenge the legitimacy of the Commission's actions and question its commitment to due process.

The construction "*chosen intimidation*" is particularly significant because it attributes agency and intentionality to the Commission. The statement implies that the EFCC consciously

prefers oppressive tactics over lawful procedures. As a result, the institution is portrayed not merely as flawed but as deliberately unjust.

From a pragmatic perspective, the utterance functions as an attempt to reverse institutional power relations. Rather than allowing the Commission to occupy the position of lawful authority, Bello's camp reconstructs it as an aggressor whose actions threaten democratic principles and individual rights.

The juxtaposition of *"intimidation"* and *"justice"* creates a strong binary opposition. While justice is associated with fairness, legality, and accountability, intimidation is associated with abuse, coercion, and oppression. By placing these concepts in opposition, the statement encourages audiences to interpret the EFCC's actions as inconsistent with its institutional mandate.

The extract therefore demonstrates how negative impoliteness can be employed strategically to challenge institutional authority and undermine public trust in regulatory agencies.

Extract 7

"Security agencies are being used to harass the former governor."

The verb *"harass"* constitutes another manifestation of negative impoliteness. Unlike neutral expressions such as *"question"* or *"investigate,"* the verb carries strong connotations of persistent mistreatment and abuse. Through this lexical choice, Bello's media team portrays state institutions as instruments of oppression rather than legitimate mechanisms of governance.

The statement also constructs Bello as a victim of institutional overreach. By framing investigative activities as harassment, the discourse shifts attention away from the allegations and toward the conduct of the investigating authorities. This strategy serves a face-saving function by reducing the salience of the accusations while increasing scrutiny of the investigators.

Ideologically, the extract contributes to a victimhood narrative that seeks to generate sympathy among audiences. Such narratives are particularly powerful in political discourse because they transform questions of accountability into questions of fairness and justice. Consequently, the statement functions not only as an attack on institutional legitimacy but also as a strategy for image restoration.

Extract 8

"The EFCC will ensure that the suspect answers for these allegations before the law."

Although presented as an institutional declaration, the statement contains elements of negative impoliteness. The noun *"suspect"* publicly associates Bello with criminal investigation, while the phrase *"will ensure"* signals institutional authority and determination.

The future-oriented modal construction communicates an intention to compel compliance. This reduces Bello's perceived autonomy and reinforces the Commission's superior institutional position. In pragmatic terms, the statement functions as a coercive act that emphasises the EFCC's power to regulate behaviour and enforce legal accountability.

The extract therefore exemplifies what Culpeper (2011) describes as coercive impoliteness, where language is employed to reinforce asymmetrical power relations and assert institutional dominance. The data reveal that negative impoliteness constitutes one of the most frequently deployed strategies in the Bello–EFCC media confrontation. Both parties utilise language that restricts autonomy, challenges legitimacy, and undermines institutional or personal credibility.

The EFCC primarily employs negative impoliteness to portray Bello as evasive, uncooperative, and resistant to lawful authority. Through expressions such as *"evaded arrest"* and *"suspect,"* the Commission constructs a narrative of accountability in which Bello appears answerable to institutional scrutiny. Conversely, Bello's camp employs negative impoliteness through lexical choices such as *"intimidation"* and *"harass,"* which portray the Commission as an oppressive institution abusing its authority. These competing representations reveal that the conflict extends beyond legal allegations to broader struggles over legitimacy and public perception. The language of both actors demonstrates that impoliteness is not merely a manifestation of hostility but a strategic communicative resource used to negotiate power, identity, and authority in contemporary Nigerian political discourse.

6.4 Sarcasm and Mock Impoliteness

Extract 9

"The EFCC deserves an award for its endless media drama."

This extract exemplifies sarcasm or mock impoliteness because the apparent praise conveyed through the phrase *"deserves an award"* is clearly insincere. According to Culpeper (2011), mock impoliteness occurs when speakers employ superficially polite expressions to communicate criticism, ridicule, or disapproval. The statement appears complimentary on the surface but functions, in practice, as an attack on the EFCC's credibility and professionalism.

The noun phrase *"media drama"* is central to the sarcastic effect. Rather than recognising the Commission's actions as legitimate anti-corruption activities, the speaker frames them as theatrical performances designed to attract public attention. This lexical choice delegitimises the institution by suggesting that publicity, rather than justice, motivates its actions.

The irony emerges from the incompatibility between the positive connotations of receiving an award and the negative evaluation implied by *"media drama."* Through this contradiction, the speaker invites audiences to interpret the statement as ridicule rather than

praise. Consequently, the utterance damages the Commission's institutional face while simultaneously portraying its actions as unserious and politically motivated.

At the discourse level, sarcasm enables the speaker to attack the EFCC indirectly while avoiding the bluntness associated with direct accusations. This indirectness often increases rhetorical effectiveness because it encourages audiences to participate in constructing the criticism themselves.

Extract 10

"The Commission has once again demonstrated its remarkable commitment to selective justice."

The extract represents another instance of mock impoliteness. The adjective "*remarkable*" conventionally expresses admiration and approval. However, when combined with the phrase "*selective justice*," the positive evaluation becomes ironic and acquires a negative meaning.

The statement attacks the Commission's legitimacy by implying that its operations are characterised by bias and inconsistency. Rather than enforcing justice impartially, the EFCC is portrayed as targeting specific individuals while ignoring others. This representation threatens the institution's positive face by undermining public perceptions of fairness and professionalism.

From a pragmatic perspective, the irony allows the speaker to communicate criticism in a sophisticated manner. The sarcastic construction simultaneously entertains audiences and damages the target's reputation. Such usage supports Culpeper's (2011) argument that impoliteness may function not only to cause offence but also to achieve broader rhetorical and persuasive objectives.

The extract also reveals how political actors manipulate language creatively to challenge institutional authority. Through irony and sarcasm, Bello's supporters attempt to redefine the Commission's identity from a defender of accountability to an agent of political selectivity.

Extract 11

"We appreciate the EFCC's extraordinary talent for conducting investigations through newspaper headlines."

This statement further illustrates mock impoliteness through ironic appreciation. The verb "*appreciate*" conventionally signals gratitude, while the phrase "*extraordinary talent*" expresses admiration. However, the surrounding context reveals that the statement is not genuine praise but criticism.

The expression "*investigations through newspaper headlines*" suggests that the Commission prioritises media publicity over due process. The statement therefore accuses the EFCC of conducting public trials rather than professional investigations.

The sarcastic formulation serves several pragmatic functions. First, it ridicules the Commission's methods. Second, it questions the legitimacy of its procedures. Third, it encourages audiences to view the institution as more interested in publicity than justice.

The extract demonstrates how sarcasm can be a powerful instrument of face-attacking because it combines humour, ridicule, and criticism in a single utterance.

Extract 12

"Mr Bello must be congratulated for believing that the law applies to everyone except himself."

Although framed as a congratulatory statement, the utterance functions as criticism. The verb "*congratulated*" creates a superficial appearance of politeness, while the remainder of the sentence exposes the ironic intention.

The statement portrays Bello as arrogant and dismissive of legal authority. By implying that he considers himself above the law, the Commission attacks his moral character and public image. The sarcastic construction amplifies the criticism by presenting the alleged behaviour as absurd and deserving of ridicule.

At the ideological level, the statement reinforces the EFCC's narrative of accountability. Bello is represented as resisting lawful processes, while the Commission is implicitly positioned as defending equality before the law.

The extract therefore demonstrates how sarcasm can be employed strategically to combine humour with moral condemnation. The data indicate that sarcasm and mock impoliteness constitute important rhetorical resources in the Bello–EFCC media confrontation. Unlike bald-on-record impoliteness, which relies on direct attacks, sarcasm enables speakers to communicate criticism indirectly through ironic praise and exaggerated approval.

Both parties employ sarcastic constructions to ridicule opponents, challenge institutional legitimacy, and influence public perception. Bello's supporters use sarcasm primarily to portray the EFCC as politically motivated, publicity-driven, and procedurally unfair. Conversely, statements attributed to the Commission utilise sarcasm to portray Bello as evasive, arrogant, and resistant to accountability.

The strategic deployment of sarcasm demonstrates that impoliteness in political discourse is not always explicit. Indirect forms of aggression can be equally effective in damaging face and shaping public interpretations of contested events. Through irony, speakers can attack opponents while simultaneously entertaining audiences and reinforcing ideological positions. The findings further suggest that mock impoliteness serves a dual communicative function. It serves as a mechanism of face attack and a persuasive strategy to align audiences with particular interpretations of reality. Consequently, sarcasm emerges as a significant feature of the broader struggle for legitimacy that characterises the Bello–EFCC confrontation.

6.5 Ridicule and Condemnation

Extract 13

"The former governor's excuses are becoming increasingly laughable."

The extract demonstrates ridicule as an impoliteness strategy through the use of the adjective "*laughable*." According to Culpeper (2011), ridicule functions as a face-aggravating mechanism because it encourages audiences to perceive the target as foolish, incompetent, or undeserving of respect. Rather than merely rejecting Bello's explanations, the statement dismisses them as objects of amusement.

The adjective "*laughable*" is particularly significant because it transforms a serious political and legal issue into a subject of mockery. Through this lexical choice, the speaker implies that Bello's explanations lack credibility and rationality. The statement therefore attacks Bello's positive face by undermining public respect for his views and portraying him as incapable of providing convincing justifications.

The comparative construction "*becoming increasingly*" intensifies the ridicule by suggesting a continuous decline in the quality and credibility of Bello's responses. This progression encourages audiences to interpret each subsequent explanation as further evidence of dishonesty or inconsistency.

At the level of discourse, the statement serves to delegitimise Bello's defence strategy. Instead of engaging with the content of his arguments, the utterance dismisses them altogether. Such dismissal functions as a powerful rhetorical tool because it reduces the likelihood that audiences will consider the explanations worthy of serious consideration.

Extract 14

"The EFCC has reduced itself to a public relations agency rather than an anti-corruption institution."

This extract illustrates ridicule directed at the Commission. The statement attacks the EFCC's institutional identity by suggesting it prioritises media visibility over its statutory responsibilities.

The phrase "*public relations agency*" is used metaphorically to diminish the perceived seriousness of the Commission's activities. By replacing the identity of an anti-corruption institution with that of a publicity organisation, the speaker ridicules the Commission and questions its effectiveness.

The construction "*reduced itself*" is equally important. It implies self-inflicted damage and institutional failure. Rather than attributing the alleged decline to external circumstances, the statement suggests that the Commission has willingly compromised its own credibility.

From a pragmatic perspective, the utterance serves to undermine public confidence in the EFCC by portraying it as more concerned with media attention than with justice. Consequently, the statement simultaneously ridicules and delegitimises.

Extract 15

"What Nigerians are witnessing is nothing short of institutional embarrassment."

The noun phrase "*institutional embarrassment*" constitutes a strong form of condemnation. The statement does not merely criticise the Commission's actions; it presents them as a source of national shame.

The lexical item "*embarrassment*" carries negative evaluative meanings associated with incompetence, failure, and loss of respect. Through this description, the speaker portrays the EFCC as an institution that has fallen below acceptable standards of professionalism and accountability.

The expression "*nothing short of*" intensifies the condemnation by eliminating alternative interpretations. It presents the evaluation as definitive and unquestionable, thereby increasing its rhetorical force.

Ideologically, the statement seeks to construct the Commission as unworthy of public trust. Such condemnation contributes to broader efforts to undermine the institution's legitimacy and challenge its authority in public discourse.

Extract 16

"The alleged looting of public funds represents a betrayal of the people of Kogi State."

This extract exemplifies condemnation through moral evaluation. The noun "*betrayal*" carries strong ethical implications because it suggests a violation of trust and responsibility.

Unlike legal terminology, which focuses on procedural violations, the concept of betrayal invokes moral judgement. The statement therefore moves beyond allegations of financial misconduct to portray Bello's alleged actions as offences against the collective interests of the people.

The phrase "*the people of Kogi State*" broadens the scope of the accusation by positioning the alleged misconduct as a crime against an entire community rather than a mere administrative irregularity. This framing increases the seriousness of the allegation and strengthens its emotional impact.

From a discourse-pragmatic perspective, the statement functions as a strategy of moral condemnation aimed at constructing Bello as an individual who has violated public trust. The utterance therefore reinforces the EFCC's broader narrative of accountability and responsibility.

Extract 17

"This investigation has exposed a disturbing pattern of disregard for public accountability."

The extract demonstrates condemnation through the negative evaluation of conduct. The adjective "*disturbing*" conveys disapproval and concern, while the noun phrase "disregard for public accountability" links Bello to behaviour that contradicts democratic values.

The statement attacks Bello's moral standing by presenting him as indifferent to principles of transparency and responsible governance. Through this representation, the Commission seeks to reinforce perceptions of wrongdoing while simultaneously emphasising its role as an institution committed to accountability.

The extract also contributes to the construction of a moral binary in which accountability and transparency are positioned against corruption and misconduct. Such binaries are common in anti-corruption discourse because they reduce complex issues to competing categories of right and wrong. The data reveal that ridicule and condemnation are among the most powerful impoliteness strategies employed in the Bello–EFCC confrontation. Through ridicule, speakers seek to undermine their opponents' credibility by portraying them as incompetent, irrational, or unserious. Through condemnation, they construct opponents as morally deficient and unworthy of public trust.

The EFCC primarily employs condemnation to portray Bello as associated with corruption, betrayal, and a disregard for accountability. Bello's camp, on the other hand, uses ridicule to portray the Commission as ineffective, publicity-driven, and politically compromised.

These findings suggest that the conflict extends beyond legal disagreement into the realm of moral and ideological contestation. Both actors seek to occupy the position of moral legitimacy while assigning moral failure to the opposing side. Consequently, ridicule and condemnation function not merely as expressions of hostility but as strategic resources for shaping public opinion and influencing audience evaluations.

The prominence of these strategies supports previous findings by Culpeper (2011), Bousfield (2008), and Odebunmi (2017), who argue that impoliteness in political discourse often serves broader functions of power negotiation, identity construction, and ideological positioning.

6.6 Associational Impoliteness

Extract 18

"The former governor is at the centre of one of the largest money laundering scandals in recent Nigerian history."

This extract demonstrates associational impoliteness through the deliberate linkage of Yahaya Bello with a highly stigmatised criminal activity. Associational impoliteness occurs when speakers damage an individual's face by connecting them with negatively perceived actions, events, groups, or identities. Rather than attacking the target directly, the strategy relies on the social meanings attached to the phenomenon in question.

The phrase "*money laundering scandals*" carries significant legal, moral, and social implications. Within contemporary Nigerian society, money laundering is strongly associated with corruption, abuse of public office, economic exploitation, and betrayal of public trust. By associating Bello with such activities, the statement creates a negative evaluative framework that encourages audiences to interpret his public identity.

The expression "*at the centre*" further intensifies the association. Instead of presenting Bello as a peripheral figure, the statement places him at the heart of the alleged misconduct. This positioning strengthens the connection between the individual and the scandal, thereby increasing the potential damage to his public image.

From a discourse-pragmatic perspective, the statement functions as a mechanism of reputational construction. Repeated associations between Bello and corruption-related activities contribute to the development of a public narrative in which allegations become central features of his political identity. Consequently, the face-threatening effect extends beyond the immediate utterance to influence broader perceptions of character and credibility.

Extract 19

"The EFCC has become synonymous with selective prosecution and political persecution."

This statement illustrates associational impoliteness directed at the Commission. The lexical item "*synonymous*" establishes a strong relationship between the EFCC and two negatively evaluated concepts: "*selective prosecution*" and "*political persecution*."

The significance of this association lies in its attempt to redefine the Commission's institutional identity. Rather than being viewed as a legitimate anti-corruption agency, the EFCC is linked with partiality, unfairness, and political manipulation. Such associations threaten the institution's positive face by undermining public confidence in its neutrality and professionalism.

The statement also demonstrates how associational impoliteness can operate as a form of ideological contestation. Bello's camp attempts to replace the Commission's preferred identity as a defender of accountability with an alternative identity rooted in political victimisation and abuse of power.

Through this process, language becomes a site of struggle where competing actors seek to define how institutions and individuals should be perceived by the public.

Extract 20

"The allegations reveal a pattern commonly associated with systemic corruption in public office."

The extract associates Bello with a broader culture of corruption. Rather than focusing on isolated actions, the statement links the alleged misconduct to "*systemic corruption*," a phrase that evokes widespread institutional decay and persistent abuse of power.

The adjective "*systemic*" is particularly significant because it extends the accusation beyond individual behaviour. It suggests that the alleged actions are part of a larger and more entrenched pattern of misconduct. Consequently, the statement amplifies the seriousness of the allegations and increases their reputational impact.

Pragmatically, the association reinforces perceptions of culpability. By linking Bello with systemic corruption, the discourse encourages audiences to interpret the allegations as representative of deeper governance failures. The result is a stronger negative evaluation of both personal and political identity.

Extract 21

"The agency continues to operate as a tool for settling political scores."

This extract demonstrates associational impoliteness by linking the EFCC to partisan political conflict. The phrase "*settling political scores*" carries negative connotations of revenge, vendetta, and political manipulation.

Through this association, Bello's representatives challenge the Commission's institutional legitimacy and question the motives underlying its actions. The statement implies that the agency is driven by political interests rather than legal principles.

The expression also contributes to a broader discourse of distrust toward state institutions. By repeatedly associating the Commission with political interference, the speaker seeks to weaken public confidence in its activities and reduce the persuasive force of its allegations.

Extract 22

"The investigation reflects the EFCC's commitment to exposing corruption and recovering stolen public resources."

Unlike previous extracts, this statement illustrates how positive associations can simultaneously produce impoliteness toward an opposing actor. The EFCC associates itself with values such as transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption while implicitly associating Bello with corruption and financial misconduct.

This strategy reflects van Dijk's (1998) ideological square, which emphasises positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Through positive association with accountability, the Commission strengthens its own institutional legitimacy while indirectly damaging Bello's public image.

The statement therefore demonstrates that associational impoliteness can operate through both negative and positive framing. The enhancement of one actor's image often results in the deterioration of another's. The data reveal that associational impoliteness plays a central

role in the Bello–EFCC media confrontation. Rather than relying exclusively on direct insults or accusations, both parties frequently employ indirect strategies that connect their opponents with socially undesirable identities, actions, and institutions.

The EFCC repeatedly associates Bello with corruption, money laundering, abuse of office, and financial misconduct. These associations function to construct a negative public identity and reinforce perceptions of accountability. Conversely, Bello's camp associates the Commission with political persecution, selective justice, media sensationalism, and institutional bias. Such associations seek to undermine the agency's legitimacy and weaken public trust in its activities.

The findings indicate that associational impoliteness is particularly effective in political discourse because reputations are often shaped by recurring patterns of association. Repeated exposure to particular labels and narratives can significantly influence public perception, regardless of legal outcomes. Consequently, associational impoliteness emerges as a powerful strategy for identity construction, ideological positioning, and the negotiation of legitimacy within Nigeria's anti-corruption discourse.

6.7 Accusatory Impoliteness

Extract 23

"Yahaya Bello looted public funds meant for the development of Kogi State."

This extract represents one of the clearest manifestations of accusatory impoliteness in the dataset. Accusatory impoliteness occurs when speakers explicitly attribute blame, responsibility, or wrongdoing to a target in a manner that threatens the target's face and damages their public reputation. Although accusation may serve legal or institutional purposes, its public articulation often functions as a powerful face-aggravating act.

The verb "*looted*" is particularly significant. Unlike neutral alternatives such as "*misappropriated*" or "*diverted*," the lexical item carries strong moral and emotional connotations. It evokes images of deliberate theft, exploitation, and abuse of public trust. Through this linguistic choice, Bello is represented not merely as an accused individual but as someone who allegedly deprived citizens of resources intended for collective development. The phrase "*meant for the development of Kogi State*" further intensifies the accusation by highlighting the social consequences of the alleged misconduct. Rather than portraying the issue as a technical financial offence, the statement frames it as an act that negatively affects public welfare. Consequently, the accusation transcends legal discourse and enters the realm of moral condemnation.

From a discourse-pragmatic perspective, the statement functions as an attempt to establish culpability in the minds of the audience. By presenting the allegation in direct and

unambiguous terms, the Commission strengthens its narrative of accountability while simultaneously damaging Bello's public image.

Extract 24

"The EFCC is deliberately persecuting the former governor for political reasons."

This extract demonstrates accusatory impoliteness directed at the Commission. The adverb "*deliberately*" is crucial because it attributes intentionality to the alleged misconduct. Rather than portraying the Commission's actions as procedural errors or institutional shortcomings, the statement accuses it of consciously engaging in persecution.

The verb "*persecuting*" carries powerful ideological implications. It suggests unfair treatment, victimisation, and abuse of authority. Through this lexical choice, Bello's camp positions the former governor as a victim while simultaneously portraying the Commission as an oppressor. The phrase "*for political reasons*" reinforces this interpretation by introducing a motive for the alleged persecution. The implication is that the investigation is driven not by evidence or accountability but by political interests. Consequently, the statement attacks the credibility, neutrality, and legitimacy of the Commission.

The extract therefore illustrates how accusation can be employed as a strategy of institutional delegitimisation. Rather than responding directly to the allegations, Bello's representatives seek to shift attention toward the motives and conduct of the investigators.

Extract 25

"The former governor repeatedly ignored lawful invitations from the Commission."

This statement contains an explicit accusation concerning Bello's conduct. The verb "*ignored*" suggests intentional non-compliance and disrespect for institutional authority. Unlike expressions such as "*missed*" or "*failed to attend*," the lexical choice implies conscious refusal. The adverb "*repeatedly*" amplifies the accusation by indicating persistence. It constructs a pattern of behaviour rather than a single occurrence, thereby increasing the seriousness of the alleged misconduct.

Pragmatically, the accusation serves to portray Bello as resistant to accountability and unwilling to cooperate with legal processes. Such representations are significant because public perceptions of cooperation often influence evaluations of credibility and innocence.

The extract therefore functions as a strategic face-threatening act aimed at undermining Bello's reputation and reinforcing the Commission's image as a law-enforcement institution.

Extract 26

"The agency has abandoned professionalism and embraced a political vendetta."

This extract exemplifies an accusation directed at the institutional conduct of the EFCC. The verb phrase "*abandoned professionalism*" accuses the Commission of failing to uphold the standards expected of a public institution.

The noun phrase "*political vendetta*" further intensifies the accusation. A vendetta is commonly associated with personal revenge, hostility, and irrational pursuit of an opponent. By employing this expression, Bello's camp portrays the Commission's actions as driven by emotion and political bias rather than legal principles.

The statement therefore challenges the institution's competence, integrity, and legitimacy. In doing so, it seeks to weaken public confidence in the Commission and reduce the persuasive impact of its allegations.

Extract 27

"The evidence uncovered by investigators points to systematic abuse of public office."

The extract constitutes an accusation grounded in institutional authority. The noun phrase "*systematic abuse*" suggests repeated and organised misconduct rather than isolated wrongdoing. This framing increases the severity of the allegation and presents it as part of a broader pattern of behaviour.

The phrase "*public office*" is equally important because it invokes expectations of accountability, transparency, and responsibility. By accusing Bello of abusing public office, the statement portrays him as violating the ethical obligations associated with governance. At the discourse level, the accusation contributes to constructing a narrative in which corruption is portrayed as a betrayal of democratic principles. Consequently, the statement functions both as a legal claim and as a moral judgement.

Extract 28

"The Commission's actions demonstrate a clear pattern of selective justice."

This extract illustrates how accusations can be directed toward institutional practices. The adjective "*selective*" implies discrimination, inconsistency, and bias. Through this lexical choice, Bello's representatives accuse the Commission of applying justice unevenly.

The phrase "*clear pattern*" strengthens the accusation by presenting the alleged behaviour as recurring and observable. Rather than referring to a single incident, the statement suggests a persistent institutional tendency.

The accusation, therefore, attacks the credibility of the Commission and challenges its claim to neutrality. By portraying the agency as selective, the statement encourages audiences to question the fairness of its investigations and enforcement activities.

Discussion

The analysis reveals that accusatory impoliteness is the most dominant strategy in the Bello–EFCC confrontation. Virtually every stage of the discourse is characterised by explicit attempts to assign blame, attribute responsibility, and construct narratives of wrongdoing. The EFCC employs accusations primarily to portray Bello as an individual involved in corruption, financial misconduct, abuse of office, and resistance to lawful investigation.

Through these accusations, the Commission seeks to reinforce its institutional role as an anti-corruption agency committed to accountability and transparency.

Conversely, Bello's camp directs accusations toward the Commission itself, portraying it as politically motivated, biased, selective, and procedurally unfair. These accusations serve as strategies of resistance to undermine institutional legitimacy and challenge the credibility of the investigation.

The findings indicate that accusation serves as the central mechanism through which both parties negotiate power, legitimacy, and public perception. More than any other impoliteness strategy, accusatory discourse structures the conflict by creating competing narratives of guilt and victimhood. Each actor seeks to present itself as morally justified while portraying the opposing side as responsible for wrongdoing.

Consequently, accusatory impoliteness emerges not merely as a communicative act but as a strategic instrument for identity construction, ideological contestation, and public persuasion within Nigeria's anti-corruption discourse.

6.8 Discussion of Findings

The analysis reveals that impoliteness constitutes a central communicative strategy in the media confrontation between Yahaya Bello and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The findings demonstrate that both actors systematically deploy linguistic resources to attack face, negotiate power, construct identities, and influence public perception. Rather than functioning merely as expressions of hostility, the impoliteness strategies identified in the data serve broader rhetorical, ideological, and institutional purposes.

The study found that bald-on-record impoliteness is frequently employed by both parties through direct accusations, explicit criticisms, and unmitigated face-attacks. The EFCC uses expressions such as *"wanted person," "suspect,"* and *"money laundering defendant"* to construct Bello as an individual associated with criminality and accountability deficits. Conversely, Bello's representatives deploy expressions such as *"witch-hunt," "political persecution,"* and *"abuse of power"* to undermine the legitimacy of the Commission. These findings support Culpeper's (2011) assertion that bald-on-record impoliteness emerges when speakers intentionally seek to maximise face damage without mitigating the impact of their utterances.

The analysis also reveals the extensive use of positive impoliteness, particularly through attacks on reputation, credibility, and social approval. The EFCC's repeated association of Bello with corruption allegations threatens his positive image by portraying him as morally and politically deficient. Similarly, Bello's camp attacks the Commission's positive face by questioning its neutrality, professionalism, and independence. These findings align with

Brown and Levinson's (1987) proposition that positive face reflects the desire for approval and acceptance, which becomes a primary target during adversarial interactions.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that negative impoliteness functions as an important strategy for challenging autonomy and institutional legitimacy. The EFCC portrays Bello as evasive and resistant to lawful authority through expressions such as *"evaded arrest"* and *"ignored invitations."* On the other hand, Bello's camp characterises the Commission as oppressive and coercive through lexical items such as *"harassment," "intimidation,"* and *"political vendetta."* These findings indicate that both actors attempt to restrict the perceived legitimacy and autonomy of their opponents while simultaneously enhancing their own positions within the discourse.

Another significant finding concerns the deployment of sarcasm and mock impoliteness. The analysis reveals that both parties utilise ironic praise and sarcastic remarks to ridicule opponents and challenge institutional credibility. Sarcastic expressions such as *"deserves an award for its media drama"* and *"remarkable commitment to selective justice"* demonstrate how apparently polite language can serve as a vehicle for criticism and face-attacking. This finding supports Culpeper's (2011) argument that impoliteness may be realised indirectly through insincere politeness and ironic evaluation.

The findings further indicate that ridicule and condemnation constitute major features of the discourse. Both actors employ evaluative language designed to portray opponents as incompetent, unethical, or unworthy of public trust. The EFCC condemns Bello by citing alleged betrayal, abuse of office, and disregard for accountability, while Bello's supporters ridicule the Commission, portraying it as a publicity-driven institution. These findings reinforce observations by Bousfield (2008) that impoliteness frequently operates as a mechanism for constructing moral hierarchies and delegitimising opponents.

Similarly, the study identifies associational impoliteness as a recurring strategy. The EFCC repeatedly associates Bello with corruption, money laundering, and financial misconduct, while Bello's camp associates the Commission with political persecution, selective justice, and institutional bias. These associations shape audience perceptions by linking social actors with positively or negatively valued concepts. The findings therefore demonstrate that identity construction in political discourse often occurs indirectly through repeated patterns of association rather than explicit accusations alone.

Most importantly, the analysis reveals that accusatory impoliteness is the dominant strategy throughout the discourse. Both parties consistently engage in assigning blame and responsibility. The EFCC accuses Bello of corruption, abuse of office, and non-compliance with investigative procedures, whereas Bello's representatives accuse the Commission of political manipulation, procedural misconduct, and selective enforcement. These accusations

form the foundation upon which other impoliteness strategies are built. The prevalence of accusatory discourse suggests that the central objective of both actors is to influence public interpretation of responsibility, legitimacy, and moral accountability.

The findings corroborate previous studies on impoliteness in political communication. The results are consistent with Culpeper's (1996, 2005, 2011) argument that impoliteness is often strategically deployed to achieve specific communicative goals rather than emerging as spontaneous verbal aggression. Similarly, the findings support Bousfield's (2008) view that impoliteness serves as a mechanism for exercising power, managing conflict, and negotiating social relationships. The study also aligns with the findings of Odebunmi (2017), Akinwale (2024), and Taiwo, Akinwotu, and Kpolugbo (2021), who observe that Nigerian political discourse frequently employs face-attacking strategies to project authority, resist opposition, and mobilise public support.

From a broader discourse perspective, the findings demonstrate that the Bello–EFCC confrontation extends beyond legal disagreement into a struggle for symbolic power. The conflict is not merely about allegations of corruption but also about the authority to define reality, assign blame, and shape public opinion. Through strategic deployment of impoliteness, both actors attempt to control narratives of accountability, victimhood, justice, and institutional legitimacy.

Ultimately, the findings establish that impoliteness functions as a crucial pragmatic resource within Nigeria's contemporary political and media discourse. The strategies identified in this study reveal how language is used not only to communicate information but also to negotiate power, construct identities, contest legitimacy, and influence public perception in highly adversarial socio-political contexts.

7. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the media confrontation between Yahaya Bello and the EFCC is characterised by extensive deployment of impoliteness strategies. Both parties employ bald-on-record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, ridicule, condemnation, delegitimisation, associational impoliteness, and accusatory discourse to negotiate legitimacy and influence public perception.

The EFCC primarily uses impoliteness to reinforce institutional authority and accountability, while Bello and his representatives deploy impoliteness to resist accusations and challenge institutional credibility. Rather than functioning merely as expressions of hostility, these strategies serve as powerful communicative tools for managing identity, constructing authority, and shaping public opinion within Nigeria's corruption discourse.

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