

Conversational Implicature in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's June 12, 2026 Democracy Day Speech; A Pragmatic Acts Analysis

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This paper x-rays conversational implicature in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Democracy Day address of June 12, 2026, using Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory (PAT) as its linguistic framework, read alongside Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature and the Cooperative Principle. Where classical Gricean analysis locates implicature in a speaker's calculated flouting of the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner, Mey's PAT relocates the source of pragmatic meaning from the utterance itself to the situated context, or "affordances," within which the utterance occurs. This paper argues that the two frameworks are complementary rather than competing. Grice identifies where implicated meaning arises in the text, while Mey's pragmeme, pract, and allopract explain why a Nigerian audience, equipped with shared situational and cultural knowledge, is able to recover that meaning. Close interpretation of the June 12, 2026 address identifies five recurring pragmemes in the speech, reassuring, reframing, warning/threatening, appealing for patience, and commending/legitimising. The paper concludes that Tinubu's address relies heavily on what is left unsaid, using implicature to manage politically sensitive admissions without appearing evasive.

Keywords: conversational implicature, Pragmatic Acts Theory, Cooperative Principle, Tinubu, Democracy Day.

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Introduction

Not everything a political speaker communicates is stated outright. Much of the persuasive and evasive power of political language lies in what is implied rather than asserted, in meaning that the audience must infer from context rather than decode from the literal semantics of the sentence. This phenomenon, which Grice (1975) termed conversational implicature, is especially prominent in commemorative state addresses, where speakers must acknowledge difficult national realities, such as insecurity, inflation, or

ethnic tension, without appearing to admit failure or invite unrest. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Democracy Day address of June 12, 2026 offers a rich site for such analysis. It was delivered amid child abductions in Oyo and Borno, continued economic hardship, and an active counter-insurgency campaign, the speech repeatedly gestures toward sensitive realities while withholding direct statement of them.

This paper investigates conversational implicature in the address through the lens of Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory

(PAT), a framework that, unlike Grice's maxim-based model, locates the source of pragmatic meaning in the situated context of utterance rather than in the utterance's departure from a norm of cooperative exchange. The paper asks two related questions; first, where in the speech does implicature operate, and what does it accomplish; second, how does Mey's notion of the pragmeme, realised through concrete practs and allopracts, help explain how ordinary Nigerians recover implicated meaning that a purely Gricean analysis might leave unaccounted for.

Presidential Speeches

In political discourses, presidential speeches cannot be over emphasized. These speeches always serve to legitimize policies, manage crises and foster national unity. In Nigerian democracy, presidential speeches often contain directive authority with appeals to collective resilience and shared identity. It must be noted here that presidential speeches in Nigeria, a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society serve as strategic political instruments of governance. These speeches can be described as performative acts that define public opinions, negotiate powers which sustain democratic stability.

Presidential speeches exist in both spoken and written forms of language. The universal relevance of presidential speeches to citizens across the world calls for an indepth research by scholars of which democracy day speech plays significant roles in Nigeria. Presidential speeches in Nigeria are used to defend the policy of government, project optimism, patriotism and to project brighter future, to reinforce democratic values while sustaining the rule of law, to outline the priorities of government; security, economy, anti-corruption, infrastructure, inclusivity and strategic instruments of good governance. Presidential speech as seen in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, becomes crucial instrument for managing legitimacy, framing hardship and shaping citizen expectations. Thus, presidential speeches are strategic political communications that are carefully crafted to achieve specific goals.

Theoretical Framework

Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature

Grice (1975) proposed that conversation is governed by a Cooperative Principle, under which speakers are assumed to make their contribution as required by the accepted purpose of the exchange, and observe four maxims: quantity (be as informative as required, no more and no less), quality (say only what is believed true and adequately evidenced), relation (be relevant), and manner (be clear, brief, and orderly). When a speaker appears to flout one of these maxims while the hearer continues to assume cooperation, the hearer infers an implicature, an unstated meaning recoverable only through contextual reasoning. Recent scholarship continues to demonstrate the uses of this model in political contexts. Ghawaidi and Alsmari (2025) show how a Middle Eastern political leader (Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman) flouted the maxims of quantity, relation, and manner to navigate sensitive geopolitical questions while avoiding direct commitment, generating both particularised and generalised conversational implicatures depending on context.

Witek (2024) extends Gricean analysis to insinuation, arguing that a speaker can introduce contentious content into a conversation while retaining deniability precisely because the content is implicated rather than asserted. Stotts (2024) reconsiders conversational maxims as social norms rather than purely rational principles, a reframing that is useful for political discourse, where audience expectations are shaped by cultural and institutional convention as much as by rational cooperation.

Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory

Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory (PAT) was developed partly as a corrective to what Mey regarded as the atomistic, decontextualised character of classical speech act and Gricean models. Mey argued that meaning is not primarily generated by an individual utterance measured against abstract maxims, but by the situated pragmatic act, understood as the product of what speaker and

hearer can say and do within a given communicative environment, or affordances. Within PAT, the generalised, abstract form of a pragmatic act is termed a pragmeme. Its concrete, situated realisation in an actual utterance is a pract, and every pract stands as an allopract, a specific instantiation of its underlying pragmeme, in the same way an allophone instantiates a phoneme. Central analytical tools within PAT include Shared Situational Knowledge (SSK), Shared Cultural Knowledge (SCK), reference (REFR), relevance (REL), inference (INFR), voice (VCE), and metaphor (MPH), all of which jointly determine what a speaker can implicate and what a hearer can recover in a given context (Mey, 2001).

PAT has been extensively applied to Nigerian political discourse. Fafiyebi and Dada (2024) used PAT to analyse the inaugural speeches of Nigeria's military heads of government, finding that pragmemes of announcing, criticising, and informing dominated, reflecting the coercive context of forceful leadership change. Osisanwo and Adeyemo (2024) applied PAT to the 2019 inaugural speeches of three Southwest Nigerian governors, identifying thirty-five practs realising six broad goals, negotiated principally through relevance, reference, shared situational knowledge, voice, and metaphor. Both studies confirm Mey's central claim that context, rather than utterance form alone, is what allows a Nigerian audience to recover a speaker's implicated meaning. This paper adopts PAT as its primary framework, supplemented by Grice's account of maxim-flouting as a heuristic for locating the specific textual points at which implicature is most likely to arise.

Literature Review

Beyond the foundational applications discussed above, a broader body of recent scholarship confirms the relevance of both implicature and PAT to political and public communication. Osisanwo's (2017) analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's inaugural speech continues to be built upon. Osisanwo and Adeyemo (2024) identified thirty-five pragmatic acts across six goals in the inaugural speeches of three Southwest governors, compared with the nineteen practs and four goals Osisanwo (2017)

found in Buhari's inaugural address, while Fafiyebi and Dada (2024) identified four pragmatic goals in the inaugural speeches of Nigeria's military heads of government, suggesting that pragmatic act patterns vary meaningfully with the legitimacy pressures a given speech context carries. The study of Majeed, et al (2025) investigated the pragmatic dimensions of political discourse on (X) focusing on the speech act and strategies employed by three major politicians in Pakistan 2024 general election. They used Speech Acts Theory as propounded by J. L. Austin and modified by Searle to analyse the speeches. The study revealed that politicians employ metaphors of struggle, war and fire to express the inevitability of victory. They concluded that meaning-making, implicature, metaphors, presuppositions, politeness could be used to construct legitimacy, authority and moral principles in political campaigns. The work is similar to this recent work in relation to political discourse. They used Speech Act Theory to examine those X discourse, while this study employed Pragmatic Acts Theory. Again, while they focused on X discussions, this recent work x-rays political speech of the President of Nigeria.

Still on political discourse relating to our recent work, Oluremi (2019) explored the pragmeme of political humour in selected Nigerian political cartoons, using Jacob Mey's Pragmeme Theory alongside Flamson and Barrett's Encryption Theory of Humour. The study found out that humour in political cartoon was used to evoke laughter & with the view of correcting the societal ills of political leaders. The work concluded that audiences who share the cartoonist's political knowledge are able to decrypt the humour. The study is similar to this work in relation to political discourses and the use of Mey's pragmatic framework as a linguistic tool for analysis. However, while the study focused on political cartoons, this recent work focuses on political speech of Mr. President.

Also related to Pragmatic Acts Analysis, Agbede and Mheta (2023) carried out an analysis of Nigerian newspaper editorials. The study revealed how messages about insecurity were reported in the media. The study employed the combination of Jacob Mey's theory and van

Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to examine the utterances based on their context. The study revealed that certain pragmatic tools such as name-calling, blame trading, are used with other political strategies by editorial boards to project the intention of our politicians through media reportage. This work is similar to this recent study in the realm of political discourse through the linguistic approach of Pragmatic Acts Theory. However, the work used newspaper editorials as their data while this recent work uses speech of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's Democracy Day address of June 12, 2026. Taken together, this literature indicates that Nigerian political and commemorative discourse is a fertile site for combined Gricean-Meyan analysis, and that no committed PAT study yet exists of Tinubu's Democracy Day rhetoric, a gap this paper addresses in our study.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based design. The data is the full text of President Bola

Ahmed Tinubu's (2026) Democracy Day speech. The text was read closely to identify utterances in which the literal, asserted content appeared to fall short of, or diverge from, the full communicative import available to a Nigerian audience. Each identified instance was then re-analysed within Mey's (2001) PAT framework to determine the underlying pragmeme, its concrete instantiation as a pract or allopract, and the contextual affordances, principally Shared Situational Knowledge (SSK) and Shared Cultural Knowledge (SCK) that make the implicated meaning recoverable to the Nigerian public. Representative instances were selected for detailed discussion.

Implicature and Pragmatic Acts in the Speech

Table 1 presents five recurring pragmemes identified in the address, their textual instantiation, the contextual affordances that activate them, and the implicature each generates.

Pragmeme / Pract	Textual Instance	Contextual Affordances (Mey)	Generated Implicature
Reassuring / Minimising	"Our democracy is not perfect, but it is ours"	SSK (shared knowledge of Nigeria's democratic imperfections); REL	Concedes flaws exist without naming them, implicating that criticism should not undermine loyalty to the system
Deflecting / Reframing	"At a time like this, let us not assign blame or point fingers. Crime has no ethnicity"	SCK (ethnic sensitivities around banditry accusations); VCE	Flouts relation to pre-empt an unspoken accusation, implicating that ethnic blame is already circulating and must be suppressed
Warning / Threatening	"These windows of surrender will not remain open forever"	SSK (ongoing Operation Safe Corridor); INFR	Flouts quantity by withholding a deadline, implicating an imminent but unstated closure of clemency
Appealing / Soliciting Patience	"Yet, many Nigerians still face economic hardship"	SSK (lived cost-of-living experience); REFR	Flouts quantity by admitting hardship briefly then pivoting to future commitments, implicating that suffering is nearing its end

Pragmeme / Pract	Textual Instance	Contextual Affordances (Mey)	Generated Implicature
Commending / Legitimising	“Let me pay tribute...”-type honorifics; naming award recipients	SCK (Nigerian politics of naming and honour); MPH	Particularised implicature that inclusion in the honours list signals political alignment and approved historiography of June 12

Reassuring: “Not Perfect, but It Is Ours”

The opening admission that Nigeria's democracy “is not perfect, but it is ours” flouts the Gricean maxim of quantity. A fuller, more informative account of the imperfections would be expected given the audience's lived experience of electoral and governance failures, yet the president supplies only a vague concession. Read through PAT, this is a reassuring pragmeme whose pract is instantiated through Shared Situational Knowledge. The Nigerian audience already knows, without being told, what the unnamed imperfections are (contested elections, insecurity, and economic hardship). It is precisely this shared knowledge that allows the vague concession to implicate acknowledgment without requiring the president to itemise failures. The implicature generated is that criticism of the system, however justified, should not translate into rejection of the system, a move that Osisanwo and Adeyemo (2024) similarly identify as a common goal-directed pract in Nigerian gubernatorial inaugural rhetoric.

Deflecting Through Relevance: “Crime Has No Ethnicity”

The statement “let us not assign blame or point fingers. Crime has no ethnicity” is pragmatically curious. Nothing in the immediately preceding co-text names an ethnic group or makes an ethnic accusation, so the utterance appears, on a strict Gricean reading, to flout the maxim of relation. Under PAT, however, the utterance is fully relevant once Shared Cultural Knowledge is factored in. Nigerian audiences are aware that banditry and kidnapping in the North-West and North-Central regions are routinely, if unofficially, coded in ethnic terms in public

discourse. The president's utterance is therefore a deflecting pract whose pragmeme responds not to what was said in the speech but to what is circulating in the wider socio-political context. This generates a particularised implicature that ethnic blame-attribution is already occurring and requires pre-emptive denial.

Withholding Specificity as Warning. “Windows... Will Not Remain Open Forever”

The ultimatum to bandits and kidnappers that “these windows of surrender will not remain open forever” flouts the maxim of quantity by withholding the one piece of information a rational addressee would most want, namely a specific deadline. Within PAT, this vagueness is not a communicative failure but a strategic pract. The pragmeme of warning is more effectively realised through inference (INFR) than through explicit statement, because an unspecified but implied end-date sustains pressure on its addressees indefinitely rather than inviting them to wait out a known cut-off. The implicature generated, that the state's patience is finite and could end at any time, would be weakened rather than strengthened by precision.

Appealing for Patience through Partial Admission

The brief acknowledgment that “many Nigerians still face economic hardship,” immediately followed by a pivot to commissive statements about future policy focus, again flouts quantity. The depth of hardship implied by inflation and cost-of-living data available to the public is left substantially understated. The pragmeme here is

one of appealing for patience, realised through a pract that trades brevity of admission for volume of forward commitment. Shared Situational Knowledge allows the audience to supply the missing severity themselves. The implicature generated, that hardship is transitional and nearing resolution, is precisely the message the government wishes to communicate without making a falsifiable claim of improvement it cannot yet support.

Commending as Legitimising the Honours List

The extended list of national award recipient's functions as a commending pragmeme, but its implicature operates at the level of inclusion and omission rather than explicit statement. Naming particular journalists, activists, and pro-democracy figures as honourees implicates, through Shared Cultural Knowledge of Nigeria's contested June 12 historiography. These individuals and the version of events they represent are the officially sanctioned account. Those omitted from the list are, by the same pragmatic logic, implicitly positioned outside that sanctioned narrative, an implicature achieved entirely through selection rather than assertion.

Discussion

Reading Tinubu's June 12, 2026 address through the combined lens of Grice and Mey shows that implicature in Nigerian presidential discourse cannot be fully explained by maxim-flouting alone. Grice's framework is useful for locating the textual sites where literal content appears thinner than the communicative situation demands, but it is Mey's PAT that explains why Nigerian audiences are able to fill those gaps. This was done through Shared Situational Knowledge of insecurity and economic hardship, Shared Cultural Knowledge of ethnic politics and commemorative historiography, and the broader affordances of the June 12 occasion itself. This confirms Mey's (2001) core contention that pragmatic meaning is generated "from the outside in," starting with the situation

and working toward what can be said, rather than starting from an utterance and asking what it could mean in the abstract.

The cumulative effect of these pragmemes is a speech that manages politically costly admissions, about insecurity, ethnic tension, and economic hardship, by implicating rather than asserting them, thereby avoiding the reputational and political risk of direct admission while still allowing the audience to feel that its lived reality has been acknowledged. This is consistent with Ghawaidi and Alsmari's (2025) finding that political leaders use implicature deliberately to maintain flexibility on sensitive topics. For Nigerian political discourse specifically, the analysis suggests that implicature functions as a release valve. It lets a president speak to hardship and insecurity without either denying them (a quality violation with high political cost if later contradicted) or dwelling on them at length (a quantity excess that could read as an admission of failure).

Conclusion

This paper has examined conversational implicature in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's June 12, 2026 Democracy Day address, combining Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle with Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory. The analysis identified five recurring pragmemes, reassuring, deflecting/reframing, warning, appealing for patience, and commending/legitimising. Each realised through concrete practs whose implicated meaning depends on Shared Situational and Cultural Knowledge available to a Nigerian audience. The study demonstrates that Mey's PAT offers an account of political implicature that is more sensitive to local context than a purely Gricean model, while Grice's maxims remain a useful heuristic for locating where in a text implicature is most likely to occur. The paper concludes that much of the political work performed by Tinubu's address, managing admissions of hardship and insecurity, deflecting ethnic blame, and legitimising a particular historiography of June 12, is accomplished not through what the speech says but through what it allows a Nigerian audience to infer.

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