

Pragmatic Facework and Economic Suffering in Nigerian Presidential Rhetoric: A Speech Analysis of Bola Tinubu (2023–2025)

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Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatic strategies employed by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu in constructing representations of economic hardship in official speeches. Grounded in Goffman's theory of face, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, and Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, the analysis explores how facework operates as a communicative tool for managing empathy, justifying reform, and performing political legitimacy during times of national crisis. Using a qualitative discourse-analytic approach, the study examines four national speeches delivered between 2023 and 2025. This includes two Independence Day addresses (October 1, 2023 and 2024) and two Democracy Day speeches (June 12, 2023 and 2025). A combination of deductive and inductive thematic coding was used to identify face-sensitive and inference-driven pragmatic strategies within the speeches. These strategies were found to jointly sustain self- and other-face, reduce interpretive resistance, and frame economic suffering as a moral, collective responsibility. Based on these findings, the study proposes the *Legitimation-as-Performance Model*—a three-part framework comprising relational calibration, inferential framing, and discursive buffering. This model conceptualizes how political actors perform legitimacy through coordinated facework and inference-rich rhetoric, particularly within fragile or transitional democracies. The study contributes to political discourse scholarship in the Global South by demonstrating how language serves as a pragmatic tool of governance, not only to persuade but to negotiate trust, deflect critique, and construct civic patience.

Keywords: Pragmatics; Facework; Politeness; Political discourse; Economic reform; Presidential rhetoric

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INTRODUCTION

In times of national crisis, political leadership is often exercised as much through language as through policy. Public speeches become crucial instruments for managing legitimacy, framing hardship, and shaping citizen expectations (Penninck, 2014; Pilyarchuk & Onysko, 2018; Mwombeki, 2019). This is especially salient in emerging democracies like Nigeria, where economic volatility, public distrust, and institutional fragility create high-stakes communicative contexts. Since his inauguration in 2023, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu has delivered several national addresses aimed at contextualizing a range of controversial economic reforms, including the removal of fuel subsidies, currency devaluation, and the implementation of austerity measures. These speeches reveal the rhetorical challenges of persuading a distressed and skeptical public to accept short-term suffering in pursuit of long-term national renewal. In this setting, the concept of *facework*—the strategic management of social identity and relational harmony—becomes central to understanding how political figures navigate blame, empathy, and authority in public discourse.

This study examines how President Tinubu pragmatically constructs and manages face in selected national speeches delivered during periods of economic hardship. While prior studies on African presidential rhetoric have explored speech acts, metaphor, and ideological framing (Aremu, 2017; Osisanwo, 2017; Taiwo et al., 2021; Jegede & Lawal, 2023), few have offered an integrated pragmatic analysis that links politeness strategies and inferential meaning-making to the legitimization of suffering. Existing research tends to isolate a single theoretical lens such as speech act theory or critical stylistics (Mobilaji et al., 2024; Okunade et al., 2025) which limits deeper insight into the interactional dynamics of political communication during reform periods. Moreover, although recent work has analyzed Tinubu's inaugural and Independence Day speeches (Anyanwu, 2023; Akinseye, 2023; Obitube et al., 2023; Olawe, 2024), limited attention has been given to how economic suffering is discursively reframed through the combined lenses of politeness, face negotiation, and inference. Addressing this gap, the present study draws on Goffman's theory of face, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, and Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory to investigate how Tinubu's presidential rhetoric strategically frames economic distress. The study is guided by three central research questions:

1. What facework strategies does President Tinubu employ in representing economic hardship?
2. How are poverty and reform-related suffering pragmatically mitigated or justified in his rhetoric?
3. How does the speaker manage his own face and attend to the face needs of the Nigerian public during times of reform?

Literature Review

Goffman's (1967) concept of face and Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory have shaped extensive research on political communication as a site of identity negotiation and relational management. These frameworks emphasize how speakers attend to self-image (self-face) and the audience's dignity (other-face) through linguistic choices. Studies conducted in both Western and non-Western contexts demonstrate that political actors deploy politeness strategies such as affiliative appeals, hedging, and indirectness to navigate sensitive issues and mitigate threats to credibility (Kádár & Zhang, 2019; Kiss, 2015; Schubert, 2025). Balogun and Murana (2018) examine how presupposition and politeness mitigate face-threatening acts in President Trump's rhetoric, while Alavidze (2018) highlights how adversarial discourse may also be tempered by patriotic appeals. More recently, Almahasees and Mahmoud (2022) and Khater et al. (2024) provide evidence from Jordanian political speeches, showing how metaphor, implicature, and presupposition interact with politeness strategies to reinforce national unity and leadership credibility. Alrufaiey and Alrikabi (2024) further deepen the relevance-theoretic and politeness-based perspectives in effective political communication by demonstrating how pragmatic inference and facework jointly enhance persuasive clarity in high-stakes political contexts. These studies show that politeness in political speech is not necessarily deferential; rather, it functions strategically to construct alignment and preserve authority.

In contexts of economic hardship, political discourse often serves to justify unpopular reforms and foster emotional resilience. Scholars such as Joye (2010) and Wanzo (2015) argue that suffering is commonly framed as morally necessary or redemptive through metaphors and appeals to national identity. Similarly, Penninck (2014) and Pilyarchuk and Onysko (2018) show that during financial crises, Western leaders often rely on metaphorical reasoning such as references to "storms," "roads," or "repairs" to construct hardship as both temporary and virtuous. These discursive frames

shift blame away from the state and toward systemic or inherited causes. Yet many of these studies remain confined to Euro-American contexts, leaving a critical gap in understanding how leaders in the Global South, where suffering is more immediate and widespread, navigate such rhetorical labor. Aberi and Ogechi (2025), for example, highlight how Kenyan presidential speeches during the COVID-19 pandemic employed moral appeals, inclusive language, and politeness strategies to frame national hardship as a moment of civic solidarity and shared resilience. Scholars have further explored how face and legitimacy are negotiated in political discourse. Mardiana et al. (2025) examine how Indonesian politicians use politeness strategies and speech acts to maintain alignment with citizens during reform communication. Focusing on crisis contexts, Schnurr et al. (2015) show that leaders discursively construct legitimacy through identity performance and persuasive stance. Kampf (2021) analyzes how speech acts like condemnation are strategically deployed to manage blame and uphold face in confrontational interviews. Rivers and Ross (2020) reveal how digital political discourse can both construct and erode authority through implicature, polarization, and face-threatening acts.

While this study focuses on Nigerian presidential rhetoric, the discursive legitimization of unpopular economic policies is a recurring theme across global democratic contexts. Scholars have shown how metaphors, affective appeals, and face-saving strategies are used to manage public trust and mitigate dissent during economic or political crises. For instance, Charteris-Black (2011) explores how metaphor in UK political rhetoric serves persuasive and legitimizing functions. In the Greek context, Vogiatzis (2022) and Polymeneas (2018) examine how valenced metaphors and epistemic stance were deployed to frame austerity and justify government action during the Eurozone crisis. Similarly, Van Vossole's (2020) study of Portugal and Simon, Rees, and Thomas (2023) on Botswana demonstrate how narratives of legitimacy shift in response to socio-political disruptions. In Central and Eastern Europe, Kustán Magyari and Rautajoki (2025) illustrate how populist leaders like Viktor Orbán use rhetorical tools to redefine democratic legitimacy. Peetz (2020) adds further insight by showing how U.S. presidential populism thrives on outsider legitimization. Widmaier (2014), meanwhile, traces crisis construction through U.S. presidential rhetoric across administrations. Adding a multilateral institutional perspective, von Billerbeck (2022) shows how high-level officials in international organizations perform discursive self-legitimation through moral positioning and narrative reframing.

In the Nigerian context, political discourse has attracted attention from stylistic and pragmatic perspectives. Early studies (Adegoju, 2005; Opeibi, 2009) emphasized metaphor and inclusion as emotional appeals. More recent work by Osisanwo (2017) and Aremu (2017) explores pragmatic acts and conceptual mappings in presidential speeches, while Temidayo (2017) compares politeness strategies in campaign rhetoric across administrations. Other scholars have examined emerging communicative forms, including social media (Tella, 2018; Opeibi, 2016) and online forums (Taiwo et al., 2021), revealing a shift toward impoliteness and discursive resistance. Studies such as Krisagbedo et al. (2021) analyze post-election discourse, while Ahmed (2017) and Mwombeki (2019) explore decolonial and pragma-dialectical approaches to African political campaigns. Adebayo et al. (2025) provide a relevant analysis of inaugural speeches under conditions of extraordinary political succession in Nigeria, emphasizing how politeness and inference are deployed to construct transitional legitimacy. Similarly, Jegede and Okere (2025) show how implicature, emotional appeals, and assertiveness are used to frame issues of credibility and governance in Nigerian political critique.

Recent analyses of Bola Tinubu's speeches (e.g., Anyanwu, 2023; Akinseye, 2023; Obitube et al., 2023) have focused on stylistic, syntactic, and ideological dimensions, such

as collocation (Olawe, 2024), rhetorical framing (Mobilaji et al., 2024), and intertextuality (Okwelum, 2023). While valuable, these studies often treat politeness, facework, and inference in isolation, if at all. Limited research systematically applies pragmatic frameworks to examine how political rhetoric recontextualizes economic suffering, particularly using an integrated lens of politeness, facework, and Relevance Theory. Despite robust scholarship on African presidential rhetoric, few studies analyze how leaders pragmatically navigate citizen discontent during reform periods. This study addresses that gap by offering a pragmatic analysis of President Tinubu's national speeches between 2023 and 2025, focusing on how rhetorical strategies construct empathy, justify hardship, and preserve legitimacy. By synthesizing key models in pragmatic theory, this research contributes to the expanding field of political communication in postcolonial settings—where language must simultaneously perform authority, manage trust, and reframe public suffering.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrative theoretical framework that draws on three complementary models in pragmatics: Goffman's (1967) theory of face, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, and Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory. Together, these frameworks provide a layered analytical lens for examining how political discourse simultaneously manages social identity, mitigates conflict, and constructs meaning during times of economic strain.

Goffman's (1967) concept of *face* refers to the positive social value a person claims during interaction. Although developed in the context of dialogic, face-to-face exchanges, this concept can be extended to monologic and institutional communication such as presidential addresses where political actors nonetheless attend to public perceptions of legitimacy, empathy, and moral authority. In contexts of crisis, leaders must maintain their self-face (as competent, caring, and in control) while attending to the face needs of the audience (recognition, dignity, reassurance). Goffman's theory provides the foundation for understanding the social stakes of rhetorical performance in high-pressure political settings.

Building on Goffman, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory distinguishes between *positive face* (the desire for approval and inclusion) and *negative face* (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition). Their typology of politeness strategies—positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record indirectness, and bald-on-record acts—helps to identify how political figures manage face-threatening content, such as economic reforms, blame attribution, or citizen suffering. In presidential rhetoric, these strategies function not only to minimize public resistance but also to symbolically align the leader with the people, particularly through inclusive appeals, hedged commitments, and empathic framing.

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) offers a cognitive-pragmatic account of how communication operates through inference. It posits that speakers aim to produce utterances that are optimally relevant—delivering maximal effect with minimal processing effort. In political speech, meaning is often constructed not through explicit claims but through presuppositions, metaphor, and implicature. These devices invite the audience to infer moral justification, collective purpose, or delayed reward, thereby softening the impact of harsh policies. For example, metaphors like “light at the end of the tunnel” or “a nation built on solid ground” prompt inferential processing that reframes economic pain as necessary and redemptive. Relevance Theory thus illuminates how indirectness enhances rhetorical efficiency while protecting face.

These frameworks help the study to account for how President Tinubu uses language not merely to convey information but to perform leadership, distribute accountability, and

co-construct legitimacy in a time of national hardship. While their combined use may appear conceptually ambitious, the integration is methodologically justified by the need to analyze the rhetorical management of public suffering, ideological conflict, and moral justification in reform-era presidential discourse. To avoid theoretical overlap, Table 1 delineates how each theory is functionally applied to distinct layers of the analysis.

Table 1. Functional Roles of Theoretical Models in the Analysis of Presidential Rhetoric

Theory	Primary Focus	Operational Domain	Typical Features	Linguistic Features
Face Theory (Goffman, 1967)	Relational identity and reputational management	Self-face and other-face negotiation in high-stakes national addresses	Empathy, projection, recognition of audience dignity	moral reassurance, recognition of audience dignity
Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987)	Strategic mitigation of face-threatening acts (FTAs)	Linguistic politeness in response to public dissatisfaction or dissent	Inclusive hedging, phrasing, moves	pronouns, deferential solidarity
Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995)	Inferential communication and ideological framing	Audience inference triggered by metaphor, implicature, presupposition	Framing presupposed rhetorical questions, unstated consequences	metaphors, hardship, rhetorical questions, unstated consequences

This table illustrates how each theoretical lens contributes to a different analytic dimension—face theory addresses identity performance, politeness theory explains relational strategy, and relevance theory accounts for inference-driven persuasion. Their functional differentiation ensures analytical clarity while preventing theoretical redundancy.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive discourse-analytic approach to examine how President Bola Ahmed Tinubu pragmatically constructs and manages public perception of economic hardship in selected national addresses. The primary data comprises four purposively selected presidential speeches delivered between 2023 and 2025: two Independence Day addresses (October 1, 2023 and 2024) and two Democracy Day speeches (June 12, 2023 and 2025). These addresses were chosen based on their high national visibility, their timing during key phases of economic reform, and their explicit engagement with themes of hardship, subsidy removal, and appeals for patience and solidarity. Speeches were obtained from verified government sources, including the official website of the Nigerian Presidency and major national broadcasters. Each transcript was reviewed to ensure fidelity to the original delivery and contextual relevance.

The analysis proceeded in three interpretive layers aligned with the study's theoretical pillars. First, based on Goffman's (1967) theory of face, speeches were examined for expressions of *self-face* (the speaker's projection of competence, empathy, and moral authority) and *other-face* (the acknowledgment of citizens' dignity and suffering). Second, drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, each text was coded for positive politeness (POS_POL), such as inclusive and affiliative language; negative politeness (NEG_POL), including hedging and mitigation; and face-threatening acts (FTA), such as direct admissions of hardship. Third, using Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory, the analysis identified implicature and metaphor (IMPLC) as tools for indirect meaning construction, and moral positioning (MORAL_POS) as rhetorical appeals to duty, sacrifice, and national renewal.

In addition to these theory-based categories, two emergent codes were developed inductively: strategic blame deflection (BLAME_SHIFT), which attributes hardship to previous administrations or systemic failings, and solution-oriented framing (SOL_FRAME), which positions reform as a path to future benefit and collective progress. The development of these inductive codes followed a grounded approach: analysts first read all speeches in full, highlighted recurrent linguistic patterns not covered by the initial framework, and then formally defined new codes in the shared coding guide based on observed textual evidence. To ensure analytical validity and reliability, investigator triangulation was employed. Two additional discourse analysts independently applied the coding protocol to a subset of the data. Discrepancies were resolved through iterative consensus-building sessions, which led to the refinement of code definitions and improved thematic clarity. Given the manageable size of the corpus, manual coding was conducted using a structured matrix that enabled cross-comparison of pragmatic strategies across excerpts.

The codes outlined in Appendix A were systematically applied to all 17 excerpts. Each excerpt was analyzed line by line, with multiple codes applied where relevant. While frequency counts were used descriptively to highlight dominant patterns across thematic categories (e.g., justification, empathy, leadership), the primary emphasis was placed on interpretive depth and pragmatic function rather than quantification. As the dataset consists entirely of publicly available presidential speeches, no formal ethical approval was required. All sources are properly cited, and the analysis adheres to accepted standards of academic integrity. The study is limited to scripted, elite political discourse and does not address audience reception or unscripted interactional contexts.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's national speeches between 2023 and 2025 reveals three dominant pragmatic functions: (1) constructing empathy and solidarity, (2) justifying economic hardship and reform, and (3) managing presidential and public face. Each theme is supported by recurrent politeness strategies, inferential framing, and moral positioning. Table 1 below summarizes the distribution of pragmatic strategies across the thematic functions. Illustrative excerpts follow, with interpretive commentary grounded in the study's theoretical framework.

Table 2. Distribution of Pragmatic Strategies Across Thematic Functions

Strategy Code	Description	Empathy and Solidarity	Justification of Hardship	Face Management
POS_POL	Inclusive or affiliative language	4	3	5
NEG_POL	Hedging, mitigation, deferential phrasing	2	1	1
FTA	Direct acknowledgment of hardship	2	3	0
IMPLC	Metaphor, presupposition, indirect inference	4	5	3
MORAL_POS	Appeals to virtue, sacrifice, patriotic duty	3	4	5
SELF_FACE	Competence, empathy, or democratic self-projection	2	2	6
OTHER_FACE	Public reassurance or dignity-affirming expressions	5	2	5

Strategy Code	Description	Empathy and Solidarity	Justification of Hardship	Face Management
BLAME_SHIFT	Attributing hardship to past administrations/systemic issues	1	4	3
SOL_FRAME	Framing reform outcomes as beneficial or redemptive	1	5	4

Note. Strategies do co-occur within a single excerpt; totals do not sum to the number of excerpts per theme.

As Table 2 shows, positive politeness (POS_POL), moral positioning (MORAL_POS), and metaphorical/inferential framing (IMPLC) appear consistently across all three thematic functions. This distribution suggests that Tinubu's rhetorical approach is oriented toward building emotional solidarity, justifying reform through morally resonant language, and guiding interpretation through indirect but meaningful cues. Notably, strategic blame deflection (BLAME_SHIFT) and solution framing (SOL_FRAME) are most prevalent in the justification and face management categories, indicating a preference for recontextualizing hardship as inherited and reform as redemptive. Meanwhile, self-face and other-face management strategies appear especially prominently in leadership discourse, reflecting the dual need to preserve presidential credibility while affirming public dignity. These patterns provide a preliminary map for the detailed thematic analyses that follow.

Constructing Empathy and National Solidarity through Facework

In the context of reform-induced hardship, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's rhetoric reveals a clear emphasis on constructing solidarity and shared endurance through pragmatic facework. As shown in Table 2, the empathy and solidarity excerpts are characterized by a high frequency of face-saving acts and positive politeness strategies. These pragmatic moves reflect a deliberate rhetorical effort to affirm public dignity, foster emotional alignment, and construct a shared sense of national endurance amid economic hardship. This emphasis is evident in Extracts 1-5.

Extract 1

"I am attuned to the hardships that have come. I have a heart that feels and eyes that see. I wish to explain to you why we must endure this trying moment." (63rd Independence Day, 2023)

Extract 2

"I am deeply aware of the struggles many of you face in these challenging times. Our administration knows that many of you struggle.... I want to assure you that your voices are heard." (64th Independence Day, 2024)

In Extract 1, the speaker combines metaphorical embodiment ("a heart that feels and eyes that see") with hedged explanation ("I wish to explain") to present himself as both emotionally aware and respectful of public autonomy. The phrase "we must endure" functions as a positive politeness strategy that reduces social distance, while the hedging signals negative politeness, minimizing the imposition of justification. This aligns with Goffman's (1967) theory of face, as the speaker simultaneously affirms his moral identity (self-face) and attends to public distress (other-face), thereby maintaining relational harmony during a period of national vulnerability. The attribution of sensory perception ("heart... feels, eyes.... see") humanizes the presidency, enabling audiences to infer emotional attunement with minimal processing effort. From a relevance-theoretic

perspective, this low-cost inference enhances the communicative payoff by framing economic hardship as both visible and personally acknowledged. This interpersonal strategy is reinforced in Extract 2 through the use of inclusive reference (“many of you”) and a face-saving act (“your voices are heard”). The utterance respects the audience’s negative face by implicitly validating their right to express dissatisfaction without sanction. The tone is emotionally responsive rather than defensive, positioning the presidency as engaged and receptive. Although the repetition of “struggle” accentuates the intensity of public suffering, the emphasis on listening reframes the government as attentive rather than detached.

Extract 3: *“As we continue to reform the economy, I shall always listen to the people and will never turn my back on you.”* (Democracy Day Broadcast, 2024)

Extract 4: *“As your President, I assure you that we are committed to finding sustainable solutions to alleviate the suffering of our citizens.”* (Democracy Day Speech, 2025)

Extract 5: *“Call me names, call me whatever you will, and I will still call upon democracy to defend your right to do so.”* (Democracy Day Speech, 2025)

The declaration in Extract 3 blends positive politeness (through personal pledging) with negative politeness (via assurance of continued support). The metaphor “never turn my back” humanizes the presidency, signaling loyalty and emotional proximity. The modal construction “shall always” projects consistency and dependability—traits crucial during national uncertainty. This utterance sustains both self-face and other-face: the speaker portrays himself as responsive and morally committed, while affirming the public’s worthiness of care and attention. Extract 4 extends this strategy of compassionate leadership. Tinubu combines self-face enhancement (through competence and empathy) with solution-oriented framing. His use of positive politeness—solidarity (“our citizens”), reassurance (“sustainable solutions”), and empathy (“alleviate the suffering”)—strengthens the impression of collective concern. The phrase “sustainable solutions” functions as a mitigating frame, redirecting attention from immediate discomfort to long-term relief, reinforcing the president’s dual role as decision-maker and national partner. In Extract 5, this posture shifts into a calculated face-threatening act—an invitation to critique, framed as a democratic value. The repetition of “call me...” dramatizes vulnerability while simultaneously asserting moral resilience. Although it opens the speaker to criticism, the phrase is reframed within a legitimating discourse of freedom of expression.

Pragmatic Justifications and Mitigation of Poverty and Hardship

Faced with widespread economic hardship, President Tinubu’s national addresses adopt a rhetorically layered strategy to justify suffering, shift responsibility, and reframe poverty not as policy failure but as a necessary transitional phase in Nigeria’s development. As shown in Table 2, the justification-themed excerpts are characterized by a high frequency of metaphor and implicature (IMPLC), moral positioning (MORAL_POS), and emergent strategies such as strategic blame deflection (BLAME_SHIFT) and solution-oriented framing (SOL_FRAME). These pragmatic tools mitigate the face-threatening nature of hardship discourse by presenting suffering as temporary, inherited, and ultimately redemptive.

Extract 6

“Reform may be painful, but it is what greatness and the future require..... There is no joy in seeing the people of this nation shoulder burdens that should have been shed years ago. I wish today’s difficulties did not exist. But we must endure if we are to reach the good side of our future.” (63rd Independence Day, 2023, para. 11)

Extract 7

“Once again, I plead for your patience... we are beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel... we must choose between two paths: reform... or collapse.” (64th Independence Day, 2024)

Extract 8

“I understand the economic difficulties we face as a nation. Our economy has been in desperate need of reform for decades. It has been unbalanced because it was built on the flawed foundation of over-reliance on revenues from the exploitation of oil.” (Democracy Day Broadcast, 2024)

In excerpt 6, the president constructs a redemptive narrative around national suffering, combining moral positioning with strategic facework. The concessive opener (“Reform may be painful”) acknowledges hardship, but this is immediately neutralized by a teleological justification—“greatness and the future require.” The future-conditional clause “if we are to reach...” introduces a temporal shift that frames sacrifice as redemptive. Metaphorical phrase such as “shoulder burdens” moralizes suffering and invite audiences to infer that present discomfort forms part of a virtuous national trajectory. Additionally, the presuppositional structure of “the good side of our future” presupposes that there is a “bad side” in the present, framing current hardship as a stage to be passed through. Meanwhile, the speaker employs both positive politeness (“we must endure”) to emphasize solidarity, and negative politeness (“I wish...”) to hedge the imposition, thus attending to both self- and other-face. Rather than presenting reform as coercive, the speaker casts it as a shared trial, morally necessary and collectively borne.

This rhetorical blend continues in Extract 7 through a constructed binary. The plea for patience functions as a positive politeness move, reaffirming alignment with the audience. The metaphor “light at the end of the tunnel” delivers a hopeful implicature, prompting the audience to infer a nearing resolution. Because the metaphor is highly familiar, it requires minimal cognitive processing while delivering emotional reassurance—achieving optimal relevance. The stark binary between “reform” and “collapse” simplifies the policy landscape, reducing interpretive ambiguity and framing public choice in moral rather than political terms. Rather than exerting direct coercion, the speaker guides the audience to infer that endurance is not only rational but ethically imperative. This discursive narrowing mitigates resistance by presenting hardship as both inevitable and redemptive. Similarly, Extract 8 blends emotional recognition with historical displacement. The use of “we” enacts positive politeness, framing hardship as a shared burden rather than a top-down imposition. More critically, the economic condition is cast as structurally inherited: the speaker attributes dysfunction to an entrenched “flawed foundation,” invoking what this study codes as *strategic blame deflection*. This technique shifts responsibility from present leadership to prior systemic failures, thereby protecting the speaker’s institutional face. The metaphor “flawed foundation” serves as a compressed explanatory frame, allowing audiences to infer systemic causes for economic hardship without explicit blame attribution. The use of the definite article “the” further suggests shared understanding or ideological consensus. Additionally, the passive construction “it was built on... for decades” removes agentive responsibility, subtly deflecting blame from the current administration. This positions hardship as a corrective response to historical missteps rather than evidence of contemporary misgovernance.

Extract 9

“If we do not correct the fiscal misalignments... our country will face an uncertain future and the peril of unimaginable consequences.” (64th Independence Day, 2024)

Extract 10

There is no doubt the reforms have occasioned hardship. Yet, they are necessary repairs required to fix the economy so that everyone has access to economic opportunity, fair pay, and compensation..." (Democracy Day Broadcast, 2024)

Extract 11

"We introduced fundamental reforms to correct structural imbalances... We must work even harder to translate broad macroeconomic gains into tangible improvements in the lives of ordinary Nigerians... The dreams our founding fathers envisaged are still a work in progress... Everyday, we put our hands on the plough." (Democracy Day Speech, 2025)

Extracts 9 to 11 sustain this pragmatic alignment. In Extract 9, technocratic terms such as "fiscal misalignments" reinforce blame deflection, while the fear appeal in "unimaginable consequences" elevates reform from policy preference to existential necessity. The speaker also appeals to international parallels ("this concern is shared globally"), saving face by placing Nigeria's struggle within a broader economic narrative, thus diffusing national culpability. This unusually direct admission of hardship ("there is no doubt...") in extract 10 represents a rare *face-threatening act*. However, it is immediately reframed through the metaphor of "necessary repairs," which implies constructive intent rather than policy failure. The shift from harm to healing: audiences are invited to process hardship as a remedial phase with deferred rewards. The follow-up list of tangible outcomes—"economic opportunity, fair pay..."—strengthens the justification by offering material incentives, thereby anchoring the abstract promise of reform in concrete public benefit. These material incentives function as positive politeness strategies to maintain public rapport. In a similar way, extract 11 blends historical narrative with metaphorical embodiment. "Structural imbalances" again reflects blame deflection by attributing current hardship to entrenched dysfunctions. The metaphor "hands on the plough" draws on agricultural imagery to position both leadership and citizens as co-laborers in a shared democratic project. The metaphor "work in progress" situates reform within a patriotic arc, redefining economic difficulty as noble toil and unfinished national aspiration. This exemplifies *moral positioning*, where difficulty is redefined as duty.

Across these excerpts, President Tinubu consistently employs a coherent blend of metaphor, moral appeal, solidarity moves, and strategic blame deflection to legitimize economic suffering. His rhetoric does not simply explain hardship but re-symbolizes it as a civic rite: a shared national undertaking that binds both leadership and citizens in the pursuit of collective progress. Positive and negative politeness strategies, inferential framing, and moral positioning operate interdependently to construct reform as just, inevitable, and socially binding.

Managing Presidential and Public Face in Times of Economic Reform

President Tinubu's national addresses reveal a carefully calibrated rhetorical strategy designed to preserve his presidential self-face while affirming the dignity and agency of the Nigerian public. Faced with subsidy removal, economic strain, and rising public dissatisfaction, Tinubu constructs a leadership persona grounded in empathy, moral responsibility, and collective resolve. As indicated in Table 2, leadership-focused excerpts feature recurrent use of positive politeness, face-saving acts, moral appeals, and metaphorical framing.

Extract 12

"My government is doing all that it can to ease the load. I will now outline the path we are taking to relieve the stress on our families and households.... Those who sought to perpetuate the fuel subsidy and broken foreign exchange policies are people who would build their family mansion in the middle of a swamp. I am different. I am not a man to erect our national home on a foundation of mud. To endure, our home must be constructed on safe and pleasant ground." (63rd Independence Day, 2023, para. 9)

Extract 13

“Fellow compatriots, the journey ahead will not be navigated by fear or hatred. We can only achieve our better Nigeria through courage, compassion and commitment as one indivisible unit... I promise that I shall remain committed and serve faithfully. I also invite all to join this enterprise to remake our beloved nation into its better self. We can do it. We must do it. We shall do it!!!!” (63rd Independence Day, 2023, para. 29)

Extract 12 exemplifies this approach through contrastive moral positioning. Tinubu differentiates his leadership from unnamed predecessors using metaphors like “mansion in a swamp,” “foundation built on mud,” and “national home” to evoke instability and corruption while positioning himself as a principled reformer. These metaphorical presuppositions delegitimize past leadership without explicit naming, while the indexical contrast “I am different” anchors his moral self-face. The hypothetical construction “would build” employs conditional modality to frame criticism as abstract rather than directly accusatory. Inclusive language such as “ease the load” and “relieve the stress” function as face-saving strategies to manage both self- and other-face by projecting the government as attentive and morally responsive to citizens’ hardship. Similarly, Extract 13 employs affirmational rhetoric (“fellow compatriots”) and collective pronouns (“we,” “our”) to frame reform as a shared national mission. The imperative “join this enterprise” is mitigated by emotionally resonant terms like “courage,” “compassion,” and “commitment,” softening its directive force through affiliative framing. The modal escalation from “can” to “must” to “shall” constructs a performative speech act, reinforcing urgency while preserving solidarity.

Extract 14

“We are Nigerians—resilient and tenacious... The road ahead may be challenging, but we will forge a path toward a brighter future with your support.” (64th Independence Day, 2024)

Extract 15

“In this spirit, we have negotiated in good faith and with open arms with organized labour on a new national minimum wage. We shall soon send an executive bill to the National Assembly In the face of labour’s call for a national strike, we did not seek to oppress or crack down on the workers as a dictatorial government would have done. We chose the path of cooperation over conflict. No one was arrested or threatened. Instead, the labour leadership was invited to break bread and negotiate toward a good-faith resolution.” (Democracy Day Broadcast, 2024)

Extract 16

“I take on this vital task without fear or favour and I commit myself to this work until we have built a Nigeria where no man is oppressed... In the end, our national greatness will not be achieved by travelling the easy road. It can only be achieved by taking the right one... The initial rays of a brighter tomorrow now appear on the early horizon. An abundant future... lies within our reach.” (Democracy Day, 2024)

Extract 17

“Our nation is not perfect, but it is strong. Our democracy is not invincible, but it is alive... Our achievements are not the work of one man. They are the result of a collective effort to make possible the Nigerian Dream.” (Democracy Day, 2025)

This pragmatic pattern continues across Extracts 14–17. Extract 14 reinforces other-face work through repeated inclusive pronouns (“we”) and affirmational descriptors (“resilient,” “tenacious”), aligning public identity with endurance and collective pride. Metaphors such as “forge a path” and “brighter future” subtly frame reform as morally purposeful without direct imposition. In addressing labor tensions, Tinubu emphasizes non-coercion and democratic negotiation: “No one was arrested or threatened.” Here, face-saving strategies merge with blame deflection, framing leadership restraint as intentional and lawful. Metaphors such as “the easy road” versus “the right one” (Extract 16) and “the Nigerian Dream” (Extract 17) activate familiar cultural schemas, inviting

optimistic inference without overstating policy details. Rather than over-relying on heroic self-portrayal, Tinubu frequently downplays personal agency in favor of collective achievement, as seen in references to “our achievements” and “our democracy is alive,” balancing self-face modesty with other-face affirmation of citizen participation. This humility posture reinforces audience alignment and diffuses singular accountability.

Across these leadership-themed excerpts, President Tinubu pragmatically manages both presidential and public face through a balance of moral appeals, metaphorical framing, and inclusive rhetoric. His discourse legitimizes reform while simultaneously securing trust and constructing an ethos of participatory leadership suited to Nigeria’s post-reform context.

A Pragmatic Model of Legitimation in Reform-Era Political Discourse

Drawing from speech patterns in President Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s national addresses, this study proposes a tentative triadic framework, illustrated in Figure 1, that explains how political legitimacy is pragmatically negotiated through language during periods of economic reform. Rather than positioning this as a formal or universally generalizable theory, the framework serves as a heuristic tool for understanding how presidential rhetoric simultaneously manages emotion, inference, and authority to negotiate public trust under conditions of public strain.

The interpretive framework of the legitimation-as-performance model comprises three interrelated pragmatic functions: relational calibration, inferential framing, and discursive buffering. Relational calibration refers to the strategic management of social distance and emotional rapport through politeness strategies. Drawing on Goffman’s (1967) concept of face and Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, the president employs affiliative cues—such as inclusive pronouns (“we”), empathic phrasing (“your voices are heard”), and reassurance—to project both competence and emotional sensitivity. Inferential framing, grounded in Sperber and Wilson’s (1995) Relevance Theory, involves the use of metaphor, presupposition, and implicature to encourage audiences to derive moral and ideological meaning with minimal processing effort. Expressions like “light at the end of the tunnel” or “a home built on solid ground” function as cognitive shortcuts that frame reform as necessary and redemptive.

Finally, discursive buffering includes face-saving and blame-mitigating moves such as hedging, strategic ambiguity, and solution-oriented framing. References to “flawed foundations” or “structural imbalances” recontextualize hardship as inherited, while appeals to “sustainable solutions” preserve a forward-looking ethos. Together, these three dimensions explain how legitimacy is pragmatically performed under conditions of democratic fragility and public mistrust. These components are functionally distinct but pragmatically interdependent. They work in tandem to transform public suffering into a narrative of collective endurance and moral necessity, allowing the presidency to symbolically perform legitimacy rather than merely claim it.

Legitimacy performance, as conceptualized here, emerges at the intersection of relational calibration, inferential framing, and discursive buffering—particularly in contexts marked by economic hardship and declining public trust. This framework is exploratory and context-specific but may serve as a useful heuristic for cross-contextual analysis of presidential rhetoric in other postcolonial or economically strained democracies. Future studies might apply or refine this schema in comparative analyses or through reception-oriented research that investigates how different audiences interpret and evaluate these rhetorical strategies. The model thus offers a new lens for understanding language as both a vehicle of political communication and a tool of pragmatic governance.

Discussion

This study examined the pragmatic strategies through which President Bola Ahmed Tinubu constructs legitimacy, manages public sentiment, and reframes economic suffering during Nigeria's reform period (2023–2025). Grounded in the Legitimation-as-Performance Model proposed in this study, the findings show how presidential rhetoric performs legitimacy through a coordinated interplay of three pragmatic functions: relational calibration, inferential framing, and discursive buffering. These functions not only align with the study's theoretical anchors—Goffman's (1967) theory of face, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, and Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory—but also directly address the three research questions guiding the analysis.

Relational calibration refers to how the president uses politeness strategies to manage emotional proximity and reinforce solidarity with citizens—answering RQ1 (What facework strategies does Tinubu employ?) and RQ3 (How does he attend to citizens' face needs?). Throughout the corpus, positive politeness features prominently. Inclusive pronouns ("we"), affiliative language ("your voices are heard"), and moral descriptors ("resilient," "tenacious") serve to minimize social distance and enhance other-face. This confirms Goffman's (1967) claim that face is a relationally negotiated construct, even within monologic, institutional discourse. For instance, phrases like "we must endure this together" function not only as solidarity appeals but also as moral alignment cues. Such expressions reflect Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategies, aligning speaker and audience as co-sufferers and co-actors in national development. At the same time, negative politeness markers—such as hedging ("I wish today's difficulties did not exist")—help to mitigate the imposition inherent in discussing economic hardship. These dual strategies allow the president to maintain a balance between self-face projection (competence, empathy, resolve) and other-face attention (reassurance, moral affirmation), particularly important in fragile public contexts.

The second component, inferential framing, highlights how the president leverages indirectness to construct meaning and manage ideological positioning—addressing RQ2 (How are hardship and reform pragmatically justified?). Drawing on Sperber and Wilson's (1995) Relevance Theory, this study found that inferentially rich metaphors such as "light at the end of the tunnel," "foundation for the future," and "a home built on solid ground" were repeatedly used to reduce processing effort while maximizing interpretive impact. Rather than explaining reform policies in technical detail, Tinubu's rhetoric prompts citizens to draw morally charged inferences: suffering is cast as temporary, hardship becomes redemptive, and reform appears inevitable. This technique resonates with Ekundayo's (2021) notion of "constructive ambiguity," extended here by illustrating how metaphors function as ideological presuppositions rather than neutral imagery. These metaphorical frames also activate high-context cultural schemas—such as the trope of national rebirth or the metaphor of journey—to render hardship narratively coherent and morally acceptable. Thus, inferential framing serves two key pragmatic goals: it protects face by avoiding blunt declarations of pain, and it performs legitimacy by aligning government action with a broader teleological arc of national progress.

The third pillar, discursive buffering, captures how Tinubu employs pragmatic strategies to mitigate blame, manage dissent, and sustain institutional credibility under pressure. This component integrates insights from both face theory and politeness theory while extending them through emergent pragmatic codes identified in this study. Strategic blame deflection appears frequently in references to "flawed foundations," "structural misalignments," and "a legacy of dysfunction." These phrases indirectly attribute economic hardship to past administrations or systemic decay without overtly blaming specific actors. By displacing blame, such utterances serve both self-face protection and

institutional face enhancement. Simultaneously, “solution-oriented framing” (e.g., “sustainable solutions,” “a better future”) reinforces the idea that current suffering is purposeful and necessary—an inferential cue that softens policy reception and encourages civic patience. This dimension also includes face-threatening acts (FTAs), such as direct acknowledgments of public suffering. However, these are often strategically hedged or embedded in optimistic contexts, confirming Brown and Levinson’s (1987) insight that even FTAs can be reframed through politeness. For example, the line “I wish today’s difficulties did not exist, but we must endure...” juxtaposes acknowledgment with moral uplift, turning complaint into duty. Collectively, discursive buffering reflects the president’s attempt to perform leadership as both responsive and resolute—a stance that preserves legitimacy without conceding culpability. It also aligns with Goffman’s (1967) insight that face is institutionally anchored and contextually fluid, requiring constant maintenance during crisis.

Taken together, the three components of the model function not in isolation but as interdependent layers of pragmatic strategy. Relational calibration builds emotional alignment, inferential framing guides interpretation, and discursive buffering sustains control over narrative and blame. This synergy enables the symbolic performance of legitimacy—a communicative act that goes beyond policy justification to constitute a form of pragmatic governance. Unlike models that emphasize populist appeal or elite persuasion in isolation (e.g., Opeibi, 2009; Taiwo, 2018), the Legitimation-as-Performance Model shows how political actors dynamically integrate face negotiation and inferential strategy to transform dissent into patience and crisis into opportunity. This model is especially relevant for reform-era democracies where public trust is precarious, and leaders must continuously reassert authority without alienating the governed.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that during periods of economic reform and public strain, presidential rhetoric operates not merely to inform or persuade, but to pragmatically perform legitimacy. Drawing on facework, politeness strategies, and inferential pragmatics, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu’s national addresses construct economic hardship as a morally justified, collectively borne process—recasting suffering as civic duty rather than state failure. The study’s central contribution is the development of the Legitimation-as-Performance Model, a triadic framework that synthesizes relational calibration, inferential framing, and discursive buffering to explain how political actors in fragile or transitional democracies negotiate trust, accountability, and authority through language. This model advances the field of political pragmatics by offering a cohesive lens through which legitimacy can be analyzed not as a static condition, but as a dynamic, communicatively enacted performance.

Beyond its theoretical innovation, the study carries important implications for political communication in the Global South. It highlights how leaders can tactically manage public sentiment during times of uncertainty, and how rhetorical strategies may soften dissent, shape public patience, and deflect blame. Practically, these insights may inform the work of political speechwriters, media analysts, and civic educators who seek to foster public engagement without deepening alienation. Future research could expand this framework through reception-oriented studies including focus groups, social media discourse, or media reactions to examine how different audiences interpret or resist face-sensitive rhetorical strategies. Comparative applications of the model across postcolonial democracies would also help test its analytical robustness and enhance our understanding of how language mediates governance under pressure.

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