

GENDERED APOLOGIES IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: A DISCOURSE-PRAGMATIC STUDY OF MALE AND FEMALE POLITICIANS' PUBLIC REGRET

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Abstract

This study investigates the performance of public apologies by male and female politicians in Nigeria, exploring how gender influences the discourse-pragmatic strategies of expressing regret. In a political landscape characterized by patriarchal norms and intense public scrutiny, the speech act of apologising becomes a high-stakes performance fraught with social and political implications. Employing a qualitative research design, this study conducts a discourse-pragmatic analysis of six public apologies, three by male and three by female politicians. The data was collected as an instrument of purposive sampling of notable cases from publicly available sources, including major Nigerian newspapers and media archives. Guided by Searle's Speech Act Theory, the analysis deconstructs the structure, function, and face-saving manoeuvres inherent in these acts of public contrition. Findings reveal distinct gendered patterns. Male politicians' apologies frequently employ indirectness and are often framed as strategic moves to restore political capital, prioritizing the speaker's own face. Conversely, the few available examples from female politicians demonstrate complex and often non-traditional apologetic forms, including satirical apologies or apologies issued by proxies, reflecting the double bind they face in navigating expectations of both political strength and feminine humility. This research contributes to the understanding of how gender ideologies are constructed, maintained, and negotiated through language in the Nigerian political sphere, highlighting the intricate relationship between power, gender, and communicative practice

Keywords: Gender, Apology, Political Discourse, Nigeria.

Introduction

In the modern political and social context, public relations have become an integral part of any campaign. From business advertisements to political races, the need to connect with a target audience is crucial. Political strategists understand this concept well, creating guidelines to connect with the public, sway opinions, and maintain a positive image (Turskoy, 2021; Brulle & Werthman, 2021). Central to managing public image is the ability to communicate effectively, especially when a public figure's reputation is at risk. Using the right words and effective metaphors is essential for public understanding, which is why the political apology has become a critical tool (Atmawijaya, 2025).

The public political apology is now a significant feature of modern statecraft—a strategic, high-stakes social performance rather

than a simple expression of remorse. In what has been termed the "age of apology," state officials increasingly engage in formal acts of contrition to recognise transgressions, accept responsibility, and express regret (Bagheri Nevisi & Hasani, 2025). This dynamic is particularly complex in Nigeria, a nation with an inherently patriarchal leadership structure. Here, the performance of an apology can become a gendered act, revealing underlying norms of power, authority, and social expectation (Odedeyi, 2024). Nigeria's political sphere exhibits one of the world's most significant gender disparities; women hold a mere 3.9% of seats in the House of Representatives and only three out of 108 Senate seats (Adebayo, 2023). This severe underrepresentation creates a charged environment in which the communicative acts of the few women in power are subject to intense scrutiny. While many political apologies serve as

an intra-elite mechanism for managing reputation, introducing gender as a variable transforms this act into a site for negotiating and reinforcing power. This study, therefore, investigates the unexamined nature of how gender shapes the apology speech act within Nigerian politics. It seeks to understand the ways in which male and female politicians perform public regret and what these performances reveal about the intersection of language, gender, and power.

The main aim of this study is to comparatively analyse the pragmatic strategies employed in public apologies by male and female politicians in Nigeria to understand how gender influences the performance of political contrition. The specific objectives are:

1. To identify and describe the specific speech act strategies (e.g., admission of fault, offer of repair, explanations) employed in public apologies made by male politicians in Nigeria.
2. To identify and describe the specific speech act strategies employed in public apologies made by female politicians in Nigeria.
3. To comparatively analyse the strategies used by both male and female politicians to determine how gender influences the linguistic performance of public regret in the Nigerian political context.

This research will be guided by the following questions:

1. What pragmatic strategies do male and female Nigerian politicians employ when issuing public apologies?
2. How do these strategies align with or deviate from established theories of gendered communication and politeness?
3. What does the form, function, and public reception of these apologies reveal about the intersection of gender, power, and political legitimacy in Nigeria?

This research is significant for several reasons. Theoretically, it will contribute to the fields of sociolinguistics, political communication, and gender studies by providing empirical data on gendered speech acts within a non-Western, specifically Nigerian, context. It addresses a gap in

the literature, which has predominantly focused on apologies in Western political systems. Practically, the findings will offer valuable insights to political actors, communication strategists, and public relations professionals on how gendered perceptions can influence the success or failure of public apologies. Finally, on a socio-political level, the study will illuminate how language is used to construct and reinforce gendered power dynamics in Nigerian politics, contributing to a deeper understanding of the subtle barrier's female leaders face.

Literature Review

The study of political apologies has burgeoned in recent decades, defining the act as a formal acknowledgment of regret by a state representative for wrongdoings committed by state actors. There is a scholarly consensus on the core structural components of a "full" or "sincere" apology, which include an acknowledgment of the harm caused, an acceptance of responsibility, and an expression of remorse. (Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2022). However, in a previous study by Zoodsma and other colleagues (2021), these acts are rarely spontaneous gestures of conscience; they are often calculated performances with strategic intentions. From a cultural-pragmatic perspective, a political apology can be conceptualized as a social performance aimed at "re-fusing" a damaged relationship between the perpetrator (the state) and the victim, thereby restoring a temporarily strained social bond. (English 2021; Chambers, 2002). This performance is evaluated by its audience, and its success or failure depends on a complex interplay of cultural scripts, actor credibility, and power dynamics.

The current work is built upon a solid foundation of scholarly consensus established in the literature, aligning substantially with the foundational theories presented. It concurs with the established definition of a political apology as a strategic social performance (Zoodsma et al., 2021; English 2021; Chambers, 2002) and accepts the core structural components of a sincere apology identified by Zoodsma & Schaafsma (2022). The study also adopts the widely recognized sociolinguistic dichotomy of "rapport-talk" and "report-talk" (Amoniyon & Obasi, 2025;

Abbamonte, 2012) as its analytical framework. Finally, it operates from the same understanding of the Nigerian political landscape described by Adebayo (2023), recognizing the severe underrepresentation of women and the "double bind" they face in a hyper-masculine discourse, a concept supported by Omwega (2024) and Feldman & Gill (2017).

The primary point of divergence, however, is one of synthesis and specific application. While the reviewed literature examines the components separately, the structure of political apologies, theories of gendered communication, and the challenges for Nigerian female politicians, the current work is unique in weaving these three strands together. The reviewed studies establish the *existence* of the "double bind" and *theoretical* differences in communication, but no single study cited analyzes how these elements manifest in the specific, high-stakes speech act of a political apology. The current study therefore diverges by moving from these general theories to a specific application, positing the political apology as a critical and previously unexamined site for observing how Nigerian female politicians practically navigate their precarious communicative position. In essence, the divergence is the shift from establishing the problem to analyzing a specific performance within that problem.

Theoretical Framework

To understand and delineate the gendered nature of political apologies in Nigeria, this study employs Speech Act Theory. According to Pluwak (2016), the theory was pioneered by J.L. Austin and John Searle, its core proposition is that utterances are not merely statements but actions, that are heavily dependent on context. According to Stevani et al. (2023), it distinguishes between the locutionary act (the literal words spoken), the illocutionary act (the speaker's intended action, such as apologizing), and the perlocutionary act (the effect on the hearer). This study focuses on the illocutionary force of an apology, which Searle classifies as an "expressive" speech act; one that conveys the speaker's psychological state (e.g., regret). For an apology to be "felicitous" or successful, certain conditions must be met,

including a sincerity condition where the speaker genuinely regrets the offense. This framework is perfect for the understanding of this paper because it allows for the analysis of politicians' statements as calculated political actions rather than just words, providing a structured method for examining the strategic intent behind their public expressions of regret.

Although, Speech Act Theory has recognized weaknesses. According to Bjorgvinsson (2011), its primary limitation is an overemphasis on the speaker's intention, which can be difficult, if not impossible, to determine with certainty, especially in the world of politics where vagueness overshadows everything. The classical model is also criticized for being too speaker-centric, sometimes neglecting the crucial role of the hearer's interpretation and the broader social context in determining an act's success. An apology that meets all theoretical conditions can still fail if the public deems it insincere. The significant power imbalance between a politician and the public heavily influences how an apology is constructed, delivered, and ultimately received.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design featuring a discourse-pragmatic analysis to examine gendered apology strategies in Nigerian politics. This approach is ideal for achieving a deep, contextual interpretation of language as a form of social action. (Buhrig & ten Thije, 2022).. The data consists of public apologies and statements of regret from notable male and female Nigerian politicians, sourced from publicly available materials, including major Nigerian and international newspapers: This day NG, BBC UK, Punch newspapers, Vanguard newspapers, Source Nigeria, CNN

This sampling strategy allowed for the deliberate selection of clear, information-rich cases from publicly available sources like major Nigerian newspapers, broadcast media archives, and official statements, ensuring the data's relevance for a focused comparative analysis. The analytical framework is guided by Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory, which posits that utterances are not merely descriptive but are also actions performed by the speaker. Within this

framework, an apology is classified as an expressive speech act, an utterance that express a psychological state, thereby repairing a social transgression. The analysis involves deconstructing each apology into its constituent speech acts to identify the specific strategies employed. This includes examining the presence and form of components such as an explicit expression of apology (e.g., "I apologize"), an admission of fault, an explanation for the offense, an offer of repair, and a promise of forbearance. By comparing how these components are structured and deployed by male and female politicians, the study reveals gendered patterns in how the act of public apology is performed.

Data Analysis

The analysis of public apologies issued by male politicians in Nigeria reveals a consistent pattern: these speech acts are primarily instrumental, functioning to manage institutional order, quell public dissent with minimal cost, or reassert dominance. They are overwhelmingly geared toward preserving the speaker's political status and control, aligning with the "report-talk" model of communication.

Regret Among Male Politicians

Case Study 1: The Institutional Apology (Senator Ovie Omo-Agege)

When Senator Ovie Omo-Agege apologized for remarks suggesting an amendment to the electoral act was targeted at the president, his apology was directed not at the public but at his colleagues whom he "may have offended". (Punch Newspaper, 2018). According to Stevani et al (2023), this is a classic *institutional* apology. The illocutionary act is one of repair, but the goal is not broad social reconciliation; it is the restoration of harmony within the elite, powerful body of the Senate. By apologizing, the senator performs a face-saving act for his colleagues while simultaneously protecting his own negative face, his autonomy and ability to continue functioning effectively within the institution. The pragmatic function is purely instrumental: to smooth over an internal conflict and maintain the operational cohesion of the political group.

Case Study 2: The Evasive Public Apology (Minister Adebayo Adelabu)

In response to public backlash over comments about electricity consumption, Minister of Power Adebayo Adelabu offered a quintessential non-apology: "Anything we have said that is considered offensive, we are sorry about that". (Vanguard Nigeria, 2024). This utterance is a masterclass in pragmatic evasion. The use of a conditional clause ("that is considered offensive") avoids a direct admission that the remark was offensive, subtly shifting the onus of interpretation to the audience. Furthermore, the use of the collective pronoun "we" diffuses personal responsibility across an ambiguous group. (Stevani et al., 2023). This apology lacks a genuine acknowledgment of responsibility and an offer of repair. Its illocutionary goal is damage control—a minimal-cost strategy designed to placate public anger without a substantive concession of fault, thereby prioritizing the speaker's face-saving over genuine redress. (Stevani et al., 2023).

Case Study 3: The Aggressive/Justificatory Apology (Senator Onyekachi Nwaebonyi)

After a heated verbal exchange with former minister Oby Ezekwesili, Senator Onyekachi Nwaebonyi stated, "I regret my choice of words to her because she's old enough to be my mother. But like I said, it is her action that brought up my reaction". This is a textbook "non-apology apology." (The source Nigeria, 2025). The initial IFID ("I regret") is immediately nullified by a justification that shifts the blame to the victim. The illocutionary force is not one of genuine remorse but of aggressive self-defense. By asserting that his reaction was "provoked," he prioritizes the defense of his own positive face (as someone who was wronged) over repairing the damage to Ezekwesili's face (Stevani et al., 2023).. This is an act of dominance, reinforcing a patriarchal norm where a man's outburst is deemed a legitimate response to a woman's "provocation." (Stevani et al., 2023).

Across these cases, a clear pattern emerges. Male political apologies in Nigeria function as tools to reassert the existing power structure. Whether restoring order within the "boys' club", managing the public with minimal concessions, seeking re-

entry into the moral community after a transgression, or putting a challenging woman in her place, these acts are overwhelmingly instrumental and status-preserving.

Regret Among Female Politicians

In contrast to their male counterparts, the discursive space surrounding apologies and regret for female politicians in Nigeria is not a simple transaction. It is a contested battleground where their legitimacy, character, and right to participate are constantly negotiated. Some of them include:

Case Study 1: The Relational Apology (Oby Ezekwesili)

When Dr. Oby Ezekwesili apologized for her withdrawal from the 2019 presidential race, her speech act was framed relationally, aligning with the "rapport-talk" model. She asked for the "forgiveness and understanding of all who are hurt," focusing explicitly on the emotional impact on her supporters. (DeCapua et al, 2006). This strategy builds and maintains connection. Simultaneously, she protected her own positive face (her reputation for integrity) by framing the withdrawal not as a failure but as a principled choice to "stand with my values rather than compromise". (CNN, 2019). The illocutionary goal was not just to apologize but to reaffirm the shared values of her political movement and maintain the loyalty of her base.

Case Study 2: The Apology as Resistance and the Surrogate Apology (Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan)

The case of Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan is particularly revealing. After being suspended from the Senate for "unruly" behavior, she issued a satirical apology for the "grievous crime of possessing dignity and self-respect". (BBC, 2025). This is a powerful subversion of the apology speech act. It uses the *form* of an apology to perform the illocutionary acts of *accusation* and *defiance*, challenging the patriarchal expectation of female contrition. (Beaudin, 2018). The response to her resistance was equally telling: women's groups, such as the "Nigerian Women Crusade for Good Governance," issued "surrogate apologies" *on her behalf*, condemning her "shameless actions" and claiming she had "set back the cause of women in politics". This

demonstrates the intense pressure on female politicians to conform and the internal policing that occurs to prevent them from "rocking the boat." This case perfectly illustrates the double bind: her act of resistance is framed as a collective liability for all women in politics.

Case Study 3: The Expressive Act of Public Lament (Patience Jonathan)

During the national trauma of the Chibok schoolgirls' abduction, then-First Lady Patience Jonathan's famous "There is God o" speech was not a formal apology but an expressive speech act of raw frustration and grief. Her emotional, non-standard language ("All this blood you people are shedding, there is God o") was widely mocked and turned into comedic fodder. (Premium Times, 2015). This incident shows the bandwidth of acceptable emotional expression for female leaders in Nigeria. While a male leader's display of anger might be interpreted as authoritative, her passionate outburst was framed as hysterical and comical—a classic gendered stereotype. The perlocutionary effect of her speech was ridicule, not the intended empathy, demonstrating how audience interpretation is filtered through a gendered lens.

Discussion of Findings

The previous analyses of public apologies and expressions of regret reveal distinct and contrasting patterns between male and female politicians in Nigeria. As seen in the male case studies, most of them issued non-apologies and faced little to no backlash; some even received praise. Meanwhile, women faced heavy criticism or ridicule despite offering sincere apologies. This supports the theory outlined in the literature review, which states that "Women's communication is often characterised as 'rapport-talk,' prioritising building connections, establishing relationships, and maintaining harmony. Conversely, men's communication is frequently described as 'report-talk,' which is more instrumental and focuses on conveying information, negotiating status, and asserting dominance. This style may result in more interruptions of others (especially women), less smiling, and the use of expansive postures to command space" (Amoniyon & Obasi, 2025;

Abbamonte, 2012).

When synthesized, these cases show that the speech act of apology is deployed differently depending on the gender of the speaker, thus reinforcing the existing power asymmetries in the political landscape in Nigeria that is inherently patriarchal: Male politicians' apologies are primarily *instrumental* and *status-preserving*, functioning as tools for institutional management and personal reputational repair. In contrast, the discourse of regret involving female politicians is *relational, resistant, and highly contested*, serving as a site of struggle for legitimacy itself.

Eventually, this gender-heavy difference on how apologies are performed and received serves to reinforce existing power system and hierarchy that Nigeria has tried to fight for decades. When the male "report-talk" style is validated as effective political communication, the system affirms a model of leadership that privileges status and control, traits culturally coded as masculine. This maintains the established order. In contrast, by placing female politicians in a double bind where any apologetic strategy would end up being received as comedic or trivial.

Conclusion

This discourse-pragmatic study of public apologies in Nigerian politics confirms that the performance of regret is not a uniform act but is profoundly shaped by the gender of the politician. The analysis reveals strategy and reception, moving beyond mere stylistic differences to

expose the underlying power asymmetries of the political landscape. Male politicians predominantly utilise an instrumental, status-preserving "report-talk" approach and even in some cases uses non-apologies. Their apologies are often indirect, and are frequently accepted with minimal public backlash. This contrasts with female politicians who risk scrutiny every time they utter any form of apology. For women, the speech act of apology becomes a high-stakes struggle for legitimacy itself, where their every word is scrutinized against conflicting gender and political norms. This dynamic creates a hostile communicative environment that serves as a subtle yet powerful barrier to women's full participation in public life.

In summary, the language of apology in Nigerian politics is a microcosm of the broader gender struggle. It is a site where patriarchal norms are linguistically performed, policed, and perpetuated. The findings show that gender equality in politics requires more than just policy changes; it demands a critical re-evaluation of the communicative expectations placed upon leaders. Future research could fruitfully explore the perlocutionary effects of these apologies on Nigerian audiences or expand the analysis to other forms of political discourse. In the end, this study demonstrates that the words used to say "sorry" in the political arena are deeply entwined with the enduring power of gender to define, constrain, and legitimize authority.

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