

(De)legitimation on Twitter: The Case of Speech Acts in Buhari-Atiku Campaign Rhetoric during Nigeria's 2019 Elections

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ABSTRACT

The 2019 Presidential Elections in Nigeria saw unprecedented intensity of campaign on Twitter, particularly between President Buhari and his challenger, Atiku Abubakar, the most dominant candidates of the two major parties, APC and PDP. The intense rhetoric was markedly amplified by Buhari's controversial decisions of suspending the Chief Justice of Nigeria and postponing Presidential and National Assembly Elections. The President tried to justify his decisions, while Atiku challenged them. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the use of Speech Acts for (de)legitimation in Buhari-Atiku tweets on these incidents. Hence, while adopting Critical Discourse Analysis, the study applied Searle's (1969) Speech Acts, Reyes' (2011) Strategies of Legitimation in Political Discourse and van Dijk's (2006, 2011) Rhetorical Discursive Strategies. The data comprised 53 tweets from the official Twitter handles of Buhari and Atiku. The results indicate that while Buhari relied on Assertives (44%), Atiku relied on Expressives (40%) for (de)legitimation. Further analysis found that Buhari's Assertives were utilised to make claims, explain, and ultimately legitimate his decisions through Appeal to Emotions (55%) or Rationality (37%). But Atiku's Expressives were mainly used to delegitimize Buhari's decisions through Appeal to Emotions (87.5%), blaming the President for dishonest rationale, emphasising the unconstitutionality of the decisions and discrediting all explanations in order to arouse negative emotions. The study concluded that Assertives and Expressives are vital for constructing political (de-)legitimation on Twitter and that the strategy of Appeal to Emotions predominates (de)legitimatory discourse on Twitter.

Keywords: Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Election; Buhari-Atiku Campaign Rhetoric on Twitter; Political (De)legitimation; Speech Acts; Political Tweets

INTRODUCTION

At the peak of the 2019 General Election campaigns in Nigeria, the incumbent President who was also seeking re-election, Muhammadu Buhari, made two controversial decisions that attracted enormous outrage, accusations, criticisms, blame and attacks from his political opponents, the media, Civil Society Organisations, the international community, and the general citizens, from both within and outside the country. The first of these decisions was Buhari's sudden suspension of the Chief Justice of Nigeria, CJN Walter Nkannu Samuel Onnoghen, on the 25th of January 2019. This decision not only shocked Nigerians; it also triggered palpable suspicion of being politically motivated as it came just a few weeks before the commencement of elections on the 16th of February and at a time when the Chief Justice was busy constituting election petition tribunals to handle election-related cases. Hence, many saw it as an unjustifiable decision taken by the President in his desperate attempt to eliminate any perceptible threat to his continuity and the dominance of his party, All Progressives Congress (APC) (Bakare, 2019; Jazeera, 2019; Welle, 2019)

Buhari's second controversial decision was the unexpected postponement of the Presidential and National Assembly Elections on the 16th of February. This was announced through the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Professor Mahmood Yakubu, who spoke to journalists in Abuja in the early hours of the Election Day at 2.44 am, less than 5 hours before the commencement of polls. This postponement came as a big disappointment to most Nigerians and the international community, who were constantly assured of the Buhari administration's full preparedness for the elections (Campbell, 2019; Zane, 2019).

Arguably, these two incidents contributed greatly to the intense rhetoric seen on Twitter between President Buhari and his challenger, Atiku Abubakar, during the 2019 election campaigns. In their polarised discourses, the President tried to explain and justify the decisions in order to encourage the voters' support and approval, to enable him achieve his goal of getting re-elected to keep power (BBC News, 2019; Punch Newspaper, 2019), while Atiku tried to take advantage of these incidents to portray Buhari and his actions as morally reprehensible and unacceptable – a strategy he aimed to undermine the President's credibility and to bring him down (Ogundipe, 2019; Olu, 2019).

However, despite the intense rhetoric displayed by Buhari and Atiku on these incidents, the literature still suggests that their utilisation of linguistic resources for *(de)legitimation* remains unexplored. Consequently, the knowledge of how Buhari utilised language to legitimise his decisions and how Atiku delegitimised the same decisions still appears unknown. There is an apparent need to investigate how the two employed linguistic resources to perform *(de)legitimation* in their tweets. Past studies, which were mainly content analyses, seem to be only concerned with how they *constructed discourses that aid mobilisation* (Fakunle, 2019), *built agenda* (Ahmad et al., 2020), *employed interactional and persuasive strategies* (Mano, 2020), and *used figurative devices and propaganda in attempts to skew the opinions of voters* (Amali, 2024). Thus, this research appears to have ignored how Buhari-Atiku linguistically constructed *(de)legitimation* in their tweets.

Moreover, previous research reveals how different linguistic resources such as *purpose clauses*, *verbal process clauses*, *moralised/evaluative adverbs and adjectives* (Oddo, 2011; van Leeuwen, 2007), *conditional sentences*, *adverbial clauses*, *direct speech* (Reyes, 2011) and *Speech Acts* (Cap, 2006, 2008; Rojo & van Dijk, 1997) are effective for expressing political *(de)legitimation*. But while this knowledge mostly relates to offline speeches, little is known about

the use of these resources for (de)legitimation on Twitter. Especially, *speech acts* have been shown to be crucial in building persuasion in political tweets (AIBzour, 2022; Elliott-Maksymowicz et al., 2021; Ramanathan et al., 2020;), but their role in expressing (de)legitimation appears to have been largely ignored.

Hence, in an attempt to bridge these gaps in research, this study investigates the utilisation of *speech acts* for (de)legitimation by President Buhari and Atiku Abubakar in their tweets on CJN Onnoghen's suspension and the Presidential and National Assembly Elections postponement. Our analysis, thus, is anchored on *speech acts* to examine how they are employed by the two contenders to deploy different strategies of (de)legitimation in their tweets. Therefore, the study sets out to address the following objectives:

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the dominant categories of *speech acts* in President Buhari and Atiku Abubakar's tweets on the suspension of CJN Walter Onnoghen and the postponement of Presidential and National Assembly Elections during the 2019 campaigns.
2. To examine how these *speech acts* are utilised to perform (de)legitimation.

LEGITIMATION

Legitimation is a political-linguistic phenomenon constructed through argumentation, persuasion, and even manipulation. It is a discursive practice concerned with providing justifications for political ideas, policies, decisions, or ideological positions that otherwise appear unacceptable, unjustifiable, or irrational to the audience (Cap, 2008; Reyes, 2011; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). Oddo (2011), Rojo and van Dijk (1997) assert that legitimation is typically concerned with giving acceptable motivations, good reasons or grounds for past, present, or future actions. van Leeuwen (2007, p. 93) posits that it is about answering the "WHY" questions – "Why should we do this?" or "Why should we do this in this way?"

According to Rojo and van Dijk (1997), acts of legitimation are mostly performed by powerful groups such as the government, the rulers, or the elites who seek normative approval for their decisions, actions, and policies but whose political power and legitimacy are being threatened by political opponents, the Media, Civil Society Organisations, or the general citizens who engage in acts of delegitimation. Delegitimation is a discursive practice of establishing a sense of negative, unjustified, unacceptable or morally reprehensible decisions, ideas, policies, or actions of the Other (Mat et al., 2023; Oddo, 2011; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). It is achieved by accusing, critiquing, and attempting to raise doubts through reinterpreting actions or decisions negatively.

Legitimation, therefore, is a critical tool deployed by political powers to solve a discursive problem by showing that their actions or decisions are consistent with the moral order of society, laws and norms accepted by members of the society in attempts to persuade the general population and obtain their support and approval for those actions, and to silence their critics. Reyes (2011) contends that political leaders perform legitimation in order to achieve social acceptance, to gain popularity or fame, or even to obtain or maintain political power. This is again consistent with Rojo and van Dijk's (1997, p. 528) argument that "If successful, legitimation not only implies the endorsement of specific actions but usually extends to the dominant group or institutions themselves, as well as to their position and leadership". Cap (2006, pp. 3-4) also emphasises this

view of legitimation when he describes it as the "enactment of the political speaker's right to be obeyed and the linguistic justification of actions following this obedience".

Hence, legitimation has remained a major focus of critical discourse analytic studies interested in political rhetoric. However, one important genre where political legitimation has seemingly not received much attention is political tweets, perhaps due to the newness of this genre. This study, thus, attempts to extend the current knowledge by investigating (de)legitimation in the political tweets of Nigerian presidential contenders during the 2019 general elections.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This study draws on the assumptions of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA). CDA is a social approach to discourse which views language (and other semiotic resources) as social practice. It is a multidisciplinary approach to discourse analysis that draws on social as well as linguistic theories. CDA practitioners are interested in how discourse can be analysed to uncover the discursive notions of power, ideology, identity, gender, hegemony, dominance, and resistance. Hence, CDA studies explore political, gender, media, and institutional discourses in attempts to reveal how struggle and conflict are manifested or mediated in discourse (van Dijk, 2011; Wodak, 2001). The analysis focuses on (de)legitimation in Nigerian presidential contenders' tweets. It is, thus, concerned with one major way through which language serves as an instrument for exerting power and control (Reyes, 2011). Because it is a discursive attempt by powerful groups to tell passive targets what to believe, (de)legitimation is arguably a means of exerting power through controlling public discourse (Rojo & van Dijk, 1997; van Dijk, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Twitter has recently attracted the attention of critical discourse analysts interested in political (de)legitimation. This research has begun to unravel different categories of argumentative, persuasive, and manipulative techniques political premiers leverage to (de)legitimate actions, policies, decisions, and ideological positions.

To begin with, Ross and Rivers (2020) investigated legitimation in President Donald Trump's tweets on his US-Mexico Border Wall policy which was rejected by the Democrats. The study applied Reyes' (2011) framework for Legitimation in Political Discourse. Results indicate that Trump relied on *Appeal to Emotions* and *Hypothetical Futures* to legitimate his policy. Through an appeal to emotions, Trump evoked two negative emotions: *fear* and *anger*. The fear was towards the 'dangerous' migrants whom he associated with *criminal gangs*, *drugs*, and *massive crimes*, while the anger was towards the Democrats who refused to support the Border Wall and 'save the American people'. Trump built on this negative attribute of the migrants to deploy the strategy of *a hypothetical future* when the migrants will 'invade' the U.S. unless the Wall is put in place. These findings corroborate those of Cap (2006, 2008), Oddo (2011), and Reyes (2011), who have consistently shown how U.S. Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama created the impression of a fearful future to legitimate military actions on Germany, Iraq, and Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks.

In another study, Nourani et al. (2020) focused on President Trump's tweets on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iran Nuclear Deal endorsed by the United Nations Security Council Resolution, and his withdrawal of the U.S. on 8th May 2018. Thus, while utilising

van Leeuwen (2007), the researchers observed that Trump mostly employed *moral evaluation* and *rationalization* in delegitimising the JCPOA. Using *moral evaluation*, Trump evaluates the deal negatively by describing it as an *immoral act*, an *act of treason*, a *badly negotiated* deal participated by the Obama administration and the Democrats for their selfish interest of benefiting from trade with Iran. Through *rationalisation*, Trump questioned the rationale and logic behind the JCPOA by arguing that the deal had failed to secure Israel, the U.S. closest ally in the Middle East, as it had allowed Iran to keep test-firing missiles and to keep cooperating with North Korea.

Therefore, Nourani et al.'s (2020) findings are, to some degree, consistent with Oddo's (2011) findings on U.S. Presidents Roosevelt and Bush, who deployed *moral evaluation* in their call-to-arms rhetoric to delegitimise Hitler, Saddam Hussein's regime, and Osama Bin Laden, and to legitimise their proposed military actions against them. The Presidents did this by employing negatively valued *nouns* and *verbs* to represent *Them* and their actions, which are in complete disagreement with *Ours*.

Similar to Nourani et al.'s (2020) study, Rivers and Ross (2020) utilised van Leeuwen's (2007) to analyse President Trump's tweets on his US-Mexico Border Wall policy. The study analysed only *Authority (de)legitimation*. Rivers and Ross reported that Trump relied on *personal authority*, *expert commendations*, and the *authority of conformity* in legitimising his Wall. They observed that Trump's *personal authority* portrayed him as a leader who had unilateral powers to handle the wall issue alone and make deals with the Democrats. His use of *expert commendations* invoked the opinions of security experts who supported the Wall. *Conformity* legitimation was used by Trump to convey the positive impression that his proposed Wall was 'receiving great support from all sides', implying that everyone else supported this policy, and so should the audience.

Rivers and Ross' (2020) finding on Trump's use of *expert commendations* to legitimate his border wall corroborates that of Reyes (2011) on how U.S. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama used *voices of expertise* in their speeches to legitimate their proposed military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, Rivers and Ross' findings on Trump's use of *conformity* to justify his *Wall* policy appear consistent with Oddo's (2011) findings on how U.S. Presidents Roosevelt and Bush also deployed conformity in their call-to-arms speeches to legitimate war by creating the impression that the world is divided into two categories: the 'We are the world' and the 'Dangerous minority'.

Finally, Al-Manaseer and Fouad (2021) analysed legitimation in the political tweets of Iraqi President Barham Salih. The study drew on van Leeuwen's (2007). The results indicate that President Salih used *personal authority* to delegitimize the ISIS massacre of the Yazidi minority and called for justice for the Yazidis. He also utilised *instrumental rationalisation* to legitimate peaceful co-existence between all ideological sects and religious groups in Iraq by referring to values and benefits to the country and the citizens. These findings are, to some extent, consistent with Rivers and Ross (2020) findings on President Trump's use of *personal authority* to delegitimize the Democrats' reluctance to support his wall policy. This suggests that political leaders sometimes draw on the Authority vested in them based on their social status to (de)legitimate socio-political issues.

Therefore, political (de)legitimation on Twitter has started to attract scholarly attention, and fascinating findings have emerged from this research so far. However, despite the fairly appreciable amount of studies, it appears, unfortunately, that previous research concentrated on President Trump's tweets when political tweeting is a global practice. Apparently, there is a need to broaden knowledge by exploring political leaders from other continents. For instance, Nigerian

politicians use Twitter extensively, but their discourse is largely ignored. In addition, the literature shows that past studies failed to focus attention on how *speech acts* to support the expression of political (de)legitimation on Twitter.

Hence, this study endeavours to bridge some gaps in research by investigating how *speech acts* are utilised to perform (de)legitimation by Nigerian political figures. It analyses (de)legitimation through speech acts in the political tweets of President Muhammadu Buhari and his challenger, Atiku Abubakar, during the 2019 general election campaigns. It specifically analyses their tweets on Buhari’s suspension of the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Walter Onnoghen, and the postponement of Presidential and National Assembly elections.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH APPROACH

As highlighted earlier, this study adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. This approach is deemed appropriate for the study because it enables the analysis of discourse (texts and conversations) in relation to social practices of power and control, ideology, dominance, resistance, etc. (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; van Dijk, 2011; Wodak, 2001). The analysis examines how *speech acts* construct (de)legitimation in the political tweets of Nigeria’s President Muhammadu Buhari and his challenger Atiku Abubakar during the 2019 General Elections.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected from President Buhari and Atiku Abubakar's official Twitter pages. The purposive samples included only tweets on the two incidents of (a) the *suspension of the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Walter Onnoghen*, on the 25th of January 2019 and (b) *the postponement of the Presidential and National Assembly Elections* on 16th February 2019. Buhari’s tweets were extracted at: (https://twitter.com/MBuhari/with_replies) and Atiku’s at: (https://twitter.com/atiku/with_replies). There was a total of 25 tweets from Buhari's page and a total of 28 tweets from Atiku's, making a sum of 53 samples that comprised the data finally analysed.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of data had two distinct but related phases, which were both done manually by the researchers. These two phases were in accordance with the two objectives the study sets out to address. The first phase, which is concerned with identifying speech acts, applied Searle’s (1969) *Speech Acts* (Table 1):

TABLE 1. Searle’s (1969) Framework of *Speech Acts*

Speech Acts	Description
Assertives (AST)	When communicators assert/deny propositions, describe states of affairs or events, make claims, etc.
Directives (DIR)	When communicators attempt to make their audience do something, it expresses what the speaker wants listeners to do.

Commissives (COM)	When communicators commit themselves to some actions in the future. It express speakers' intended course of actions in the future.
Expressives (EXP)	When communicators express certain attitudes about state of affairs. This include, for example, accusing, attacking, deploring, apologising, appreciate.
Declaration (DEC)	When communicators' utterances change the state of affairs in the world, they bring about correspondence between propositional content and reality.

The second-level analysis, which focused on examining how the speech acts identified perform (de)legitimation, drew on Reyes' (2011) framework on *Legitimation in Political Discourse* (Table 2). Moreover, in an attempt to achieve more rigour, the analysis also examined how forms of (de)legitimation are realised through different discursive strategies. Hence, it utilised van Dijk's (1998, 2006, 2011) *Rhetorical Discursive Strategies* (Table 3). This allowed the researchers to critically evaluate how (de)legitimation strategies are further enhanced by different linguistic resources and rhetorical techniques; how illocutionary forces interact with discursive strategies in building (de)legitimation.

TABLE 2. Reyes' (2011) Strategies of Legitimation in Political Discourse

Strategy	Description
1. Appeal to Emotions (APP)	When political actors pursue legitimation by triggering the emotions of their audience.
2. A Hypothetical Future (HYP)	When political actors legitimate their actions through a time frame or timeline connecting the past, present, and future.
3. Rationality (RAT)	When political actors legitimate their policies or actions by presenting them as rationally evaluated, seriously considered, well-heeded, honest, something that makes sense for the community, and the 'right' thing to do.
4. Voices of Expertise (VOI)	When political actors legitimate their actions, policies or decisions by evoking statements made by experts that support the positions or claims they are presenting.
5. Altruism (ALT)	When political actors legitimate their proposed actions, decisions, or policies, they are presented as not driven by personal interest but by selfless service to the audience, by their desire to help the innocent, the vulnerable, and the poor.

TABLE 3: van Dijk's (1998, 2006, 2011) Rhetorical Discursive Strategies

Negative Topics (NTO)	Agency (AGY)	Euphemism (EUP)	Metaphor (MET)
Positive self-presentation (PSP)	Topic vs. comment organisation (TvC)	Evidentiality (EVI)	National self-glorification (NSG)
Level of description (LEV)	Focus (FCS)	Illustration/Example (EXM)	Norm Expression (NEX)
Degree of Completeness (DEG)	Actor Description (ACD)	Generalisations (GEN)	Number Game (NUM)
Granularity (GRA)	Authority (AUT)	Hyperbole (HYP)	Polarisation (POL)
Implications (IMP)	Burden (BUR)	Irony (IRO)	Populism (POP)
Presuppositions (PRE)	Categorisation (CAT)	Lexicalisation (LEX)	Victimisation (VIC)
Denomination (DEN)	Comparison (CPR)	Metaphor (MET)	Argumentation (ARG)
Predication (PRD)	Counterfactuals (CTF)	National self-glorification (NSG)	Vagueness (VAG)
Modality (MOD)	Disclaimer (DLM)	Norm expression (NEX)	Consensus (CSS)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

THE DOMINANT SPEECH ACTS IN PRESIDENT BUHARI AND ATIKU ABUBAKAR'S TWEETS ON CJN ONNOGHEN'S SUSPENSION AND POSTPONEMENT OF PRESIDENTIAL AND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS

The analysis revealed that while President Buhari relies on *Assertives* speech acts, his challenger, Atiku Abubakar, mostly utilises *Expressives*. Buhari's rhetoric mostly exhibited the use of *assertives* to make claims, explain, and state facts about his decision to suspend CJN Onnoghen and to postpone the Presidential and National Assembly Elections (Example 1). On the other hand, Atiku's rhetoric mostly deploys *expressives* to counter Buhari's discourse by accusing, blaming, and obviously attempting to induce suspicion and distrust in the minds of the audience, so that these decisions appear unacceptable, illegitimate (Example 2).

Moreover, another speech act preponderant in Buhari-Atiku tweets is *directives*. The two similarly use this illocution to urge their audiences to act or behave in specific ways that support the realisation of their discourse goals. In doing this, they both attempt to create an appropriate emotional climate that would enable them to sway the minds of audiences. President Buhari, whose discourse aims to get his decisions accepted, uses directives for evoking patriotism, for dowsing tensions, for assuaging apathy, and for inspiring the audience as part of the process of making his decisions acceptable (Example 3). On his part, Atiku, while framing his discourse to portray Buhari's decisions as morally and legally reprehensible and ill-intentioned, harnesses *directives* to encourage his audience to resist the incumbent's decisions by acting in certain ways (Example 4).

The following section focuses on the different (de)legitimation performed by the two:

HOW SPEECH ACTS ARE UTILISED TO PERFORM (DE)LEGITIMATION IN BUHARI AND ATIKU TWEETS

The analysis discovered that Buhari-Atiku's utilisation of speech acts in these tweets generally displays contrasting interpretations and moral evaluations of the two incidents. Based on Buhari's interpretations, these decisions are both corrective, appropriate, and acceptable. From Atiku's interpretations, both decisions are wrong, inappropriate, and unacceptable. Consequently, what fundamentally manifests from these contested frames is the Us-Them *binary opposition* (Chilton, 2004). Each of them creates two opposing sides or groups – the Us-group and the Them-group. The Us-group, which is attributed positive qualities and actions, is where each candidate aligns himself and his audience; while the Them-group, which is attributed negative qualities and actions, is where the opponent and his party are portrayed to belong. The creation of this dichotomy allows Buhari and Atiku to demonstrate *division and rejection* (Rojo, 1995) and to employ positive Self- and negative Other-presentation strategies (van Dijk, 2011; Wodak, 2001), through which they legitimate Us, Our ideas and actions, and delegitimize the Other and his actions.

Building on this polarisation, each of the two contenders manipulates these *speech acts* to enhance the audience's perception of (de-)legitimation in his discourse. President Buhari's *assertives* mostly exhibit the legitimation strategies of *Appeal to Emotions* (55%) or *Rationality* (37%), while Atiku's *expressives* mainly display *Appeal to Emotions* (87%). Buhari legitimates his decisions through *Rationality* by employing a matter-of-fact tone to claim that these decisions are honest and legal, taken by appropriate authorities, and in keeping with the anti-corruption policy his administration promised Nigerians. He legitimates these decisions through *an Appeal to Emotions* by deploying the rhetorical techniques of *negative Other-presentation* and *positive Self-*

presentation, where he attempts to induce the audience's positive emotions towards himself and his actions and their negative emotions towards the suspended Chief Judge.

On his part, Atiku delegitimizes Buhari's decisions mainly through *Appeal to Emotions* by utilising *Expressives* for attacks, accusations, and blame and interpreting the decisions negatively as dictatorial, anti-democratic, unlawful and ill-intentioned. Consequently, this strategy is used by Atiku to arouse the audience's negative emotions, such as suspicion, distrust and disgust towards the incumbent President by presenting him negatively as a dictator, anti-democracy, violator of the constitution, and an unscrupulous leader, while presenting himself positively as a democrat, law-abiding, and one with the audience. Hence, the predominant impression in Atiku's discourse is that of a democrat versus a dictator.

Table 4 displays the frequencies and percentages of the different (de-)legitimation strategies found in the data:

TABLE 4. (De-)legitimation Strategies in Buhari and Atiku Campaign Tweets

Legitimation Strategy	Buhari		Atiku	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Appeal to Emotions	21	55%	28	87.5%
A Hypothetical Future	03	8%	0	0%
Rationality	14	37%	04	12.5%
Voices of Expertise	0	0%	0	0%
Altruism	0	0%	0	0%
Total/Percentage	38	100%	32	100%

In another finding, Buhari and Atiku have deployed different rhetorical discursive strategies to support different (de)legitimation strategies through the speech acts performed. Buhari's discourse mostly features *Populism*, *Positive Self-presentation*, *Lexicalization*, *Evidentiality*, *Norm Expression*, and *Negative Other-presentation*. Atiku's discourse mostly exhibits *Lexicalization*, *Negative Other-presentation*, *Agency*, *Populism*, *Positive Self-presentation*, *Negative Topic*, and *Norm Expression*. Thus, even from their most-featured rhetorical strategies, it becomes clear how the contestants differ in their rhetoric. The incumbent, who enacts his discourse to legitimate the decisions, employs more *populism* and *positive Self* to construct truth, build trust and earn acceptance, while the challenger, whose goal is to delegitimize these decisions, employs more *Lexicalisation* (mostly negative items) and *Negative Other* to induce suspicion, distrust and disgust on the minds of his audience.

The following sub-section discusses and illustrates these findings:

RATIONALITY THROUGH ASSERTIVES

As highlighted earlier, this study discovered that Buhari utilises *Assertives* to perform *Rationality* legitimation in his Twitter rhetoric. *Rationality*, according to Reyes (2011), is about presenting policies, decisions, and actions as honest, rationally evaluated, seriously considered, and the only 'right' things to do. Political actors legitimating their decisions through *Rationality* do so by presenting those decisions as impersonal and not rashly taken but after following thoughtful procedures and exploring all options.

On Justice Onnoghe's suspension, President Buhari's *assertives* perform *Rationality* by claiming that the suspension is in compliance with an order from the Code of Conduct Tribunal and by explaining that it is also in agreement with the anti-corruption policy his administration

promised Nigerians. In this stream of tweets, Buhari’s *assertives* justify his action further by disclosing some shocking intelligence about Onnoghen’s involvement in corruption. First, Buhari talks about how security agencies discovered *suspicious transactions of millions of dollars, all of which were undeclared or improperly declared* in the CJN’s bank account. Secondly, he refers to the *CJN’s own written admission* to the charges, where the latter cites *mistake* and *forgetfulness* as reasons for not declaring his assets. This is to prove the serious allegations of corruption being petitioned against the CJN. So, President Buhari’s discourse rationalises this suspension as an appropriate legal measure taken by appropriate authorities – the Code of Conduct Tribunal.

On Presidential Elections postponement, Buhari’s *assertives* rationalise the decision by insisting that his administration has no hand in it, and that it is actually a decision by appropriate Authority – the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) – that has the constitutional powers to do so. In his tweets, Buhari employs manipulative rhetoric to distance himself from the postponement but to suggest its appropriateness and legality.

Example 1 illustrates Buhari’s *assertives* for *Rationality* on Justice Onnoghe’s suspension:

Example 1

<p>(01) Fellow Nigerians, A short while ago, I was served with an Order of the Code of Conduct Tribunal issued on Wed 23rd January 2019, directing the suspension of the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Honourable Justice Walter Nkanu Samuel Onnoghen, from office pending final determination... [AST] Muhammadu Buhari, Jan 25, 2019</p>	<p>PSP, EVI, LEX, POP,</p>	<p>RAT</p>
<p>(01) ... of the cases against him at the Code of Conduct Tribunal and several other fora relating to his alleged breach of the Code of Conduct for Public Officers [AST]. Muhammadu Buhari, Jan 25, 2019</p>	<p>PSP, EVI, LEX, POP,</p>	<p>RAT</p>

From the tweets in Example 1, we can clearly see how President Buhari exploits *assertives* in constructing *rationality* legitimation on his suspension of CJN Onnoghen. Through the use of this illocutionary force, Buhari makes claims in order to underline the legal, impersonal, and honest justifications for his decision. He claims that the suspension is actually ordered by a court of law, the Code of Conduct Tribunal, which received petitions on Justice Onnoghen’s corrupt practices and thoroughly investigated those allegations. He also claims that the decision is in keeping with his administration’s *anti-corruption policy*. Therefore, Buhari’s justifications for this suspension emanate from its impersonality and legality.

Moreover, in attempting to enhance the linguistic realisation of this *Rationality*, Buhari’s rhetoric exhibits *positive Self-presentation* through a credible persona of a leader whose official decisions are in compliance with the rule of law and anti-corruption policies. This credible ethos the President attributes to himself is validated through the strategies of *evidentiality* and *lexicalisation*. The strategy of *lexicalisation* enables the deployment of items like *order*, *directing*, and *policy* through the use of the President’s rhetoric, which exhibits a matter-of-fact tone and consequently suggests his trustworthiness ethos. These lexical items portray Buhari’s decision as in compliance with the court order and according to good policy. The strategy of *evidentiality* is seen in Buhari’s discourse when he refers to *several corruption cases against the CJN*, the *Order of the Code of Conduct Tribunal*, and the *fight against corruption* as a policy his administration promised to implement. This strategy is intentionally used to prove to the audience that the suspension is actually acceptable as it is the right thing to do.

Finally, Buhari’s rhetoric demonstrates the strategy of *populism*. The portrayal of himself as a law-abiding leader whose actions are according to the rule of law and good policy is actually intended to attract popularity. Nigerians have for long been blaming their political leaders for not obeying court orders and not implementing anti-corruption policies in the pursuit of their agendas. So, if Buhari is seen to be acting differently now, this will definitely earn him more and more fame among Nigerians, and it is very likely that his decision will be accepted as valid.

APPEAL TO EMOTIONS THROUGH EXPRESSIVES

The findings indicate that Atiku Abubakar, in his tweets, relies heavily on *Expressives* speech acts in deploying *Appeals to Emotions* to counter President Buhari's legitimacy discourse. The challenger does this by utilising *expressives* to accuse, criticise, discredit and deplore President Buhari and his actions. On CJN Onnoghen’s suspension, Atiku’s *expressives* delegitimize Buhari’s decisions by presenting him negatively as a dictator, anti-democratic, dishonest leader, and violator of the constitution. His discourse attempts to evoke the audience’s emotions of doubt, suspicion, and distrust towards Buhari and his decisions (see Example 2).

On the postponement of Presidential and National Assembly elections, Atiku’s *expressives* delegitimize Buhari’s decision by explicitly attacking and accusing the President of trampling on citizens’ constitutional rights in the pursuit of his desperate political agenda. His discourse represents the postponement as an unnecessary decision brought about by the President’s deliberate plan to *disenfranchise* Nigerian voters and manipulate the 2019 election results in his favour. He vehemently discredits Buhari’s *Rationality* on this postponement, describing it as *anti-democratic* and *a case of the hand of Esau but the voice of Jacob* to imply Buhari’s disguised involvement. In his rhetoric, Atiku’s illocutions appeal to the audience’s emotions of doubt, suspicion, and distrust towards the President and his actions.

In sum, Atiku’s discourse in both of these incidents is that of *a democrat against a dictator*. Example 2 illustrates Atiku's *Expressives* for *Appeal to Emotions* on CJN Onnoghen's suspension.

Example 2

(01) The Purported Suspension of CJN Onnoghen is an Act of Dictatorship Taken too Far [EXP]. Atiku Abubakar, Jan 25, 2019	NOP, AGY, NTO, LEX,	APP
(01) The purported suspension of the Chief Justice of Nigeria by President Muhammadu Buhari is an anti-democratic act which I reject in its entirety and call on Justice Onnoghen and the judiciary to resist with every legal and constitutional means that they can muster [EXP]. Atiku Abubakar, Jan 25, 2019	NOP, AGY, NTO, LEX, NEX,	APP

The tweets shown in Example 2 illustrate how Atiku employs *expressives* to achieve the strategy of *Appealing to Emotions* for delegitimising Buhari's suspension of CJN Onnoghen. Through the illocutionary focus in these tweets, Atiku conveys the accusation that the suspension actually branches accepted norms and that it has not been properly carried out. He apparently tries to arouse the audience's emotions of doubt, suspicion, distrust and disgust in his attempt to make the suspension appear unacceptable. His illocutions have also been facilitated by a number of rhetorical strategies, namely *negative Other-Presentation*, *agency*, *negative topic*, *lexicalisation*, *metaphor*, and *hyperbole*.

It needs to be emphasised that the most dominant rhetorical strategy in Atiku's discourse is negative Other-presentation. We can see how this strategy is actually attained through almost all the other strategies identified. In the first place, the strategies of agency and negative topic are used by Atiku to present Buhari negatively by emphasising his active responsibility in *unlawfully removing the CJN*. This negative action the President is involved in is verbalised differently through lexicalisation as an *act of dictatorship, an anti-democratic act, the guise of suspension, and the act of desperation*. It is arguable that these emotion-laden lexis have carefully been chosen by Atiku to not only signal his critical and disapproving tones towards the suspension but also to induce the same emotions in the audience's minds so that they reject the suspension.

APPEAL TO EMOTIONS THROUGH DIRECTIVES

As highlighted earlier, both Buhari and Atiku similarly use *Directives* speech acts and the strategies of *norm expression, lexicalisation, and populism* for moving their audiences emotionally. They both exploit this illocutionary force to call on their audiences to act or behave in specific ways as part of the process of (de)legitimation. President Buhari, while enacting his discourse to legitimise his decisions, uses *directives* to evoke patriotism, douse tensions, assuage apathy, and inspire the audience to accept these decisions. On the other hand, Atiku, whose discourse attempts to delegitimize Buhari's decisions, utilises *directives* to call on his audience to reject Buhari and defy his dishonest plans by acting in certain ways.

For instance, Buhari, who urged Nigerians to participate in elections on the new date, takes advantage of *directives, norm expression and populism* in his rhetoric to moralise voting by representing it as a civic duty despite the disappointment brought about by the unexpected postponement. See Example 3.

Example 3

<p>(01) Honour your civic duty as voters by going to the polls tomorrow to vote for the government of your choice, for the government that will lead Nigeria toward its finest destiny [DIR].</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Muhammadu Buhari, Feb 22, 2019</p>	<p>NEX, PSP, LEX, POP,</p>	<p>APP</p>
<p>(01) As citizens, there is no greater duty than this and no greater honour [AST]. (02) Tomorrow, I know you will once again make Nigeria proud of its people [DIR].</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Muhammadu Buhari, Feb 22, 2019</p>	<p>NEX, PSP, POP,</p>	<p>APP</p>

On his part, Atiku, while framing his discourse to interpret Buhari's decisions as morally reprehensible, harnesses *directives, norm expression, populism, lexicalisation, and negative Other* to arouse emotions and calm tension. He tries to pacify his audience and encourage them to defy the incumbent's 'ploy' by participating in elections on the rescheduled date and by voting Buhari out of office. Atiku's discourse is intentionally framed to portray the President and his decision negatively and to urge the audience to do what is needed by participating in the elections in order to get rid of him. See Example 4.

Example 4

<p>(01) Maintain the peace and be law-abiding [DIR]. (02) Do not react to this provocation with anger, violence or any action that might be exploited by those who do not want this election to hold [DIR]. Atiku Abubakar, Feb 16, 2019</p>	<p>NEX, NOP, LEX, PSP, NTO, POP</p>	<p>APP</p>
<p>(01) Please come out to vote on Saturday, 23 February and Saturday, 9 March respectively [DIR]. (02) Frustrate those who do not want this election to be held by coming out in very large numbers [DIR]. (02) That is the best antidote to their plans [AST]. Atiku Abubakar, Feb 16, 2019</p>	<p>NEX, NTO, NOP, LEX, POP, AGY, MET</p>	<p>APP</p>

Thus, while President Buhari and his challenger Atiku Abubakar in their tweets relied on *assertives* and *expressives* speech acts, respectively, the two similarly deployed significant *directives*.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, on both *speech acts* and *(de)legitimation*, appear consistent with those of many past studies. First, the utilisation of *assertives* for legitimation by President Buhari agrees with Cap's (2006, 2008) finding on President Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric that legitimised U.S. military operations in Iraq. Cap observed that *assertives* contributed significantly to supporting Bush's legitimatory discourse. The findings of this study have, therefore, further indicated the significance of *assertives* in building legitimation on Twitter. Moreover, these findings also corroborate the findings of earlier studies that *expressives* and *directives* are effective for political rhetoric on Twitter (see AlBzour, 2022; Natsheh & Atawneh, 2021). These studies similarly reported the dominance of *expressive* and *directives* in political tweets, which seems to support the argument that political persuasion on Twitter exhibits more preference for *pathos* than *logos* and that they mostly rely on triggering emotions rather than presenting logical facts (Hills, 2019).

Coming to the findings on *(de)legitimation*, this study has further proven that, first, *Appeal to Emotions* has been a crucial strategy deployed by political powers seeking to justify or challenge actions, policies, or ideological positions. Studies on different political genres have consistently revealed how political leaders work on emotions such as *fear*, *anger*, *sadness*, *revenge*, *insecurity*, *disgust*, and *(dis)trust* in their attempts to prepare audiences and skew them towards accepting and supporting or rejecting present actions or future proposals. They achieve this through the semantic technique of Us versus Them, where positive properties are attributed to the Us-group (where the rhetors and their audiences belong) and negative properties are attributed to the Them-group (where, for example, their political adversaries, migrants, minority religions and ethnic groups, etc. belong) in order to legitimate certain actions or policies against Them (Oddo, 2011; Rojo & van Dijk, 1997; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999).

The emotion of *fear*, for example, was appealed to by U.S. Presidents FDR, Bush, and Obama in their speeches that legitimised violence (Cap, 2006, 2008; Oddo, 2011; Reyes, 2011). These Presidents used *fear* to manipulate and mislead the American people by emphasising the imminence of an attack on the U.S. and her allies by Saddam Hussein of Iraq and the Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan, who were 'already' planning to launch another strike that would be even worse than the 9/11. In their discourses, these leaders created the impression that unless the proposed military actions were taken, the future of America and her allies was very dangerous.

They justified their decisions to send more troops to these countries so that Saddam was stopped from developing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), the danger of Al-Qaeda was not allowed to grow further, and the vision of another 9/11 was averted.

Therefore, the findings of the current study on the dominance of *appeal to emotions* in President Buhari and Atiku Abubakar's (de)legitimatory discourses on Twitter actually corroborate the findings of Cap (2006, 2008), Oddo (2011), Reyes (2011), and Ross and Rivers (2020) who have all shown how political leaders worked on emotions for (de)legitimation. Thus, what this revelation suggests is that, irrespective of genre, emotional appeal remains a most effective strategy for political (de)legitimation. Its dominance has been reported not only in call-to-arms, pro-war speeches but also in election campaign tweets. Moreover, while previous research largely ignored the categories of linguistic resources that contribute to emotional appeals in (de)legitimatory discourse, the current study has attempted to extend the current knowledge by revealing the classes of speech acts that are utilised for this on Twitter.

Furthermore, the finding of the current study on the dominance of *rationality* legitimation in President Buhari's tweets corroborates those of many previous studies. This is seen in Ross and Rivers (2020), Nourani et al. (2020), and Al-Manaseer and Fouad (2021). From the findings of Ross and Rivers, President Trump, in his tweets, deployed *Rationality* to delegitimise the Democrats' refusal to support his US-Mexico Border Wall policy. Nourani et al. (2020) have shown how Trump used *Rationality* in his tweets to delegitimise the Iran Nuclear Deal (the JCPOA). From Trump's angle of vision, the JCPOA was badly negotiated and did not favour the U.S. Al-Manaseer and Fouad (2021) reported how Iraqi President Barham Salih used *Rationality* to legitimate peaceful co-existence between all ideological sects and religious groups in Iraq by referring to its values and benefits to the country and the citizens.

Moreover, Buhari's *Rationality* seen in this study appears similar to the forms of (de)legitimation expressed by European leaders justifying strict immigration control measures. For instance, Spanish authorities deployed this strategy to legitimise their forced expulsion of 'illegal' migrants (Rojo & van Dijk, 1997). The Austrian immigration authorities used *Rationality* to justify their massive rejection of immigrant workers' family re-union applications (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). Thus, the current study has further proven the crucial value of *Rationality* as an effective strategy for political (de)legitimation in both offline and online genres.

Finally, on rhetorical-discursive strategies, this study's findings appear consistent with those of some past studies on (de)legitimation. Specifically, the employment of the Self-Other binary was similarly reported by Oddo (2011), Rojo and van Dijk (1997), and van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999). Similar to the findings of these studies, Buhari and Atiku utilised this strategy to support their (de)legitimatory discourses. Hence, the strategy of Us versus Them is key in constructing (de)legitimation in both offline speeches and tweets.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the findings have a number of implications for expressing political (de)legitimation on Twitter. First, the findings indicate that while President Buhari relied on *Assertives* to explain and legitimate himself and his decisions, Atiku relied on *Expressives* to accuse and delegitimize Buhari and his decisions. This implies that while *assertives* are effective for legitimation, *expressives* are effective for delegitimation. Second, we have seen from the findings that both contenders similarly relied on *appeal to emotions* for (de)legitimation. Buhari

legitimised himself and his decisions by arousing positive emotions of *trust*; Atiku delegitimised Buhari and his decisions by arousing negative emotions of *doubt*, *suspicion*, and *distrust*. This implies that emotional appeal is the most prevalent strategy for achieving (de)legitimation on Twitter. Third, the findings show that while Buhari leveraged the rhetorical-discursive strategies of *positive Self-presentation*, *negative Other-presentation*, *evidentiality* and *populism*, Atiku leveraged *negative Other-presentation*, *positive Self-presentation*, *lexicalisation*, *agency*, *hyperbole*, *actor description*, and *norm expression*. This implies that *positive-Self* and *negative-Other* are the principal rhetorical techniques from which legitimacy and delegitimacy discourses on Twitter derive.

Therefore, based on the knowledge gained from these findings and their implications, the study offers some suggestions for future research so that our understanding of (de)legitimising discourse continues to broaden. First, we suggest that future research be focused on speech acts and political (de)legitimation across different (languages and) cultures. This would reveal how choices of speech acts for (de)legitimation could be influenced by differences in (language and) culture. Second, (de)legitimation could be explored across offline and online genres, especially across speeches that allow an unrestricted number of words and Twitter that allows only 280 characters. This would enable us to examine how generic features could interact with forms of (de)legitimation.

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