

REFERENCING AND INFERENCING: A COMPARATIVE PRAGMATIC STUDY OF OCCUPY NIGERIA AND ENDSARS PROTESTS' DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This study presents a comparative pragmatic analysis of the Occupy Nigeria (2012) and EndSARS (2020) protests, focusing on how protesters construct meaning in public protest discourse. Although protest movements have become prominent forms of political participation in Nigeria, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the pragmatic mechanisms through which protesters encode and communicate their intentions in protest texts. Consequently, the linguistic strategies through which meaning is negotiated, implied, and interpreted in protest discourse remain insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap, the study investigates how reference and inference function as pragmatic tools for meaning construction in protest communication. Drawing on the frameworks of Yule (1996) and Mey (2001), the research examines how identified referents in protest texts relate to contextual factors to convey meaning and reveal speakers' communicative intentions. The study argues that protest discourse in Nigeria functions as a strategic site of meaning-making in which protesters deploy referential expressions and inferential cues to construct collective identity, articulate dissent, and implicitly negotiate power relations within the socio-political context. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, protest texts from the two movements are analysed to identify patterns of referential expressions and inferential meanings. The findings reveal that protesters frequently employ pronouns, particularly "we," to construct collective identity and establish in-group and out-group distinctions. Demonstrative pronouns and noun phrases are also strategically used to signal physical and psychological distance, often expressing rejection or disapproval. Furthermore, inferential meanings embedded in the discourse reveal speakers' intentions to threaten, reassure, criticise, condemn, incite, and confront authority. The study situates Nigerian protest discourse within a global context and, by so doing, contributes to the ongoing project of re-imagining language in a globalised world, demonstrating how locally grounded protest expressions circulate through transnational communicative networks and participate in broader conversations on justice, governance, and civic resistance.

Keywords: Reference, inference, EndSARS, Occupy Nigeria, protest discourse, context.

1.0 Introduction

Language is a fundamental medium of human communication through which individuals coordinate actions, share knowledge, and express thoughts (Goodman & Frank, 2016, p. 818).

Beyond everyday interaction, language also plays a central role in public life, particularly in moments of social and political contestation such as protests. Protest constitutes a collective social process through which citizens articulate grievances, challenge authority, and mobilise support to influence public opinion and demand institutional or policy change (Cammaerts, 2015, p. 2). In this sense, protest represents an important form of civic engagement, allowing social actors to contest governance practices and advocate for reforms across domains such as economic policy, human rights, health, gender, and political accountability (Oyedemi, 2018). Within such contexts, language functions not merely as a communicative medium but as a strategic resource through which protesters frame issues, contest state authority, and construct collective positions (Chiluwa, 2015; Cammaerts, 2015).

The right to protest is widely recognised within international and national legal frameworks, including Article 21 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 11 of the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and Section 40 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). Nigeria has experienced several protest movements reflecting citizens' engagement with governance and public policy. Among the most prominent are the Occupy Nigeria protest of 2012, which emerged in response to the removal of fuel subsidies, and the EndSARS protest of 2020, which mobilised widespread opposition to police brutality. Both movements attracted significant national and international attention and generated extensive public discourse across physical and digital spaces, highlighting the central role of language in shaping public engagement with socio-political issues.

Moments of protest and political crisis often produce dense and symbolically charged discourses through which social actors articulate grievances, negotiate identities, and challenge institutional authority. As Adeyanju (2007) observes, political discourse in crisis situations frequently contains expressions that signal threats to peace, law, and social order. Existing scholarship has examined protest discourse from perspectives such as political communication, media representation, and critical discourse analysis. While these studies provide valuable insights into the dynamics of protest communication, comparatively limited attention has been paid to the pragmatic processes through which meaning is constructed and interpreted in protest discourse, particularly in the Nigerian context. Specifically, the role of pragmatic mechanisms such as reference and inference

in shaping the interpretation of protest messages and the construction of shared socio-political meanings remains insufficiently explored.

This study addresses this gap by examining how referential and inferential mechanisms operate in the discourse of the Occupy Nigeria (2012) and EndSARS (2020) protests. Drawing on the pragmatic perspectives of Yule (1996) and Mey (2001), the study analyses selected protest texts to demonstrate how linguistic choices enable participants and audiences to identify social actors, interpret implicit meanings, and construct shared understandings of socio-political realities. Through a comparative analysis of texts from both movements, the study demonstrates how protest discourse mobilises pragmatic resources to articulate grievances, construct collective identities, and position actors within broader ideological struggles.

By situating Nigerian protest discourse within a global context, the study further contributes to the ongoing project of re-imagining language in a globalised world. It demonstrates how locally grounded protest expressions circulate through transnational communicative networks and participate in broader conversations on justice, governance, and civic resistance. In this way, protest language in Nigeria is understood not merely as local political communication but as a form of linguistic practice that interacts with and reshapes contemporary global activist discourse.

The subsequent sections of the paper review relevant scholarship, articulate the theoretical framework and methodological approach, and present a comparative pragmatic analysis of protest discourse in the Occupy Nigeria and EndSARS movements.

2.0 Occupy Nigeria and #End SARS Protests: An Overview

The protest tagged Occupy Nigeria, started on Monday, 9 January 2012, when the Federal Government of Nigeria on January 1, 2012, removed fuel subsidy in Nigeria without warning and announced an increase in the pump price of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) from ₦65 (Sixty-five naira) to ₦141 (one hundred and forty-one naira), as contained in the Long-term Fiscal Framework and 2012 Fiscal Strategic paper submitted by President Jonathan to the National Assembly, proposing full deregulation of the oil sector to commence from the 2012 fiscal year. This singular action shook the sensibilities of Nigerians. It elicited stiff resistance from Nigerians as led by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and supported by a

coalition of Civil Society groups, opposition politicians and professional associations, all coalescing into a Joint Action Front (JAF), to stage a five-day nationwide protest from Monday January 9, 2012 to Friday January 13, 2012. Protests occurred in cities such as Kano, Surulere, Ojota (within metropolitan Lagos), Abuja, Minna, and at the Nigerian High Commission in London, characterised by civil disobedience, civil resistance, strike actions, and demonstrations.

The #EndSARS protest was a decentralized online social movement that began in 2017, using the hashtag #EndSARS to voice concern about police brutality, abuse, and impunity by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) in Nigeria, especially against the youths, in response to the formation of the unit in 1992 in response to increasing crime rates in Lagos state, which by 2002 had spread to other states of the federation, but whose officers had deviated from the founding principles to become a terror to innocent citizens, a resurgence in October 2020 after further revelations of the unit's abuses, and mass demonstrations across major cities in Nigeria and social media platforms with over 28 million tweets on Twitter alone. The protest, which was initially peaceful, turned violent after it was alleged that security forces and suspected thugs attacked protesters, resulting in the death of some protesters and the injury of many.

3.0 Research Problem

Although both Occupy Nigeria (2012) and #EndSARS (2020) are major civic uprisings in Nigeria's recent history, how participants used language to frame grievances, build collective identities, and mobilise public support remains not well understood from a pragmatic perspective. Existing studies (e.g., Agbedo, 2012; Chiluwa, 2015; Meng, 2021; Onanuga, 2021; Adeniyi, 2022; Chidozie, E. C. & Chukwuezi, E. E., 2024; among others) tend to describe their political contexts, media dynamics, or ideological content, but rarely examine how referencing and inferencing—two core pragmatic mechanisms—shape the interpretation and persuasive power of protest discourse. Furthermore, the two movements took place in different communication environments: Occupy Nigeria relied mainly on traditional media and early social networking platforms, while #EndSARS occurred within a highly digital, multimodal, and globally connected space. These differences in communication ecology likely influenced how protesters chose referential expressions (e.g., “we,” “the youth,” “the cabal,” “a president,” “SARS”) and how audiences

inferred implicit meanings, contextual assumptions, and ideological positions. However, scholarly work has not systematically compared these pragmatic strategies across the two protests.

The main issue, therefore, is the limited scholarly attention to the pragmatic mechanisms by which protesters encode and communicate meaning in protest discourse, particularly through reference and inference. More specifically, there is a lack of comparative research showing how referencing and inferencing function differently in the discourses of the Occupy Nigeria and #EndSARS movements, and how these differences reflect changes in Nigeria's socio-political landscape, media culture, and patterns of civic engagement. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how language shapes the creation, circulation, and influence of protest messages in evolving democratic contexts. Consequently, this study offers a new perspective on the examination of protest discourse within pragmatics and, more broadly, in linguistics.

4.0 Empirical Review

The study of language use in socio-political contexts has increasingly foregrounded pragmatics as a critical analytical lens. Pragmatics, concerned with meaning-in-context, provides tools such as referencing, inferencing, implicature, deixis, and presupposition to uncover how speakers encode ideological stances and shape audience interpretation (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). Scholars such as van Dijk (2006) and Fairclough (2010) emphasize that discourse practices in political and protest settings are inherently strategic, deploying linguistic choices that subtly negotiate power, legitimacy, and collective identity. Protest discourse, therefore, becomes a site where groups signal alignment, frame grievances, and mobilize action through shared inferential knowledge and contextual cues.

Previous studies in linguistics have demonstrated the use of various linguistic theories to analyse protest discourse in placards (Agbedo, 2012; Abuh, 2024), posters (Ibrahim, 2017; Agbara & John, 2022), social media posts (Onanuga, 2021; Adeniyi, 2022; Chidozie & Chukwuezi, 2024), cartoons and visual images (Ukor, 2022; Usman, 2024), and newspaper reports and headlines (Egbunike, 2015; Ademilokun, 2023). Most scholars who have worked on the context-based analysis of protest have not used the pragmatic tools of reference and inference to compare the language of protest with other forms of discourse. For instance, Agbedo (2012) analysed the linguistic messages of placards displayed during the fuel subsidy removal protests in Nigeria, using

Halliday's (1978) notion of context stratum (part of Systemic-Functional Grammar) as the analytical tool, and found an emerging pattern of civil protest in Nigeria that interrogates a wide range of socio-economic and political ills plaguing the Nigerian nation. Using a pragma-semiotic approach, Igwebuike, Abioye & Chimuanya (2017) analysed the verbal and visual representations of people and their actions during the Occupy Nigeria protest, employing Mey's (2001) pragmatic act and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal discourse analysis.

In a study that deployed Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Act Theory and Hoye and Kaiser's (2007) Visual Act Theory for data analysis, Ukor (2022) found that verbal and visual elements in the Nigerian EndSARS protest movement were used in the acts of charging, stating, commanding, reminding, naming, describing, etc. Visual elements like colour, facial expression, and other linguistic expressions such as metaphor, symbolism, gesture, contrast, and satire were also found to be used to demand and lampoon the government; the authors concluded that visual act theory and pragmatic acts complement each other in multimodal communication. Agbara and John (2022) investigated pragmatic inferences in verbal aggression employed during Nigeria's ENDSARS protest to identify the pragmatic inferences used by protesters to register their resentment and frustrations, and to identify how protesters negotiated the intended meaning of the various inscriptions on the posters. By deploying the pragmatic tools of implicature and presupposition, Chidozie and Chukwuezi (2024) found that the language of protesters was characterised by distinct classes of presuppositions, which served as persuasive techniques that made the message seem real and convincing.

While numerous studies address the linguistic characteristics of both protests, few undertake a comparative pragmatic analysis focusing specifically on referencing and inferencing across the two movements. Existing works tend to treat each protest independently or emphasize discourse structure, ideology, or digital activism without examining how pragmatic markers shift across socio-political and technological contexts. This study fills that gap by offering a comparative perspective that links pragmatic strategies to evolving protest cultures in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Pragmatists (i.e., Malinowski, 1923; Firth, 1962; Halliday & Hassan, 1989; Odebunmi, 2006; Kecskes, 2010 & 2014; Odebunmi, 2016; Paranowo, 2020, and others) have long argued the

importance of the discourse environment for meaning. This study prioritises the discourse context, using the pragmatic tools of reference and inference outlined by Yule (1996) and Mey (2001) to analyse the selected texts. Reference and inference are two distinct yet interrelated processes in pragmatics (Mey, 2001). When users of language carry out linguistic actions in discourse, they refer to human and non-human characters. The addressee must understand what entity or process the speaker has in mind. This indicates that any communicative situation requires the identification of entities, processes, and instances.

In this sense, reference is a relation that holds between words or phrases in language and what a speaker uses those words or phrases to refer to in the real world in a discourse context (Akinwotu, 2016, p. 92). Yule (1996, p. 23) defines reference as “an activity in which the speaker uses a particular linguistic form (referring expressions) to point the listener to the identification of some entities”. A speaker can use references to select referents such as people, objects, and concepts in a specific context of interaction. Reference is a social act because reference is connected to the goals of the speaker, and the speaker assumes that the meaning of the identified referent will be understood as the speaker intended (Yule, 1996, p. 17). Reference is a social act in which the speaker assumes that the meaning of an identified object, person, or notion in a given context will be interpreted as the speaker intended because reference is associated with the goals of the speaker (Chukwu, 2024):

Pragmatic reference has to do with the use of words to indicate persons or objects that are not recoverable from a sentence or immediate linguistic environment. However, the objects or persons being referred to can be identified from the context in which the reference is made or from the background knowledge of the participants in the conversation.

Deictic expressions are a type of pragmatic reference: "indexical expression is a special referential expression, in which, in addition to the naming semantics of their sense, they have the sense of the reference to the particular context in which that sense is used" (Mey, 2001, p. 54). Reference is a general term for naming entities in the world or context (Cruse, 2006), and a referring expression or reference is "a linguistic unit, a noun phrase, which is used in an utterance and is linked to something outside the language" (Kreidler, 1998, p. 130), which can be dead, living, abstract, or a group of such. Pronouns are perhaps the most common referring expressions (Yule 1996, p. 17),

and they are contextualised to derive contextual meaning through the inferencing process. For example, a proper noun is a specific name in a text, the pronoun refers to something based on the location of the speaker and/or hearer, and its referring expressions refer to persons (e.g., first, second, third person pronouns, I, me, you, we, her, him, them, that man, etc.), which usually refers to the participants of speech (first and second person) and the participant of the speech (third person) that is not speaking and hearing (Wodak et al., 2009). The referents of the definite and indefinite noun phrases are also context dependent.

Yule (1996) claims that "Inference is what the listener brings to bear to make what is said equal what must be meant". Grundy (2000) defines inference as "a characteristic of the utterance or its connection to other known facts or features that leads the hearer to the suspicion that the literal meaning is not (the only) meaning that the speaker intends to convey". The meaning of an utterance depends on what is said (or written) and what is inferred by the listener or reader, a process which Mey (2001, p. 54) claims requires "contextual coordinates" such as mutual understanding of the discourse situation/ context, shared background knowledge of interlocutors, shared linguistic knowledge, and mutual understanding of social conventions and cultural beliefs as factors necessary for appropriate inferencing and interpretation of meaning. Every utterance has both explicit and implicit meaning, and the implicit meaning usually corresponds to the intended meaning of the speaker, even if it was not explicitly stated. It is also self-evident that appropriate inferencing by the hearer (that is, successful reference) is a necessary condition for successful reference.

Building on the classic notions of reference and inference and how they interplay in discourse, Hall and Mazzarella (2023) empirically show that speaker accountability is greater for explicated content (linguistically encoded directly) than for implicated content (inferred indirectly), which is relevant to this study as texts tend to have intentional gaps that audiences must infer. Hu, Degen, and Schuster (2023) further show that pragmatic inferences, and in particular scalar inferences, are shaped by assumptions about unexpressed alternatives, suggesting that inferencing is not a solitary cognitive act but a socially and contextually embedded act of inferencing constrained by linguistic selection, communicative context, and probabilistic reasoning. Furthermore, the classical pragmatist framework in which inference is reduced to recovering speaker intent, while theoretically more robust, fails to adequately acknowledge that inference is an interactive emergent

process or part of discourse fluidity (Elder and Haugh 2024). This integrated approach, for example, can ask when a referring expression is used in a text, what the referent is, and how it is identified. This study conceptualises reference as the means by which entities, processes, and events are selected for discussion, and inference as the means that provides implicit or unstated meaning, such that communication is more than just literal forms constrained by common ground discourse context, cultural norms, and interactional history.

Methodology

The content analysis method was used to examine the chosen texts because it was qualitative research. Information was gathered from X posts (previously Twitter) and newspapers. The Guardian, The Punch, and Nigerian Tribune are the chosen newspapers. The information includes ten (10) quotes from the speeches of the TUC and NLC, the leaders of the Labour unions, during the Occupy Nigeria demonstration, as well as ten (10) X posts from EndSARS activists during the EndSARS demonstration. According to the data, the EndSARS protest took place between October 4, 2020, and October 20, 2020, whereas the Occupy Nigeria protest took place between January 2 and January 14, 2012. The pragmatic tools of reference and inference developed by Yule (1996) and Mey (2001) were used to analyse and thoroughly study them.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Pronouns, proper nouns, definite noun phrases, indefinite noun phrases, demonstratives, and adverbial expressions of place and time are examples of referring expressions that indicate the referents in the selected texts. The context determines the meanings of these referents rather than their structure. The speaker's intentions to threaten, reassure, criticise, condemn, incite, and warn are revealed by the expressions they use. This depends on the mutual understanding of the discourse situation or context, the background knowledge of the interlocutors, their linguistic knowledge, and their shared understanding of social conventions and cultural beliefs.

Use of Pronouns

Throughout the texts, pronouns are used in various ways to refer to the speaker, the addressee, the government, and other protest leaders. Pronouns such as: I, we, you, they, and they are among the pronouns that are used. As the analysis below demonstrates, the context determines how each should be interpreted:

First person singular ‘I’ and ‘me’

Text 1

I will advise Goodluck Jonathan personally to boot those witches known as Alison Madueke and Okonjo Ngozi Iweala out of his way if he wants to win back the heart of Nigerians.

(The Punch Newspaper, January 13, 2012, p.6)

Text 2

#EndSARS is the good morning message to our gallant protesters. I pray we do not lose anyone again. #ArrestKillerOfficers is long overdue, and open all SARS cells nationwide; it's a kidnapper's den.

(X post, Oct 17, 2020)

REF: The speaker who doubles as a person opposed to the removal of fuel subsidies is referred to by the pronoun “I” in texts 1 and 2. The demands of the demonstrators were made clear by the speakers’ voices. Assuming a leadership role, the speaker in text 1 openly counsels President Goodluck Jonathan on how to regain the public's support. In text 2, the speaker guides and prays for protesters, assuming both a physical and spiritual leadership role. To placate the demonstrators, the physical leader gives instructions to those in charge.

INF: The inferred meaning from text 1 is an implicit threat based on the common background knowledge of the discourse context. Text 2 explicitly indicts the police authorities, thereby implicitly inciting the public.

Text 3

We are getting reports of some peaceful protesters arrested in front of the Nigerian Embassy in Egypt. We want to report this to the proper channels, but we need more information. If you have more information, please let me know. (X post, Oct 18, 2020)

REF: In text 3, the speaker is the referent of “me.” Its reference, however, goes beyond the speaker's identification within the context to include the leadership role that the speaker has taken on. The shift from the collective “we” to the individual “me” suggests a change in responsibilities. It also asserts the speaker's authority within the given context.

INF: Despite text 3’s informative structure, the speaker subtly warns those who engage in protests to cease or face reporting and legal action.

Second person singular/ plural pronoun ‘You’

In a communicative context, the audience, readers, or listeners are directly addressed or referred to using the second-person pronoun. The referent of “you,” which can be either singular or plural, depends on the context.

Text 4

They said we have collected money and have been compromised, but how can we repay you who have shown so much faith in this struggle? (The Guardian, Jan. 14, Pg. 7)

Text 5

SARS is still on the streets. They are still committing crimes and killing people. We want that changed. If you think we will get tired, you are wasting your time. This is just the beginning.

(X post, Oct 17, 2020)

REF: In text 4, protesters are captured by the referent “you,” but not the speaker. To address the demonstrators directly and reassure them of the protest leaders' dedication to the cause, the speaker uses the pronoun “you.” For the demonstrators to ignore the bribery rumour and make concessions against their leaders, this reassuring gesture is required. In text 5, the group of people opposing the protest serves as the referent for “you”. In the context, this group is implied to be those in government and those who support them. In texts 4 and 5, the referent of “you” changes based on the speakers’ intentions and the circumstances.

INF: Text 4 conveys an implicit message of reassurance. Even so, the text’s structure indicates an act of informing. The speaker’s claim of on-going protest in Text 5 poses a threat to the government.

First person plural pronoun ‘we’ and ‘us’

In the texts, this class of pronouns is used to refer to the group of protesters, the speaker, the hearers, and in certain instances, both the protesters and those opposed to the protest. Depending on the discourse context, each can be identified.

Text 6

We cannot afford to disappoint Nigerians; we cannot afford to fail Nigerians. Nigerians at home and abroad are looking up to labour. We cannot afford to back out at this time.

(Nigerian Tribune, Jan. 14, P. 4)

Text 7

What we need now are very good lawyers; any police officer's name mentioned for brutality or killing should be charged immediately in court by the time we use one as a scapegoat, they will know we are serious about this new Nigeria. (X post, Oct 18, 2020)

Text 8

If we have refineries, and we have dedicated barrels for local consumption. It means that the litres of petrol from the refineries that are functioning won't have the freight, the demurrage, the cost of the smaller vessel that offloads, insurance, and others.

(The Punch, Jan. 7, Pg. 9)

REF: In texts 6, 7, and 8, 'we' has different referents depending on the context: a 'royal we' as in text 6 (it is not addressee inclusive), a more inclusive 'we' as in text 7 (addressee inclusive), and a 'we' that is 'universal' as in text 8 (it includes the speaker and his public [both present and non-present]); it indicates the speaker's assumption or understanding of the addressees' frames of mind that things are not right in the oil sector). Therefore, 'we' in the three selected texts is used to create a sense of shared identity with others, enabling collective action.

INF: Incitement is the implied meaning of text 6. Even so, the structure clearly conveys a sense of reassurance. The threat in Text 7 is meant to serve as a warning to the careless police officers who have killed and brutalised innocent people. Although Text 8 is structured as advice, it subtly criticises the incompetence of those in charge of the nation's oil industry.

Third person plural pronoun 'they' and 'them'

Typically, the use of "they" and "them" indicates a large number of people. However, as will be examined below, the two serve purposes beyond those that are merely structurally conditioned in the context of protest:

Text 9

They said we are going to get tired. They said we can't do it for more than four days. Today is the fourth day, and we are increasing. Are you people tired? No! We must achieve our aim.

(The Punch, Jan. 13, Pg. 2)

Text 10

The announcement ending SARS was just Step1- they've been banning SARS every year. The continuous assaults and murders still ongoing show that corrupt officers are defying the order.

Tomorrow, we will peacefully march to present our demands. We want action. Not just an announcement.
(X post, Oct 12, 2020)

REF: Texts 9 and 10's use of the third-person plural "they" denotes the existence of a group outside of the speaker's and his protesters' group. The pronoun "they" is linked to a construction of an external group of people that is not included in the discourse itself, according to the context's common knowledge. It alludes to those who are against the demonstration. However, it is used in a more limited sense in text 10 to refer only to government officials who are responsible for disbanding SARS but have so far failed.

Text 11

We told them that the National Executive Council (NEC) of our congresses gave us a mandate. We cannot go beyond that mandate. On N65 we stand!

(Nigerian Tribune, Jan. 14, P. 4)

REF: Another indication of opposition to the protesters in the context is the use of the objective cases of the person plural pronoun 'them' in text 11. Based on a mutual understanding of the circumstances, "them" is inferred to be the federal government representatives who had previously met with the protest leaders without making any progress.

INF: Threats to the government are implied in Text 9, which expressly refers to an informing act. Text 11 not only informs but also subtly warns, while Text 10 makes an implicit warning clear.

Use of Proper Noun

According to Alabi (2014), a proper noun is a capitalized, specific name of a specific individual, location, organization, or object. Regardless of where they appear in a sentence, proper nouns always start with capital letters. The protest texts' proper nouns were given more meanings by the discourse context. For instance:

Text 12

I will advise Goodluck Jonathan personally to boot those witches known as Alison Madueke and Okonjo Ngozi Iweala out of his way if he wants to win back the heart of Nigerians.

(The Punch Newspaper, January 13, 2012, p.6).

Text 13

This promises to be a long-drawn battle; we know its beginning, but we do not know its end or when it will end. But we are confident that the Nigerian people will triumph over the cabal in Aso Rock.
(Nigerian Tribune, Jan. 3, Pg. 2)

REF: Text 12 has the structural reference to particular people: Goodluck Jonathan, Alison Madueke, and Okonjo Iweala, but based on the interlocutors' shared background knowledge, Okonjo Iweala is the Minister of Finance, Alison Madueke is the Minister of Petroleum Resources, and Goodluck Jonathan is the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Due to their positions, they were responsible for removing fuel subsidies and the financial hardships that followed, which led to widespread protests among the population. The two women are labelled witches, which captures the long-standing enmity against them, and the cultural beliefs that witches have with interlocutors. Aso Rock, in text 13, is a geographic landmark in Nigeria. However, here it is understood as the location where those in power make decisions that affect the lives of the people (the "cabal"), causing protests and unrest.

INF: Text 13 explicitly threatens the government while subtly encouraging and inciting the protesters to see the end of the tunnel, while text 1 contains the structure of advice but is an implicit threat based on common knowledge of the protest context.

Use of a Definite Noun Phrase

A specific and identifiable entity within a particular context is called a definite noun phrase. Let us look at the examples below:

Text 13

This promises to be a long-drawn battle; we know its beginning, but we do not know its end or when it will end. But we are confident that the Nigerian people will triumph over the cabal in Aso Rock.
(Nigerian Tribune, Jan. 3, Pg. 2)

Text 14

In the last 24 hours, there have been 1.8 million tweets with the hashtag #EndSARS. Unless it is taken from the tweet to the street, nothing is going to happen. It was the Asians who first discovered that stubborn people react to only a terrifying crowd. (X post, Oct. 4, 2020)

REF: A political clique or faction is indicated by the definite noun phrase "the cabal" in text 13 (Hornby, 1997). The politician in question, along with their supporters, has been charged with

being indifferent to the plight of Nigerians, who are already dealing with difficult economic circumstances. The word “cabal” implies negativity in this context. They are held accountable for the outrage and protests that people have experienced. Text 14’s allusion to “the Asians” implicitly supports the call for protest and does not just refer to those of Asian heritage.

INF: Text 13 implies a threat to those in positions of authority, whereas text 14 subtly encourages.

Use of an Indefinite Noun Phrase

A noun that refers to a general or non-specific noun with the articles "a," "an," or no article is called an indefinite noun phrase. It usually adds something new or unknown to a conversation.

Text 15

I sympathise with Nigerians because I never knew a president who cannot pay N18,000 minimum wage to workers could come up with obnoxious policy to annihilate his people.

(The Punch, Jan. 3, P.11)

Text 16

#SarsAlert: Successful young men are tagged 'Yahoo Boys' and ladies are also victims of SARS illegality/harassment. #EndSarsNow #EndSARSBrutality. (X post, Oct 4, 2020)

REF: In text 14, the interlocutors' shared contextual background knowledge identified “a president” as President Goodluck Jonathan. Due to his removal of subsidies and refusal to pay the new minimum wage, he is accused of causing the suffering of Nigerian workers. The interpretation of “Yahoo boys” in text 15 as young men involved in online fraud is aided by the interlocutors' shared linguistic knowledge and similar background knowledge. The discourse context helps us understand this Nigerian-origin linguistic idiom. An appropriate interpretation of the text is ensured because both the speaker and the listeners are aware of the word's meaning.

INF: Although text 15 expressly expresses condemnation with implicit incitement against the SARS officers, text 14 is an explicit criticism that subtly incites the public against the government.

Use of Demonstrative Pronouns and Demonstrative Noun Phrases

Demonstrative pronouns are words used in English to point to specific things or people by replacing nouns. Demonstrative pronouns could be ‘this’ or ‘that’ to indicate singular entities and ‘these’ or ‘those’ for plural entities. They can also be used to indicate proximity e.g., ‘this’ and ‘these’ (near), ‘that’ and ‘those’ (far). On the other hand, a demonstrative noun phrase is usually

introduced by a demonstrative pronoun to refer to a particular object, person, place or idea. It also indicates proximity or distal and singular or plural. The context is critical to the interpretation of demonstratives, as shown below:

Text 17

This is unacceptable to us and the Nigerian masses who have been ambushed by a government they expressly gave a popular mandate to represent them a few months back. The president has declared a total war on the poor masses of this country.

(Nigerian Tribune, Jan. 2, Pg. 2)

Text 18

Another good day to ENDSARS, there's nothing to reform about that unit, those blood suckers and men of the underworld. We won't stop till we #EndSARS#EndSarsNow #EndPolice Brutality.

(X post, Oct. 10, 2020)

REF: In text 17, 'this' is a proximal demonstrative pronoun that conveys nearness, which is symbolic, since it does not involve a pointing gesture, but activates knowledge about the communicative situation of the referent. It refers to the removal of the subsidy that raised the price of petroleum at the pump. In text 18, the use of demonstrative noun phrases 'that unit' and 'those blood suckers' is used by the speaker to indicate both physical and psychological distance from the speaker and the group of protesters: physically, the referents are distal, and psychologically, it is a demonstration of apathy and hatred for the referents, as is also seen in the use of 'those witches' in text 1 which is dependent on the mutual understanding of the social conventions and cultural beliefs of the interlocutors concerning witches.

INF: Texts 17 and 18 subtly depict threats to those in power based on the interlocutors' shared prior knowledge.

Use of Adverbial Expressions

Where and when an action occurred or will occur are revealed by the adverbial expressions used in the texts.

Text 19

The announcement ending SARS was just Step 1- they've been banning SARS every year. The continuous assaults and murders still ongoing show that corrupt officers are defying the order.

Tomorrow, we will peacefully march to present our demands. We want action. Not just an announcement.
(X post, Oct 12, 2020)

Text 20

Chaos everywhere. Still no response from the authorities. Keep the energy up! We are not backing down!!! #ENDSARS #EndPoliceBrutality.
(X post, Oct. 9, 2020)

REF: The adverbial phrases “every year” and “tomorrow” in text 19 are not limited to a specific moment in time. In this context, “every year” conveys people’s ire at the federal government for not outlawing the SARS unit over the years, while “tomorrow” alludes to a future date that indicates preparedness for further actions against the government and the unit. In text 20, the word “everywhere” refers to a situation that is thought to be fairly universal. The speaker uses the word “everywhere” to imply large-scale protest actions with a lot of participants.

INF: Text 19 poses a direct danger to those in authority, according to the general understanding of the situation. The text implies criticism of authorities for inaction. In addition to being a threat, text 20 is an indictment. It implies a collective threat or resolve, even if not explicitly stated (“we are not backing down” suggests continued protest).

Conclusion

By examining pragmatic acts in the discourse of the Occupy Nigeria and EndSARS movements, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to re-imagine language in a globalised world. The findings suggest that referent’s function both as markers of protest discourse and as indicators of social and political reference, with their interpretation relying less on grammatical form than on context, prior knowledge, and shared cultural norms, which anchor meaning in each instance. Through these mechanisms, protest language conveys a range of intentions, including condemnation of injustice, threats to state authorities, calls for collective action, reassurances among fellow demonstrators, and critique of government policies. While some referential strategies—such as pronouns and other devices—are common to both movements, the 2020 EndSARS protests exhibit distinctive patterns compared with the 2012 Occupy Nigeria demonstrations. Unlike the earlier movement, which referenced specific politicians and culturally loaded concepts such as witches, the largely youth-led and predominantly online #EndSARS protests employed more fluid referential tactics,

including adverbs (e.g., “this,” “tomorrow,” “everywhere”) and demonstratives, emphasising immediacy and engagement in a transnational digital space. In these contexts, pronouns such as “we” shifted between inclusive (“let us unite”) and exclusive uses depending on the situation, reflecting the dynamic, context-sensitive nature of protest communication.

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