

A Pragmatic Analysis of President Tinubu's Response to the Address of the CBCN President at the State House

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Abstract

This study examines the pragmatic features of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's response to the address of Most Rev. Matthew Man-Oso Ndagoso, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), during the bishops' visit to the State House, Abuja, on 28 July 2026. The interaction occurred against the background of concerns expressed by the Catholic bishops regarding insecurity, economic hardship, education, democracy, credible elections, religious freedom and the return of mission schools. The study adopts a qualitative pragmatic approach, drawing principally on Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, implicature and politeness theory. The analysis demonstrates that President Tinubu's response performs several communicative functions, including asserting, promising, reassuring, defending, directing and persuading. His use of expressions such as *"We don't have another country but here – this Nigeria," "We will defeat terrorism,"* and *"there is prosperity on the horizon"* illustrates the deployment of representative, commissive and expressive acts to construct optimism and national solidarity. His response to the bishops' concerns also reveals strategic use of implicature, particularly in his presentation of the government's achievements and his attribution of responsibility for some matters to constitutional structures. The study argues that Tinubu's response constitutes a politically strategic discourse in which pragmatic resources are employed to negotiate disagreement, defend government policies, reassure the audience and maintain a cooperative relationship with religious leaders. The study concludes that presidential responses to institutional criticism are not merely informational but constitute complex acts of political persuasion, face management and ideological positioning.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech acts, implicature, political discourse, CBCN, Tinubu,

Introduction

Political communication is an important area of pragmatic inquiry because political language does not merely communicate information; it performs actions, establishes relationships, expresses attitudes, manages disagreement and attempts to influence the beliefs and behaviours of interlocutors. Political leaders therefore employ

language strategically to defend policies, persuade citizens, reassure stakeholders and construct particular interpretations of social reality (Chilton, P. 2025). The encounter between President Bola Ahmed Tinubu and members of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) at the State House, Abuja, on 28 July 2026 provides an important context for examining political discourse from a pragmatic perspective. The CBCN delegation, led by its newly elected President, Most Rev. Matthew Man-Oso Ndagoso, presented concerns about the state of the Nigerian nation, including insecurity, education, poverty, democracy, credible elections and religious freedom. The bishops also requested consideration of the return of mission schools and fair treatment of worshippers across the country.

In his response, President Tinubu acknowledged the concerns but also defended the performance and direction of his administration. He maintained that the government had stabilised the economy, was repositioning the security architecture and was taking steps to improve education and national development. He also urged religious leaders to support efforts against violence and promote national unity. The interaction is particularly significant pragmatically because it involves two institutional actors with different communicative roles. The CBCN President speaks as a religious leader and institutional representative expressing concerns about citizens and the Church, while the President of Nigeria responds as the head of government. Their discourse therefore involves power, authority, institutional identity, politeness, disagreement and persuasion. This paper investigates how President Tinubu's response communicates meanings beyond the literal meanings of the words employed. It focuses particularly on the speech acts, implicatures, politeness strategies and persuasive devices through which the President responds to the bishops' concerns.

Background to the 2026 CBCN–Presidential Meeting

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria met with President Tinubu at the State House in Abuja on 28 July 2026. The meeting was led by CBCN President Archbishop Matthew Ndagoso, who presented a number of concerns about the state of the country. According to the State House account, the bishops raised concerns relating to security, tertiary education, democracy, credible elections and poverty, while also advocating the return of mission schools and equal treatment for worshippers. Archbishop Ndagoso specifically called for free and fair elections in 2027 and urged the President to strengthen democratic institutions.

An independent account of the bishops' address reports that Ndagoso expressed concern about Christians' sense of equal citizenship and urged the government to protect constitutional rights consistently. He also highlighted insecurity, economic hardship, infrastructure deficiencies and problems in the power sector. President Tinubu responded by highlighting government interventions and policies. He spoke about the restructuring of security institutions, the expansion of the armed forces, improved equipment, education, NELFUND, economic recovery and the return of mission schools. On the latter issue, he explained that state governors have constitutional authority concerning mission schools and recalled his own experience as Lagos State governor. The interaction therefore provides a rich corpus for

pragmatic analysis because it involves claims, counterclaims, commitments, reassurances, directives, evaluations and implicit political positioning.

3. Statement of the Problem

Studies of political discourse in Nigeria have increasingly examined the language of political speeches, campaign discourse and presidential addresses (Ahmed, Y. 2017). However, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the pragmatic analysis of responses made by political leaders to institutional criticism, particularly criticism originating from religious organisations. The CBCN's 2026 address presented the government with a set of sensitive concerns involving insecurity, poverty, democracy, education and religious rights. President Tinubu's response was consequently not simply a conventional political speech. It was a communicative reaction to criticism from a highly influential religious institution. The central problem of this study is therefore to determine how the President used language to respond to, negotiate and sometimes challenge the concerns expressed by the CBCN President.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

1. examine the speech acts employed by President Tinubu in responding to the CBCN President;
2. identify the pragmatic meanings conveyed through the President's utterances;
3. analyse the implicatures generated by the President's response;
4. investigate the persuasive strategies used by the President;
5. determine how pragmatic choices help the President manage agreement and disagreement with the CBCN.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. What speech acts are prominent in President Tinubu's response to the CBCN President?
2. What pragmatic meanings are communicated through these speech acts?
3. What implicatures arise from the President's response?
4. What persuasive strategies are evident in the response?
5. How does the response manage institutional disagreement between the government and the Catholic bishops?

Theoretical Framework

Speech Act Theory

The study adopts Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory. Austin argues that utterances can perform actions, while Searle classifies speech acts into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations. This framework is particularly useful because President Tinubu's response contains utterances through which he does more than provide information. He asserts, promises, directs, reassures, evaluates and defends. For example:

"We will defeat terrorism." The utterance functions as a **commissive**, because the President commits the government to a future course of action. Similarly: "It should be part of your sermons." This functions primarily as a directive, because the President requests or instructs religious leaders to incorporate opposition to terrorism and violence into their preaching.

6.2 Grice's Cooperative Principle

Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle proposes four conversational maxims which are: Maxim of Quantity, Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Relation and Maxim of Manner. The framework helps explain how speakers communicate meanings that are not explicitly stated. Political speakers may apparently observe or strategically depart from these maxims to generate implicatures. In Tinubu's response, statements about economic recovery and improved quality of life can be interpreted pragmatically as attempts to counter the bishops' representation of widespread hardship.

Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory is also relevant. Political interactions involving disagreement create potential face-threatening acts. The President therefore has to disagree with the bishops while maintaining institutional respect. His use of respectful references to the bishops, including his description of them as "revered fathers," functions as a positive-politeness strategy.

Methodology

The study adopts a **qualitative descriptive research design**. The data consist of publicly reported portions of President Tinubu's response to the CBCN President during the 28 July 2026 State House meeting. The primary textual source is the official State House report of the meeting, supplemented by reports from reputable news organisations. The State House account records the major themes and direct quotations from the President's response. The analysis focuses on selected utterances that demonstrate: representatives; commissives; directives; expressives; assertives; implicatures; politeness; metaphor; persuasion; positive self-presentation; and responsibility attribution.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Representative Speech Acts

Representative speech acts communicate the speaker's belief concerning the truth or validity of a proposition. A major example is: "The economy has recovered." President Tinubu uses this utterance to present economic recovery as an established fact. Pragmatically, the statement performs more than an economic description. It challenges the negative representation of the economy contained in the bishops' concerns about poverty and hardship. The President further states: "The government has stabilised, and there is prosperity on the horizon." This is another representative act. It constructs the government's economic programme as successful and the future as positive. The pragmatic implication is that the President wants the bishops to interpret current economic difficulties as temporary conditions within a broader

process of recovery.

Commissive Speech Acts

Commissives commit the speaker to future action. One of the strongest examples is: "We will defeat terrorism." This is a clear commissive act. President Tinubu commits his administration to achieving a future security objective. The statement has two pragmatic effects. First, it **reassures** the bishops and the wider public. Second, it projects political authority and confidence. The modal auxiliary "will" is significant. Rather than saying that the government *hopes* to defeat terrorism, the President uses a high-certainty modal construction. This creates an impression of determination and governmental capability.

Directive Speech Acts

President Tinubu also employs directives. A particularly important example is: "It should be part of your sermons." Here, the President directs the religious leaders to incorporate condemnation of terrorism and violence into their religious preaching. Pragmatically, the statement constructs the fight against insecurity as a **shared responsibility**. The government is therefore not represented as the only actor responsible for solving insecurity. Religious leaders are assigned a complementary communicative role. This is strategically important because it transforms the discourse from: government responsibility → shared national responsibility.

Expressive Speech Acts

Expressive speech acts communicate psychological or emotional states. President Tinubu's statement: "We don't have another country but here – this Nigeria" functions expressively by demonstrating attachment to Nigeria and encouraging national solidarity. The pronoun "we" is particularly important. It creates an inclusive relationship between the government, religious leaders and citizens. Instead of constructing the situation as: government versus critics, the President constructs it as: Nigerians collectively facing national challenges. This is an important positive-politeness strategy.

The Pragmatics of "We"

The pronoun **we** deserves special attention. President Tinubu repeatedly uses inclusive forms such as: "We don't have another country but here – this Nigeria." The first-person plural pronoun can function as an inclusive deictic, encompassing the President, bishops and Nigerian citizens. Its pragmatic effect is to reduce institutional distance. The President is therefore not simply speaking as a political authority; he linguistically positions himself as a member of the national community.

National Anthem as Intertextual Persuasion

One of the most significant pragmatic strategies in the response is the reference to the national anthem: "In our complexity and diversity, we shall thrive, live, rejoice and be good to all..." The reference functions as intertextual persuasion. Rather than presenting national unity exclusively as a political ideology, the President anchors it in a familiar national text. The anthem becomes a source of shared cultural authority.

The pragmatic strategy is powerful because disagreement with the President can potentially be separated from disagreement with the ideals of national unity and patriotism.

Reassurance as a Pragmatic Strategy

The bishops' address contained serious concerns about insecurity, democracy, poverty and religious rights. President Tinubu responds repeatedly through reassurance. For example: "The economy has recovered." And "There is prosperity on the horizon." These expressions function as **reassurance strategies**. They attempt to modify the bishops' negative assessment by providing a more optimistic interpretation of national conditions. The contrast may be represented as:

CBCN'S REPRESENTATION	TINUBU'S RESPONSE
Economic Hardship	Economic Recovery
Insecurity	Security Restructuring
Elections Concerns	INEC Independence
Educational Challenges	Educational Progress
Uncertainty	Prosperity in the nearest future

The interaction therefore contains competing representations of Nigerian reality.

President Tinubu also uses defensive pragmatic strategies when responding to criticism.

He states:

"I inherited the assets and liabilities of my predecessor."

This statement has a significant pragmatic function.

The utterance acknowledges responsibility for the present government while simultaneously contextualising existing problems as inherited conditions.

It therefore performs a defensive face-saving function. The implied argument is that the: Present problems cannot be attributed exclusively to the current administration because the administration inherited pre-existing structural problems. This is a classic political responsibility-management strategy.

Economic Discourse and Positive Self-Presentation

The President presents several government achievements: Economic Stabilisation , NELFUND; security restructuring; expansion of the armed forces; improved equipment; education; additional universities; and absence of an ASUU strike. The State House reports that Tinubu specifically invoked the continuity of four-year university programmes and the absence of an ASUU strike as an "answer to our prayers." Pragmatically, these examples function as **evidence claims** designed to

support the broader proposition that the government is making progress.

The Pragmatics of "Answer to Our Prayers"

The expression: "For me, that's answered prayer" is particularly interesting because of the religious context of the interaction. President Tinubu is addressing Catholic bishops. The expression "answered prayer" therefore resonates with the religious identities of his interlocutors. This can be interpreted as a form of audience-oriented pragmatic adaptation. Rather than using exclusively economic or bureaucratic language, the President adopts religiously resonant language. The expression creates common ground between: political discourse + religious discourse.

Metaphor and Political Competition

President Tinubu's response to electoral concerns contains striking metaphorical expressions:

"If political opponents are crying wolf, maybe they are afraid of their own shadows", and: "We wrestle each other to the finishing point." These expressions are pragmatically significant.

"Crying wolf" as an expression in contexts implies that political opponents exaggerate danger or make accusations without sufficient basis. The President thereby discredits the claims of political opponents. Consider also the expression: "Afraid of their own shadows". This metaphor implies that the opposition's fears may originate from their own anxieties rather than from actual threats. Note the following also: "Wrestle each other to the finishing point". This metaphor conceptualises political competition as a physical contest. Channels Television reports the President as saying that he would not give political opponents a "red carpet" and that the contest would continue to the "finishing point." The pragmatic implication is that Tinubu presents himself as politically resilient and unwilling to surrender his political position without contest.

Implicature

Implicature is central to understanding the deeper meanings of the response. One may consider the expression: "I won't deviate from our national anthem." Literally, the President says that he will remain committed to the principles expressed in the anthem. The implied meaning is broader: his administration's political project is being presented as consistent with national unity and patriotic ideals. Similarly: "We don't have another country but here.". The literal meaning is straightforward, but the pragmatic implication is: 'Nigerians must work together rather than abandon or undermine the country'.

Politeness and Institutional Respect

Although President Tinubu disagrees with some of the bishops' concerns, he does not generally attack them personally. His reference to them as: "revered fathers" functions as a positive-politeness strategy. It acknowledges their social and religious status and helps preserve their positive face. This is particularly important because the bishops' address constitutes an institutional challenge to government

performance. Openly dismissing them could threaten the cooperative nature of the encounter.

Pragmatic Interpretation of Selected Utterances

President Tinubu's Utterance	Speech Act	Pragmatic Function
"There is prosperity on the horizon."	Representative/Expressive	Hope and optimism
"We will defeat terrorism."	Commissive	Promise and reassurance
"It should be part of your sermons."	Directive	Assigning religious leaders a role in security
"INEC is neutral."	Representative	Defence of electoral credibility
"That's an answer to our prayers."	Expressive	Religious common ground

The analysis above demonstrates that President Tinubu's response is characterised by a combination of representative, commissive, directive and expressive speech acts; also demonstrates extensive use of **positive politeness**. The President's references to the bishops as "revered fathers" and his inclusive use of "we" reduce social distance.

Conclusion

This study has examined President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's response to the address of the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria during the CBCN's 2026 visit to the State House. The analysis reveals that the response is pragmatically complex. It goes beyond the transmission of information to perform several communicative functions. President Tinubu uses representative speech acts to defend his administration's performance, commissive acts to promise action against insecurity, directive acts to encourage religious leaders to contribute to national security, and **expressive acts** to promote patriotism and solidarity. The response also employs implicature, metaphor, politeness and persuasive strategies. Expressions such as "We don't have another country but here," "We will defeat terrorism," and "there is prosperity on the horizon" construct a discourse of national unity, governmental determination and future optimism. The President's response to the bishops' criticism of the economy demonstrates a process of pragmatic reframing: whereas the bishops emphasised suffering and hardship, the President emphasised recovery and stabilisation. Similarly, where the bishops raised concerns about insecurity, the President highlighted restructuring and future victory over terrorism. The study therefore concludes that President Tinubu's response represents a form of strategic political discourse in which language is employed simultaneously to defend government policy, manage institutional disagreement, construct political legitimacy, reassure the audience and persuade interlocutors to share the administration's interpretation of national conditions.

12. Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the study recommends that:

1. Nigerian political discourse should receive greater pragmatic attention, particularly presidential responses to criticism.
2. Religious and political institutional discourse should be studied as sites of negotiation of power and social responsibility.
3. Future studies should examine the CBCN President's address and President Tinubu's response comparatively.
4. Researchers should investigate how metaphors such as *wrestling*, *crying wolf* and *answered prayer* shape political meaning.
5. Further research should employ Critical Discourse Analysis alongside pragmatics to investigate ideology, power and representation.
6. Corpus-based studies could quantify the distribution of speech acts, pronouns, modal verbs, metaphors and politeness markers in Nigerian presidential discourse.

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