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Silence and Pauses in President Tinubu's 'EndBadGovernance' Protest Speech in Nigeria: A Phono-Pragmatic Study Adesanmi M. A & Edun, O. M.

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Abstract

This paper examines the communicative import of silence and pauses in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's speech during the critical period of 'EndBadGovernance' protest that rocked the country, Nigeria. The protest, a response to issues of governance failures and, the untold hardship, marked a critical situation in Nigeria's socio-political landscape, requiring a speech that could marry authority and empathy, and also sue for unity. Analysing Tinubu's speech, this research explores how silence and pauses interact with the pragmatic goals of his rhetoric, enhancing his authority and emotional appeal. From the angle of Phono-pragmatics, the work relies on Speech Act Theory of Searle (1969) and, Couper-Kuhlen (2004) Prosodic Theory to investigate how Tinubu exploits silence and pauses to amplify the illocutionary force of his speech acts. With the aid of Praat software, the analysis identifies the length, frequency, and placement of pauses, as well as their pragmatic effects. Findings reveal that pauses perform three primary functions of establishing authority, since moments of silence project control and confidence; igniting a sense of reflection because pauses allow the audience to process emotionally charged topics like governance, reforms and protest grievances. It also highlights the cultural relevance of silence in Nigerian rhetorical traditions, in a way, offering insights into the interplay between prosody, pragmatics, and political rhetoric in the contexts of African. Findings highlight silence and pauses as not merely absences of sound but important rhetorical tools that amplify meaning and impact in political speeches.

Keywords: Phono-pragmatics, EndBadGovernance, Rhetoric, Political Discourse, Speech Act Theory

Introduction

The coming of the EndSARS protest in Nigeria in the year 2020, was symbolic and historic uprising against systemic injustices in the country. According to Adelakun (2021), it was initially targeting the atrocities committed by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). However, the movement soon evolved into an encompassing call for accountability, good governance, and systemic reforms, embedded in the hashtag EndBadGovernance. It was a moment that underscored the frustrations of millions of Nigerians over corruption, youth unemployment, inadequate

infrastructure, and worsening living standards. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a political figure who had staged his campaigns on promises of transformational leadership, inclusive governance, and economic revival, was thrust into the spotlight during the crisis as he addressed these grievances during his 'EndBadGovernance' protest speech.

As expected, the president's campaign promises resonated deeply with the electorate during his rise to power. Prominent among his pledges were commitments to tackle corruption, create millions of jobs, reinvigorate national security, and address youth empowerment through initiatives aimed at education and entrepreneurship (The Guardian Nigeria, 2022). On the contrary, as highlighted by numerous observers, the realisation of these promises has been fraught with delays and missteps. Reports by Premium Times (2023) and Punch Newspaper (2023) have critiqued the government's seemingly lack of urgency in implementing key reforms, particularly those addressing unemployment and police accountability which are issues at the center of the EndBadGovernance movement. As public trust eroded, the frustration and disillusionment that prompted the original protests resurfaced, placing Tinubu's leadership under significant scrutiny. The delivery of Tinubu's speech during the heightened tensions of the protest presented a critical test of his rhetorical skills and leadership. Political leaders often rely on effective communication to calm unrest, project authority, and offer reassurance. Tinubu's speech sought to address these objectives while reaffirming his commitment to fulfilling his campaign promises, but, as a matter of responsibility, it had to do so in a context fraught with skepticism and distrust. Fundamental to his rhetorical approach was the strategic use of silence and pauses, key tools for structuring his message, emphasising critical points, and fostering emotional resonance.

Phono-pragmatics and Political Rhetoric

In political communication, phono-pragmatics provides a lens on which the interaction between sound (e.g., intonation, silence, pauses) and pragmatic meaning can be studied. Silence and pauses, often dismissed as mere absences of speech, are potent rhetorical devices that can project authority, create emotional impact, and give the audience time to process key ideas (Couper-Kuhlen, 2004). Tinubu's speech is good example of how these prosodic elements are leveraged for the purpose of

achieving pragmatic goals, particularly in a high-stakes context like the EndBadGovernance protest. The speech also underscores broader concerns about leadership communication in Nigeria. Studies, such as those by Ekundayo (2021) and Olatunji (2022), have shown that Nigerian political speeches often lack the resonance required to inspire confidence among citizens, especially during moments of unrest.

This study interrogates the phono-pragmatic strategies in Tinubu's EndBadGovernance protest speech, focusing on how silence and pauses are used to emphasise promises, build empathy, and assert authority. By highlighting these elements, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role prosody plays in political communication, particularly in a Nigerian context marked by linguistic diversity and cultural differences. President Tinubu's EndBadGovernance protest speech was delivered at a moment when public trust was fragile, skepticism about his ability to deliver on campaign promises was high. At different fora, the content of his speech has been analysed in popular, yet, little attention has been given to how his use of silence and pauses functioned pragmatically to address these challenges and shape public perception. This study therefore aims to analyse the phono-pragmatic role of silence and pauses in President Tinubu's EndBadGovernance protest speech, with emphasis on their pragmatic effects in managing public discontent and reaffirming leadership. The specific objectives of this study are: Investigate the frequency, duration, and placement of silence and pauses in the speech; Analyse the pragmatic functions of silence and pauses, particularly in relation to key speech acts including promises, reassurances, and directives; and Examine how these prosodic features enhance or detract from Tinubu's rhetorical goals of leadership, empathy, and unity.

Review of Literature

Studies have actually emphasised that strategic silence and pauses are powerful rhetorical tools in political communication, influencing audience perception and reinforcing authority. Bull and Miskinis (2019) interrogated pauses in political speeches and found that well-timed silences enhance credibility and allow audiences to process complex information. The study submitted that political figures use pauses to project confidence, emphasise key points, and encourage audience engagement. Similarly, McGregor (2020) examined how world leaders, including Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, used silence during crisis communication. The findings indicated that silence

can be used either to build anticipation or signal uncertainty, depending on the speaker's delivery. This suggests that when leaders use pauses intentionally, it may reinforce their control over discourse, but unintended silences may undermine credibility. Also, pragmatic use of silence in political interviews, demonstrating that deliberate pauses can serve as a defense mechanism, allowing politicians, in particular, to evade difficult questions or shift the narrative (Heritage and Clayman, 2021). This is tandem with the assertion that silence is not merely passive but an active conversational strategy.

Adebayo and Olagunju (2019) explored Nigerian presidential speeches, emphasising that leaders employ pauses to create emotional connections with their audiences. The study found that silence observed before promises of reform increased perceived sincerity and authority. The focus of study by Olayiwola (2020) is how Nigerian politicians manipulate prosodic elements such as pauses and pitch variations to navigate political crises. His analysis of Goodluck Jonathan's speeches during the Boko Haram insurgency revealed that strategic silence was used to project empathy and seriousness. In a related study, Nwosu and Adegbite (2022) examined phono-pragmatic features in political campaign speeches in Nigeria. Their study maintained that pauses facilitate audience persuasion by reinforcing key messages and aiding information retention. This is of a particularly relevance to the EndBadGovernance protest, where audience emotions played a critical role in speech reception.

Silence and pauses serve multiple functions in political crisis communication, from reinforcing leadership authority to fostering empathy. Silence has been observed as a crisis management strategy, noting that controlled pauses allow leaders to project calmness and deliberation. Coombs and Holladay (2020). In moments of national tension, how a leader talks is also as significant as the message being conveyed. And silence, at sometimes resonates the loudest. This study emphasised that in moments of national tension, well-placed silence can help leaders establish credibility. Abubakar (2021) studied gubernatorial crisis speeches in Nigeria. The work revealed that pauses were used to douse tensions and equally promote unity. It submitted that prolonged silence after emotionally charged statements enabled the audience to internalize key messages. While confirming the dearth of literature on phono-pragmatic study of political studies, the present study sets to address the gap by analysing the phono-pragmatic role of silence and pauses in President Tinubu's EndBadGovernance protest speech.

Theoretical Framework

Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969)

Speech Act Theory describes how language performs actions beyond conveying information. Political speeches often contain illocutionary acts i.e., statements intended to perform actions that can include reassuring, promising, or commanding, and perlocutionary acts, statements that influence audience perception and response). Tinubu's use of silence and pauses in this paper is examined in relation to the acts: Reassurances and Promises, Commands and Directives, and Expressions of Empathy.

Prosodic Theory (Couper-Kuhlen, 2004)

Prosodic Theory explores how suprasegmental features of speech such as pauses, pitch variations, and rhythm influence communication. This study employs Prosodic Theory to analyse pause length and placement, examine rhetorical pauses, and explore silence as a persuasive tool.

Methodology

A mixed-method approach, combining acoustic analysis with qualitative pragmatic analysis to examine Tinubu's use of silence and pauses in his *EndBadGovernance* protest speech is employed in this study. The secondary data for this study president Tinubu's *EndBadGovernance* protest speech. The speech is obtained from reputable news sources, and archival records to ensure accuracy. The Praat Software (Boersma & Weenink, 2021) was used for acoustic analysis of pause duration, frequency, and placement within the speech. Qualitative Discourse Analysis was used to examine how pauses and silence function pragmatically in reinforcing meaning, persuasion, and leadership projection. The speech is transcribed and marked for pauses and silence. Pauses are categorised as (0–1 seconds) for short, (1–3 seconds) for medium, or (3+ seconds) for long. The Praat software is used to measure pause duration and frequency. The function of each pause is analysed in relation to speech acts (e.g., reassurance, command, or empathy). Rhetorical effects are examined to determine how pauses contribute to audience engagement and message emphasis. Key segments of the speech where silence or pauses have significant rhetorical impact are selected.

Such segments include before or after promises of governance reform, during emotionally charged moments, and when addressing protesters directly

Analysis of Silence and Pauses in Tinubu's Speech

Filled and unfilled Pauses

Filled pauses include vocalised hesitations such as "uh," "um," and "you know." Although they are often considered signs of hesitation, they can also function as tools for controlling speech rhythm and audience engagement. For instance in *My fellow Nigerians, we must... um... we must rebuild trust in our governance*, the hesitation signals careful word choice, reinforcing the seriousness of the message. Occasions of unfilled pauses are deliberate moments of silence that are often employed for the purpose of emphasis, reflection, or transition between key points. A key moment of example from the speech is: *The loss... (3-second pause) ...the pain suffered by our youth must not be ignored*. Here, the long pause following *the loss* allows the audience to absorb the emotional weight of the statement, enhancing empathy and engagement.

Rhetorical Pauses

Rhetorical pauses are intentionally observed before or after key statements to emphasise important messages and create persuasive impact.

Pauses before Critical Statements

A pause before a significant statement can build anticipation and also signal importance. For example: *The future of Nigeria depends on... (pause) ...justice and accountability*. The observation of pause at this point creates suspense, making the following statement more impactful and memorable.

Pauses after Critical Statements

A pause after a key statement allows the audience to process the significance of such a statement. For instance in *We must end corruption. (pause) We must end police brutality, observing a brief*

silence here reinforces the call to action and gives the audience time to internalize and process the message.

Silence as a Reflective and Emotional Tool

Tinubu tactically employs silence when discussing sensitive topics such as police brutality and governance failures. For example: *To the families of those we lost... (5-second pause) ...we share in your pain.* The extended pause before addressing grieving families reflects solemnity, empathy, and shared sorrow.

Silence to Allow Audience Processing

Pauses are used to give listeners time to internalise emotionally charged statements. In *Change is not easy. (pause) But it is necessary,* the moment of silence after *Change is not easy* confirms public skepticism while allowing reflection before introducing a reassuring follow-up.

Pauses for projection of Authority and Leadership

To Reinforce Leadership Presence

Leaders often employ controlled silence to maintain leadership, confidence and control over their speech delivery. In *We will rebuild this nation. (pause) We will restore trust,* the deliberate pause between these declarative statements facilitates credibility and underscores a firm, authoritative stance.

Silence as a Tool for Command and Persuasion

When pauses are well-placed, they emphasise directives and also create a sense of urgency. For example in *We must act now. (pause) Not tomorrow. Not next year. Now,* the silence exemplifies the urgency of the call to action, compelling immediate audience response.

Cultural Context: Silence in Nigerian Political Oratory

Silence as a Marker of Respect and Authority

In his submission, Odebunmi (2020) states that in Nigerian oratory traditions, silence often signals wisdom, authority, and contemplation. This in tandem with Tinubu's pauses as they align with cultural expectations, reinforcing his role as a decisive leader.

Acoustic Analysis of Pauses

With the aid of Praat software, the study measures the duration and frequency of pauses in Tinubu's speech:

Type of Pause	Frequency	Average Duration	Example from Speech
Filled Pauses	8 times	0.5 – 1.2 sec	"... we must... um... act now."
Short Pauses	Silent 12 times	0.2 – 1.0 sec	"Change is not easy. (0.5 sec pause) But necessary."
Medium Pauses	Silent 6 times	1 – 3 sec	"To the families of those we lost... (2 sec pause) ...we share in your pain."
Long Pauses	Silent 3 times	3+ sec	"The loss... (5 sec pause) ...the pain suffered must not be ignored."

The analysis of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's *EndBadGovernance* protest speech reveals that silence and pauses serve as deliberate rhetorical tools to emphasize key messages, build credibility, and emotionally engage the audience.

Pragmatic Effects of Silence and Pauses: Building Authority and Leadership

The use of pauses help Tinubu control the pacing of his speech, thus reinforcing his position as a composed and authoritative leader. Silence placed before policy promises resonates their perceived seriousness. In *We will not tolerate... (pause) ...corruption*. The pause underscores a kind of strong determination and leadership resolve.

Eliciting Reflection and Emotional Engagement

Pauses allow the audience time to process emotionally charged statements. As used when discussing police brutality and governance failures, allowing silence to symbolise both grief and solidarity as reflected in *To the victims of police brutality... (pause) ...we mourn with you*. Here, the silence heightens emotional resonance.

Aligning with Cultural Expectations

Silence is often used as a sign of wisdom, respect, and in Nigerian political oratory, contemplation (Odebunmi, 2020). Tinubu's controlled use of pauses is in line with cultural norms, making his message more relatable and credible.

Conclusion

The study claims that silence and pauses are just not passive elements, rather, they are active rhetorical strategies in political speech. Tinubu's intentional use of silence highlights leadership, fosters emotional engagement, and it equally aligns with cultural expectations in Nigerian political discourse. It therefore suffices to submit that the analysis carried out in this work revealed that silence is a tool for leadership and authority where strategic pauses before and after key statements reinforced Tinubu's control over the speech, projecting confidence and decisiveness, and the seriousness of governance reforms. The extended pauses during emotionally charged moments (when discussing police brutality) allowed the audience to process grief and shared experiences while the controlled use of silence evoked empathy and solidarity, projecting a sense of solidarity with the protesters and other citizens. In Tinubu's *EndBadGovernance* speech, pauses and silence are crucial in shaping audience perception, reinforcing leadership, and projecting national unity. The findings contribute to the growing field of phono-pragmatics, emphasizing the need for more linguistic and discourse-based studies in African political communication.

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