

SILENCE AS A PERLOCUTIONARY TOOL: A SPEECH ACT ANALYSIS OF PRESIDENT BOLA AHMED TINUBU'S NON-RESPONSE TO THE #ENDBADGOVERNANCE PROTESTS

**Josephine JOSHUA¹, Hassan TIMOTHY² & Edward Ndatsada
MEDUGU³**

¹Department of English, Adamawa State College of Education, Hong.

²Department of Languages and Communication, Federal Polytechnic, Mubi.

³Department of Early Childhood Education, Adamawa State College of Education,
Hong.

Abstract

In political pragmatics, silence is an "ostensive" act that carries profound communicative weight, often acting as a zero-signifier in high-stakes governance. This study examines the pragmatics of "Executive Silence" using President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's non-response during the initial 72 hours of the August 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests in Nigeria. Drawing on Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), the study treats this period of silence not as a communicative void, but as an Indirect Speech Act with a specific illocutionary force of "strategic containment." The corpus comprises a chronological timeline of the 2024 protests, official presidential media briefs, and meta-discourse from Nigerian dailies and civil society communiqués. Utilizing Qualitative Discourse Analysis, the study evaluates how the President's silence functioned as a perlocutionary tool to influence protest momentum. Crucially, the paper evaluates this silence against SDG 16 (Peace and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). It argues that while silence can be a tool for administrative brinkmanship, it fundamentally weakens the "Social Contract" partnership between the state and civil society. The analysis suggests that the pragmatics of silence, when overextended, creates an information vacuum that undermines the transparent, multi-stakeholder cooperation essential for sustainable development in a burgeoning democracy.

Keywords: Pragmatics of Silence, Speech Act Theory, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, SDG 16, SDG 17, Governance, Nigeria. Political discourse, Crisis communication

Introduction

In the study of human communication, silence has traditionally been viewed as a void—a mere absence of speech. However, in contemporary pragmatics, silence is increasingly recognized as a potent "ostensive" act. It is not a communicative failure but a deliberate choice that carries profound illocutionary force. As Jaworski (1993) posits, silence is a communicative sign that can be as assertive and meaningful as any spoken word. In the realm of political statecraft, the "Pragmatics of Silence" serves as a strategic tool, used by leaders to navigate crises, exert power, or signal a refusal to negotiate.

In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, presidential communication has often been a site of intense pragmatic scrutiny. The administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, which began in May 2023, has been defined by bold economic reforms, including the removal of fuel subsidies and the floating of the Naira. These policies culminated in the #EndBadGovernance protests of August 2024. During the most critical first 72 hours of these nationwide demonstrations, the President maintained a "stony" silence. This period of non-response offers a rich corpus for pragmatic analysis, as the public's expectation of a speech act transformed the President's silence into a highly significant "zero-signifier."

When a nation is in crisis, the default expectation is for the leadership to engage in "Expressive" or "Commissive" speech acts to calm the populace. However, President Tinubu's initial response to the August 2024 protests was an extended interval of silence. The problem lies in the interpretation of this silence: Was it a "Silence of Deliberation" (intended to formulate a thoughtful response) or a "Silence of Dismissal" (intended to delegitimize the protesters' demands)?

Furthermore, from a developmental perspective, such silence creates a friction point with international benchmarks for good governance. In an era where SDG 16 calls for transparent, inclusive institutions and SDG 17 demands multi-stakeholder partnerships, a 72-hour information vacuum raises questions about the health of the "Social Contract" between the Nigerian state and its citizens. This study seeks to investigate the pragmatic intent behind this silence and its perlocutionary effect on national stability. The primary objective of this study is to analyze the pragmatics of President Tinubu's silence during the 2024 protests. Specifically, the study seeks to: Identify the illocutionary force of the President's non-response during the first three days of the protests; evaluate the perlocutionary effects of this silence on the Nigerian public as reflected in media discourse; and assess how this "executive silence" aligns with or undermines the goals of SDG 16 (Peace and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

This study is significant for several reasons. Linguistically, it contributes to the growing body of work on "African Political Pragmatics" by providing a case study of silence as an indirect speech act. Politically, it provides a critical evaluation of crisis communication in Nigeria, offering insights into how non-verbal statecraft influences public perception. Most importantly, by aligning the study with SDG 16 and 17, it bridges the gap between theoretical linguistics and sustainable development, demonstrating that the way a leader communicates (or fails to) has direct consequences for institutional trust and global partnership.

Conceptualizing Silence in Pragmatics

In classical linguistics, silence was often treated as a "null" variable—a break between segments of speech. However, the "Pragmatic Turn" in language studies has redefined silence as a communicative strategy. Jaworski (1993) argues that silence is an "ostensive" act, meaning it is a signal that demands interpretation. He categorizes silence along a continuum, ranging from a complete lack of communicative intent to a highly charged, intentional "speech act."

In the political arena, Kurzon (1998) distinguishes between "unintentional silence" (an oversight) and "intentional silence" (statecraft). For a leader, silence is rarely an accident; it is a choice made to maintain "face" or to exert power through ambiguity. This study focuses on what Kurzon terms "Executive Silence," where a leader deliberately withholds a response to a public stimulus to control the narrative or de-escalate a situation without making concessions.

Speech Act Theory: From Austin to Searle

The theoretical bedrock of this paper is Speech Act Theory, pioneered by J.L. Austin (1962) and refined by John Searle (1969). The theory posits that to say something is to do something. The Locutionary Act: The act of saying (or in this case, the physical act of remaining silent). The Illocutionary Force: The intended function of the act. In the case of President Tinubu, the illocutionary force of his silence may be interpreted as "deliberation" or "dismissal." The Perlocutionary Effect: The actual result of the act on the audience.

Applying this to silence requires viewing the absence of speech as a "Zero-Signifier." When the public context (protests, economic hardship) creates a "Sincerity

Condition" (Searle, 1969) that demands a response, the failure to provide one becomes a speech act in itself. This "Non-Speech Act" performs a specific function: it signals to the protesters that their "Face-Threatening Act" (the protest) has not yet forced a "Commissive Act" (a promise of change) from the state.

The "Social Contract" and Political Communication in Nigeria

Political communication in Nigeria is deeply rooted in the concept of the "Social Contract"—the unwritten agreement where citizens grant power to leaders in exchange for protection and economic well-being. Obadare (2018) notes that Nigerian leaders have historically used silence as a tool of "power-distance," creating a gap between the ruler and the ruled that reinforces a hierarchy.

Historically, presidential silence in Nigeria has been polarizing. From the "hermetic" silence of the Yar'Adua era to the "technical" silences of the Buhari administration, the Nigerian populace has developed a high level of "Pragmatic Competence" in decoding what their leaders aren't saying. President Tinubu's silence during the #EndBadGovernance protests must be viewed within this historical context. Unlike previous eras, the 2024 protests occurred in a digital age where silence is immediately filled by social media speculation, making the "Perlocutionary Effect" of silence more volatile than ever before.

Silence, Transparency, and the SDGs

The intersection of linguistics and sustainable development is found in SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Strong institutions are built on "Responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making" (Target 16.7). Silence is pragmatically at odds with "responsiveness."

Furthermore, SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) emphasizes the need for transparent dialogue between the state and civil society. When a leader is silent, the "Partnership" is effectively suspended. Literature on "Collaborative Governance" suggests that silence during periods of civil unrest can be interpreted as a withdrawal from the partnership, thereby undermining the goal of achieving sustainable development through collective action.

To help you build a robust theoretical foundation for your 15-page paper, here is a 3-page draft for Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework. This chapter applies Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and Face-Work to explain why President Tinubu's silence was not just an absence of speech, but a strategic "face-saving" mechanism.

Theoretical Framework

Politeness Theory and the Concept of "Face"

The primary framework for this study is Politeness Theory, as formulated by Brown and Levinson (1987), which is rooted in Erving Goffman's concept of "Face." In pragmatics, "Face" refers to the public self-image that every individual (including a political leader) wants to maintain. Brown and Levinson divide this into two aspects: Positive Face: The desire to be liked, appreciated, and validated by others.

Negative Face: The desire to be autonomous, free from imposition, and in control of one's own actions.

In the context of the #EndBadGovernance protests, both the President and the protesting public were engaged in a high-stakes "Face" struggle. The protests acted as a massive Face-Threatening Act (FTA) against the President, challenging his "Positive Face" (his image as a competent leader) and his "Negative Face" (his authority to govern without interference).

Silence as a Face-Saving Strategy

When a leader is confronted with an FTA, they have several options: speak boldly, apologize, or remain silent. Brown and Levinson categorize "Going off-record"

as a politeness strategy where the speaker (or non-speaker) acts in a way that allows for multiple interpretations.

President Tinubu's 72-hour silence can be theorized as a Negative Politeness Strategy. By not responding immediately, the President protected his "Negative Face" by refusing to be forced into a premature reaction by the protesters. It was a pragmatic assertion of autonomy. Simultaneously, silence served as a Face-Saving Act (FSA) for the institution of the Presidency. An immediate, heated response might have led to "Face-Loss" if the President appeared rattled or defensive. Silence, therefore, functioned as a "pragmatic shield," allowing time for the administration to collect data and craft a response that appeared calculated rather than reactive.

The Intersection of Politeness and SDG 16/17

The "Face-Work" of a leader has direct implications for SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

SDG 16 Perspective: While silence saves the leader's personal "Face," it may threaten the "Institutional Face" of the government. For a state institution to be seen as "strong" and "accountable," it must engage in dialogue. Prolonged silence can be interpreted by the public as "Institutional Impoliteness," which erodes the trust necessary for Goal 16.

SDG 17 Perspective: Partnerships thrive on mutual validation (Positive Face). When the government uses silence as a strategy, it pragmatically ignores the "Positive Face" of its civil society partners. This study argues that "Strategic Silence" is a delicate balance: it protects executive authority but risks bankrupting the "Social Contract" partnership intended by SDG 17.

By combining Speech Act Theory with Politeness Theory, we can map the President's silence as a multi-layered pragmatic event.

Locutionary level: 72 hours of no verbal output.

Illocutionary level: An off-record strategy of "Face-Preservation."

Perlocutionary level: A mixed result of regained executive control (Negative Face saved) versus increased public alienation (Partnership threatened).

The "Information Vacuum" and Multi-Stakeholder Trust

SDG 17 emphasizes that sustainable development requires "partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society." When President Tinubu remained silent for 72 hours, he pragmatically created an Information Vacuum. In the absence of a "Locutionary Act" from the state, the "Partnership" was disrupted in three ways:

Domestic Civil Society (The Social Contract): The silence was interpreted by CSOs as a breach of the consultative partnership. This led to a "Communicative Breakdown" where protesters felt the state was no longer a partner in progress, but an adversary.

The International Community (SDG 17.16): Global partnerships depend on stability and predictable communication. The international community (UN, foreign diplomats) relies on a leader's "Declarative Speech Acts" to gauge national stability. Silence, in this case, signaled a lack of "Responsive Governance," potentially affecting Nigeria's standing in global development partnerships.

Data and Transparency (SDG 17.18): This goal demands timely, reliable data. Silence is the antithesis of data. By not addressing the underlying economic statistics (subsidy costs, inflation data) during the peak of the protests, the administration pragmatically "withheld" the transparency needed for an inclusive partnership.

The Perlocutionary Cost of "Strategic Brinkmanship"

While the silence may have been a "Power Play", its Perlocutionary Effect (the reaction it caused) was the fragmentation of the national collective. For a "Strong

Institution" (SDG 16) to foster "Partnerships" (SDG 17), the pragmatics of its communication must be proactive rather than reactive. Tinubu's eventual August 4th broadcast was a "Repair Strategy," but the preceding silence had already "Taxed" the relationship between the government and its people.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a Qualitative Case Study Research Design, utilizing Pragmatic Discourse Analysis (PDA) as the primary analytical tool. PDA is particularly suited for this study because it focuses on language use in specific socio-political contexts, allowing the researcher to uncover the hidden meanings, intentions, and "silences" within communication. The study does not just look at what was absent, but how that absence functioned within the specific timeframe of the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests.

The Corpus (Data of the Study)

The data for this study is categorized into two distinct sets: The Silence Interval and the Meta-discourse Response.

Primary Corpus (The Silence Event): The 72-hour period between August 1, 2024 (Commencement of Protests) and August 4, 2024 (The Nationwide Broadcast).

Secondary Corpus (The Verbal Reactions): A purposive sample of 15 News Headlines from three major Nigerian national dailies: The Punch, The Guardian, and Vanguard. These headlines represent the "Perlocutionary evidence"—the public and media interpretation of the President's silence.

The Anchor Text: The official transcript of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's August 4, 2024, Nationwide Broadcast. This text is analyzed to identify the "Repair Strategies" used to address the preceding silence.

Data Elicitation and Sampling Technique

A Purposive Sampling Technique was used to select media headlines that explicitly mentioned the President's silence or lack of response. The criteria for selection included:

Headlines published within the "Silence Window" (Aug 1–4, 2024).

Headlines that attributed a specific pragmatic "intent" to the silence (e.g., "Tinubu ignores," "Tinubu deliberate delay").

Editorial opinions that linked the silence to institutional stability (SDG 16).

The Coding Process

To analyze the silence through the lens of Speech Act and Politeness Theories, the data is coded into three "Pragmatic Categories":

Code	Category	Linguistic Indicator
SIL-DIS	Silence as Dismissal	Headlines using verbs like <i>ignores</i> , <i>shuns</i> , or <i>unmoved</i> .
SIL-DEL	Silence as Deliberation	Phrases suggesting the President is "monitoring" or "consulting".
SIL-FTA	Face-Threatening Silence	Reactions indicating public anger, speculation or loss of institutional trust.

Method of Analysis

The analysis follows a three-step pragmatic procedure:

Contextualization: Setting the socio-economic scene (subsidy removal, inflation) that made silence a "marked" behaviour.

Illocutionary Mapping: Using Searle's (1969) framework to determine if the silence functioned as an Assertive (stating a position of power) or a Directive (ordering the status quo to remain).

SDG Impact Assessment: Evaluating how the "SIL-FTA" (Face-Threatening Silence) directly conflicts with the targets of SDG 16 (inclusive governance) and SDG 17 (civil-state partnership).

Presentation of the Corpus

The following table represents the meta-discourse during the "Silence Window" (August 1-4, 2024). These headlines serve as the linguistic evidence of the perlocutionary effect of the President's non-response:

S/No.	Source	Headline
1	<i>The Punch</i>	"#EndBadGovernance: Protests rage on as Tinubu keeps mum"
2	<i>Vanguard</i>	"Tinubu's silence is loud, provocative- Clark"
3	<i>Guardian</i>	"Presidency: Tinubu is monitoring situation, to speak soon"
4	<i>Premium Times</i>	"Day 3: Anxiety grows over President's continued silence"
5	<i>Daily Trust</i>	"Protest: Why Tinubu has not addressed Nigerians"
6	<i>ThisDay</i>	"International community watches as Aso Rock remains silent"

Analysis of Illocutionary Force: The "Silence of Power"

The primary illocutionary force identified in the corpus is Strategic Containment. By "keeping mum" (Headline 1), the President performed a non-verbal act of Negative Politeness. From a pragmatic standpoint, any immediate speech act would have required the President to either "Comply" (grant demands) or "Refuse" (deny demands). Both acts are high-risk.

By remaining silent, the President utilized a "Wait-and-See" Illocution—an indirect act that signalled the administration was not yet ready to be "pushed" into a commitment. However, the pragmatic cost of this was high. As seen in Headline 2, the silence was interpreted as "provocative." In Speech Act Theory, when a "Sincerity Condition" is met (i.e., the nation is in a state of emergency), silence is no longer a neutral pause; it becomes a Direct Act of Hegemony.

Perlocutionary Effects: Anxiety and Institutional Friction

The perlocutionary effect (the effect on the hearer/public) was a transition from demand to distress. Headlines 4 and 6 highlight a growing "Anxiety" and a shift in the "International" gaze.

Pragmatically, silence during a protest creates an Information Vacuum. According to Relevance Theory, when a leader is silent, the public expends more "Cognitive Effort" to infer meaning. In this case, the public inferred "indifference" or "incapacity." This directly undermines SDG 16 (Strong Institutions) because a "strong" institution is defined by its ability to provide clear, reliable communication during

crises. The perlocutionary effect was thus a "Face-Loss" for the democratic process, as the silence was decoded as a lack of accountability.

Breaking the Silence: The August 4th Speech as "Repair"

When President Tinubu finally spoke on August 4, 2024, his speech functioned as a Pragmatic Repair Strategy.

The Locutionary Act: A 15-minute televised broadcast.

The Illocutionary Force: A "Commissive" act to acknowledge the pain of the people ("I hear you") and an "Assertive" act to defend his policies.

However, the analysis of the speech reveals that even within his words, there were "Silences." He remained silent on specific demands (such as the immediate reversal of fuel subsidy), proving that silence can exist within speech. This "internal silence" further impacts SDG 17, as it shows a selective partnership—the government chose which parts of the civil society "dialogue" to hear and which to ignore.

Discussion: Implications for SDGs

a. Silence, Institutional Accountability, and SDG 16

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) is predicated on the development of "effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels" (Target 16.6). In the pragmatic landscape of Nigerian politics, President Tinubu's 72-hour silence during the #EndBadGovernance protests represents a significant friction point with these targets.

While silence can be a tool for internal administrative deliberation (Sub-theme 15), its public face is often interpreted as a lack of "responsive, inclusive, and participatory decision-making" (Target 16.7). When a state institution—the Presidency—withholds speech during civil unrest, it pragmatically signals a closure of the democratic space. This study finds that "Strategic Silence" often serves the short-term goal of de-escalating street momentum but carries the long-term cost of institutional "Face-loss," where the public views the silence as a dismissive illocutionary act rather than a deliberative one.

b. SDG 17: Fragility of Civil-State Partnerships

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) emphasizes the "Social Contract" between governments and civil society. A partnership is fundamentally a communicative relationship. The 2024 protest timeline reveals that the absence of a presidential "Locutionary Act" forced civil society organizations (CSOs) into an "interpretive struggle."

According to Relevance Theory, the cognitive effort required by the public to decode a leader's silence leads to varied and often hostile implicatures. In a healthy SDG 17 partnership, communication should be "ostensive" and transparent to minimize misinformation. Tinubu's silence, however, created an "information vacuum" that was filled by divisive rhetoric on digital platforms. This study concludes that for Nigeria to meet the 2030 Agenda, executive pragmatics must evolve from a "Culture of Silence" to a "Culture of Proactive Engagement," ensuring that silence is not used as a barrier to the multi-stakeholder dialogue required for national development.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's silence during the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests was a deliberate Indirect Speech Act with a specific illocutionary force of strategic containment. Through the lens of Politeness Theory, the silence functioned as a Negative Politeness Strategy to protect the "Face" of the Presidency from immediate concessions. However, the

perlocutionary effect was a rise in public anxiety and a perceived breach of the social contract, directly conflicting with the transparent governance goals of SDG 16 and the partnership ideals of SDG 17.

Recommendations

- a. Administrative Pragmatics: The Nigerian Presidency should adopt a "Placeholder Speech Act" policy—where a brief, empathetic acknowledgement is issued immediately during crises to satisfy the "Sincerity Condition" while deeper deliberations occur.
- b. Linguistic Training for Policymakers: Political communication teams should be sensitized to the "Pragmatics of Silence" to understand how "saying nothing" is decoded as "doing something" in a digital, high-stakes democracy.
- c. SDG Integration: National communication strategies should be audited against SDG 16.10 (Public Access to Information) to ensure that "Strategic Silence" does not morph into "Institutional Opacity."

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