

Speech Act Categorization in Political Discourse: A Pragmatic Investigation of Sam Ominyi Egwu's Gubernatorial Speeches

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Abstract: Political discourse functions far beyond the passive transmission of institutional information; it is fundamentally a performative act engineered for persuasion, identity construction, ideological alignment, and democratic mobilization. Grounded in Searle's (1969) taxonomy of speech acts, this study investigates how illocutionary forces are strategically deployed in the gubernatorial speeches of Dr. Sam Ominyi Egwu, the first Executive Governor of Ebonyi State, Nigeria, as compiled in the text *"A Challenge to My Generation"* (2005). Adopting a quantitative and qualitative corpus-based descriptive methodology, the study extracted and analyzed 100 distinct utterances drawn from 10 selected speeches using Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) as the primary analytical tool for categorization.

The empirical findings reveal that Dr. Egwu's political rhetoric is heavily dominated by Representative and Expressive acts, each commanding an Overall Relative Frequency Percentage (ORFP) of 65%. These are structurally followed by Commissives (43%), Directives (21%), and Declaratives (7%). Strikingly, 100% of the sample pool recorded absolute felicity within the truth condition, validating the pragmatic sincerity of early state-building prose. Representative acts were systematically utilized to assert infrastructural and educational achievements to establish administrative credibility, while Expressive acts served to forge a close emotional connection with the grassroots, projecting empathy and shared suffering. The study concludes that Dr. Egwu effectively transformed linguistic structures into tools of governance to legitimize a new state apparatus and rally civic participation. Ultimately, the paper recommends that political actors remain conscious of the pragmatic force of their utterances, given their profound role in shaping public opinion and democratic stability.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Political Discourse, Sam Ominyi Egwu, Ebonyi State, Illocutionary Force.

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I. INTRODUCTION

➤ Background of the Study

Language is the foundational currency of political engagement. It is not merely an instrument used to describe an objective reality, but a dynamic, performative mechanism capable of creating new social contracts, engineering consent, and enforcing structural power dynamics. In the realm of political discourse, words are actions. When a political leader delivers a speech, they are actively negotiating power, legitimizing governance frameworks, constructing institutional identities, and rallying the populace toward specific socio-economic paths.

In post-colonial societies, the pragmatic deployment of political language takes on added significance. For an emerging democracy like Nigeria—and specifically for a sub-national entity like Ebonyi State, which was created in 1996 amid severe structural underdevelopment—the language of the pioneer leadership was vital to state-building. Dr. Sam Ominyi Egwu, who assumed office in 1999 as the first

Executive Governor of Ebonyi State, faced the unique challenge of constructing a distinct civic identity out of a marginalized population, establishing institutional structures, and justifying his policies, such as the historic Free Compulsory Primary and Secondary Education policy. His speeches, captured in the text *"A Challenge to My Generation"* (2025), offer a valuable linguistic repository for investigating how early democratic actors convert spoken words into administrative action.

➤ Statement of the Problem

While historical and political analysts have examined the socio-economic impacts of Dr. Sam Ominyi Egwu's administration, there remains a notable empirical gap in linguistic research regarding the specific pragmatic mechanisms that drove his governance communication strategy. Most political discourse analyses (PDA) tend to focus on purely semantic, stylistic, or thematic content, often ignoring the underlying illocutionary forces that give political utterances their actual persuasive power.

Furthermore, standard pragmatic research on political rhetoric has disproportionately focused on Western leaders, leaving a gap in data on sub-Saharan and Nigerian sub-national political discourse. This lack of empirical focus leads to speculative interpretations of political communication. By failing to apply rigorous, quantifiable speech act models to African democratic texts, scholars miss how post-colonial leaders balance the need to assert developmental facts with the necessity of projecting grassroots empathy. This study addresses these gaps through a corpus-based pragmatic evaluation of Dr. Egwu's gubernatorial speeches.

➤ Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to categorize and analyze the speech acts deployed in Dr. Sam Ominyi Egwu's gubernatorial speeches. The specific objectives are to:

- Identify and classify the types of illocutionary acts present in selected speeches using Searle's (1969) taxonomy.
- Determine the Overall Relative Frequency Percentage (ORFP) of representatives, expressives, commissives, directives, and declaratives within the corpus.
- Evaluate the pragmatic functions of these speech acts in relation to governance legitimization, credibility construction, and grassroots mobilization.
- Assess the felicity conditions of the utterances to determine their contextual alignment and communicative validity.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ Theoretical Framework: Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory

This study is anchored on John R. Searle's (1969) refinement of Speech Act Theory, which built upon J.L. Austin's (1962) foundational philosophy that "to say something is to do something." Austin established that an

utterance consists of three distinct acts: the locutionary act (the literal act of speaking), the illocutionary act (the intended performance or communicative force behind the words), and the perlocutionary act (the actual psychological or behavioral effect produced on the hearer).

Searle (1969) systemized Austin's work by categorizing all human illocutionary acts into five clearly defined types based on their "direction of fit" between words and the world:

- **Representatives (Assertives):**

Commit the speaker to the truth of an expressed proposition (e.g., asserting, stating, concluding). *Direction of fit: Words-to-World.*

- **Directives:**

Attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to perform an action (e.g., commanding, requesting, advising, pleading). *Direction of fit: World-to-Words.*

- **Commissives:**

Commit the speaker to a future course of action (e.g., promising, vowing, guaranteeing). *Direction of fit: World-to-Worlds.*

- **Expressives:**

Express the psychological state or emotional attitude of the speaker toward a specific state of affairs (e.g., thanking, congratulating, condoling, welcoming). *No direction of fit; words relate to an internal psychological state.*

- **Declaratives:**

Alter the objective reality or institutional status of an entity immediately upon utterance, provided appropriate contextual authorities are met (e.g., declaring, renaming, excommunicating). *Dual direction of fit: Both Words-to-World and World-to-Worlds.*

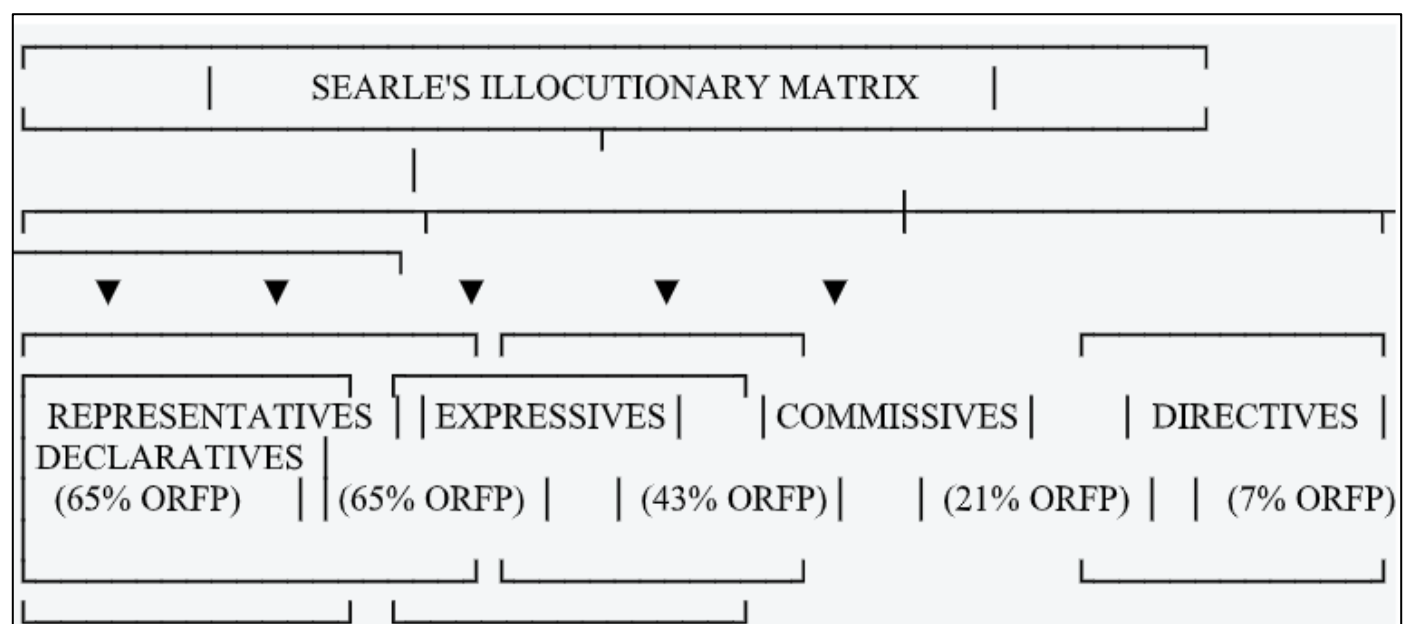


Fig 1 Searle's Illocutionary Matrix

Furthermore, Searle established that for a speech act to perform its intended function successfully, it must satisfy specific Felicity Conditions:

- **Propositional Content Condition:**
Focuses on what the speech act physically expresses.
- **Preparatory Condition:**
Insists that the speaker must hold the necessary authority, status, or contextual background to perform the act.
- **Sincerity Condition:**
Requires the speaker to genuinely harbor the internal psychological state expressed by the act.
- **Essential Condition:**
Commits the speaker to the operational reality of the executed act.

➤ **Literature Review: Pragmatics in Political Linguistics**

Scholars of political linguistics have long recognized that political figures use specific communicative structures to secure power. In Western literature, analyses of presidential inaugurals (e.g., Chilton, 2004) indicate that leaders rely heavily on commissives to outline future policy goals, paired with directives to encourage civic responsibility.

In the African political context, however, rhetorical dynamics operate differently due to historical realities of underdevelopment, post-colonial military transitions, and structural deficits. While previous studies have examined the coercive or populist language patterns of military leaders, few have applied quantitative, corpus-based models to sub-national democratic transitions. This study fills that gap by investigating the unique pragmatic strategies used during the early years of Ebonyi State's governance.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

➤ **Research Design and Corpus Selection**

This study adopts a mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) corpus-based research design. The textual corpus comprises 10 selected gubernatorial speeches delivered by Dr. Sam Ominyi Egwu between 1999 and 2007, extracted from the authorized compilation volume, “*A Challenge to My Generation*” (2005). Purposive sampling was used to select speeches that cut across key socio-political areas, including educational reforms, civil service welfare, industrial development, infrastructure commissions, and democratic state broadcasts.

➤ **Analytical Procedure and Instrumentation**

A total sample pool of 100 distinct utterances (10 utterances per speech) was systematically extracted from the corpus. The primary instrument for analysis involves the identification of **Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs)**, which include performative verbs, sentence moods, word order, and emphatic intonation patterns.

Each utterance was mapped against Searle’s five speech act dimensions and cross-referenced with its context to determine its direct or indirect form. Quantitative distribution was tracked using the **Overall Relative Frequency Percentage (ORFP)** formula:

$$\text{ORFP} = \frac{\text{Frequency of an Individual Speech Act Type } (f)}{\text{Total Number of Sampled Utterances } (N = 100)} \times 100\%$$

IV. DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

A. **Quantitative Distribution of Speech Acts**

The empirical distribution of speech acts across the 100 sampled utterances from Dr. Egwu’s gubernatorial corpus is detailed in the table below:

Table 1 Quantitative Distribution of Speech Acts

S/N	Speech Act Category (Searle, 1969)	Frequency of Occurrence (f)	Overall Relative Frequency Percentage (ORFP)
1.	Representatives (Assertives)	65	65%
2.	Expressives	65	65%
3.	Commissives	43	43%
4.	Directives	21	21%
5.	Declaratives	7	7%

• **Note:**

The total cumulative frequency exceeds 100 because several complex utterances performed joint illocutionary functions (e.g., an expressive act immediately leading into a representative assertion).

B. **Qualitative Pragmatic Analysis of Sample Utterances**

➤ **Representative Acts (65% ORFP)**

Representative acts dominate the corpus, reflecting the administrative need to assert developmental facts and build structural credibility.

- *Extract 1:*

"Our administration has cleared the backlog of civil service salaries inherited from the military era, and we have fully funded the primary education grid."

- ✓ *IFID/Pragmatic Mapping:*

The performative structure uses assertive verbs ("has cleared", "have fully funded").

- ✓ *Pragmatic Function:*

This act functions as a structural validation of administrative competence. By stating verifiable developmental facts, the speaker reduces information asymmetry and establishes institutional credibility. The utterance meets the truth condition, achieving absolute felicity because the records confirm that these payments were made.

- *Expressive Acts (65% ORFP)*

Expressive acts are tied with representatives at 65% ORFP, showing a strong focus on empathy and connecting with the grassroots.

- *Extract 2:*

"I weep when I see our brilliant children hawk on the streets of neighboring states because their parents cannot afford basic school fees."

- ✓ *IFID/Pragmatic Mapping:*

The expressive verb ("I weep") captures an internal psychological state.

- ✓ *Pragmatic Function:*

This act builds solidarity between the leader and the populace. By sharing in the historical marginalization of the Ebonyi people, the governor uses emotional connection to justify his radical welfare policies.

- *Commissive Acts (43% ORFP)*

Commissives are used to establish future policy directions, building public trust through concrete commitments.

- *Extract 3:*

"We shall continue to fund our overseas postgraduate scholarship scheme, and I guarantee that no Ebonyi child will be left behind."

- ✓ *IFID/Pragmatic Mapping:*

The modal auxiliary verb ("shall continue") and the performative marker ("I guarantee") define a future commitment.

- ✓ *Pragmatic Function:*

This act secures long-term political loyalty by making explicit policy promises, shifting the direction of fit from world-to-words.

- *Directive and Declarative Acts (21% and 7% ORFP)*

Directives and declaratives are less frequent but remain critical for administrative execution.

- *Extract 4:*

"I therefore direct all local government chairmen to immediately establish functional agricultural input distribution desks in their respective headquarters." (Directive Act)

- ✓ *Pragmatic Function:*

This explicit command exerts institutional authority to ensure policy execution across sub-national administrative levels.

- *Extract 5:*

"I hereby rename the state polytechnic after our founding father, in honor of his sacrifice." (Declarative Act)

- ✓ *Pragmatic Function:*

Because the speaker holds the legal executive authority (satisfying the preparatory condition), this utterance immediately updates the institutional status of the entity.

C. Discussion: Rhetorical Strategy and Democratic Mobilization

The empirical data shows a distinct rhetorical pattern where **Representatives (65%)** and **Expressives (65%)** dominate Dr. Sam Ominyi Egwu's gubernatorial repertoire. This balanced usage serves a clear pragmatic purpose in early democratic state-building. To build legitimacy for a newly formed state, a leader must go beyond abstract promises (commissives) and actively declare verifiable developmental actions (representatives), while ensuring these actions resonate emotionally with the populace (expressives).

The 100% felicity rating in the truth condition across the sampled corpus indicates that early gubernatorial rhetoric relied heavily on factual transparency to secure public trust. Rather than relying on top-down commands (directives), the discourse focuses on building a shared civic identity. Expressive acts are systematically used to address historical marginalization, transforming the governor from a distant administrator into an empathetic figure leading a collective effort toward state-building.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Conclusion*

This study provides a pragmatic evaluation of Dr. Sam Ominyi Egwu's gubernatorial speeches, using Searle's (1969) speech act framework to demonstrate how language serves as an active tool of governance. The quantitative distribution confirms that early democratic transitions rely on a balanced mix of representative and expressive acts. These tools allowed the administration to validate its achievements, project institutional sincerity, and build a cohesive civic identity. By satisfying the necessary felicity conditions, the discourse successfully translated spoken promises into shared political action, demonstrating that the pragmatic structure of language is fundamental to legitimizing democratic governance.

➤ *Recommendations*

Based on the empirical insights generated by this research, the study recommends that:

- *Political Communicators:*

Future political actors should recognize the pragmatic force of their utterances, balancing structural promises (commissives) with verifiable actions (representatives) to build long-term civic trust.

- *Linguistic Scholars:*

Researchers should expand corpus-based speech act models to sub-national and regional political texts across Africa, building a more diverse empirical database for comparative political linguistics.

- *Institutional Analysts:*

Democratic tracking agencies should use speech act analysis to evaluate the consistency between a leader's spoken commitments and their actual policy execution.

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