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**Phone No:** +2348039511789

**E-mail:** alameenalfira@gmail.com

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SAJOLLCOS, HOD's Office,

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Gombe State University, Gombe

[sajollicos@gsu.edu.ng](mailto:sajollicos@gsu.edu.ng),

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## A Pragmatic Investigation of the Speech of Former President Muhammadu Buhari on Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020

Habu Yusuf

Yobe State University, Damaturu, Yobe State Nigeria.  
Yusufdanbaba20@gmail.com

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### Abstract

*The research is a pragmatic investigation of the speech of former President Muhammadu Buhari on Covid-19 Pandemic 2020. It focuses on the investigations of the speech in question using speech acts theories of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Thus, the study investigates the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary effect of the speech. The following types of illocutionary effect were taken into consideration: Assertive, Expressive, Declarative, Commissive, Directive and Verdictive. The investigations revealed that former President Muhammadu Buhari used direct and indirect speech acts to pass across his message to the Nigerian people. The speech act theory of Searle was used alongside verdictive from the Speech act theory by Austin. The results reveal the following: Assertives 33%, Commissives 35%, Directives 22%, Declaratives 6% while expressive and verdictive have 2% each. The findings show that the former President Buhari used more of Commissives, Assertives and Directives to communicate to the Nigerian people. The speech acts theories have significantly aided the data analysis in the work, in turn, the message of the speech has been understood in terms of its both the direct and indirect meanings, which means the former President succeeded in skillfully transferring his message to Nigerians.*

**Key Words:** Pragmatic Analysis, Speech acts, Covid-19

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### INTRODUCTION

Language as a means of communication enables human beings to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. This assertion stresses the social functions of language and the fact that humans use it to express themselves and to manipulate objects in their environment. (Austin, and Searle), cited in Devid (40) stress the role of language as a social tool in human interaction. This is why effective communication requires an understanding and recognition of the connections between a language and the people who use it (Julie and

Deborah 1). In this connection, it is used as a way of fighting diseases and pandemic like Covid-19 that claimed the lives of thousands of people across the world and Nigeria in particular.

The aim of language is to communicate between people. People use it to communicate to one another, the purpose and context of the communication differs. As a result, language plays a crucial role in health, as it influences communication between healthcare professionals and patients. Language enhances clear



communication, ensures accurate information exchange, proper diagnosis, in addition to effective treatment plans. Moreover, language is integral in health education, promoting understanding of preventive measures and healthy behaviors within communities especially during the crises of the Covid-19 pandemic that put the world into pandemonium and feeling of uncertainty. This opened a new paradigm in relation to health communication as one of the important aspects for human existence.

Language is essential in the implementation of successful health prevention, sensitisation and governmental directives and decision in a country, as it can be used as a survival strategy. Taiwo (2009) observes that language is the conveyor belt of power, as it moves people to vote, debate or revolt. It is therefore a central explanation of political stability or polarization, and you must be alive to do all these hence the need for the pragmatic analysis of former president Buhari's speech on COVID-19 2020.

Speech, whether written or spoken, is used to influence or incite people. Hence, the primary purpose of speeches in health emergencies is to influence, educate, inform, persuade, incite, or direct people on the government policies and programmes on the prevention and cure of diseases. Language is very essential in this instance because it is through language the enlightenment, development and orders are given to put a stop to the dreaded Virus.

The president is the highest political office holder in the country. He is also the commander and the chief of the Nigerian security architecture. Hence, his speech is the most important one in the country especially in the time of emergency and crises. The Covid-19 came in 2019 when the former president Muhammadu Buhari was in office for his second tenure as the democratically elected president.

Like other world leaders the former president Muhammadu Buhari, in consultation with the medical professionals came up with his own speech which he addressed the Nigerian people regarding the development in respect of the government position concerning the newly discovered virus. It is based on the premise that every speech carries a meaning and people use language to do a lot of things with it. They also use it to perform action of which context plays an important role in the process for better understanding. And this is the work of the pragmatic analysis to investigate.

The most important aspect of pragmatics is the context in which a speech takes place. The context of situation is the most significant part in order to deduce the true meaning given by the speaker. We constantly see pragmatics at work in our language. Speakers consistently imply specific meanings, and the listener can easily infer the underlying intention of the speaker. In the times of health emergencies, political leaders often address their people to tell them the next step to follow, in order to prevent them from



contracting the disease or what to do in order not to transmit the already contracted disease to other people especially ones that are easily transmitted like COVID -19. In the process, they say something that people perceive it differently or something that they are not even aware of. This work is conducted to explicitly reveal the actual meaning and the implications of the speech of former president Muhammadu Buhari on COVID -19 pandemic.

## **Conceptual Review**

### **Pragmatics**

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics that deals with the hidden rules of spoken or written language that makes us know how to understand a language in a social context to communicate effectively. Pragmatics is defined as a branch of linguistics that is concerned with how context influences the interpretation of language. It deals with the use of language in communication, investigating factors like speaker intentions, social context, and implied meaning to understand how language is used in real-life situations. According to Jacob L. Mey (6) Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the condition of society. Kempson (561) opines that "pragmatics is the study of the general cognitive principles involved in the retrieval of information from an utterance.

Pragmatics, according to Charles Morris (6), is the study of relation of signs to interpreters. For Levinson (9), pragmatics is "the study of those

aspects of the relationship between language and context that are relevant to the writing of grammar". Leech (6) defines pragmatics as the "study of meaning in relation to speech situation". Pragmatics enables the speaker to use language to achieve a particular effect on the mind of the hearer. As a result, it is a goal-oriented discipline.

Speech act theory was initiated by the Australian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein but was actually given prominence by the British philosopher John Lang Shaw Austin in his William James lecture at Harvard in 1955. These lectures, twelve in all, were posthumously published as *How to do things with words* in 1962 shortly after his death in 1960. This is considered as one of the central developments in pragmatics.

The speech act theory, therefore, aims to do justice to the fact that people do more things with words than what their words ordinarily mean. The theory accounts for the act speakers perform when producing an utterance, which as a result serve as function in communication. Austin opines that our utterances do more than simply make statements: questions and orders are not used to state something. Speech acts, in essence is used as a tool to do things, and we do it by ways of performing verbal actions of many kinds in our lives every day.

The above explanations suggest the study of participants' personalities in the utterances, the factors that govern

their choices and the effects of their utterances after they have been made. Watson and Hill' cited in (Osisanwo 54-55) suggest that pragmatic is the study of language from the viewpoint of the user, especially the choices, the constraints he/she meets with in employing the use of language and the effects the use has on the communication situation. Thus, pragmatic theories are principles laid down for the study and the manner that is conveyed using utterances and speech processes that are linguistic and extra linguistic in nature. Linguists observe that human use their utterances to perform actions. In a view to study the actions performed by utterances, speech acts theory was introduced. The speech acts theory, and by extension, the whole of pragmatic theory, recognize the power of words and utterances. Austin the founder of speech act theory, uses this term to refer to an utterance and the total situation in which the utterance is used (Thomas 51). Austin opines that in uttering a sentence a speaker is usually involved in an act (6).

The idea proposed by Levinson is also in line with Griffith (2006: 17) who states that speech act does not refer simply to the act of speaking, but to the whole communicative situation, including context of the utterance (including the situation in which the discourse occurs, the participants and any preceding verbal or physical interaction) and paralinguistic features which may contribute to the meaning of the interaction. Therefore, for a speech act to be well formed, certain circumstances must be obtained. These circumstances are

known as felicity conditions. Austin via Cutting (2002: 18) argues that felicity conditions are the context and roles of participants, which must be recognized by all parties. Moreover, the action must be carried out completely and the persons must have the right intentions, for example, "I sentence you to five months in prison." In this sentence, the performance will be infelicitous or inappropriate if the speaker is not a specific person in a special context (in this case, a judge in a courtroom).

The theory falls in to three components: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

The illocutionary acts are the speaker's purpose or intent. It represents what the speaker wants to convey, for example to promise, to threaten or to praise. A locutionary act is an act of saying something that is, the linguistic properties or actual word of the message. It is the act of producing an utterance with a certain meaning. The perlocutionary act is effect of the speaker's utterance on the hearer.

Agustin (1962) differentiates locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts into the following:

1. A locutionary acts is an act of producing meaningful utterances; the utterance with certain noise and meaning.
2. An illocutionary act is an act performed by saying something.





3. A perlocutionary act is an act performed by means of saying something; persuading someone to believe that something is so. It concerns the effect of the act of saying something.

Attempts have been made in classifying or categorising the illocutionary force of utterances. To this end, different scholars, notably, Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and Allen (1986), have all contributed to its classification. This study, however, concentrates on Austin's and Searle's classificatory features.

Austin (1962) classified speech acts into five (5) categories of:

- I. Verdictives: these are typified by giving of verdict by a jury, arbitrator, or empires. It may also include giving an estimate, assessing, reckoning or appraisal.
- II. Commissives: these are characterized by undertaking e.g. promise, contract and so on. They are those by which the speaker is obliged to do some acts by uttering the sentence.
- III. Exercitives: These are typified by exercising power, rights, or influence. They

include appointing, voting, and urging.

IV. Behavitives: These have to do with social behaviour, and attitudes. They include congratulating and challenging.

V. Expositives: These make plan how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversations. Examples can be thus: denying, affirming and stating.

Improving on Austin's classifications of illocutionary acts, Searle categorises the illocutionary act of utterance into five (5) classes as follows:

- (1) **Declaratives:** Declaration are kinds of speech acts, which change the world via their utterance. The acts of declaratives are approving, betting, blessing, christening, confirming, cursing, declaring, disapproving, dismissing, naming, resigning, and so on. For example, in the sentence "I quit from this job". The speaker tells the hearer that he/she quits the job.
- (2) **Assertive:** This class of the illocutionary act is also called representative; it commits a speaker to the truth of the proposition. They are statements that describe a situation in the world which could be true or false. They include stating



claiming, reporting, and announcing. The type includes arguing, asserting, boasting, claiming, complaining, criticizing, denying, describing, informing, insisting, reporting, suggesting, swearing, and so on, for example, "I met your sister yesterday." The speaker here performs the act of informing by telling the hearer that he/she had met the hearer's sister yesterday.

- (3) **Directives:** These are statements that compel or make another person's action fit the propositional element. It is usually used to give order, thereby causing the hearer to take a particular action, request, command, or advice.
- (4) **Commissive:** These statements commit the speaker to certain future action. It could be in the form of a promise. These acts include committing, guaranteeing, offering, promising, refusing, threatening, volunteering, vowing etc. For example, "I will be there at 5 o'clock. In performing the act of commissives, the speaker says a promise to the hearer to come at five.
- (5) **Expressives:** The purpose of expressive statements is to express sincerity of the speech acts such as excuses and sympathy. They are the

kinds of speech acts, which state what the speakers feel. The acts, include apologizing, complimenting, condoling, congratulating, deploring, praising, regretting, thanking, and so on, for example, "I like your house very much." By saying so, the speaker shows his/her appreciation to the hearer's house.

### Objectives of the Study

This study sets out to analyze the speech of the former Nigerian President on Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 using the speech acts theories proposed by Austin and Searle. The research is thus meant to identify the speech act features of the selected speeches, to analyze the features in relation to the contexts in which the speech was presented, and to determine how the identified features project the messages in the speech.

### Theoretical Framework

Historically, speech acts theory was propounded by Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Australian philosopher, but was given prominence by John Lang Shaw Austin, a British philosopher in his William James lectures at Harvard in 1955. All the twelve lectures were posthumously published as *How to Do Things with Words* in 1962 shortly after his death in 1960. This is indeed the initial progression of pragmatics.

In the view of Dijk (218), the basic idea of pragmatics is that when we speak in certain contexts, we also accomplish certain social acts. Our intentions for such actions, as well as

the interpretations of intentions of other speech participants, he adds, are all based on a set of knowledge and belief. Additionally, Ayodabo (1995) introduces the essence of language function to the discussion on pragmatics when he observes that pragmatics focuses on illocutionary acts, an important aspect of speech acts that specifies what a language is used for, in each situation. Pragmatic theory has been drawn from logic especially as regard to philosophy of language and the theory of speech acts. This, however, makes the work more justified since the interpretation of the former President's speech is very crucial in that emergency and was also a light for future emergency speeches and their implications.

Pragmatic theories are indeed some of basic factors to the study of human speech, since it deals with what the speech implied, not explicitly stated, and draws conclusions from what is said based on shared knowledge or beliefs.

Based on the above explanations, the theoretical framework chosen for this work are the speech acts theories proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). This is to enable the researcher to do the analysis of the former President Muhammad Buhari's speech in respect of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. The theory suggests that when people talk, they perform action, since people perform action with words. We should also remember that the actions have implications, and this is exactly what the researcher intends

to do with the data derived from the speech in question. The researcher merged the two theories because Searle's classifications of illocutionary speech acts is an improvement of the Austin's classifications of the speech acts theory.

### Methodology

The data was collected from the internet through the Nairametrics newspaper. To accurately achieve the purpose of unraveling the message and its implications, the speech act analysis of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) were adopted in the analysis. The research uses a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) Each relevant data is selected purposively and analyzed based on locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. This was achieved through the following illocutionary acts of Commissive, Directives, Expressive, Declaratives and Assertives. This method was selected to make the analysis clear and easy to understand. Efforts were made to calculate the percentages of the speech act types to make interpretations of the tables clear and empirical. This serves as the basis for the discussion.

### Data Analysis

1. **Locution:** "Regrettably, we also had our first fatality, a former employee of PPMC, who died on 23rd March 2020."

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (reporting)/ Indirect-Declarative (Confirming).** As a result of the virus, the former president confirmed the dead

of former employee of PPMC to the Nigerian people.

2. **Locution:** "This order does not apply to hospitals and all related medical establishments as well as organizations in health care-related manufacturing and distribution".

**Illocutionary: Direct-Expressive (excuse) Indirect- Directive (order) Expected perlocutionary effect.**

**(Assurance).** Here, the former president has directed that the staff of medical establishments and health care-related manufacturing and distribution would not be affected by the restriction of movement.

3. **Locution:** "From the first signs that Coronavirus, or COVID-19 was turning into an epidemic and was officially declared a world-wide emergency".

**Illocutionary effect: Direct-Assertive (starting) Indirect-Commissive (Bowling).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (preparing).** The former president bowed to fight the virus as a world emergency.

4. **Locution** "We are in touch with these institutions as they work towards a solution that

will be certified by international and local medical authorities within the shortest possible time".

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (stating) Indirect-Commissive (committing).**

He expressed his government's commitment to do anything possible to stop the virus.

5. **Locution** "For now, the best and most efficient way to avoid getting infected is through regular hygienic and sanitary practices as well as social distancing".

**Illocutionary: direct-Assertive (stating) Indirect- Directive (advice)**

**Expected perlocutionary effect: warning.** The former president advised the Nigerian people to cultivate the habit of sanitation as a prevention strategy.

6. **Locution:** "We also created a Presidential Task Force (PTF) to develop a workable National Response Strategy that is being reviewed on a daily basis as the requirements change. This strategy takes international best practices but adopts them to suit our unique local circumstances".



**Illocutionary: Direct-Declaratives (Approving) Indirect-Directive (commanding)**

**Expected perlocutionary effect: confidence.** Under this, the former president had given an order to the (PTF) to work and provide update on daily bases based on the prevailing circumstances.

7. **Locution:** "I also requested, through the Nigeria Governors Forum, for all State Governments to nominate Doctors and Nurses who will be trained by the NCDC and Lagos State Government on the tactical and operational response to the virus in case it spreads to other states".

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (informing) Indirect Directive (Requesting)**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (seriousness).** The former president directed all the governors to act through NCDC.

8. **Locution:** "I want to assure you all that Government Ministries, Departments and Agencies with a role to play in the outbreak response are working hard to bring this virus under control".

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (Reporting) Indirect: Directive (Command)**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Confidence).** The former president implicitly directed all aspects of his government to participate in controlling the virus.

9. **Locution:** "the Federal Government started planning preventive, containment and curative measures in the event the disease hits Nigeria".

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (Announcing)/ Indirect-Commissive (promising).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Confidence).** He promised to do whatever it takes to subdue to varus, in case it spread all over the country.

10. **Locution:** "Accordingly, as a government, we will continue to rely on guidance of our medical professionals and experts at the Ministry of Health, NCDC and other relevant agencies through this difficult time".

**Illocutionary act: Direct-Commissive (Committing)/ Indirect-Directive (Command).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Hope).** He directed everyone to rely only on Ministry of Health and NCDC for any information regarding the varus.



- 11. Location:** “Our focus therefore remains to urgently and drastically contain these cases, and to support other states and regions in the best way we can”.

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (Reporting) /Indirect Commissive (promise).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Assurance and confidence).** The former president promised to urgently support the states to contain the virus.

- 12. Location** “We will use this containment period to identify, trace and isolate all individuals that have come into contact with confirmed cases. We will ensure the treatment of confirmed cases while restricting further spread to other States”.

**Illocutionary- Direct-Assertive (stating) /Indirect Commissive (Promising).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (hopefulness).** He promised to restrict the virus from spreading and ensure treatment for already contracted ones.

- 13. Locution:** “The whole instruments of government are now mobilized to confront what has now become both a health emergency and an economic crisis”.

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (Reporting)/ Indirect-Commissive (Volunteering).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (confidence).** The former president has shown commitment to fighting virus, for it has economic implications in the country.

- 14. Locution:** “We are fully aware that such measures will cause much hardship and inconvenience to many citizens. But this is a matter of life and death, if we look at the dreadful daily toll of deaths in Italy, France and Spain”.

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (complaining)/Indirect-Verdictives (Appraisal).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Lamenting).** He acknowledged the hardship faced by the Nigerians.

- 15. Locution:** “Based on the advice of the Federal Ministry of Health and the NCDC, I am directing the cessation of all movements in Lagos and the FCT for an initial period of 14 days with effect from 11pm on Monday, 30th March 2020. This restriction will also apply to Ogun State due to its close proximity to Lagos and the high traffic between the two States”.



**Illocutionary- Direct-Commissive (Committing)/Indirect Directive (Commanding).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (endurance).** The former president directed the cessation of movement in Lagos, Ogun and FCT.

- 16. Locution:** "All citizens in these areas are to stay in their homes. Travel to or from other states should be postponed. All businesses and offices within these locations should be fully closed during this period".

**Illocutiinary: Direct-Assertive (Announcing) Indirect-Directive (Command).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Endurance).** He directed complete closure and cessation of activities including governmental and non-governmental activities the locations.

- 17. Locution:** "Furthermore, commercial establishments such as;  
a. food processing, distribution and retail companies;  
b. petroleum distribution and retail entities,  
c. power generation, transmission and distribution companies; and  
d. private security companies are also exempted".

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (Announcing) Indirect-Directive (Command).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Excitement).** He directed that those that provide food, petroleum, power and private securities be excluded from the restrictions order.

- 18. Location:** "Accordingly, the Hon. Minister of Health is hereby directed to redeploy all Port Health Authority employees previously stationed in the Lagos and Abuja Airports to key roads that serve as entry and exit points to these restricted zones".

**Illocutionary- Direct: Directive (Command)/Indirect: Directive (Order).** The former president directed the Hon. minister of Health to acts in other location of interest.

- 19. Location:** "Movements of all passenger aircraft, both commercial and private jets, are hereby suspended. Special permits will be issued on a needs basis".

**Illocutionary: Direct-Directive (Command)/ Indirect Commissive (Promising).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Enthusiasm).** He promised to give special permits to the suspended passenger aircraft.

- 20. Locution:** "I will therefore ask all of us affected by this order to put aside our personal comfort to safeguard ourselves and fellow human beings. This common enemy



can only be controlled if we all come together and obey scientific and medical advice”.

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive (suggesting)/Indirect-Directive (Advice).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Unity to confront the Virus).** The former president directed all Nigerians to come together as one and fight the virus scientifically.

**21. Locution:** “Furthermore, I have directed that a three-month repayment moratorium for all TraderMoni, MarketMoni and FarmerMoni loans be implemented with immediate effect”.

**Illocutionary: Direct-Assertive: (stating)/ Indirect-Directive (Command).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (Excitement).** The former president ordered that loans be given as relief packages for the Nigerian people.

### Speech Acts (ORFPS) (Direct and Indirect) of the Speech

Speech Act.	No. of Acts	Percentage
Assertive	15	33%
Expressive	1	2%
Declaratives	3	6%
Commissives	16	35%
Directives	10	22%
Verdictives	1	2%
<b>Total Number of Acts: 46</b>		

**22. Locution:** “For the most vulnerable in our society, I have directed that the conditional cash transfers for the next two months be paid immediately. Our Internally displaced persons will also receive two months of food rations in the coming weeks”.

**Illocutionary: Direct-Directive (Order) Indirect: Commissive (Promise).** He promised conditional cash transfer to the vulnerable Nigerians.

**23. Locution:** “At this point, I will ask that all contributions and donations be coordinated and centralized to ensure efficient and impactful spending. The Presidential Task Force remains the central coordinating body on the COVID-19 response”.

**Illocutionary: Direct-Declaratives (Approving)/ Indirect-Directive (Command).**

**Expected perlocutionary effect (hope).** The former president directed that all the donations be centralized for transparency.





## **Discussion of the Analysis**

Language is the most important tool of communication. People use language to transfer what is in their minds to audience. It is used to perform action and explain situation. By implications, we ask our audience to do certain things for us. Thus, the speech of the former President Muhammadu Buhari on Covid-19 2020 is not an exception.

The Speech act theory as given by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) are used for the analysis. Language is not innocent; it is infused with certain hidden meanings and indirect utterances with some implications, even as some speakers are not fully aware of the implications of their utterance, X-raying this requires a reliable method and pragmatic investigations answers the call.

The speech act theory proposed by Searle is used alongside verdictive from the Speech act theory by Austin. The results show that, Assertive has 33%, Commissives 35% while 22% goes for Directives. The analysis shows that the former President Buhari used more of Commissives, Assertives and Directives to pass across his message to the Nigerian people. If you look at the analysis very well, you will understand that most of the Directives and Commissives were indirectly used by the former President. This is because politicians are skeptical about their utterance even at a times of health emergencies like the Covid-19

Pandemic. Still, the former president also used some directives and Commissives directly in his speech.

The former president used Directives to direct the relevant government machinery to contain the virus and to tell Nigerians how to avoid contracting the virus, and by extension how to be treated in the event that one has already contracted it. The former president also used Commissives to take responsibility and show that the situation is under control and that he would not relent until he subdues the pandemic.

The former president used assertive mostly in direct speech to show that he is indeed a democrat and not a dictator as some people portray him to be. Therefore, looking at the timing of the speech, the researcher may assume that the speech is a little bit polite.

The direct speech acts were mostly Assertives 65%, directives 13% and declaratives and Commissives with 9% each and 4% for expressives. In the indirect speed acts, the former president mostly used directives 57 %, Commissives 35% and declaratives 4%. That means most of the directives and Commissives were indirectly used.

## **Conclusion**

The analyzed speech acts make us get the intended meaning of the speaker. We uncover not just their surface but also their hidden meanings. Doing so matters a lot in speech



comprehension and understanding. The speech acts have helped us to understand the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, its origin, how it spread and how it should be prevented. The former President Muhammadu Buhari has clearly and effectively used all the government apparatus in tackling the virus as clearly argued in his speech, even though he communicated some important parts indirectly. The speech acts as given by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) have

helped us in bringing out the hidden meaning for easy understanding.

The speech acts have also described the nature and manner of speech of the former president. The speech portrays him as a man who is very careful with his utterance, one who says less and means much. He is someone that asks you to do something without telling you to do it.

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### **Authors Bio-data**

Habu Yusuf is an Assistant Lecturer at the department of English Yobe State University, Damaturu. He got his Bachelor's Degree in English language from Yobe State University Damaturu in 2015 and a Master's degree in English at Nasarawa State University in 2023. His current research interest are: Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, stylistics and Applied Linguistics.

He is currently pursuing his PhD. English language at Gombe State University.  
[Yusufdanbaba20@gmail.com](mailto:Yusufdanbaba20@gmail.com) 07032906772