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PRAGMATICS OF POLITICAL DECEPTION: A STUDY OF EUPHEMISM AND TRUTH EVASION IN NIGERIAN LEGISLATIVE DEBATES

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Abstract: This study examines the pragmatics of political deception in Nigerian legislative debates, with specific focus on the use of euphemism and truth evasion as strategic communicative practices. Anchored in Critical Pragmatics, the study conceptualises deception not as outright lying but as the deliberate manipulation of meaning through indirect speech acts, modal expressions, implicature, and responsibility diffusion. Using a qualitative research design, the study analyses purposively selected extracts from Nigerian National Assembly debates on governance, security, economic policy, and corruption-related issues. The findings reveal that legislators consistently employ euphemistic language to soften blame, modal hedging to weaken commitment, and indirect responses to avoid direct accountability. These pragmatic strategies allow political actors to appear cooperative and institutionally respectful while obscuring agency and diluting truth. The study concludes that political deception in legislative discourse is systematic and institutionalised, with significant implications for transparency, democratic accountability, and public trust in governance.

Keywords: Political deception; Euphemism; Truth evasion; Legislative discourse; Critical pragmatics

Introduction

Political communication in contemporary democracies is increasingly characterised by strategic ambiguity, indirectness, and calculated avoidance of responsibility. Rather than offering clear commitments or transparent explanations, political actors often rely on subtle linguistic manoeuvres that allow them to appear accountable while simultaneously evading truth. In Nigeria, where politics is deeply contested and emotionally charged, legislative debates provide a fertile ground for such practices. The language of lawmakers is rarely neutral; it is carefully crafted to manage public perception, deflect blame, and preserve political capital. Understanding how deception operates at the pragmatic level is therefore essential for interrogating democratic accountability.

Pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics, focuses on meaning in context and examines how speakers use language to achieve intentions beyond literal meanings. Within political discourse, pragmatics exposes how indirect speech acts, implicatures, presuppositions, and modal expressions function as tools of persuasion and concealment. Political deception is rarely expressed through outright lies alone; it is more often realised through euphemism, vagueness, and strategic silence. Nigerian legislative debates exemplify this tendency, as lawmakers navigate

sensitive national issues such as corruption, insecurity, and governance failure. These contexts demand linguistic caution, making pragmatic strategies particularly salient.

Euphemism occupies a central place in political deception because it enables speakers to sanitise harsh realities. By replacing uncomfortable truths with softened expressions, politicians can downplay responsibility or obscure the gravity of events. Terms such as "irregularities," "challenges," or "unintended consequences" often substitute for corruption, failure, or negligence in legislative discourse. This linguistic softening creates distance between the speaker and the moral weight of the issue under discussion. Such practices align with observations that Nigerian politicians frequently distort or embellish realities to maintain favourable self-presentation (Onebunne, 2024).

Truth evasion in political discourse also operates through indirect speech acts that allow speakers to avoid explicit commitments. Rather than directly answering questions or acknowledging culpability, politicians often provide responses that shift focus, invoke procedural constraints, or appeal to collective responsibility. These indirect strategies make it difficult for audiences to hold speakers accountable, as meaning is dispersed across implication rather than assertion. Kilani (2023) notes that Nigerian political discourse during the 2023 general elections revealed a blurred boundary between truth and falsehood, largely sustained through pragmatic evasions rather than outright misinformation.

Modal expressions are also a cause of political misrepresentation which creates a sense of uncertainty and contingency in what otherwise should be unambiguous. The modals that are mostly used including may, might, could, and will consider help legislators to look like they are responsive, but they do not take a definite action. These statements serve as barriers to responsibility in the future since promises are presented as possibilities, but not as commitments. The pragmatics of modalities comes into play in legislative discussions as a potent tool of dealing with the expectations without providing results. The wider trends of this manipulative rhetorical decision-making in Nigerian political discourse can be seen in this strategic use of modality (Oparinde and Rapeane-Mathonsi, 2021).

The Nigerian legislative space is especially important to research in terms of political deception, as it is institutionally oriented to reflect the public interest. The transparency, rational argument, and democratic deliberation is supposed to take the shape of parliamentary debates. But in the real sense, this ideal is not always the case in reality, because legislators have been known to be involved in face-saving, blame avoidance, image management, and so on. Language is turned into a weapon of politics instead of the truth. This clash of the ideals of democracy and the process of linguistics highlights the significance of the pragmatic analysis.

Scholarly activity on Nigerian political discourse has recently begun to pay more and more attention to the contribution of pragmatics to the formation of the public meaning. Research on misrepresentation, hate rhetoric, and manipulative persuasion all demonstrate that the language used in politics is not always taken at face value. It is shown that the pragmatic strategies of the social media in Nigeria are used to create heated debates due to the use of unofficial assertions and contextual inference instead of direct claims (Ayeni, 2024). Though these were in the context of online platforms, such results have a high echo in the legislative discussion, where evasiveness is institutionally acceptable and even desirable.

Political deception should also be interpreted as a reaction to pressure and danger in the political sphere. The legislators are subjected to the constant scrutiny of the constituents, media, and opposition parties. This pressure motivates linguistic strategies enabling plausible deniability and keeping in power. As noted by Onebunne (2024), when political actors are piled with pressure, they tend to lean on pragmatically lying down and avoiding blame

by indirectly attacking political adversaries. The field of legislative discussions, accordingly, turns into the field of strategic acting, instead of acting in good faith.

The other facet of political deception is implicature and subtext wherein the meaning is given indirectly and needs an inference on the part of the audience. Ekwelibe (2024) depicts the use of political prophecies and campaign statements as an example of how political organizations utilize subtextual implicatures to lie without telling lies. The same happens in legislation talk where politicians will imply intentions or place blame without stating them. The use of common cultural and political knowledge increases the success of deception and decreases its detection.

Nigerians pragmatic deception is further enhanced by their culture of political communication where there is a focus on sentiment and identity. According to Adegbite (2024), most political talk in Nigeria is often based on emotions and not issues and as such, it promotes evasive communication whereby focus is made on alignment instead of speaking the truth. In law-making politics, it is common to appeal to national pride, solidarity, or national sacrifice instead of providing a detailed policy explanation. These rhetorical strategies are pragmatic in nature since they are designed to shush up criticism and excuse inactivity.

Political language is not always seen as being unethical by the deceivers. Pragmatically, it is commonly justified as politeness, diplomacy, or as a tactical communication. Adetunji (2025) demonstrates that the politeness and impoliteness approaches in Nigerian politics are interconnected with persuasion and power negotiation. In this sense, euphemism and evasion are presented as the means of keeping decorum and pursuing political agendas. This normalisation has rendered pragmatic deception so ingrained in legislative rhetoric.

The aftermath of these forms of linguistic practices however has far-reaching consequences on the aspect of accountability in democracy. When the truth is continually eluded by legislators with the use of language, the public loses its trust, and the political cynicism increases. The pragmatics of violence is provided by Ayodabo (2024), who suggests that the avoidance of responsibility during political speech is connected to evading harm through linguistic means, where harm is legitimised indirectly through the avoidance of language. The denial to name the problems the way they are in litigation situations delays the solutions and causes the continued failures of governance.

This paper is contextually placed in this expanding literature of pragmatic scholarship to examine the issue of Nigerian legislative discussions specifically. It does not focus on the campaigns or social media like in studies but rather interrogates institutional political language in which truthfulness is anticipated and symbolically imposed. Through the analysis of euphemism, indirect speech acts, and modal expressions, the research shows how the process of deception is routinised in formal democratic politics. It does not view legislative language as an impartial document, but as a strategized act.

The use of pragmatics analysis as an instrument of analytical focus provides the opportunity to comprehend political deceit in a more comprehensive way that reflects truth and falsity in a binary way. It prefigures the negotiation of meaning, withholding of meaning, or a re-invention of meaning in situ. This strategy fits in the arguments by Aliu (2025) that the political discourse has been in Nigeria whereby there are numerous narratives that vie against each other and do so by being pragmatically manipulated. The legislative discussions are therefore places of narrative regulation and not a place of clear thinking.

Finally, the given paper states that political deception of legislative discussions in Nigeria should be seen as a pragmatic issue and not as a failure in morality. Euphemism and evasion of truth are systematic methods that defend political actors at the expense of democratic principles. The study can add to the general discourse on

language, power, and accountability in Nigerian politics by revealing these tactics. It also highlights why linguistic awareness is the crucial tool of democratic engagement and skeptical citizenship.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of the current study is based on the interdisciplinary theory of Critical Pragmatics that considers the contributions of pragmatics, discourse analysis, and critical social theory in an attempt to understand how meaning, power, and ideology are negotiated in language use. Critical Pragmatics transcends the classical interest of pragmatics in matters of the speaker's meaning and context to question the ways linguistic decisions are strategic, institutional, and political. It is especially usable in the context of the analysis of the Nigerian legislative debates, where the use of language is well controlled to conceal the responsibility, safeguard the political interests, and preserve the institutional legitimacy. In this context, deception does not just entail outright lies but encompasses euphemism, vagueness, modality, and implicature as systematic communicative practices. The theory thus helps in a study of how the political actors use the pragmatic resources to evade the truth and are seen as cooperative and rational.

The idea of Critical Pragmatics views language as a social activity that is entrenched in power relations and institutional restrictions. The speakers in legislative arenas are guided by predetermined rules of conduct on debate, accountability to the community, and media control so that they prefer to be indirect instead of blatantly deceitful. Euphemisms and modals are the instruments of strategy, which enable politicians to re-frame controversial issues, soften agency, or blame-shifting. Critical Pragmatics enables the study to expose how seemingly neutral or polite utterances do ideologically significant acts by presupposing the relationship between linguistic form and political intent. This point of view is crucial to comprehending the reason why deception in political speech seems so unobtrusive and disavowable.

One of the major issues of Critical Pragmatics is the manipulation of the processes of implicature and inferencing. Politicians often depend on the implication as opposed to the direct meaning, which gives the listeners room to make their own conclusions that can be later renounced by the speaker. The use of indirect speech acts and hedged statements in the legislative discourse of Nigeria tends to give the illusion of transparency, but denies any substantive commitment. The framework describes the process in which the meaning is strategically underdetermined in order to maximise political gain. It also takes into consideration the fact that shared socio-political knowledge is what makes deception successful without being explicitly false.

Modality in the expression of commitment, certainty, and responsibility is also a focus of Critical Pragmatics. The modal verbs, adverbs, and conditional constructions represent the most important aspects in the avoidance of accountability in legislative speech. Politicians avoid taking responsibility by making actions appear to be possible, necessities that circumstances dictate, or decisions made by the group. The theory offers tools of analysis to unravel how such modal decisions reallocate agency and diffuse responsibility. This is especially important to discussions on governance, corruption, and policy failure in Nigeria.

Critical Pragmatics also has another strength in the focus on ideology and moral positioning. Euphemistic language is usually loaded with evaluative significance that normalises dubious acts at the expense of the illegitimisation of criticism. Political actors are created through the use of lexical softening as well as strategic ambiguity in which they present themselves as reasonable, patriotic, or able to do only what they must. The study can reveal these ideological effects with the help of Critical Pragmatics which enables establishing a connection between micro-level linguistic decisions and macro-level political discourses. This makes the deception not only to be analysed as a communicative technique but also as a form of ideology.

Generally, the paper Critical Pragmatics offers an extensive interdisciplinary context to the analysis of the pragmatics of political trickery in Nigerian legislative discourses. It combines the contextual interpretation, power analysis, and critical review of the meaning-making processes. The framework describes the mechanism of deception in institutional discourse by concentrating on euphemism and indirect speech acts as well as evasion of the truth as patterned practices. Such a theoretical background allows understanding the specifics of managing responsibility, creating the image of the politician, and maintaining political power through the use of language in Nigerian politicians.

Empirical Review

The empirical research on political language in Nigeria and similar situations shows that most of the time, deception is achieved in the form of on-the-nose pragmatic techniques, but not outright lies. Mensah, Nzuanke, and Adejumo (2022) discuss the strategic application of labelling to the Nigerian political discourse in the present day and how such negative and delegitimising labels are applied to position opponents as morally questionable or even social threats. In their analysis, they explain that such labels are indirect accusations whereby speakers can suggest the wrongdoing without having to present evidence. Through half-truths and innuendo, political figures avoid responsibility as they influence the opinion of the masses. The piece of research empirically determines labelling as a misleading pragmatic means, which lies in political discourse.

The resemblance to the present study is in the fact that the focus on the indirect meaning and the use of strategies in the Nigerian political discourse is shared. Yet, where the study by Mensah et al. (2022) pays attention to labelling in general political speech, the present research pays specific attention to the topic of euphemism, modality, and truth avoidance in the context of the Nigerian legislative debates.

The study on euphemistic discourse by Adedeji (2023) takes a pragmatic approach to its analysis of the application of euphemism as an ethical appeal in international peacekeeping. It is shown that euphemistic expressions can be frequently applied to soften the hard truths, cover the responsibility, and appeal to shared moral values. Despite the fact that the findings have been framed under a peace discourse, it has been established that euphemism may cloud agency and water down accountability. Adedeji uses hard facts to demonstrate that strategic ambiguity is often used to achieve ethical persuasion.

The parallels to the present research are based on the fact that the main theme is on euphemism as a pragmatic approach. The difference, however, lies in the fact that Adedeji (2023) focuses on the aspect of euphemism in the world's ethical and peace-related discourse but the current research places euphemism in lawmaking discussions in Nigeria and questions how the concept is used as a tool of political deceit and avoidance of responsibility.

Oboko (2023) examines the language of corruption in Nigeria through the sociolinguistic lens, with the sociolinguistic practices serving to degenerate values. According to the study, euphemism and metaphorical language have the effect of making corrupt practices normal and less severe. Speakers neutralize or make the actions found in corruption culturally familiar to avoid moral outrage and blame. The results of Oboko point to the fact that language can be used as a means to conceal the violations of ethics.

This paper conforms to the existing literature in that it is also interested in the issue of euphemism and moral reframing as tactics of deception. Nonetheless, although Oboko (2023) dwells upon the discourse of corruption in the general Nigerian society, the current research deals with practical tactics of deception in the institutional context, in the legislative discussions.

The study of pragmatic strategies in police interrogation by Bamigbola (2022) is a useful resource for the research of deception and managing the truth with language. The study reveals that both interrogators and suspects adopt

the application of euphemism, vagueness, and indirect responses in order to manage the flow of information as well as to prevent self-incrimination. The paper shows the application of pragmatic tools to reveal the truth in situations where one should avoid a straightforward answer. This is an empirical study that points out the importance of indirectness as a strategic element in high-stakes institutional encounters.

The point of the coincidence with the present research is that both studies have a common focus on institutional discourse and pragmatic evasion. This distinction lies in the fact that Bamigbola (2022) considers the context of police interrogation, whereas the present study considers the debate in law and the politics of responsibility management.

The sociopragmatic analysis of political euphemisms in Tshiven 00:00 politics presented by Mudau (2023) shows that the use of understatement and evasive words is favored to avoid threats to face and preserve political legitimacy. The paper shows that the political players employ the concept of euphemism to put contentious policies and practices back in a less adversarial language. These plans will enable speakers to escape direct responsibility without losing the support of the people. The results prove that euphemism is a culturally rooted but politically expedient asset.

This work resembles the present research because it is aimed at political euphemism and practical evasion. Nevertheless, Mudau (2023) is a South African linguistic and cultural environment, whereas the current paper is located in the context of the Nigerian legislative discourse and is specifically addressing the issues of truth evasion and responsibility avoidance.

Raji-Ellams (2022) uses a pragmatic-rhetorical method to comprehend metaphor and power representations of African leadership and proves that figurative language is used to enable performative avoidance and deceit. According to the study, leaders can use their metaphors and rhetorical devices to deliver power without unveiling contradictions and failures. Pragmatics manipulation enables the politician to control the interpretation of the audience and evade criticism. This piece of work empirically connects rhetorical creative work to misleading political performance.

Its commonality with the present research is that both studies are concerned with pragmatic manipulation and deception when communicating politics. The distinction, however, is that Raji-Ellams (2022) examines metaphor in cultural and literary portrayals of leadership, whereas the present article examines euphemism, modality, and indirect speech acts in Nigerian legislative discussions in real life.

Methodology

The present research is based on a qualitative research design, which is founded on Critical Pragmatics to address the topic of euphemism, indirect speech acts, and truth evasion in Nigerian legislative discussions. The qualitative approach is relevant since the research aims at interpreting the process through which the meanings, intentions, and responsibilities are negotiated strategically using language as opposed to quantifying the linguistic characteristics. It is an interpretive and discourse-based design that concerns itself with the utilization of pragmatic resources by political actors to handle accountability within institutional constraints. The legislative discussions have been viewed as socially situated documents that are influenced by power relations, rules in the process, and popular questioning. Under this method, one is able to deeply investigate deception as a communicative practice and not as single instances of lies.

The research data will include the transcripts of the Nigerian National Assembly debates selected (plenary meetings, budget debates, as well as, investigative hearings). The timeframe considered in this review is the controversies around such significant national concerns as economic reforms, security concerns, corruption

accusations, and election situations. They were accurate and authentic because they were recorded in official Hansard records and video transcripts available online. There were only debates with high-stakes policy choices or public controversy that were taken into consideration because this type of context is more likely to give rise to evasive and strategic language. This corpus is a rich source of institutional data to be analysed pragmatically.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to sample out excerpts of the debates that explicitly or implicitly entailed an event of denial, blame-shifting, justification, or responsibility avoidance. The utterances with euphemistic expressions, modal verbs, devices of hedging, or indirect answers to direct questions were given preference. The strategy of sampling was based on the responses of the major political players who included the main officers, committee leaders, and ministers when they were subject to legislative scrutiny. The selection of excerpts was not dependent on frequency but was done according to their relevance to the area of the study which was on deception. The sampling was done until pragmatic saturation followed meaning no new deceptive strategies came to light.

The data were collected by creating verbatim extracts of official records and maintaining the original words, pauses, and contextual clues where possible. The contextual information that goes with each extract includes debate topic, speaker role, and interactional setting. This contextual framing was required in the process of interpreting pragmatic meaning and speaker intention. Paralinguistic cues like intonation and emphasis were observed to be helpful in the interpretation where there were video recordings. This methodological process ensured of reliability and traceability of the data.

The analysis was carried out through a qualitative pragmatic coding process that was based on Critical Pragmatics. Primary open coding revealed cases of euphemism, indirect speech acts, modal hedging, vagueness, and implicature. These were then categorized into general categories of analysis like responsibility deflection, institutional face saving, moral reframing, and strategic ambiguity. The speakers were observed in terms of their reaction to accusations, questions, or requests for clarification. The discussion was based on the linguistic decisions that influenced the understanding of truth, blame, and agency within the debates.

In order to achieve analytical rigour, the decisions made in the coding were informed by clear pragmatic criteria which were informed by the existing scholarship. The analysis was conducted through reflexivity to ensure the researcher was not biased and over-interpreted. Openness in the process of data selection, coding, and interpretation increases the validity of the results. The consideration of ethics was also followed through the utilisation of publicly available records and personalised attacks against individual legislators were avoided. Altogether, it can be said that the methodology approaches the discovery of the pragmatics of political lying in the discourse of the legislative process in Nigeria in a systematic and context-sensitive manner.

Analysis

The discussions indicate that euphemism is a prevailing pragmatic option under which the Nigerian lawmakers avoid responsibility and moderate the intensity of politically sensitive acts. When writing about the security spending and counterinsurgency operations, explicit terms of failure, loss, or failing are often substituted with some softened terms like operational difficulties, unfortunate accidents, or temporary losses. As an example, during a discussion addressing queries on the death of civilians, one legislator claimed that there were collateral consequences of the need to engage in security activities. On a pragmatic level, such a euphemism eliminates human agency and moral responsibility and redefines violence as an abstract by-product of necessity. The statistics indicate that these lexical combinations always minimize accountability and create an impression of reasonable ruling.

Other features of the indirect speech acts include tools of evading truth. Instead of giving the answers directly in response to the allegations or questions, the legislators tend to give statements that carry out another illocutionary act than their apparent content. When asked directly about the issue of budget misappropriation, one of the speakers stated that the committee has never exceeded its mandate. Although this is put as a statement of process, the utterance then pragmatically acts as a denial, without appeals to the content of the accusation. The statistics show that this trend is repeated in debates, thus speakers are able to answer with technical responses, and they can avoid answering in a way that makes them incriminates themselves.

Modal expression also allows legislators to keep a distance by undermining commitment and shifting the agency. There were frequent modal verbs: may, might, would, and could used in the discussion of policy failure and delayed implementation. As an illustration, a speaker has pointed out that some of the lapses might have been because of circumstances that were out of our control. The modal may present uncertainty, whereas the passive form brings confusion about who is to blame for the lapses. Modality acts as a hedge in the entire data set, which converts actions taken into speculative possibilities, thus protecting a speaker.

Another trend that is also present in the data is the repetition of the collective pronoun use as a pragmatic responsibility diffusion strategy. We and our are often used by legislators discussing controversial decisions even when these decisions were made by particular individuals or committees. One of them is the sentence that we all thought there was a need to take forced action about the situation. This grouping of framing establishes an institutional identity that erodes the sense of individual responsibility. Constructing responsibility pragmatically incurs the necessity of inclusive pronouns to build it as a community, abstract and culpability are hard to isolate.

The other salient feature in the data is strategic topic shifting, which is a strategy of evasion that is an implicature. With such accusations at hand, some legislators shift the discussion to the larger issues of the nation or historical limitations. In a discussion about fuel subsidies abnormalities, one of the speakers replied by stating that it has been a long-term structure that the previous governments inherited. Although this does not directly respond to the question, the utterance leaves no doubt that the responsibility is elsewhere. This practical action is based on mutual knowledge about the context to be able to justify evasion without directly refusing.

Lastly, it can be identified that euphemism and indirectness tend to collaborate with the appeal to the institutional decency and national solidarity. Members of the legislature often introduce evasions by saying with due respect to this honourable house, or in the interest of national stability. These face-saving strategies are such that they make evasion a form of ethical restraint and not deception. This data shows that such prefatory statements have a pragmatic role in validating silence or vagueness or half-truth. Altogether, the discussion confirms that the realisation of political deception in the Nigerian legislative discourses can be achieved due to the systematic pragmatic decisions that transform truth, responsibility, and accountability without uttering falsehood.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper arrives at the conclusion that political deceit in Nigerian presidential debates is achieved by pragmatic means and not by outright lies. Euphemism, indirectness, modal hedging, collective pronouns, and implicature are all in action to conceal agency, undermine commitment, and avoid responsibility. The discussion shows how lawmakers tactfully work to control meaning to look cooperative, respectful, and institutionally loyal without having to deal directly with sensitive matters. These traditions render ambiguity the norm and undercut the truth-seeking role of legislative deliberation. As a result, deception becomes not a communicative failure but an institutionalised discourse practice, which is determined by power, pressure to be accountable, and self-preservation politics.

With these results findings the study recommends that the accountability mechanisms established by the legislature should be more concerned with pragmatic evasions rather than explicit misinformation. The media and parliamentary oversight bodies must come up with instruments of analysis that would help in detecting euphemism, modal dilution, and indirect denial in political speech. Practical awareness training to journalists, civil society players, and even the legislators themselves may be useful to facilitate better and accountable communication. Also, the legislative rules of debate can be enhanced to involve immediate replies to the public interest questions. These actions would help to make the practices of Nigerian legislations more transparent, ethical political communication, and democratic.

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