

## Investigating Communicative Competence in Discourse: A Universal Pragmatic Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's Letter to the Senate

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### Abstract

*The effectiveness of a message is usually enhanced by the extent of its pertinence to the people for which it is channeled. Thus, the determinant factor of relevance of any political speech to a people would be by how much the speech addresses issues that are key to solving and addressing the problems in the polity. In recent times, Nigeria has, and is still, experiencing a redoubtable critical period, evocative of the human cruelty experienced during a civil war that claimed many lives and properties, apart from other resultant effects. The violent occurrences, especially the Boko Haram saga and the Fulani-Herdsmen/Farmers clashes, with which Nigerians are daily submerged, are disturbing. , Sequel to this background, this study examines a speech of President Muhammadu Buhari that is aimed at resolving the crises, using Habermas' theory of Universal Pragmatics, with a view to investigating the extent to which he communicates competently to his subordinates. Universal Pragmatic posits that anyone acting communicatively cannot avoid raising the following validity claims: uttering something inheritably, giving the hearer something to understand, making himself understandable and coming to understand another person. Our analysis reveals the Letter of Muhammadu Buhari as having met the validity claims set forth by Jurgen Habermas and therefore competent for the resolution of the crisis and the promotion of peace and unity in the country through communication.*

**Keywords:** Message, Letter, Political Speech, Universal Pragmatics, Validity Claims, Speakers, Hearers.

### Introduction

The contributions of pragmatics to language study have made English Language a more interesting field of study. The idea that language is used to perform different roles in doing things and that the meanings of such roles used to accomplish such act is highly dependent on socio-cultural context, was introduced into the discussion of linguistics meaning by Malinowski (1923) and Firth (1968). Since then, sociolinguists and sociologists have been particularly concerned with the use of the language negotiate role-relationship, peer solidarity, the exchange of turns and face saving in conversation. (Lawal, 1997, p.16)

The role of communication in governance cannot be overemphasized. Communicative role in governance supports the importance of speech delivery in the addressing issues concerning the country. Presidential speeches, most times, subject the president to using the official voice which should indicate a new hope or a continuation of a better administration. Every utterance in such speeches conveys message(s).

Under the purview of pragmatics, universal pragmatics also known as Formal pragmatics holds that anyone acting communicatively cannot avoid raising the following validity claims: uttering something transmissible, giving the hearer something to understand, making himself understandable and coming to understand another person.

Universal pragmatics draws a broad distinction between strategic and communicative actions. Strategic action is oriented toward success, while communication action is oriented towards understandings. Strategic action is parasitic on communicative action. By this, it is implied that communicative action is the primary mode of linguistic interaction and the basic function of communication is to reach a reciprocally defined understanding.

Anytime language users take actions aimed at reaching an understanding, the speech acts they exchange assume the weight of a mutually recognized validity. In other words, each of those involved in communication takes interlocutors as accountable for what they have said, thereby



justifying the validity of the understanding that is reached. Habermas (1979) believes that a speech act is generative and it is this generative power that makes it possible for a speech act to succeed or fail. The generative power of a speech act consists in the fact that the speaker in performing a speech act, can influence the hearer in such a way that the hearer can take upon interpersonal relation with the speaker. It follows therefore, that a speech act that is generative must have illocutionary effect on the hearer.

Generating meanings from utterances goes beyond linguistic knowledge: non-linguistic factors are also to be considered in order to have a concise account of how embedded meanings in communication play an active role. Knight (2010) in 'Habermas' Formal Pragmatics and the Speech Act of Stephen' used the formal pragmatic theory in analyzing speeches of the biblical Stephen. He opined that bible text forms the foundation in idealizing supposition of everyday purposive and illocutionary activity and also provides the inspiration for the communicative rationality sought after by Habermas needed for communicative action. Omoloso (2016) using Habermas' universal pragmatics in conjunction with the context of the last sermon of Prophet Mohammad [SAW] will go a long way in resolving Nigeria's problems.

Different scholars of repute have carried out research works on speech acts, rhetoric, discourse and pragmatic features of presidential addresses or speeches. Nevertheless; it has been observed that little has been given claims as posited by Habermas in the collection of a particular president's speech. Therefore, President Muhammadu Buhari's speech is what the study will dwell on. This work is distinct because the researcher deploys and draws eclectically from the universal pragmatic approach (presupposition, validity claims, speech act, deixis, felicity condition) to analyze Muhammadu Buhari's political speech with a goal of establishing social relation between him and the masses, thus employing Habermas(1979) universal pragmatic theory. It further seeks to contribute to existing literature in pragmatic discourse by subjecting the speech of president Muhammadu Buhari to

Habermas idealized presuppositions and validity claims with a view to examining the discursive practices reproduced through presidential speeches and the extent to which this speech adhere to the presuppositions and claims.

The scope of this work is Muhammadu Buhari's letter to the Senate President on farmer-herdsmen crises. The speech was retrieved from the internet through *Sahara Reporters* on 25 January, 2018. The choice of data was informed by the fact that the crisis is the one of the major challenges facing the nation at the time of this study. It is therefore necessary to examine the claims made by the President regarding this area.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Formal pragmatics serves two important functions in Habermas' philosophy. First, it is the theoretical underpinning of the theory of communicative action, this being a crucial element of his theory of society. Second, it contributes to ongoing philosophical discussion regarding truth, meaning, rationality and action. Universal pragmatics, as the name suggests, attempted to reconstruct the universal, context-transcendent, features of language use. Habermas came to reject the terms 'universal' in favour of 'formal', which reminds us of formal pragmatics in the relationship with formal semantics of which the similarity between the two is particularly important for Habermas' accounts of meaning the truth.

Habermas' pragmatics theory of meaning attempts to analyze and harmonise the relations among utterances, the situations and contexts in which they are embedded. Background knowledge of a speaker's personal history, cultural heritage, can be rendered explicit without too much trouble and this sort of knowledge constitutes the horizon of our shared experiences. In this way, it safeguards against social disintegration, thus forming a crucial part of the formal properties of universal pragmatics.

By linking meaning with the acceptability of speech act, Habermas moves the analysis beyond a narrow focus on the truth-conditional semantics of representation to the social intelligibility of interaction. The complexity of social interaction then allows him to find three basic validity claims



potentially on any speech used for cooperative purposes.

### **Habermas' Validity Claims**

According to Habermas (1979), the task of universal pragmatics is to identify, study and reconstruct necessary universal conditions for reaching a possible understanding through communication. He further stressed that anyone acting communicatively must, in performing any speech action, raise universal validity claims and supposes that they can be maintained or fulfilled.

The universal validity claims are:

- i. Uttering something understandable;
- ii. Giving the hearer something to understand;
- iii. Making himself thereby understandable;
- iv. Coming to an understanding with another person. (Habermas, 1979, p.2)

From the above, it can be deduced that the fundamental basis of universal pragmatics is to facilitate mutual understanding. As emphasized by Habermas, no human communication oriented towards achieving mutual understanding could fail to observe validity claims. Habermas explains, coming to an understanding is the process of bringing about an agreement the presupposed basis of validity claims which can be mutually recognized. According to him (Habermas, 1979, p.3):

As soon as this consensus is shaken, and the presupposition that certain validity claims are satisfied (or could be vindicated) is suspended, the task of mutual interpretation is to achieve a new definition of the situation which all participants can share. If their attempt fails, communicative actions cannot be continued.

### **Speech Act/ Presupposition**

Universal pragmatics draws theoretically in some ways from the speech act theory. Habermas expatiates that communicative competence is a core angle that is universal just as linguistic competence. Therefore, a general theory of speech act would describe exactly the fundamental system of rules that adult speaker masters such that he or she able to happily

employ sentences in utterances, regardless of which particular language the sentences may belong and in which contexts the utterances are used. (Habermas 1979, p.27)

According to Habermas (1979, p.28), while a grammatical sentence fulfills the claims to comprehensibility, a successful utterance must satisfy three additional claims:

- (i) it must count as true for participants in so far as it represents something in the world;
- (ii) it must count as truthful in so far as it expresses something intended by the speaker;
- (iii) it must count as right in so far so it conforms to socially recognized expectations.

Anytime language users take action aimed at reaching an understanding, the speech acts they exchange (their communication efforts), assume the weight of a mutually recognized validity. In other words, each of those involved in communication takes her interactants as accountable for what they have, thereby justifying the validity of the understanding that is reached. Habermas thus believes that a speech act is generative and it is this generative power that makes it possible for a speech act to succeed or fail. For a speech act to have the necessary illocutionary force potentials and invoke appropriate perlocutionary effect, it must fulfill some idealized presuppositions, which are (Habermas 1987, p.8):

- i. Participants in a communication exchange should use the same linguistic expression in the same way. That is, there should be no ambiguity.
- ii. There should be no suppression or exclusion of any relevant argument by the participants.
- iii. There should be no persuasive force used, other than that of superior argument which is exerted.
- iv. All participants in a talk exchange should be motivated by a common concern for better argument.
- v. Participants in communication should expand their validity that is



understood to have significance beyond the specific context of discourse. This means that the validity should apply to other contexts outside the one where validity is established. That is, it should have universal relevance, which is possible if discourse is relieved of the constraints of time and space.

- vi. All validity claims should be subject to critical evaluation in argumentation.
- vii. Everyone that is capable of speech should be accorded the right to participate in a talk exchange and should be entitled to introduce new topics or express attitudes, needs or desires.

All these presuppositions should have been satisfied somehow in any situation of communication (Grice's 1975). The goal of Habermas in universal pragmatics is the possibility of reaching a consensus that must be premised on a speech situation in which all participants make up their own minds, possess communicative competence and be free from coercion. Having reviewed our theoretical framework, we would now subject our data analysis to see how far it meets Habermas' validity and presupposition claims.

#### Data analysis

- i. Letter by President Muhammadu Buhari to Senate President, Bukola Saraki, on Benue Killings.

#### Excerpt 1

"As I briefed you and the Rt. Hon. Speaker, when we met on the 14<sup>th</sup> January 2018, several courses of action had already been taken prior to the Senate Resolution. You may recall that I told you of the following step taken as soon as information came to meet me about the Benue killings."

#### Excerpt 2

'On Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> January, I sent the Minister of Interior and the Deputy Inspector General of Police in charge of Operations for a report on the assessment of the situation. On Friday, 5<sup>th</sup> January, the Inspector General of Police briefed me verbally on the latest situation. Calm had then been restored. On Monday 8<sup>th</sup>, the minister of Interior met with the following: Governors of ... the six aforementioned states.

#### Excerpt 3

'After the meeting, I instructed the Minister of Interior to brief you on the information gathered so far and steps taken... I had long session with Governor Ortom of Benue state which I informed him of police arrest of some suspects... I told him that I had instructed the IGP to speed up trial and prosecution of the suspects and give wide publicity to the police efforts'.

#### Excerpt 4

'At the request of the governor, a meeting was held in the Presidential Villa on 15<sup>th</sup> January, with a wide-cross-section of Benue personages where frank and open discussion were held and everybody in the meeting appreciated the complexity and difficulties of this farmer/herder strife. I assured all and sundry of my commitment to ensure that justice is expeditiously done'

#### Excerpt 5

'To infer, therefore that nothing has been done is correct. The police are strenuously working to apprehend the rest of the culprits of these heartless killings. Furthermore, I have instructed the Inspector General of police to relocate to Benue state...'

#### Excerpt 6

'... I underscored that need to review the operational, technical and administration structure of the National Intelligence



Agency... as I promised in my inaugural Address on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2015. Action is being initiated and I expect to receive maximum cooperation from the Senate, in line with paragraph (iii) of the Senate Resolution’.

The assertive verbs ‘briefed’, ‘told’, and ‘sent’ in excerpt 1 and 2 above indicate that there had been prior discussion between President Muhammadu Buhari and the Senate President. The speaker asserts a strong sense of responsibility in his action. The verb ‘recall’ as used in excerpt 1 plays a role of foregrounding the argument initially established in his speech, thus giving the Senate President something to understand and also making himself understandable.

By this, a Habermas validity claim of uttering something understandably has been met. It goes further to say that there is a background knowledge between the speaker and the hearer on an argument which is the ‘Benue killings’ for the President had on different occasions as the excerpts reveal, involved the Senate President in the discussion.

In excerpts 2, 3, 4 and 6, the president involves everyone who in one way or the other plays a positive role in ensuring that different ideals, views are positioned in the interest of crisis eradication, like Minister of Interior, Inspector General of Police, Governor of Benue state, etc. By this action, Habermas idealised presupposition that ‘everyone that is capable of speech should be accorded the right to participate in a talk exchange and should be entitled to introduce new topics or express attitudes, needs or desires has been achieved.

Furthermore, President Muhammadu Buhari recognizes the consequence of a failed administration. With no persuasive force used, he requests ‘maximum cooperation from the Senate, in line with paragraph (iii) of the Senate Resolutions’ in curbing the menace emanating from the herdsmen-farmers crisis (excerpt 6). This adheres to Habermas postulation that “all participants in a talk exchange should be motivated by a common concern for a better argument.

The pronominal ‘I’ occurs frequently in the speech. As illustrated in excerpt 1,2,3,5 and 6, the use of the pronoun ‘I’ was made for deictic purpose and a form of superior argument exerted as no form of persuasive force used but on issues which could promote societal peace. Furthermore, ‘I’ as used in the excerpts had the effect of foregrounding the sincerity of the speaker in what he wants to address. After opening a line of communication (excerpt 1) and establishing a basis of communication intersubjectivity with the audience as universal pragmatic theory demands, the writer dwelt on issues paramount to the lives of the citizenry. That conforms to Habermas’ idealised presupposition that there should be no suppression or exclusion of any relevant argument by the participants.

Where political bias overshadows objectivity, listeners can decide to pretend not to have understood a speaker or come to an understanding with the speaker no matter how successful the speaker has been in attaining universal validity claims. That may be taken into account as to why a section of the Nigerian community seems not to see in the President’s speech any concern by the President to resolve the problems of insecurity particularly the herdsmen-farmer clashes. This development is inferred from the President’s speech in excerpt 5. Here, it appears the president sensed lack of understanding of his claims by the masses. In order to avoid failure in the communication action, he switches to strategic action by reinforcing his initial argument with a view of being communicatively competent. This, he does by espousing on other measures being put in a place towards tackling the menace. As emphasized by Habermas, if communicative action fails, the option available will be that of switching to strategic action, breaking communication altogether, or talking other actions aimed at achieving and understanding at a difference level. Any meaning that meet the validity conditions and is recognized by another as having done so is considered to be vindicated or communicatively competent. Thus in accepting a validity claim raised by the speaker,



the hearer must acknowledge what Habermas calls the validity symbolic structure that is, the hearer acknowledges that a sentence is grammatical, a statement is true, an intentional expression is truthful, or an utterance is correct.

Another aspect of Habermas' universal pragmatic theory that researcher wants to subject the presidential speeches to, is, his remark that a successful utterance must satisfy three additional claims if it wants to have any claim to comprehensibility. One of the claims is that the utterance must count as true for participants in so far as it represents something in the world. To the extent that the presidential speech addresses issue relating to the lives of humans, it has satisfied Habermas' truth condition. The utterances and action in excerpt 6 proves his declaration true and right to the audience. Specifically, in the assertive "... as I promised in my inaugural address on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015", it can be said the speech and the speaker met all conditions of felicity and illocutionary act, hence it is said to be felicitous. The requestive speech act in this excerpt 'I expect your maximum cooperation...' presupposes that the speaker did not intend his message for his immediate audience alone. The speaker's request that his message should be taken out to others who were not present demonstrate that the speech is meant not only for primary audiences, but Nigerians at large. This shows the message to have met the fifth of Habermas' idealized presupposition that requires participants in communication to expand their validity that is understood to have significant beyond the specific context of discourse. This means that contributions in a discourse should be capable of universal application.

The data were expression of issues that were intended by the speaker. This has met the second universal condition. The third condition is that the utterance must be right in so far as it conforms to socially recognized expectations.

The speech conforms to socially recognized exceptions, coming from the president of the country, addressing the generality of Nigerians at large on issues crucial to their survival.

### Conclusion

This paper has used Habermas' idealized presupposition and validity claims to analyse President Muhammadu Buhari's speech as contained in the letter to the Senate President on Benue killings. The research concluded that the utterance in the speech has adhered to the claims and preposition proposed by Habermas. Thus, the study reveals that anyone acting communicatively must, in performing a speech action, raise some idealized presuppositions and validity claims and assumes that they can be vindicated or redeemed.

The president's speech is also meaningful to the current population of Nigerians as it touches the ills that have bedeviled the society. Also, the third universal validity claims has been met by presidential speech as, by delivering the speech in English, formal language, and issues related to their social life, the speaker paves the way for people to understand him. It is assumed that the speech would retain its profundity even if it is translated to other languages because it addresses issues that are pertinent to their peaceful co-existence, 'regardless of time and space'. (Habermas, 1979, p.28)

In conclusion, the president's speech, having been contextualized in Habermas' universal pragmatic theory, not only carries out actions of leadership and present information to Nigerians but also facilitates mutual understanding by satisfying the validity claims of truth, truthfulness and normative rightness. We therefore suggest that more interest be taken by linguists by doing a comparative study of two speakers with different sociopolitical situation to examine if the validity claims opined by Habermas are met or not.

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