

LANGUAGE MATTERS IN A PANDEMIC: PRAGMATIC ACTS ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SPEECHES OF MINISTER OF HEALTH, OSAGIE EHANIRE

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Abstract

Communication plays a crucial role in the facilitation of growth and development in every society. Language matters during the pandemic as it is employed as a tool to communicate, sensitise and organise awareness campaigns on preventive measures and response activities. This study investigated the various practs employed by Nigerian Honourable Minister of Health (HMH), Dr. Osagie Ehanire to connect with his audience with the intention of curbing the coronavirus pandemic. The objectives were to examine the frequencies of pragmatic acts performed in the speeches of the HMH; and determine how the identified practs project his message. Three speeches were purposively retrieved from the official website of the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Health. The study adopted a mixed method approach, while Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory served as the theoretical underpinning. At the end of the study, it was discovered that the minister deployed 67 practs across the three speeches to achieve five pragmatic goals, namely: to reveal intentions, achievements and further actions (50.7%); to commend and appreciate (19.4%); to give instructions and directives (11.9%); to encourage/motivate (11.9%); and to express concern or worry (6%). It was also discovered that pragmatic tools such as reference, inference and shared situational knowledge enabled the masses to understand better the pragmatic intentions of the minister. It can therefore be concluded that through the analysis of different practs in the selected speeches, the pragmatic goals of the minister are revealed and the principal themes of the speeches are determined.

Keywords: Coronavirus; HMH Osagie Ehanire; language; practs; pragmatic acts

1. Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 “COVID-19”, a deadly contagious disease, emerged in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019. Since then, it has spread to 200 countries (Azlan, et al, 2020, p. 2), and as of August, 2021, World Health Organization (WHO) (2021) reports that there have been more than 200 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 4.3 million deaths globally. Consequently, the virus has been declared a global pandemic by WHO. A pandemic is defined as occurring over a wide geographic area and affecting an exceptionally high proportion of the population (Lexico, n.d.), the first known use of the term being in 1666 (Woods, 2020). It is imperative to clarify that “coronavirus” represents any virus whose structure presents crownlike spikes. The virus was given an official name: Severe Acute

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Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the name of the disease which causes COVID-19 (WHO, 2020 cited in Woods, 2020).

To curb the alarming rate of transmission and reproduction of the virus across the populace, and in the absence of a COVID-19 vaccine as of 2020, Ferguson, et.al (2020, p. 3) note that non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) aimed at reducing contact rates in the population were quickly imposed by affected countries. Examples of the measures adopted during this time included closing schools, religious centres, event centres, bars and other social venues. Other NPIs recommended by WHO to governments and public worldwide was to practice hand-hygiene, exercise social distancing, and to impose a shelter-in-place order. Accordingly, most governments adopted this intervention as a policy to curtail the transmission of the virus by declaring some degree of lockdown, and suggesting the notion of a new normal for the immediate future.

It therefore becomes imperative for the citizenry to be aware of the lethal nature of the virus and comply with safety measures. Since communication plays a crucial role in the facilitation of growth and development in every society, humans therefore communicate especially through the distinctive use of language. Language matters during the pandemic as it is employed as a tool to sensitise and organise awareness campaigns on preventive measures and response activities. As rightly observed by the UNESCO (2020) language is “an intrinsic part of human rights and fundamental freedoms of their users, including access to accurate life-saving information and healthcare (p.1).”

In Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari, on 9th March, 2020 established a Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 saddled with the responsibility of coordinating and overseeing the country’s multi-sectoral efforts to contain the spread and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The twelve-member task force, chaired by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, Mr. Boss Mustapha, is made up of top political leaders and health experts in the country. One of the key members of the team is the Honourable Minister of Health, Dr. Osagie Ehanire. With the intention of keeping the public abreast of strategic progress with Nigeria’s response, and emerging developments regarding preparedness, the Honourable Minister of Health (HMH, henceforth) gave different speeches at various times during press briefings of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19. The import of these speeches, which revolve around coronavirus pandemic, cannot be overemphasised as they become “an effective tool for the management of the virus all over the world” (Ugoala and Israel, 2020, p. 741). Hence, three speeches delivered by HMH, Dr. Osagie Ehanire at the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 press briefings are selected for this study. The aim of this research is to investigate the various practs employed by Dr. Osagie Ehanire to connect with his audience with the intention of curbing the coronavirus pandemic. The specific objectives are to: identify the pragmatic acts employed in the selected speeches of the HMH; examine the frequencies of pragmatic acts performed in the speeches of the HMH; and determine how the identified practs project the message of the HMH in the speeches.

2. Brief Biography of Dr. Ehanire

Osagie Emmanuel Ehanire was born on 4th November, 1946 in Warri Town, Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. He is a Nigerian medical doctor and politician. Ehanire studied Medicine at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich in Germany, qualifying as a surgeon. He worked in Germany at various hospitals. On his return to Nigeria in 1982, he worked at the University of Benin Teaching Hospital as Senior Registrar in the Department of Surgery. He also served at various times on the Medical Review Board of Edo State Hospital Management Board. As the Edo State Coordinator for the Buhari Support Organisation (BSO),

he was a key player in ensuring the victory of President Muhammadu Buhari at the 2015 presidential election. Following the beginning of a new administration led by President Buhari in May 2019, Ehanire was appointed the Minister of Health in August 2019. (Source: *Wikipedia*)

3. Empirical Review

There have been many scholarly works which employ the tools or elements of pragmatics to analyse speeches of various personalities. Abuya (2012) subjected President Goodluck Jonathan's inaugural speech to pragma-stylistic analysis. He employed the framework of Austin's (1962) Speech Acts Theory to identify and analyse the various speech acts that manifested in the inaugural speech of the president. Ubong and Sifonde (2012) undertook a comparative study of President Jonathan's and President Obama's inaugural addresses with the intent of analysing the speech act types, the sentence structure and the politeness principles of face acts employed by the presidents. Using Speech Acts Theory, Ayeomoni and Akinkuolere (2012) focused on the pragmatic functions of locution, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts of victory and inaugural speeches of President Yar'Adua. Maretha (2014) examined the kinds of speech acts employed in the two apology speeches of President Clinton, *I Mised* and *I Have Sinned* using Searle's theory on illocutionary forces.

Wangatiah, Ongarora and Matu (2016) carried out a pragmatic analysis of selected political speeches in Kenya using Wilson and Sperber's (2004) Relevance Theory with the aim of demonstrating the extent to which political speeches weaken the spirit of national integration. Odogwu and Akpojisher (2018) subjected President Buhari's Independence Day Speech of October 1st, 2017 to pragmatic analysis. They sought to unravel all the pragmatic acts embedded in the speech. Ugoala and Israel (2020) employed Mey's Pragmatic Acts theory to examine the first official speeches of presidents of Nigeria and Ghana on coronavirus pandemic. The review of this body of works reveals that the authors adopted either Speech Acts theory or Pragmatic Acts theory in their analyses of their respective speeches, except Wangatiah, Ongarora and Matu (2016), who also employed Wilson and Sperber's (2004) Relevance Theory. Nevertheless, this study is a learning paradigm in the pragmatic field as it attempts to examine the various practs employed in the speech of Ehanire using the Pragmatic Acts Theory of Mey (2001).

4. Theoretical Framework: Pragmatic Acts Theory of Mey (2001)

The theoretical stance of this study is Pragmatic Acts Theory propounded by Mey (2001). The Pragmatic Acts Theory is a response to some inadequacies of Austin's Speech Act Theory. As observed by Fairclough (1998, p. 9), speech acts theory "is best thought as atomistically". According to Mey (2001), speech acts theory lacks a theory of action; it concentrates on 'speech' while excluding other phenomena of language use such as writing since language manifests both in written and spoken forms. Mey (2001) further notes that speech acts can be considered as adapting oneself linguistically and otherwise to one's world. As a result of this critique, linguists such as Mey (2001) have suggested that the term 'speech act' can be replaced by a more 'general' one, such as 'act of language'. Mey (2001) is therefore more interested in seeing language in use manifesting as situation-bound dependent phenomenon. He is of the view that the typical way of looking at an individual's use of language is to see him/her as performing pragmatic acts. The pragmatic acts always comprise an agent and an act. Mey (2001) avers that "as far as the individual agent is concerned, there are his or her class, gender, age, education, previous life history, etc." (p. 214). These identified variables are regarded as "member resources (MR)"; that is the resource that people dispose regarding communication. This individual's history, according to Fairclough (1998), is often referred to

as “background knowledge”, which is the shared, apriori knowledge and naturally facilitates the meaning making process.

In Pragmatic Acts Theory, Mey (2001) argues that emphasis should be placed on the importance of the situation, environment and extra-linguistic factors in meaning construction and comprehension. He opines that human activity is not the privilege of the individual; rather the individual is situated in a social context, which means that he or she is empowered, as well as limited, by the conditions of his/her social life.

Besides, Mey (2001) asserts that a speech act never comes alone but carries with it a bevy of other acts on which it essentially depends for its success; these inclusive acts include a conglomeration of the member resources of the activity part and the textual part of a pragmeme, also known as pragmatic act. Mey (2001) claims that “there are no speech acts, but only situated speech acts or instantiated pragmatic acts” (p. 218). This is because speech acts, in order to be feasible, have to be situated in a particular context of situation, as no speech act can be properly understood unless it is situated within the environment in which it was meant to be understood. The environment creates the ‘affordance’ by which language users oriented towards a correct interpretation of what they say as well as what they hear.

Therefore, pragmatic acts “involve adapting oneself to context as well as adapting context to oneself” (Mey, 2001, p. 218). Pragmatic acts are situation-derived and situation constrained. They do not explain human language use by starting from the words uttered by the speaker. Instead, they focus on the interactional situation in which language users realise their aims. Mey (2001) explains further by stating that:

The theory of pragmatic acting does not try to explain language from the inside out; that is from words having origin in a sovereign speaker and going out to an equally sovereign hearer. Rather, its explanatory movement is from the outside in, the focus is on the environment in which participants find their affordance; such that the situation is brought to bear on what can be said in the situation, as well as what is actually being said. (p. 220)

This view is considered as the pragmeme which according to Odebumi (2008) is the only force behind the production of utterances. Hence, pragmatic acts theory is an attempt to explain the way pragmemes are represented in pragmatic acts in relation to speech situations, where the emphasis is not on conditions and rules for an individual speech act, but on characterising a general situational prototype, that is, a pragmeme that can be executed in the situation.

For better comprehension of the Pragmatic Acts Theory, Mey (2001) came up with the schema represented in Figure 1 below:

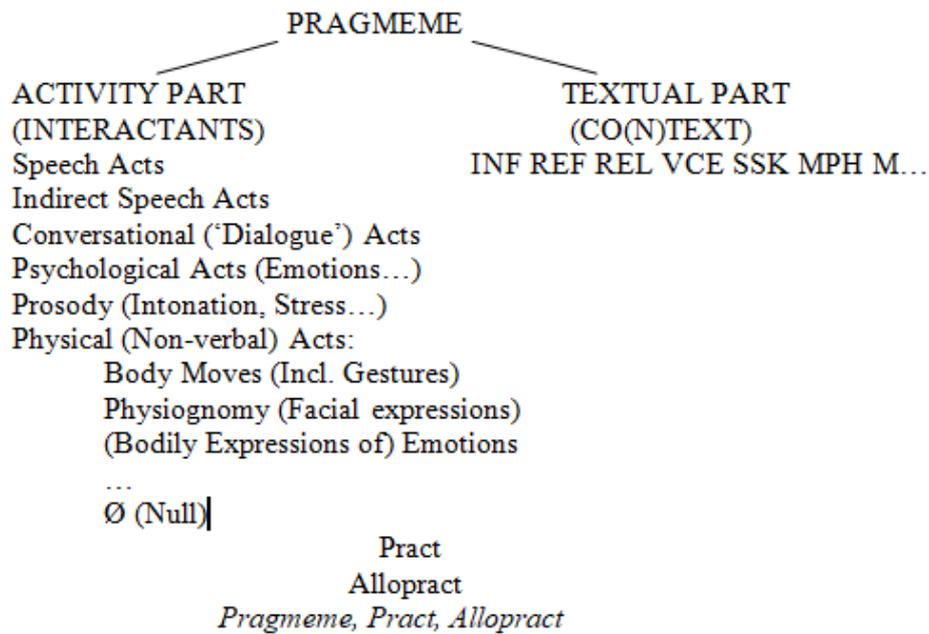


Figure 1: Mey’s Model of Pragmatic Act (Mey, 2001, p. 222)

The model above shows that a pragmeme has two parts: activity part and textual part. The central part in the concept of “pragmatic act” is pragmeme. A pragmeme is the generalised pragmatic act; it is regarded as an abstraction. A pragmeme can be instantiated through individual pragmatic act (Mey, 2001). This is what Mey referred to as “practs”. An “allopract” or “pract”, according to Mey is “a concrete and different realization of a particular pragmeme” (2001, p. 221). Odogwu and Akpojisher (2018, p. 107) note that a pract is “determined by participants understanding of the situation and the effect such pract will have in a particular context.” The activity part of a pragmeme as shown in the model shows options that are available to participants (interlocutors) in a text. These include speech acts, indirect speech acts, dialogue or conversational acts, psychological acts, prosody, physical acts, body moves, facial expressions or physiognomy, and body expressions. A speaker can choose any or combine several concepts in interaction. The textual part “contextual features that influence communication” is exhibited through concepts of inference, reference, relevance, voice, shared situation knowledge, metaphor and metapragmatic joker (Mey, 2001). The activity part depends on textual part for its realisation; and both sides of pragmeme depend on context for meaning realisation. Hence, the interaction between activity part and textual part of a pragmeme produces a pract.

Pragmatic Acts Theory of Mey (2001) is suitable for this study since the theory is capable of unravelling the underlying situated acts in a discourse, be it a monologue, dialogue or multilogue. Dr. Osagie Ehanire’s speeches are monologic texts which have targeted audience. As pointed out by Ugoala and Israel (2020, p. 744), “though speeches are written, the ultimate goal is for it to be read out, so that people can listen and respond by acting on the content of the speech...speeches, just like any utterance in any communication event, have the ability to spur listeners into actions and reactions.” Hence, this linguistic theory is suitable in discovering the pragmatic acts employed by the HMH to connect with the citizenry

5. Methodology

The data for this study are three speeches, named Appendix A, Appendix B, and Appendix C, and uploaded on Nigerian Federal Ministry of Health official website (www.health.gov.ng) on 12th, 15th and 21st May, 2020 respectively. This specific timeframe was chosen because it reflects the period when Coronavirus was at its peak, which has forced the country into a lockdown. With the exclusion of the speech titles as written in the downloaded manuscripts, Appendix A has a total of 14 paragraphs with 815 words; Appendix B has 12 paragraphs with 745 words; while Appendix C has 13 paragraphs with 730 words. The study adopts a mixed method approach which includes both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory serves as the theoretical underpinning for this study with the aim of revealing the special ways in which language has been used by the HMH to convey his intended message(s) to the Nigerian citizenry so as to curb the coronavirus pandemic. Pragmatic analytical tools of reference (REF), inference (INF) and SSK are used in the analysis. Tables are presented to illustrate the frequencies and percentages of pragmatic acts embedded in the selected speeches for clear and easy interpretation.

6. Results

Adopting Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory, the speeches are analysed with the aim of unravelling the minister's use of language to convey his intentions to the masses in order to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria, and consequently, mitigate the impact of the virus on the country's economy. To get the quantitative result of the analysis, the number of occurrence of each pract is divided by the total number of practs in each speech, and then multiplied by 100.

$$\frac{\text{Number of occurrence of each pract}}{\text{Total number of practs}} \times 100$$

The frequency distributions of the pragmatic acts discovered in the analysed speeches are presented in the tables below:

Table 1.**Pragmatic Goals and Acts and Their Individual Frequencies of Appendices A, B and C**

Pragmatic Goals	Practs	Appendix A		Appendix B		Appendix C	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
To reveal intentions, achievements and further actions	Informing	9	39.1	10	50	9	37.5
	Asserting	1	4.3	1	5	1	4.2
	Assuring	1	4.3	1	5	1	4.2
To commend and appreciate	Thanking	2	8.7	3	15	2	8.3
	Praising	4	17.4	1	5	1	4.2
To give instructions and directives	Instructing	2	8.7	1	5	3	12.5
	Advising	0	0	0	0	1	4.2
	Requesting	0	0	0	0	1	4.2
To encourage or motivate	Promising	2	8.7	1	5	3	12.5
	Encouraging	1	4.3	1	5	0	0
To express concern or worry	Lamenting	1	4.3	1	5	2	8.3
Total	11 practs	23	100	20	100	24	100

Table 1 depicts the frequency of the pragmatic goals and the practs employed by the HMM in each of the selected speeches. As seen in the table, eleven (11) pragmatic functions – informing, asserting, assuring, thanking, praising, instructing, advising, requesting, promising, encouraging, and lamenting – are used in the three speeches to achieve five (5) pragmatic goals. Appendix C has the highest number of practs (24; 35.8%); and this is followed by Appendix A (23; 34.3%), and Appendix B (20; 29.9%).

Table 2.

The Overall Frequencies of Pragmatic Goals and Pragmatic Acts in Appendices A, B and C

Pragmatic Goals	Overall Frequency	%	Practs	Frequency Per Practs	%
To reveal intentions, achievements and further actions	34	50.7	Informing Asserting Assuring	28 3 3	41.8 4.5 4.5
To commend and appreciate	13	19.4	Thanking Praising	7 6	10.4 9
To give instructions and directives	8	11.9	Instructing Advising Requesting	6 1 1	9 1.5 1.5
To encourage or motivate	8	11.9	Promising Encouraging	6 2	9 3
To express concern or worry	4	6	Lamenting	4	6
Total	67	100	11 practs	67	100

Table 2 reveals the total frequencies of the pragmatic goals and the practs employed altogether in the three speeches analysed in this study. Sixty-seven (67) practs are discovered, and these practs have eleven (11) pragmatic functions as identified in the previous table. Practs expressing the pragmatic goal of revealing intentions, achievements and further actions are largely used in the speeches, accounting for (50.7%). This is followed by the pragmatic goal of commending and appreciating (19.4%). The pragmatic goals of giving instructions and directives, and encouraging/motivating have the same percentage, each taking up (11.9%) of the total percentage. The pragmatic goal with the least number of practs is the goal of expressing concern or worry, accounting for (6%).

7. Discussion

From the analysis of the Nigerian HMH's COVID-19 related press briefings, sixty-seven (67) practs are discovered, with eleven (11) pragmatic functions: informing, asserting, assuring, thanking, praising, instructing, advising, requesting, promising, encouraging, and lamenting. These pragmatic functions are marked with certain pragmatic analytical tools such as reference (REF), inference (INF) and shared situation knowledge (SSK). The practs are employed to achieve different pragmatic goals such as to reveal intentions, achievements and further actions; to commend; to give instructions; to encourage and motivate; and to express concern or worry. This section discusses the pragmatic goals with its distinguishing practs embedded in the selected HMH's speeches.

Goal 1: To reveal intentions, achievements and further actions

This pragmatic goal accounts for the highest number of frequency in the three speeches, occurring thirty-four (34) times (50.7%). To achieve this pragmatic goal, the HMH deploys three practs. Informing pract (41.8%) is predominantly used, occurring 28 times; and this is followed by asserting (4.5%) and assuring (4.5%) practs; each appearing three (3) times.

Informing: The speaker predominantly employs informing pract in his speech to give sufficient information to the citizenry regarding the situation of the coronavirus pandemic in

the country. The minister informs the masses about Buhari-led administration's plans and policies towards combating the deadly virus, as well as the administration's achievements hitherto. The analysis reveals that the minister employs informing practs in the first couple of paragraphs in each of the three speeches to give the masses an update regarding the total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Nigeria; the total number of COVID-19 patients treated and discharged; and total number of COVID-19 related deaths recorded. An instance of this is seen in paragraph 1 of Appendix A:

As at this morning, 12th of May 2020, 242 new covid-19 cases were confirmed in Nigeria, giving a total of 4641 in 34 States of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory, with unfortunately 150 fatalities recorded. 902 cases have happily been cured and discharged from care. The 242 new cases reported are from Lagos 88, Kano 64, Katsina 49...

This pract also gives the minister the opportunity to share with the masses the steps the government had taken and is still taking towards curbing the spread of COVID-19 in the nation. Evidence of this is seen in paragraph 4 of Appendix A and paragraph 2 of Appendix C:

We had responded to the situation in Kano by dispatching a team of medical experts to provide technical support to the State Ministry of Health. I am happy to inform that the team has done well in their assignment and has reported a lot of success... (p. 4; Appendix A)

We now have 26 laboratories spread in 17 states. This has increased our testing capacity... (p. 2; Appendix C)

The minister deploys this pract to identify the various actions the Nigerian government is taking to curb the transmission of the deadly virus. Such actions include: partnering with various agencies and organisations; dispatching a team of medical experts to provide technical support to the Kano and Bauchi States Ministries of Health; printing the mandatory institutional quarantine guideline for returnees from diaspora; stabilising the COVID-19 situation in Kano State; developing a strategy document of National Primary Healthcare Development Agency; establishing more laboratories; increasing daily testing capacity; developing new Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to track surveillance strategic directions and programmes; among other actions. Through INF, these various actions as identified by the HMH in his speeches inform the masses that the government is making genuine efforts in tackling the virus; hence, among the masses, the pract generates a sense of confidence and hope in the Buhari-led administration.

Asserting: Asserting pract, which appears only once in each of the three speeches, making three times (4.5%) in all, is also deployed by the speaker. The minister makes different assertions in the speeches to reveal measures that will reinforce government's fight against coronavirus in the country. For instance, in paragraph 11 of Appendix A: *The laboratory services in this centre is no doubt a great boost to our testing capacity in Abuja and with the treatment centre will enhance our capacity to handle confirmed positive cases*, the minister asserts that the new COVID-19 treatment centre in Abuja which provides various medical services will play a significant role in combating the spread of the virus. Another instance of asserting pract is seen in paragraph 3 of Appendix B:

Adherence to advisory against interstate travel and compliance with other simple measures like use of masks and avoiding crowds will significantly mitigate the burden.

In this instance, the minister employs asserting pract to reiterate the precautionary measures which are pivotal towards controlling the transmission of coronavirus, such as restriction of movements, use of face masks, and social distancing.

Assuring: Assuring pract occurs three times (4.5%) in the speeches; appearing once in each of the three speeches. Due to the panic that is associated with the coronavirus pandemic among the populace, it therefore becomes imperative for the minister to assure and pacify the masses that the government is working round the clock to combat the spread of COVID-19. Evidence of this pract is seen in paragraph 2 of Appendix A:

The Federal Ministry of Health is working with its agencies, other organs of Government and multinational organizations in continuous efforts to control transmission with tried, tested and innovative measures.

The minister deploys this pract to assure the citizenry that his ministry is partnering with other important stakeholders within the country to curb the spread of the deadly virus. Another instance of assuring pract is seen in paragraph 4 of Appendix C:

We are careful about our numbers to ensure that the figures we announce are accurate. Sometimes, there are errors, but we correct them as soon as they are noticed...

The minister, speaking on behalf of the Nigerian Ministry of Health, assures the masses of carrying out their responsibility of publicly announcing the number of COVID-19 cases in the country with more painstakingness and accuracy in order to avoid needless mistakes. Assuring pract is importantly used in the speeches to gain the confidence and trust of the masses towards the government.

Goal 2: To commend and appreciate

The overall frequency of this pragmatic goal is thirteen (13), accounting for 19.4% of the total percentage. To achieve this pragmatic goal of commending, the Health Minister employs two practs across the three selected texts: thanking (10.4%) and praising (9%) practs. The minister deems it imperative to express gratitude to various stakeholders in Nigeria for channelling their efforts and resources towards halting the continuous spread of coronavirus in the country.

Thanking: The pract of thanking is used by the minister seven times (10.4%) across the speeches. He uses this act to appreciate certain individuals who have contributed towards ensuring the nation is free from the perils of COVID-19. For instance, in paragraph 4 of Appendix B: *The situation in Kano has largely stabilized, thanks to the good relationship between the visiting Federal task team and Kano State Task force on COVID-19...*, the Health Minister commends the Federal task team and the Kano State Task Force on COVID-19 for collaborating harmoniously in combating the spread of the deadly virus in Kano State. Through the pragmatic tool of inference, it is revealed that Kano State was battling with the deadly effect of coronavirus prior to the intervention of the Federal Government. The Minister goes further in paragraph 6 to thank the Governor of Kano State, Abdullahi Ganduje, for providing required support to the task force sent by the Federal Government to the state with the responsibility of curtailing the spread of the virus in the state. In the same vein, the Health Minister also thanks the Governor of Cross River State, Ben Ayade, in paragraph 9 of Appendix C for his quick response towards combating COVID-19 in his state. This appreciative gesture exhibited by the Minister can be seen as a strategy of issuing a clarion call to other governors in the country to brace up and take the fight against coronavirus pandemic more seriously.

It is discovered that the Health Minister concludes his speeches by deploying thanking pract to appreciate his audience for paying attention to his messages. An instance is seen in the last paragraph of Appendix A – *Thank you for your attention*. This act, which allows the Minister to connect with his audience, is evident in the three speeches analysed in this study; hence, it has the effect of eliciting a positive response or attitude in the audience towards the messages conveyed by the Health Minister.

Praising: Pract of praising appears six times across the selected speeches, accounting for 9%. The HMH deploys this pract to express his admiration for certain individuals who are tirelessly working hard to ensure the deadly virus is curtailed in the country. Among those persons (or groups of persons) praised by HMH are organs of states maintaining vigilance at various borders in the country, a team of medical experts, Nigeria Governors’ Forum, private sector (Appendix A); Kano State government (Appendix B); and doctors and other health workers (Appendix C). An instance of praising pract is seen in paragraph 4 of Appendix A:

We had responded to the situation in Kano by dispatching a team of medical experts to provide technical support to the State Ministry of Health. I am happy to inform that the team has done well in their assignment and has reported a lot of success in helping to stabilize the State's Health system...

The HMH relishes the success achieved by the team of medical experts dispatched to Kano state to help in stabilising the health system of the state. SSK reveals that Kano state’s health system was heading towards utter devastation as result of the coronavirus pandemic; this has therefore prompted the Federal Government to come to the aid of the state in restoring her health system. The success attained in Kano state, however, instigated a feeling of hope and confidence among the masses regarding the competence of the Buhari-led administration in tackling COVID-19.

Goal 3: To give instructions and directives

The overall frequency of this pragmatic goal is eight (8), accounting for 11.9% of the total result. To achieve this pragmatic goal of giving instructions and directives, the minister employs three practs across the three selected texts: instructing (9%), advising (1.5%), and requesting (1.5%) practs. The HMH instructs and admonishes the masses as regards what they should do in order to assist in achieving the overall aim of the speeches – the need to curb the spread of coronavirus.

Instructing: The pract of instructing is used by the minister six times (9%) across the three selected speeches. The minister employs this pract to give specific instructions to all the stakeholders who are actively involved in combating the spread of coronavirus in the country. For instance, in paragraph 12 of Appendix A: *I use this opportunity to again enjoin State Governors to continue to ensure they reach the isolation capacity target of 300 beds..., while calling on Philanthropists to support their efforts...*, the HMH directs the state governors to continually sustain their efforts to curb the Coronavirus in their respective states by providing isolation capacity target of 300 beds; he also calls on philanthropists to support the efforts of the state governors by expanding the capacity for tracing, testing isolation and treatment. In the same speech (paragraph 13; Appendix A), the minister also instructs the citizens to always take measures to curb the spread of the virus by wearing their facemasks when in a public space.

Another evidence of instructing pract is seen in paragraph 11 of Appendix B: *Finally, I shall reiterate again the importance of adhering to public health advisories (wearing our face masks, observing social distancing, practicing hand washing or sanitizing, standard*

respiratory hygiene, avoiding crowds and all non-essential travel... Through inference, Dr. Ehanire highlights some directives which he expects the citizens to abide by in order to curtail the Coronavirus pandemic; such directives include the use of facemasks, observing social distancing, practicing hand washing, avoiding non-essential travel, etc. The minister finds it important to sensitise and encourage the citizens about the Coronavirus to ensure that there is social behavioural change in hygiene practices which will ultimately curb the spread of the virus. That way, every citizen can better prepare for the threat imposed by the disease.

Advising: Advising pract, which appears only once all through the three speeches (1.5%), is also deployed by the HMH. This pract is used in paragraph 6 of Appendix C: *I would also advice [sic] those who have taken the test and are awaiting result to heed the advisory to self-isolate from friends, wear face masks and observe hand and respiratory hygiene until your result is released.* There is shared situation knowledge (SSK) about the ravage of the coronavirus pandemic in the country, and consequently, tests are being conducted on the citizens to ascertain their status vis-à-vis the disease. The minister therefore admonishes those who have taken the test and are awaiting the outcome to adhere to the directives of self-isolating, wearing facemasks and maintaining proper hygiene.

Requesting: Pract of requesting appears only once across the selected speeches, accounting for 1.5%. The HMH deploys this pract to task the state governments with providing more laboratories and increasing the number of surveillance teams which will enhance the number of testing carried out daily across the country. The evidence of this pract is seen in paragraph 3 of Appendix C: *As more laboratories come on board, I would like to use this opportunity to call on state governments to increase the number of surveillance teams so that more testing can be done in the laboratories.* By charging the state governments with this responsibility, the minister believes that such a task, if well implemented by the governments, will corroborate the efforts of the federal government towards curbing the spread of the virus.

Goal 4: To encourage or motivate

This pragmatic goal accounts occurs eight (8) times across the selected speeches, accounting for 11.9% of the total results. To achieve this pragmatic goal, the HMH deploys two practs: promising pract (9%), occurring 6 times; and encouraging pract (3%) pract, occurring 2 times.

Promising: The promising pract appears six times across the three speeches. On behalf of the federal government, the minister considers it important to commit himself to certain actions that would contribute towards combating the spread of the coronavirus in Nigeria with the intention to gain the support of the masses. An evidence of this is seen in paragraph 5 of Appendix A:

...The similar missions to Katsina and Jigawa identified needs in those States, which include the need for a molecular laboratory in Katsina to reduce the backlog of pending tests and the turn-around time for results. This will be looked into. Other high burden areas or States grappling epidemic control issues will be offered similar support.

The minister promises the masses that the government will critically evaluate the specific needs in Katsina and Jigawa states with the aim of proffering solutions to those needs. He also promises to extend the hand of help to other states who are struggling to curtail the spread of the virus. Even though the minister has not mentioned the name of the virus in this extract, the shared situational knowledge (SSK) assists the audience to figure out that the minister is referring to the coronavirus pandemic.

Another instance of promising pract is seen in paragraph 9 of Appendix C: ...*We shall work with the state teams to ensure that we scale up surveillance and contact tracing in the state. We shall explore the possibility of upgrading laboratories in the state to ensure ease of testing when suspected cases are identified.* The minister expresses the government's commitment towards helping the Cross River state (one of the states in Nigeria) curb the spread of the Coronavirus. The HMH promises to help in scaling up surveillance and contact tracing, and upgrading laboratories in the state. This technique has been adopted by the minister to win the confidence and trust of the citizens, convincing them that the Nigerian government is equipped and capable of curtailing the ravage of the Coronavirus in the country.

Encouraging: The pract of encouraging is used by the minister two times (3%) across the three selected speeches. The two instances are seen in paragraph 3 of Appendix A: *We therefore encourage the organs of State maintaining vigilance at our borders, including our Port Health Services, to keep up the good work and not to tire or relent...*, and paragraph 3 of Appendix B: *We implore States and partners not to relent, but to keep up with the pace, which, in some states will increase well before it begins to decrease...* The minister recognises the efforts various stakeholders have been making towards ensuring that the country is free from the shackles of the COVID-19 pandemic, and he goes ahead to encourage them not to relent their efforts, "but to keep up with the pace". The minister urges the security agencies stationed at the country's borders not to relax in their efforts of safeguarding the borders and preventing illegal immigration into the country. Through inference, the audience is made to realise that porous and unguarded borders can contribute to a spike in the number of COVID-19 infections in the country. Hence, there is a need to ensure that the borders are properly guarded to stop cross-borders activities of people who move from other countries to Nigeria. The minister also urges the state governments and other partners to ensure that the fight against Coronavirus is sustained.

Goal 5: To express concern or worry

This pragmatic goal accounts for the least number of occurrence in the three speeches, occurring only four (4) times, and accounting for 6% of the total results. It is not surprising that this goal appears the least in the data analysed since the government does not want to portray a weak or incompetent outlook to the masses which would make them (masses) express doubt in the ability of the government to curb the spread of the virus. The minister therefore minimises the pragmatic goal of expressing concern or worry in the speeches to show strength and confidence. To achieve this pragmatic goal, the HMH deploys only one pract: lamenting pract, which appears four (4) times.

Lamenting: The pract of lamenting is used by the minister four times (6%) across the selected speeches. The minister uses this pract to express grief as regards the upsurge of coronavirus cases in the country, especially as the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases increases consistently and fatalities are often recorded. This is evident in the first paragraphs of Appendices A and B, where the minister states categorically the exact number of confirmed cases recorded; number of deaths recorded; states in which the cases are recorded; number of cases that have been cured and discharged; and the case gender ratio. Also, in paragraph two of Appendix C: ...*However, while our daily testing capacity is presently at 2,500, unfortunately, we are presently able to test less than 1,500. This is due largely to inadequate surveillance and contact tracing in the states,* the minister expresses concern as regards the government's inability to meet their daily testing capacity target, and for proper context, he gives the reason the government is experiencing such a difficulty, claiming it is as a result of "inadequate surveillance and contact tracing in the states". This excerpt reflects the SSK about the

Coronavirus pandemic and the need to conduct tests to ascertain those who have contracted the virus.

8. Conclusion

This study has investigated the various practs employed by Dr. Ehanire in three of his speeches delivered at the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 press briefings. The speeches were analysed with the aim of unravelling the minister's use of language to convey his intentions to the masses in order to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria to consequently mitigate the impact of the virus on the country's economy. The analysis of the speeches revealed that the minister employed a total of sixty-seven (67) pragmatic acts to achieve his pragmatic goals. These pragmatic acts performed eleven (11) pragmatic functions: informing (41.8%), asserting (4.5%), assuring (4.5%), thanking (10.4%), praising (9%), instructing (9%), advising (1.5%), requesting (1.5%), promising (9%), encouraging (3%), and lamenting (6%). Additionally, it was observed that the analysed practs have certain pragmatic tools, such as reference (REF), inference (INF) and shared situation knowledge (SSK), with each contributing significantly to the overall meaning of the speech. All the practs in the three speeches point to the need for collective efforts in combating the Coronavirus pandemic. The minister, through his well-articulated speeches, has been able to spur the Nigerian citizens into actions that will help in preventing the pervasiveness of the virus. Generally, these speeches served the purpose for which they were intended, and this is evident in the five pragmatic goals identified in the analysis. This study concludes that through the analysis of different practs in the selected speeches, the pragmatic goals of the minister are revealed and the principal themes of the speeches are determined.

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