

DISCURSIVE MARKERS IN A SELECTED CLIMATE CHANGE SPEECH OF PRESIDENT BOLA AHMED TINUBU

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Abstract

Given the increasing ecological crises in Nigeria, this study discursively investigates markers in the first speech on Climate Change by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu to reveal the discursive frames deployed to report the country's alignment with climate change policies. The data consists of Tinubu's first speech on Climate Change at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2024. The study is undergirded by van Dijk's Socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis, with a focus on framings. The findings reveal that President Tinubu deployed discursive devices of Authority, Categorisation, Consensus, and Example/ Illustration that project his administration's commitment to addressing climate change impacts. Sampled discursive configurations further reveal that Tinubu explicitly employed these devices to project Nigeria as a global team player, a vulnerable nation, a voice for vulnerable nations, and a competent participant in global climate measures. By analysing these underlying discursive frames, the study argues that Tinubu's discursive constructions instantiate the role of language in advocating for the equitable distribution of climate change support. Discursively identifying his government's investment in the climate change framework is thus a linguistic strategy deployed by Tinubu to project Nigeria as a country aligned with global frameworks on climate change, hence deserving of consistent climate change support at the international level.

Keywords: Bola Ahmed Tinubu, critical discourse, climate change, discursive markers, environment, frames, Nigeria, speech.

Introduction

This paper discusses the issue of discursive markers in a speech of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the fifth democratically elected President of Nigeria of the Fourth Republic, sworn in on May 29, 2023 (Statehouse, 2023). He won the 2023 election on the platform of the All Progressives Congress (APC) Party. As the incumbent president of Nigeria, he attended his first international summit on climate change in Baku, Azerbaijan, at the 29th Session of the Conference Parties to the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (COP29-UNFCCC), where he presented a monologic speech reporting his administration's positions on and responses to climate change issues. In the present study, the speech is subjected to a critical discourse analysis using van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis.

There has been a growing concern about the impacts of climate change on the environment. Climate change is an emerging environmental issue threatening human health, the economy, as well as survival (Bouwer, 2019). Climate change is a human-made crises that arise from activities and practices like burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and extreme industrial processes (Makwanya, 2013). These practices trap heat in the atmosphere and lead to global warming. The rise in global temperature, sea level, higher frequency of hurricanes, droughts and floods, fluctuation in agricultural produce due to changes in rainfall, and water scarcity are problems caused by climate change (Bouwer, 2019). As nations struggle with the varying impacts of climate change, governments from different cultures have

united to advocate for measures to develop resilience against the impact of climate change and reduce activities that will worsen the situation.

In 1992, the United Nations established a framework convention on climate change with the sole aim of stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere to prevent risky human interference with the climate system (Climate Action, 2024). The framework features regular conferences where leaders and delegates from different countries meet to negotiate and agree on how to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, adapt to the impacts of climate change, and provide financial assistance to developing countries (UNFCCC, 1992). The Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement are key achievements of this convention. Developing countries can localize any of these international frameworks to address their climate change needs. One of the five principles of the UNFCCC is to advocate for climate action through communication (Jacobson, 2001). This principle emphasizes the importance of language and relates to the focus of this study.

Language and climate change discourse

The metafunctions of language are captured under Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, and they are, namely, ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction deals with its potential to help us represent or experience the world around us (Halliday, 1990). In other words, language choices are functional in shaping how the public understands the happenings in their environment. Stibble (2015) described this mental process as 'stories we live by'. Climate change discourse manifests in the media and public forums. In the context of climate change conventions, speeches function as tools for political leaders to assert their respective national priorities and influence global climate policies and the attitude of the public (Fairclough, 2001). Ajiboye (2024) stated that politicians and public office holders, through their communication channels, are enforcing policy crises because the global climate crisis affects every individual on the planet. Nigeria, as a developing nation, is highly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change due to geographical, socio-economic, and governmental factors (Okon et al, 2021). For example, many states are close to coastal areas, which puts them at risk of flooding. Also, there is a high rate of poverty in the country, which limits public access to resources, facilities, and information needed to cope with extreme weather conditions (World Bank, 2019). Given the hyped 'Renewed Hope' mantra of his administration, the aim of this study is to conduct a critical discourse analysis of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's speech at the first international summit he attended on climate change discourse. The aim is to examine the discursive markers or strategies deployed in the speech and their ideological functions in framing climate change. Specifically, it investigates how critical discursive strategies are used to represent Nigeria's identity and to advocate for support.

Existing studies have examined political speech from the angle of critical discourse (Ekwueme, 2020). Recent literature on global climate has focused on the functions of linguistic polyphony in climate change speeches. Wu Xiang and Qu (2024), for example, argued that international stakeholders employ language strategically to frame climate change initiatives as an urgent need and convey their dissatisfaction. Ajiboye and Olojede's (2024) ecolinguistic studies revealed that African leaders' rhetoric on the subject of climate change may be marked by ecocentrism, anthropomorphism, and eco-futurism in an attempt to emphasize the need for collective efforts in sustaining nature. Despite the growing interest in global climate change, studies focusing on Nigerian leaders' speeches on the subject of climate change have been limited, hence the need for the current study.

Statement of the Problem

Environmental issues have attracted attention from diverse fields of study. Tam's (2024) study indicated that culture can also influence people's attitudes towards environmental issues. He argued that the understanding of cultural dynamics is pivotal for designing effective, context-sensitive interventions targeted at fostering sustainability. Evidence from extant studies has also confirmed this stance. For example, in cultures that uphold collectivistic values, it has been discovered that environmental issues are perceived in a healthy manner because of the benefits attached to the

knowledge (SMU City Perspective Team, 2023). However, demographic factors can also determine people's attitudes. Unlike locals, cosmopolitan people have been observed to exhibit pro-environmental behavior due to a general openness to new and diverse knowledge, such as the challenges and mitigation strategies for environmental crises (Tam, 2024).

Arikenbi, Aiakhuagbor, Ikharo & Jimba's (2023) study appraised the effectiveness of mass media campaigns in promoting environmental sustainability in Nigeria. Mass media campaigns can be in the form of compelling narratives, images, videos, infographics, and animations. Though the data of the study is limited to the south-eastern part of the country, the study indicated that mass media campaigns have significantly increased public awareness of environmental issues in Nigeria. Meanwhile, studies like Nwanne (2013) revealed that a mixture of communication channels makes the role of mass communication more compelling in correcting environmental issues because different communications affect people in different ways. Given this, it can, therefore, be deduced that language plays a significant function in communicating environmental issues like climate change. Ogungbemi (2023) explores the linguistic representation of environmental and human degradation in Helon Habila's 'Oil on Water' and indicates that language shapes the perceived reality of ecological destruction and social conflict. The study revealed that, through the use of descriptive language, metaphor, and narrative perspective, literature is a useful tool for environmental advocacy because it has the potential to influence public perception and policy. Nevertheless, inadequate attention has been paid to climate change in the field of linguistics. Wu, Xiang, and Qu (2024) examined the functions of concessive 'but' constructions and linguistic polyphony in the speeches of United Nations Climate Change Executive Secretaries. The study is parallel to this current study in terms of data context. The findings of the study indicate that the speeches frame climate change as an urgent need and indirectly convey dissatisfaction and criticism of various parties and stakeholders who fail to contribute their support. This style of discourse is targeted at enhancing qualities or virtues like unity, solidarity, and transparency, whilst minimizing negative representation of parties or stakeholders. In Nigeria, Ajibiyi and Olojede (2024) carried out an ecolinguistics analysis of selected speeches on climate change by the former President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. The research is the most recent and similar to our interest in this study. Guided by Stibbe's theoretical postulation of 'Stories We Live By' in ecolinguistics, the research focused on the ecological stance and ideological posturing with which the human subject is framed. The study represents a robust inquiry into the nature of discursive frames in climate change because seven speeches of the President at International Summits on Climate Change in different countries from 2025 to 2021 were analysed. Six discursive frames were identified in the monologic speeches, namely ecocentrism, anthropogenesis, anthropomorphism, medicant identity, and eco-futurism. The study argued that Buhari's discourse emphasizes the value of nature and the physical environment, highlighting their role as essential systems that support and sustain life and therefore deserve significant human attention and care. However, less is known about the discursive frames employed in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's speech on climate change, which, if investigated, will provide more insights into the role of language in advocating and negotiating for environmental support, especially in the area of climate change. To bridge this gap, the study aims to:

- i. Identify the discursive markers in the climate speech of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu
- ii. Examine the functions of these discursive devices in representing President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's commitment to global climate change goals

Methodology

The study utilizes a qualitative research design, specifically focusing on the discursive markers within President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's first speech on Climate Change at the 29th session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 29-UNFCCC). The speech was purposefully chosen because it is the first monologic speech of the President to be presented at a Climate Change Summit on November 19, 2024, in Baku, Azerbaijan, and it represents the ideological stance on climate change discourse. The present study is guided by aspects of van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The main objective

is to examine how President Tinubu discursively frames Nigeria's commitment to climate change goals and identify the functions of these discursive strategies in his climate change speech. The theory is suitable for this study because it provides insights into how cultural and ideological differences influence the presentation of climate advocacy programmes.

Theoretical Framework

As stated above, this study adopts insights from the analytical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a multidisciplinary approach to language. It deals with how social power, abuse, dominance, and inequality are established in different contexts (Ekwueme, 2020). Van Dijk's approach to CDA is socio-cognitive. According to van Dijk (1993), "modern and often more effective power is mostly cognitive and enacted by persuasion, dissimilation or manipulation, among other strategic ways to change the mind of others in one's interest" (p. 254). Van Dijk's model of CDA emphasizes the role of cognition in discourse. It deals with how societal knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes influence the understanding and production of discourse. Van Dijk argues that ideological discourse usually features a concept that he described as the ideological square (van Dijk, 2006b). Osisanwo described this construct as the quality of "emphasizing our good things, emphasizing their bad things, de-emphasizing our bad things, de-emphasizing their good things" (Osisanwo, 2020, p. 75). These discursive strategies can be employed to favour the speaker or writer while blaming negative situations and events on opponents. Dijk's model of CDA has tools that can guide one to identify the ideological and strategic use of language by discursive markers. The assumption in conducting CDA is that texts are latent with ideologies that readers are not aware of. Van Dijk (2006) postulates 27 categories of ideological discourse markers which include number game, evidentiality, intertextuality, categorization, consensus, authority, irony, populism, self-glorification, and some others. There are three levels of analysis involved in this model of critical discourse: the micro level focuses on the features of the text; the meso level focuses on the way the text is produced and consumed or interpreted within its context; the macro level is where we situate the text within broader societal, political and ideological contexts (Dijk, 2006).

The Analysis of President Tinubu's Climate Speech

Four major discursive strategies deployed in the selected President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's speech on climate change were identified. The four discursive strategies are authority, categorization, consensus, and example/illustration. They are discussed in the section below.

Authority

Authority as a discursive strategy deals with the use of intertextuality in a discourse. The use of authority is seen in the extract below. Net-zero emissions are an internationally agreed-upon goal to mitigate global warming. Different European countries like the UK and Australia passed a net-zero emissions law with a target to reach net zero by 2050 and 2035, respectively. In line with global standards, one of the ways countries set net-zero emissions targets is by employing nationally determined contributions (NDCs). Authority as a discursive tool was deployed in PBAT speech and is exemplified below:

Extract 1:

Further, Nigeria is working towards achieving net-zero emissions by 2060 and enhancing its National Determined Contribution (NDC). Accordingly, Nigeria has developed its NDC implementation framework and looks forward to partnering on its delivery.

Nigeria as a global team player

The construct ‘net-zero’ is a germane phrase in global climate discourse. It reflects a country’s shared knowledge about international goals like the Paris Agreement. President Bola Tinubu deploys the expression ‘net-zero emissions by 2060’ to show that Nigeria agrees with international climate efforts. He frames Nigeria as a global team player, which is necessary for attracting international aid or investments. Also, by asserting that Nigeria has developed its NDC framework, he demonstrated his familiarity with the international framework, which implies that the country is taking proactive steps to translate commitments into feasible strategies. It indicates that the country is domesticating international measures. The infinitive phrase ‘looks forward to partnering on its delivery’ is also another lexical tool deployed to frame Nigeria as part of a global team. The use of authority is a means of positioning the country strategically and boosts the country’s image as a reliable nation, which is appealing to global partners.

Categorisation

This discursive frame involves the organisation of people into different groups (Osisanwo, 2020). The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2023) claimed that seventeen out of twenty countries most threatened by climate change are in Africa. Some of the challenges posed by climate change to nations in this region include water scarcity and food insecurity. Categorisation as a discursive tool was deployed in PBAT’s speech and is exemplified below:

Extract 2

Nigeria is one of the countries of the world most vulnerable to adverse impact of climate change. There are increasing evidences that the country is experiencing widespread challenges attributed to climate change and its impacts.

Nigeria as a vulnerable nation

Categorisation is revealed in the clause “Nigeria is one of the Countries most vulnerable to the adverse impact of climate change”. President Tinubu began his speech by categorising Nigeria as being of the most affected nations vulnerable to climate change problems. The phrase ‘most vulnerable adverse impact of climate change’ emphasizes the country’s susceptibility to external forces. The assumption here is that Nigeria is distinctly exposed to climate risks, which can be linked to a shortage of infrastructure and economic weaknesses. This categorisation appeals to sympathy and creates urgency. The credibility of this categorisation is enhanced with the claim that ‘there is increasing evidence that the country is experiencing widespread challenges attributed to climate change and its impacts.’ Even though some listeners might find this illocution valid, others might find it vague as it leaves room for interpretation. By categorising Nigeria as a vulnerable nation, PBAT’s speech frames Nigeria as a victim of global climate problems, which is a linguistic strategy of shifting blame away from the failure of his government. This marker helps the speech gain solidarity with other vulnerable African Countries, which is necessary to qualify for global support.

Consensus

This is a strategy that is involved in forming agreement and solidarity. The Global Goal of Adaptation was established in the 2015 Paris Agreement to limit global temperature increase to 1.5°C or 2°C. According to the UNFCO, the framework is flexible enough to accommodate the driven needs of each nation. Consensus is used multiple times in this presidential speech.

Extract 3

Nigeria aligns with the rest of Africa in demanding greater, easier access to international climate finance, including grants and concessional loans, to support mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Extract 4

To enable countries' resilience strong enough to withstand climate change impacts, Nigeria hereby advocates for the provision of means of implementation to achieve the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA).

Extract 5

Nigeria further aligns with the Harare Declaration by the African Ministers of Health to take action on the impact of climate change on health.

Nigeria as a voice for vulnerable nations

As seen in the extracts above. Consensus is employed to frame Nigeria as a representative voice for other African nations vulnerable to climate change challenges. The phrase “Nigeria hereby advocates” conveys an impression of unity and collective action. PBAT assumes that Nigeria has the ethical authority and commitment to make this claim on behalf of other vulnerable nations. Given the position of Nigeria as the giant of Africa and the most populated country on the continent, this belief is valid. The reference to GGA further supports Nigeria’s advocacy with global frameworks. PBAT referenced this goal and also used this inclusive language, like ‘to enable countries’ resilience’ to build consensus around shared challenges and solutions. This way, the country is not perceived as an isolated participant in global matters, but rather as a leader elevating its influence in the international climate agenda. This frame is functional because it exudes a cooperative attitude that attracts collaboration from stronger nations.

In extracts 3 and 4, the use of the consensus strategy is further revealed. It is deployed to request assistance. For example, the phrase ‘Nigeria aligns with the rest of Africa’ buttresses Nigeria’s solidarity with other African nations. By employing this nominal group, PBAT depicts Nigeria as a country that shares its identity with other African nations, a strategy that encourages a sense of belonging.

At the Meso-level, this strategy strengthens Africa’s voice. The ‘demand’ for ‘greater, easier access to international climate finance, including grants’, reflects PBAT’s belief in equity and fairness in the financing of climate change initiatives in developing countries. His use of ‘demand’, though assertive, is effective for challenging developed countries to fulfil their commitments to vulnerable nations as outlined in the climate change program. Therefore, the use of consensus is used to frame finance as a shared responsibility.

In extract 5, the link between climate change and health is brought to the limelight. PBAT indirectly appealed to developed countries to view climate change at a broader level, as an issue that has impacts on the country’s health sector. Given the importance of good health to every human being, this statement buttresses the urgency and fairness of addressing not only Nigeria’s but Africa’s needs in terms of financing climate change.

Example/illustration

This is a discursive strategy that involves mentioning something concrete to support a statement or revealing the active commitment or vice versa of the speaker or listener. In the study data, an instance is identified and explained below.

Extract 6

In 2023, an Intergovernmental Committee on Carbon Market Activation Plan was

formed to oversee the carbon market's efficient implementation.

Nigeria as an active and competent participant in global change measures

In the extract above, the phrase “the formation of the Intergovernmental Committee on Carbon Market Activation Plan” represents an example/illustration device and functions as a legitimisation strategy. By referencing a concrete initiative, PBAT reinforces Nigeria’s commitment to climate action, making the discourse more credible. It is used to provide concrete evidence that Nigeria is taking measurable steps in climate governance, reinforcing its credibility in global discussions. The mention of the “Intergovernmental Committee” suggests a structured and formalized effort, which enhances the perception of governmental efficiency. The inclusion of a specific year (2023) is a temporal marker that strengthens the persuasive power of the discourse. It suggests a recent and ongoing commitment rather than vague or future promises. This helps in shaping audience perception by making climate action seem immediate and relevant.

Discussion of findings

From the analysis, it can be deduced that PBAT engaged discursive tools to portray his administration’s commitment to the goal of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. By framing Nigeria as a global team player, a vulnerable nation, a voice for vulnerable nations, and finance as a shared responsibility, his speech measures up to the UNFCO expectations from developing countries. In tandem with the UNFCC framework, the speech is presented with formal language and in general terms, focusing on reporting on the proactive steps his administration is taking to address climate change impacts and adaptation measures.

PBAT’s lexical choices, such as the repetitive use of ‘advocates’, ‘align’, and allusion to global framework projects, Nigeria as a country familiar with the challenges of climate change but actively taking proactive steps to develop resilience. The findings of the study revealed that the discursive markers have distinct functions. Authority as a discursive tool was used to frame Nigeria as a global team player. PBAT referenced climate change goals like ‘net-zero emission’ to present his administration’s commitment to global change plans. Categorization is deployed to frame Nigeria as a victim of global climate problems. The strategy strengthens his demand for equitable distribution of financial aid. Furthermore, by framing Nigeria as a voice for vulnerable nations through the use of consensus, the relationship between language and power in global negotiation is established. PBAT referenced salient agreements and used ‘advocate’ to emphasize solidarity and encourage shared responsibility. The discursive frame identified in this study affirms the ecocentrism frame in Ajibiye and Olojede’s (2024) ecolinguistics analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari’s speech on climate change. This stance refers to the belief that human activities with nature have impacts on our health, too. This view is evident in the way he linked climate change to health issues through the Harare Declaration. The results of the study suggest that discursive strategies that emphasize solidarity and commitment to global goals are effective in environmental discourse. By engaging them, stakeholders in environmental programmes can attract support from the public. A possible reason for the absence of other discursive markers like irony, euphemism, depersonalization, or self-glorification in the speech could be linked to the fact that they do not align with the formality that befits the context. For example, irony may be misinterpreted while self-glorification can be deemed insincere. Future studies can attempt to analyse a broader corpus of climate speeches to identify discursive patterns across different countries.

Conclusion

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s speech at the 29th session of the UNFCCC underscores how powerful language can shape global views and serve national interests. By strategically employing rhetorical strategies like Authority, Categorization, Consensus, and Examples/Illustration, he presents Nigeria as both a nation vulnerable to climate change and an active player in global climate action.

These are not just rhetorical strategies—they reflect a careful attempt to place Nigeria in the broader climate justice discourse. These strategies helped frame the country as proactive, aligned with international frameworks, and deserving of multinational support in fighting climate change problems. Lexical choices such as "advocate," "align", and references to global frameworks reflect a deliberate effort to align with global expectations while asserting national interests. This article affirms that discourse is not merely communicative but also political and ideological, shaping perceptions and influencing international negotiations. By foregrounding solidarity and collective responsibility, Tinubu's speech effectively appeals to global cooperation, particularly in terms of climate financing and shared accountability. The absence of discursive tools like irony or self-glorification suggests a conscious effort to maintain a diplomatic tone and credibility. President Tinubu's speech illustrates how language, when carefully crafted, becomes a powerful tool for climate advocacy, international alignment, and policy legitimacy. By referencing well-known frameworks like the Paris Agreement and the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA), Tinubu not only highlights Nigeria's need for equitable support but also showcases the nation's active involvement through initiatives such as the Carbon Market Activation Plan.

Tinubu's approach demonstrates a keen awareness of the power dynamics within global climate discussions. By positioning Nigeria as a "voice for vulnerable nations," he moves beyond portraying the country as a mere victim to strategically advocating for African agency, urging wealthier nations to confront their historical role in the climate crisis. This kind of rhetoric can foster solidarity and draw international attention, but its true impact lies in the actions that follow. Without tangible steps like turning Nigeria's net-zero 2060 goal into a clear, actionable plan with transparency and inclusivity, such speeches risk being perceived as symbolic rather than truly transformative.

To effectively tackle climate challenges, Nigerian policymakers need to go beyond speeches and ensure that their public commitments are backed by tangible, locally driven climate policies. This could include prioritizing community-based adaptation projects to address pressing issues like flooding and food insecurity. Building on Tinubu's efforts to create consensus, Nigeria needs to strengthen regional alliances with other African nations, allowing for joint negotiations on climate finance and pushing developed countries to make grants and concessional loans more accessible. Additionally, the government should improve public engagement by translating international climate discussions into clear, culturally relevant messages in various languages, which will encourage public involvement and hold leaders accountable. Lastly, fostering collaboration between academic researchers and policymakers is key to tracking the progress of climate commitments, and future studies could compare Tinubu's strategies with those of other Global South leaders to identify effective climate advocacy practices.

This study contributes to our understanding of the role of discourse in shaping environmental narratives and promoting global collaboration. However, future research should examine a wider range of climate-related speeches across regions to reveal broader discursive patterns. Future studies can also apply eco-linguistic perspectives to environmental communication to highlight the interdependence between ecological well-being and human health, as seen in the allusion to the Harare Declaration.

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