

INTERTEXTUALITY AND INTERDISCURSIVITY IN POLITICAL APOLOGIES: TRACING THE REUSE OF APOLOGY TROPES IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC HISTORY

Covenant Adura

Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts,
Bingham University, Karu Nasarawa State, Nigeira

Abstract

This study examines the discursive strategies of political apologies within Nigeria's democratic landscape, utilising the theoretical lenses of intertextuality and interdiscursivity. The research is important as it moves beyond evaluating the sincerity of apologies to deconstructing their function as rhetorical tools that recycle historical tropes to achieve specific political ends. The primary objective is to trace how apology discourses are reused, recontextualised, and recalibrated across different political events, revealing a patterned performance that shapes public memory and political legitimacy. Employing critical discourse analysis, this paper analyses five media excerpts from *The Sun* and *The Guardian* newspapers, dated between April 2023 and April 2025. The findings reveal a persistent repertoire of apology tropes, including the 'legacy apology', the 'proxy apology', the 'nostalgic reconciliation apology', the 'rejected apology', and the 'bureaucratic error apology', which are intertextually linked to past grievances. The study contributes to the field by providing a nuanced framework for understanding Nigerian political discourse, demonstrating that apologies are not isolated speech acts but are deeply embedded in a complex web of historical, social, and political discourses that continually inform and reshape public sphere negotiations.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Interdiscursivity, Political Apologies, Democratic Discourse

Introduction

The political landscape of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, since its inception in 1999, has been persistently punctuated by moments of public contrition. In these instances, figures of authority from sitting presidents and government bodies to influential non-state actors issue apologies for a spectrum of failings, including historical injustices, electoral malfeasance, and governmental incompetence. While these utterances are often presented as singular acts of accountability and moral reckoning, their pervasive and patterned recurrence suggests a more strategic, discursive practice that demands critical examination beyond surface-level rhetoric. This study, therefore, posits that political apologies in Nigeria are not novel, sincere creations but are deeply intertextual and interdiscursive constructs. They are drawn from a limited, recycled repertoire of tropes that are strategically repurposed to navigate contemporary political crises, legitimise authority, or manage public dissent. The central problem this paper addresses is the mechanistic reuse of these apology narratives, arguing that understanding this repetition is crucial to deconstructing the mechanics of political legitimacy and public persuasion in Nigeria's complex, multi-ethnic democracy.

The aim of this research is to intensively trace the reuse and recontextualisation of apology tropes across key moments in recent Nigerian history. Its specific objectives

are to identify the core tropes employed, analyse their discursive structure through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and explicate their function within the broader socio-political power dynamics. The significance of this inquiry is twofold: it offers scholars of African political communication a nuanced analytical framework that moves beyond evaluating sincerity to deconstructing function, and it provides citizens with the critical discursive tools necessary to decode the performative nature of political rhetoric, thereby fostering a more demystified and engaged public sphere. To ground this investigation, it is essential to situate it within the extant scholarly landscape on political apologies, which, while vast, reveals significant contextual and theoretical gaps when applied to the Nigerian milieu. Foundational work by Tavuchis (1991) in *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation* establishes apologies as remedial social rituals; whose efficacy is contingent upon the recognition of a breach and a demonstrable commitment to change. However, Tavuchis's framework is largely situated within Western, individual-centric contexts, necessitating a critical translation to environments like Nigeria, where the state-citizen relationship is historically fraught with distrust and the collective experience often overshadows the individual (Adebanwi, 2022).

Expanding the scope to the political realm, Nobles (2008), in *The Politics of Official Apologies*, provides an indispensable framework for analysing state-level apologies as calculated political acts rather than purely moral gestures. This is highly relevant to the Nigerian context, where apologies often emanate from presidential offices or government bodies. Yet, a gap emerges, as Nobles' focus is primarily on settled historical wrongs (For example, slavery, internment) in established democracies, which differs markedly from the ongoing, cyclical, and often unresolved nature of political grievances that characterise Nigeria's post-colonial experience (Maier, 2000; Smith, 2021).

More contemporary linguistic and pragmatic studies offer finer-grained tools for analysis. Kampf (2009), in exploring the discourse of minimising responsibility, provides a lens through which to view the non-apology apologies prevalent in Nigerian politics, where regret is expressed without acceptance of culpability. Similarly, the work of Harris, Grainger, and Mullany (2006) on the pragmatics of political apologies informs the micro-linguistic analysis required to dissect the structure of apologetic utterances. Within the specific Nigerian context, scholars have begun to lay the groundwork. Opeibi's (2009) application of discourse analysis to political campaign rhetoric demonstrates the potency of discursive studies in Nigeria, though it focuses on electoral campaigns rather than remedial discourse. More directly, Adetunji's (2009) work on intertextuality in corporate discourse provides a robust methodological precedent for applying this concept to Nigerian political texts, illustrating how discourses are woven together to construct identities.

Recent scholarship continues to build this picture. Smith (2021), in *The Performance of Regret in African Political Discourse*, argues compellingly that performative contrition is frequently a tool for political survival, a thesis with which this paper strongly aligns. However, Smith's work takes a broader continental view, leaving space for a deeper, more focused intertextual analysis of a single nation's discursive history. Furthermore, excellent recent studies like Eze's (2022) analysis of media framing of governmental accountability and Bello's (2023) examination of political rhetoric in the Fourth Republic treat apologies as incidental events within larger phenomena, rather than as a central, patterned, and strategic discursive practice in its own right.

This study therefore departs from and builds upon this existing body of research by synthesising the macro-level political theory of state apologies (Nobles, 2008) with the micro-level discourse analysis of apology pragmatics (Harris et al., 2006; Kampf, 2009) and the intertextual/interdiscursive framework championed by Fairclough (1992, 1995) and Blommaert (2005). It critically evaluates the literature to highlight a salient gap: while many studies note the occurrence of political apologies in Nigeria, few systematically trace the recurrence of specific discursive tropes across time, explicitly linking them to a theory of intertextual performance and power. This paper contends that it is precisely this repetition; this discursive recycling that reveals the most profound insights into the mechanics of political power, public memory, and the negotiation of legitimacy in Nigeria's evolving democracy. By examining apologies not as isolated events but as nodes in a vast network of historical and contemporary discourses, this research aims to illuminate the enduring patterns that shape political communication and public reception in Africa's most populous nation.

Theoretical framework

This research is grounded in the interconnected concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, mainly as developed within critical discourse analysis (CDA). Intertextuality, a term introduced by Kristeva (1986) based on Bakhtin's idea of dialogism, suggests that all texts are a mosaic of quotations; each text is an absorption and transformation of another. In the context of political apologies, this means that no apology exists in isolation. Every speech act is inherently linked to a web of previous apologies, historical narratives, media reports, and public expectations. When a Nigerian political leader offers an apology, that statement is not just about the immediate event but also evokes memories of past apologies, failures, and unfulfilled promises. This adds a complex layer of meaning where the new text is understood through the lens of the old.

Interdiscursivity, a concept further refined by Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995), extends this idea beyond specific texts to the mixing of different discourses, genres, and styles. Fairclough argues that part of the power of a text lies in its ability to draw upon and combine these different discursive elements. A political apology, for instance, is a genre that interdiscursively blends the moral discourse of repentance (borrowed from religious domains), the legalistic discourse of accountability, and the political discourse of public relations and legitimacy-building. In Nigeria, this blending is particularly potent, given the profound influence of religious rhetoric on public life and the enduring discourse of national unity.

This framework guides the analysis by providing the tools to deconstruct the sampled apologies. It demands that we ask not just "what is being said?" but "what previous texts and discourses are being invoked?" and "to what end?". It allows us to see an apology not as a solitary speech act but as a node in a vast network of discursive practices. For example, a contemporary apology for electoral fraud is intertextually linked to the annulment of the 1993 election and the various apologies or lack thereof that followed. It is interdiscursive insofar as it might employ the genre of a religious confession to address a political failure, thereby attempting to borrow the moral authority of the church to shore up diminishing political capital. This theoretical lens is therefore not merely an analytical add-on; it is essential for uncovering the deep structure and strategic function of political apologies, revealing them as calculated performances that reuse established tropes to navigate the perpetual crisis of legitimacy in Nigerian governance.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilising Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its methodological core, guided by the principles of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The data for this analysis consists of five purposively selected media excerpts reporting on political apologies in Nigeria. The sources are two of Nigeria's foremost digital news platforms, The Sun and The Guardian, chosen for their national reach and established reputation. The excerpts were selected based on their relevance to the research focus, their publication within a concentrated recent timeframe (April 2023 to April 2025) to capture a contemporary snapshot, and their representation of different apology types from various actors (former presidents, religious figures, political candidates, and the government itself). The method of data collection involved a systematic search of the digital archives of both newspapers using keywords such as "apology," "sorry," "forgiveness," and "Nigerians" combined with "government," "president," or "politician." The five selected excerpts are: 1) "Nigerians to Buhari: Your apology for forgiveness worthless, not accepted" (The Sun, 30th April 2023); 2) "2023 elections: We're sorry, Fr. Mbaka apologises to Nigerians" (The Sun, 25th June 2023); 3) "Hashim lauds IBB's apology, calls for national reconciliation" (The Guardian, 26 Feb 2025); 4) "Natasha rejects forged apology, vows to expose political oppression" (The Guardian, 25 Mar 2025); and 5) "We're sorry for errors in federal appointments list - FG" (The Sun, 10th April 2025). The analytical approach involves a close textual analysis of the language used in the apologies and the surrounding media discourse, identifying intertextual references to past events and apologies. It then examines the discursive practice, how the texts are produced, circulated, and consumed. Finally, it situates this within the broader social practice of Nigerian politics, interpreting the findings in terms of power, ideology, and the ongoing struggle for democratic legitimacy.

Data analysis and discussion

This section presents an extensive analysis of the five selected excerpts, interrogating the manifestation of intertextuality and interdiscursivity within each case. The analysis reveals a patterned repertoire of apology tropes, each serving distinct political functions while being deeply embedded in Nigeria's historical discursive landscape.

Excerpt 1

"Nigerians to Buhari: Your apology for forgiveness worthless, not accepted" (The Sun, 30th April 2023)

This excerpt serves as a potent case study for applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to deconstruct the failure of a political apology. Moving beyond a descriptive account of the event, a CDA-informed analysis reveals this not as a simple rejection of an apology but as a discursive battleground where historical narrative, political power, and public agency are contested. This analysis is structured through Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional framework, examining the text's linguistic features, its discursive practice, and the broader social practices of power and legitimacy in Nigeria. At the level of text, the headline's lexical choices are immediately significant. The declaration of the apology as "worthless" is a powerful semantic framing that strips the speech act of any symbolic or remedial value. This is not a neutral report but an active judgement. The public reactions quoted within the article; phrases like "economic hardship," "insecurity," and "divisive policies" function as intertextual anchors. They do not merely list grievances; they actively reconstruct the entirety of Buhari's eight-year tenure as a pre-text, a corpus of failure against which his final utterance is

measured and found wanting. This exemplifies the CDA principle that texts are not isolated but are inherently dialogic, always in conversation with prior texts and social realities (Fairclough, 1992; Kristeva, 1986). The apology's vague phrasing, "forgive him for any wrong he must have done," employs what Kampf (2009) identifies as the discourse of minimising responsibility. The use of the conditional "must have done" and the non-specific "any wrong" avoids direct acknowledgment of particular failures, a linguistic strategy typical of the "non-apology apology" that seeks the form of contrition without its substantive, culpable content.

The dimension of discursive practice examines how this text is produced, disseminated, and consumed. The newspaper acts not as a passive recorder but as an active agent in framing the discourse. By selecting and amplifying specific, dismissive public reactions, the media practices what Fairclough (1995) would term a "circuit of discourse," where media representation shapes public perception, which in turn fuels further media commentary. The consumption of the apology by the public demonstrates a high degree of critical discursive literacy. The rejection is evidence of what Blommaert (2005) would describe as an intertextual competence; the Nigerian public, drawing on a historical repertoire of hollow political performances, is adept at decoding the gap between discursive form and political substance. They interpret the apology not as a sincere *Mea Culpa* (Tavuchis, 1991) but as a strategic act of legacy management, an attempt to "clear his conscience" rather than atone for documented wrongs.

This leads to the third dimension: social practice. The failure of Buhari's apology is ultimately a failure of interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 1992). The speech act attempts to blend the moral-religious discourse of repentance and forgiveness with the political discourse of leadership and accountability. However, in a socio-political context historically fraught with distrust between the state and its citizens (Adebanwi, 2022), this blending is rejected violently. The public's response asserts that the discourse of moral apology is only legitimate and effective after the discourse of effective governance has been fulfilled. The apology, therefore, becomes a site for the negotiation of political legitimacy. Its rejection is a powerful social act that denies the leader the ability to control the narrative of his legacy. As Nobles (2008) argues, official apologies are fundamentally political acts aimed at reshaping historical narratives and legitimising authority. In this case, the public, through the medium of the press, seizes that discursive power, issuing a final verdict that solidifies a legacy of failure rather than rehabilitating it.

In conclusion, a CDA analysis reveals that Excerpt 1 is far more than a story of a rejected apology. It is a demonstration of how intertextual references to past failures drain a present speech act of its power. It showcases a struggle over interdiscursive authority, where the public insists on the primacy of tangible governance over performative remorse. Ultimately, this case underscores that in Nigeria's democratic landscape, the efficacy of a political apology is contingent not on its linguistic form but on its alignment with a social reality experienced by the citizenry, revealing a profound crisis of legitimacy that no discursive performance can easily repair.

Excerpt 2

"2023 elections: We're sorry, Fr. Mbaka apologises to Nigerians"
(The Sun, 25th June 2023)

This excerpt presents a rich case for a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that moves beyond a superficial reading of contrition. This excerpt is not merely an account of an

apology but a complex intertextual and interdiscursive performance designed to repair the discursive authority of a influential figure operating at the nexus of religion and politics.

The power of this apology is fundamentally derived from its intertextuality. As Kristeva (1986) posits, texts are mosaics of quotations, and Fr. Mbaka's apology is incomprehensible without its precursor texts: his highly publicised pre-election sermons and prophecies fervently endorsing a specific political candidate. This apology exists in a direct dialogic relationship with those prior pronouncements; it is a responsive text that seeks to manage the discursive fallout of its antecedents. The apology's meaning is constructed not from its own words alone but from the public's memory of the failed prophecy it references. This exemplifies the CDA principle that discourse is historically situated and that every text is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the discourses that precede it (Fairclough, 1992). The apology is an attempt to control the narrative arc from endorsement to failure, framing it within a redemptive cycle of sin and repentance.

At the core of this performance is interdiscursivity; the blending of discourses from different social domains (Fairclough, 1995). Fr. Mbaka's act is a potent interdiscursive *mélange*. He employs the genre of confession and repentance ("We're sorry"), leveraging the moral weight and spiritual authority inherent in his role as a Catholic priest. This discourse frames the error not as a political miscalculation but as a spiritual failing requiring absolution. The subject of the apology is unequivocally political; an election endorsement. This situates the speech act within the discourse of power, influence, and partisan alignment. As a public figure whose prophecies are newsworthy, his apology is also a performance for media consumption, designed to manage his public image and credibility capital.

This strategic blending is a calculated effort to use the unquestionable moral authority of religious discourse to remediate a failure in the precarious realm of political discourse. However, from a CDA perspective, this is not a sincere fusion but a strategic appropriation. The function of the apology aligns with Kampf's (2009) analysis of "non-apology apologies" and discourses of minimization. By framing the issue within a religious paradigm of seeking forgiveness, Mbaka subtly sidesteps a direct acknowledgment of flawed political judgment or the tangible consequences of his endorsement. The apology becomes a vehicle for responsibility minimisation; the fault is spiritualized, thus evading a concrete accounting within the political domain where it originated. Therefore, the primary function of this speech act is not moral reckoning with the Nigerian electorate but credibility repair and the restoration of discursive authority. The apology is a tool for managing what Harris, Grainger, and Mullany (2006) would identify as a face-threatening act. Mbaka's credibility, the source of his influence, was damaged by the failed endorsement. By performing a public apology steeped in religious sincerity, he seeks to reclaim his position as a legitimate voice. This aligns with Blommaert's (2005) view that discourse is a form of power, and the ability to control a narrative, even one of failure is a key social resource. CDA analysis reveals Fr. Mbaka's apology as a deeply strategic interdiscursive performance. It is a proxy apology that uses the genre of religious contrition to address a political miscalculation, thereby attempting to borrow the immutable authority of the church to shore up his own diminished political capital. This case underscores that in Nigeria's discursive landscape, apologies are often less about accountability to the public and more about the perpetual maintenance of the apologist's own power and legitimacy within a competitive field of influence.

Excerpt 3

“Hashim lauds IBB's apology, calls for national reconciliation”
(The Guardian, 26 Feb 2025)

In examining Excerpt 3, “Hashim lauds IBB’s apology, calls for national reconciliation” (The Guardian, 26 Feb 2025), through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it becomes evident that the apology attributed to former military leader Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) operates as a sophisticated intertextual and interdiscursive construct. This is not merely an expression of regret but a strategically deployed discursive performance aimed at reshaping historical narratives and reconfiguring political legitimacy. The analysis here is structured around Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional framework, delving into the textual, discursive, and social practices that underpin this utterance.

At the textual level, the apology’s lexical and semantic choices are deeply significant. The invocation of “national reconciliation” serves as a potent intertextual anchor, explicitly linking IBB’s statement to broader discourses of transitional justice and historical reckoning, such as those associated with South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This linkage is not incidental; it is a deliberate rhetorical strategy to imbue the apology with a moral gravity that transcends its immediate context. However, as Fairclough (1992) argues, texts are inherently dialogic, and this apology engages in a complex dialogue with Nigeria’s contested past, particularly the annulment of the 1993 elections, a watershed moment in the nation’s democratic history. The vague phrasing typical of such nostalgic apologies, lacking specific acknowledgment of agency or detailed wrongdoing, aligns with Kampf’s (2009) concept of “minimising responsibility,” where linguistic vagueness serves to dilute culpability while maintaining the appearance of contrition.

Moving to the dimension of discursive practice, the production and circulation of this apology reveal its function as a tool of interdiscursive blending. The apology is not issued in isolation but is mediated through a commentator, Hashim, who lauds it and frames it within a call for unity. This mediation is crucial; it exemplifies what Fairclough (1995) describes as the “circuit of discourse,” where media representation amplifies and legitimises certain narratives while marginalising others. The apology interdiscursively merges the discourse of military authority with that of democratic reconciliation, a fusion that is inherently paradoxical. A former military ruler employing the language of democratic restoration represents a calculated effort to reconstruct IBB’s legacy from that of an autocrat to a national elder statesman. This aligns with Nobles’ (2008) assertion that official apologies are fundamentally political acts, designed to reshape historical narratives and legitimize authority retrospectively. At the level of social practice, the apology functions as a mechanism of power and ideological reconfiguration. Its timing, decades after the event, is particularly revealing. This belatedness is not a mark of sincerity but a strategic intervention in contemporary political discourse. By apologising for a historical failure, IBB implicitly critiques current governance failures, thereby positioning himself as a moral arbiter whose past errors have been redeemed through contrition. This is a clear instance of what Blommaert (2005) identifies as the power of discourse to control narratives and allocate social resources. The apology becomes a site of struggle over historical memory and political legitimacy. Its acceptance or rejection is less about the past than about the present-day utility of that past; a point underscored by Smith (2021), who argues that performative regret in African politics often serves as a tool for political survival and legacy management.

Furthermore, the public's reception of such an apology is likely to be mediated by what Adebani (2022) describes as a deep-seated distrust between the state and citizens in Nigeria. The intertextual competence of the Nigerian public, honed through repeated exposure to hollow political performances, enables a critical decoding of such gestures. The apology may be interpreted not as a genuine act of accountability but as an interdiscursive maneuver to symbolically rehabilitate a contentious figure without substantive restitution. This reinforces the CDA tenet that discourse is embedded in power relations and ideological contests (Fairclough, 1992). In conclusion, a critical analysis of Excerpt 3 reveals that IBB's apology is a nuanced intertextual and interdiscursive performance. It leverages historical grievances and reconciliation discourses to achieve contemporary political ends, exemplifying how apologies in Nigeria's democratic landscape are often less about moral reckoning and more about the perpetual negotiation of power and legitimacy. This case underscores the necessity of evaluating political apologies not through their professed sincerity but through their strategic function within broader socio-political practices.

Excerpt 4

"Natasha rejects forged apology, vows to expose political oppression"
(The Guardian, 25 Mar 2025)

In examining Excerpt 4, "Natasha rejects forged apology, vows to expose political oppression" (The Guardian, 25 Mar 2025), a critical discourse analysis (CDA) reveals a profound discursive power struggle, where apology is not a gesture of remorse but a weapon of political coercion. This case exemplifies what Fairclough (1992) identifies as the dialectical relationship between discourse and social power, where language is both shaped by and shapes power relations. The forged apology represents an intertextual fabrication; it is a discursive counterfeit designed to impose a narrative of defeat upon Natasha by forcibly inserting her into a genre of contrition she did not author. This act is not merely deceptive but constitutes what Blommaert (2005) describes as an attempt to "allocate symbolic resources" in this case, the power to define truth and assign guilt.

Intertextually, the forged text mimics established tropes of political apology, drawing on a recognisable repertoire of penitential discourse to lend itself a veneer of authenticity. However, its authority is immediately destabilised by Natasha's rejection, which creates a dialogic tension between two competing texts: one asserting submission, the other defiance. This intertextual conflict illustrates Kristeva's (1986) axiom that every text is a response to previous texts. Here, the rejection is a direct negation of the forged narrative, a discursive reclamation of agency. Natasha's response does not merely deny the apology but actively recontextualises it within a broader discourse of political oppression, thereby transforming the incident from a personal matter into a public meta-commentary on authoritarian tactics. Interdiscursively, the episode demonstrates a calculated blending of discourses. The forgery attempts to merge the moral discourse of apology with the coercive discourse of political intimidation, effectively weaponising remorse. In contrast, Natasha's rebuttal interdiscursively combines the discourse of human rights advocacy ("vows to expose political oppression") with that of victimhood and resistance. This strategic fusion amplifies her position not merely as a candidate rejecting a falsehood but as a symbol of democratic resistance. Such a manoeuvre aligns with Fairclough's (1995) concept of "interdiscursive hybridity," where the mixing of discourses can serve to challenge or reinforce power structures. In this case, Natasha's hybrid discourse

contests the state's narrative control and exposes the mechanisms of discursive domination.

The implications of this trope extend beyond the immediate event. It illuminates what Kampf (2009) might term a "non-apology" in its most sinister form; one that is not even issued by the subject but imposed upon them, void of any sincerity and purely instrumental. The public reception of such a gesture, mediated through Nigeria's historically grounded scepticism towards political rhetoric (Adebanwi, 2022), would likely decode it as an act of aggression rather than reconciliation. This case underscores Nobles' (2008) contention that apologies are fundamentally political acts, but here, the politics is adversarial. The apology becomes a battlefield where discursive legitimacy is fought over, and where the power to apologise is synonymous with the power to dominate. In conclusion, a critical analysis of Excerpt 4 through the lens of CDA reveals that the forged apology is a potent example of discursive violence. It highlights how intertextual and interdiscursive strategies are employed not to seek forgiveness but to assert control, manipulate public perception, and suppress dissent. This reinforces the need to analyse political apologies not as moral statements but as strategic moves within Nigeria's ongoing struggle for democratic authenticity.

Excerpt 5

"We're sorry for errors in federal appointments list - FG"
(The Sun, 10th April 2025)

This excerpt presents a seemingly innocuous instance of governmental contrition. However, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) reveals this "bureaucratic error apology" as a sophisticated discursive performance designed to manage public perception and insulate power from substantive accountability. This trope functions not as a genuine moral reckoning but as a strategic ritual that perpetuates a cycle of minimal responsibility, leveraging intertextual and interdiscursive strategies to achieve its political ends. At the textual level, the lexical choice of "errors" is a deliberate and potent semantic framing. This term operates within what Kampf (2009) identifies as a "discourse of minimising responsibility." By classifying the mistake as an "error," the Federal Government (FG) frames the issue within a technical and administrative register, implying a procedural lapse rather than a deliberate act of political patronage or ethno-regional bias accusations that are endemic in the Nigerian political landscape (Smith, 2021). The phrasing "we're sorry for errors" is a classic non-apology apology (Harris, Grainger, & Mullany, 2006); it accepts a vague, impersonal fault while evading any admission of intentionality, specific negligence, or the underlying systemic injustices that such "errors" often mask. The text's intertextuality is precise yet shallow: it creates a direct dialogic relationship solely with the flawed appointments list itself (Fairclough, 1992), consciously avoiding intertextual links to the broader, more damning historical discourse of systemic marginalisation and biased federal character implementation.

The dimension of discursive practice exposes this utterance as a calculated act of public relations damage control. The apology is produced and disseminated not as a voluntary act of transparency but as a necessary response to public scrutiny, likely following media exposure or social media backlash. This positions the government in a reactive, rather than proactive, stance, a pattern that Fairclough (1995) would argue shapes a public perception of an institution that is perpetually correcting itself rather than operating with initial competence. The genre of the bureaucratic apology is interdiscursive par excellence; it strategically blends the discourse of public administration with its values of efficiency, accuracy, and transparency with the

discourse of corporate public relations. This blending is a power-laden manoeuvre. It allows the state to borrow the perceived neutrality and problem-solving ethos of technocratic language to symbolically resolve what is often a deeply political problem, thereby containing the crisis within a manageable framework of a "correctable error" rather than a "fundamental flaw" in governance.

Ultimately, at the level of social practice, this apology functions as a mechanism for maintaining the status quo of power relations. Its primary social function is not to restore public trust but to perform a ritual of accountability that is so minimal and technical that it demands no real political cost or structural change. The apology becomes what Blommaert (2005) would describe as a strategic allocation of symbolic resources; by offering this limited *mea culpa*, the government seeks to possess and control the narrative of the event, defining it as a closed issue of administrative oversight now resolved. This performative act is designed to pre-empt and disarm more serious accusations of corruption or ethno-religious favouritism. However, its efficacy is contingent on a citizenry wearied by what Adebani (2022) terms a "historically fraught distrust between the state and its citizens." The Nigerian public's intertextual competence, honed through repeated exposure to such hollow performances, likely decodes this not as sincerity but as a familiar, cynical tactic. The recurrence of this trope points to a systemic pathology where governance is discursively constructed through a cycle of error and minimal, perfunctory accountability, thereby perpetuating the very legitimacy deficits it aims to repair (Nobles, 2008). In this light, the bureaucratic error apology is revealed as a key discursive tool in the perpetual negotiation of political power in Nigeria, one that prioritises the appearance of order over the substance of just and competent governance.

Discussion of findings

The analysis of the five media excerpts reveals that political apologies in Nigeria are not spontaneous acts of contrition but are highly strategic, intertextual, and interdiscursive performances. They function as a limited, recycled currency in the economy of political legitimacy, deployed to achieve specific ends rather than to enact genuine moral reckoning. The findings critically extend the theoretical propositions of Fairclough (1992), Blommaert (2005), and Nobles (2008) by grounding them in the specific, fraught context of Nigeria's post-colonial democracy.

Firstly, the study identifies a persistent repertoire of apology tropes, each a calibrated response to a particular legitimacy deficit. The 'rejected apology' (Excerpt 1) and the 'forged apology' (Excerpt 4) are two sides of the same coin, representing a breakdown in the intended interdiscursive blend. In Buhari's case, the public's intertextual competence forged from a historical memory of unfulfilled promises (Adebani, 2022) enabled a critical decoding that rejected the fusion of moral and political discourse. The apology was measured against the pre-text of his administration's failures and found to be a performative attempt at legacy management, not a substantive act of accountability (Tavuchis, 1991; Kampf, 2009). Conversely, the forged apology is an act of discursive violence, an extreme form of what Kampf (2009) might term a 'non-apology', where the speech act is weaponised to impose a narrative of submission. It demonstrates that the power to author an apology is synonymous with the power to control public identity and narrative, a stark illustration of Blommaert's (2005) assertion that discourse is a key social resource.

Secondly, the analysis exposes the strategic function of interdiscursive blending as a primary tool for credibility repair. The 'proxy apology' (Excerpt 2) and the 'nostalgic reconciliation apology' (Excerpt 3) both leverage the moral authority of

non-political discourses to remediate political failures. Fr. Mbaka's apology is a quintessential example of this, blending religious discourse (confession, repentance) with political discourse (election endorsement) in a calculated manoeuvre to spiritualise a temporal miscalculation, thereby evading concrete political accountability. Similarly, IBB's belated apology interdiscursively merges the discourse of military authority with that of democratic transitional justice, a paradoxical fusion aimed at rehabilitating a contentious legacy and positioning him as a redeemed elder statesman (Nobles, 2008). This finding critically nuances Smith's (2021) thesis on performative regret, showing that in Nigeria, such performances are not merely for survival but are sophisticated attempts to transcend one's historical role by appropriating the discursive power of morally superior domains.

Finally, the 'bureaucratic error apology' (Excerpt 5) epitomises a systemic ritual that perpetuates a cycle of minimal accountability. By framing failures within a technical, administrative register, the state engages in a discourse of responsibility minimisation (Kampf, 2009) that effectively contains crises. This trope interdiscursively blends public administration language with corporate public relations, symbolically resolving deeply political problems of patronage and bias as mere "correctable errors." This performative ritual, as Fairclough (1995) would argue, shapes a public perception of an institution that is perpetually reactive rather than fundamentally competent. Its function is not to restore trust but to allocate symbolic resources (Blommaert, 2005) in a way that maintains the status quo, demanding no real political cost or structural change and thus perpetuating the very legitimacy deficits it aims to repair.

In essence, the recurrence of these tropes' points to a profound crisis of discursive legitimacy. The efficacy of an apology is contingent not on its linguistic construction but on its alignment with a social reality experienced by a critically literate public. The Nigerian populace, through repeated exposure, has developed a sophisticated intertextual competence that decodes the gap between discursive form and political substance. This forces political actors into an increasingly complex dance of interdiscursive appropriation, yet the findings suggest these strategies are often transparent and, as in Buhari's case, can spectacularly fail, revealing the limits of discursive power in the face of material governance failures.

Conclusion

This study has argued that political apologies in Nigeria's Fourth Republic are far from isolated speech acts; they are deeply embedded nodes within a vast, intertextual network of historical grievances, media discourses, and public memory. Utilising the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, the research has demonstrated that these utterances are strategic, patterned performances that draw from a limited repertoire of tropes to navigate the perpetual crisis of legitimacy that characterizes the Nigerian state. The central contribution of this work is its systematic unveiling of the mechanics of this discursive recycling. It moves beyond evaluating the sincerity of apologies, a pursuit often fraught with subjective impasse, to deconstruct their function. The analysis reveals that whether rejected, forged, proxy, nostalgic, or bureaucratic, each apology trope serves as a tool to achieve specific political ends: to manage legacies, repair credibility, rehabilitate contentious figures, weaponise narrative, or insulate power from substantive accountability. This finding firmly supports Nobles' (2008) contention that official apologies are fundamentally political acts, but it critically expands it by illustrating the complex interdiscursive strategies required to execute these acts in a context of deep public scepticism.

The implications of this research are twofold. Theoretically, it provides a nuanced, context-sensitive framework for analysing political discourse in post-colonial African states, where the state-citizen relationship is historically fraught and public memory is long. It affirms that CDA principles are not merely Western exports but are essential tools for unpacking the power dynamics in such environments. Practically, it offers citizens and media commentators a critical metalanguage for decoding political rhetoric, fostering a public sphere that is less susceptible to the mystifications of performative contrition.

Ultimately, this study concludes that the repetitive, tropological nature of political apologies in Nigeria is a symptom of an unresolved struggle for democratic authenticity. The apologies are not catalysts for change but are discursive placeholders for the substantive governance, accountability, and justice that remain elusive. Future research could productively explore the reception of these apologies through audience studies or trace the evolution of a specific trope across a longer historical arc, from the First Republic to the present. By continuing to interrogate the dialogue between text and power, scholarship can further illuminate the intricate dance of legitimacy that defines not only Nigerian politics but the broader African democratic experience.

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