

## Comparative Analysis of Speech Acts and Persuasive Strategies in Buhari-Atiku Tweets during Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Election Campaign

Zubairu Malah

Department of English and Literary Studies, Yobe State University, Damaturu

### Abstract:

During Nigeria's 2019 elections, President Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar were two dominant presidential candidates. The duo displayed high intensity of campaign on X (Twitter), which attracted multidisciplinary attention. However, despite the appreciable amount of research on Buhari-Atiku campaign rhetoric, their use of Speech Acts for persuasion appears unexplored. This paper identifies the major speech acts in Buhari-Atiku campaign tweets, and examines how the speech acts are utilised to construct persuasion. The analysis applied Searle's (1979) Speech Acts and Teun van Dijk's (2006, 2011) Rhetorical Discursive Strategies. The data comprised 140 campaign tweets from the official Twitter handles of Buhari and Atiku, published from October, 2018 to February, 2019. The results reveal that while assertives are the most preponderant speech acts in both Buhari (61%) and Atiku (43%) tweets, each of the contestants utilised these speech acts differently to construct persuasion in ways that support his agenda. Buhari's assertives are mostly for claiming achievements in the last four years; Atiku's assertives are mostly for countering Buhari's claims and emphasising his failures. Secondly, while Buhari employs commissives (15%) to express his commitment to keep reforming Nigeria and take her to the next level of prosperity and progress, Atiku deploys directives (27%) to urge Nigerians to support him and his intelligent plans for getting Nigeria working again. The study concludes that assertives play key roles in constructing campaign persuasion on Twitter by Nigerian presidential contenders.

**Keywords:** Speech acts; campaign rhetoric; discursive strategies; Nigeria's 2019 presidential elections; political persuasion; Twitter;

### Introduction

Language has been the most strategic weapon in the armoury of political persuaders. As modern politics is becoming more and more discursive, politicians continue to utilise language as a vital instrument for constructing persuasion (Charteris-Black, 2009; Flanagin & Metzger, 2017). *Political persuasion*, according to Charteris-Black (2011), Perloff (2010) and Perloff (2013), is about political actors' attempts to influence their audience by designing their discourse to: (a) convey credible image of themselves (ethos), (b) present rational and cogent political arguments in support of their positions/proposals (logos), (c) address the audience's key interests and concerns, (d) trigger appropriate emotions (pathos), and (e) create frames through which the audience would view, understand, and interpret political situations and actions (framing). In a similar submission, Reisigl (2008, p. 96) argues that "The crucial aims of political actors doing politics are to assert themselves against opponents, to gain followers, and to persuade addresses to adopt a promoted political opinion".

As a result of this centrality of language in political persuasion, linguistic resources have remained a major focus of research on political discourse. Researchers have developed interest in how political actors utilise these resources in ways that construct persuasion. Consequently, studies

have revealed how resources such as *metadiscourse* (Albalat-Mascarell & Carrió-Pastor, 2019; Ho, 2016), *lexical cohesion* (Klebanov, et. al., 2008; Malah, 2021), *metaphors* (Charteris-Black, 2009; Malah & Taiwo, 2020; Musolff, 2004; Semino, 2008), and *speech acts* (Abuya, 2012; Ayeomoni & Akinkuolere, 2012; Boakye, 2014; Hassan et al., 2025; Malah et al., 2025a; Malah et al., 2025b; Reflinaldi, 2024) are vital for political persuasion. The literature establishes that these resources are persuasively utilised by political powers in their speeches to project credible image, move audience emotionally, present logical grounds in support of their viewpoints, assert their authority, establish ideologies, legitimise themselves and their ideas/actions, delegitimise their opponents and their ideas/actions, in attempts to push their political agendas.

Specifically, as contemporary politicians are increasingly adopting social media for political interactions (Bamigbade & Dalha, 2020; Howard, 2006; Opeibi et al. 2017; Perloff, 2014), speech acts have been shown to be particularly effective for constructing political persuasion on Twitter (X) (Elliott-Maksymowicz et al., 2021). Twitter has become a very popular political platform because it enables candidates to have a real-time and large-scale connection with electorate, engage with them to develop closer and more direct relationship, promote themselves, attack opponents, garner support, and influence media coverage (Kreiss, 2016; Parmelee, 2014). Studies have found how tweeting candidates employ speech acts to construct persuasion by conveying credible image of themselves (Natsheh & Atawneh, 2021; Ramanatan et al., 2020), boosting their followers' confidence and hope (Adawiyah et al. 2020; Marzuq et al., 2024), presenting themselves positively and their opponents negatively (Natsheh, 2019; Malah et al., 2025a), and even inciting violence (AlBzour, 2022).

However, despite the tremendous advances made in analysing persuasive speech acts in political tweets, the literature appears to suggest that the knowledge gained is still far from being comprehensive. Little is known about African politicians' persuasive utilisation of speech acts on Twitter, as previous research seems to have concentrated on US Presidents, especially Trump, and a few Asian leaders from Malaysia, India and Indonesia, when political tweeting has become a global phenomenon. There is the need to extend the current state of knowledge by exploring politicians of other continents. A good example is how Nigeria's President Buhari and his challenger Atiku Abubakar made extensive use of X (Twitter) for campaign during the 2019 general elections, but, unfortunately, little is known about their utilization of speech acts for persuasion. Hence, the current study endeavours to bridge these gaps in research by investigating the Buhari-Atiku use of speech acts for persuasion in their campaign rhetoric on Twitter during this election. Thus, the study sets out to address the following objectives:

- i) To identify the dominant speech acts in the campaign tweets of President Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar during the 2019 elections in Nigeria;
- ii) To examine and compare how these speech acts are utilised by the contenders to construct persuasion in the tweets.

### **Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Election Campaign and Twitter**

Nigeria's 2019 election saw the most intense campaign rhetoric in the country's history (Sule, 2019; Sule et al., 2020). The campaign was characterized by heated debates, accusations and counter-accusations, propaganda, claims and counter-claims like never before, and this was seen

especially between President Muhammadu Buhari of All Progressives Congress (APC) and his challenger Atiku Abubakar of People's Democratic Party (PDP) (Bamigbade & Dalha, 2020; Ojukwu et al., 2019). These two were the most popular candidates of the two major political parties at the time of this election. Buhari was the incumbent President seeking re-election, and Atiku was seeking to take back power to his party, which was defeated by Buhari in 2015 after 16 years in power.

Moreover, this election came at the peak of social media use for political interaction in the country (Bamigbade & Dalha, 2020; Bello et al., 2019). Hence, it also saw the most phenomenal utilisation of X for campaigning (Momoh, 2019; Olowokere & Audu-Bako, 2019). Consequently, the Buhari-Atiku campaign rhetoric on X attracted scholarly attention from different disciplines. Studies discovered that the two utilised their tweets to *interact with voters* to build relationship, *persuade voters* to vote in their favour, *build their agenda*, and *shape public opinion* (Ahmad et al., 2020; Auwal et al., 2020; Kadijat et al., 2020; Mano, 2020; Opeibi, 2019). It was also found how sentiments expressed by Nigerian twitizens in response to Buhari-Atiku Twitter rhetoric correlated positively with the final election results, how twitizens' expressed sentiments predicted the electoral outcomes (Bello et al., 2019; Fagbola & Thakur, 2019).

Therefore, as far as the literature shows, despite the intensity of persuasion displayed by Buhari and Atiku in their campaign tweeting during this election, their utilization of *speech acts* for persuasion still remains largely unexplored. There is compelling need to broaden the literature by analysing how they harnessed *speech acts* to support their persuasive intentions. Thus, this study endeavours to address this need.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on the Speech Acts theory. This theory was founded by Austin in his paper *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In this theory, Austin argues that language use is like performing physical actions. He adds that based on the prevailing circumstances and the intentions of the speaker or writer, utterances perform *Illocutionary Acts* (or functions) such as stating, criticizing, denying, ordering, accusing, and praising (Cutting, 2002; Flowerdew, 2013; Levinson, 1983; O'Keefe et al. 2011; Yule, 1996). Building on Austin's ideas, Searle (1976) systematized the theory by classifying the Illocutionary Acts (Speech Acts) utterances can perform, namely *Representatives*, *Directives*, *Commissives*, *Expressives*, and *Declarations*. Subsequently, speech acts have been found to be vital instruments for analysing political discourse to uncover what political actors are doing with their utterances. Studies have established that political persuaders exploit Speech Acts as rhetorical devices. Hence, the current study attempts to contribute in this direction by analysing how Nigerian presidential candidates Buhari and Atiku employed speech acts to construct persuasion in their campaign tweets of 2019 elections.

### **Review of Related Studies on Speech Acts for Political Persuasion**

Numerous studies have uncovered how political persuaders employ *speech acts* as rhetorical devices in both offline and online genres. From the analysis of offline genres such as *Campaign Speeches*, *Victory or/and Concession Speeches*, and *Inaugural Speeches*, and even *Covid-19 MCO Announcements*, many studies have reported consistent findings that the most preponderant speech acts for political persuasion include *assertives*, *commissives*, and *directives*. These studies further

observed that political figures mostly utilise these speech acts for specific rhetorical functions in their speeches. First, *assertives* are mostly exploited by political persuaders to exercise power and authority, build confidence and hope among their audiences, and project themselves and their parties positively (Abuya, 2012; Ayeomoni & Akinkuolere, 2012; Boakye, 2014; Koussouhou & Dadjo, 2016; Reflinaldi et al., 2024; Sari & Sumiati, 2023). Secondly, *commissives* are mostly used for expressing commitment and promise to carry out certain future actions that will benefit their audiences (Abuya, 2012; Hashim, 2015; Hashim, 2016; Sameer, 2017; Akram et al., 2020). Thirdly, *directives* are mostly drawn upon to urge the audience to carry out certain actions or behave in certain ways that will be good for and benefit the entire nation, and for dissuading them from engaging in certain actions or behaviours that have potentials to jeopardise the country's prosperity (Ahmed & Amir, 2021; Hashim & Hashim, 2022; Krishnan et al., 2021).

Similarly, studies exploring online genres have also established the utilization of *speech acts* for political persuasion on Twitter. Political figures of different cultures have been found to deploy categories of illocutionary forces to achieve different rhetorical functions in their tweets. But these studies have revealed significant deployment of more *expressives* than we have seen in traditional speeches, perhaps due to Twitter's limitations of 280 publishable characters that constrain tweeters to rely more on emotional appeals than logical appeals. Studies such as Natsheh (2019) and Spago et al. (2019) have found how President Trump employed speech acts to present his opponents negatively through *derogatory nicknaming* or *conventional insult* and then present himself positively. We have also seen the use of speech acts by Malaysia's Najib, India's Modi, Indonesia's Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto in ways that sought to *establish strong interpersonal relation* with their citizens (Ramanathan et al., 2020; Adawiyah et al., 2020). There was also the use of speech acts to *project ethos* on Twitter by President Trump and Nigerian presidential candidates, Buhari and Atiku (Natsheh & Atawneh, 2021, Herman, 2022; Malah et al., 2025b). Finally, studies have also discovered how Trump manipulated speech acts to incite political violence at the US Capitol (AlBzour, 2022).

Therefore, from this review, it appears arguable that speech acts have been a crucial source of prolific inquiries into political rhetoric. We have seen how researching speech acts in different political genres has uncovered how political figures often leverage on them to support their persuasive intentions. However, despite the tremendous amount of research so far, it appears that knowledge on how speech acts construct persuasion in political campaign tweets is still not comprehensive. Specifically, the literature suggests that, despite the intense persuasion exhibited on Twitter by Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari and his challenger Atiku Abubakar during the 2019 Presidential Election campaigns, their use of *speech acts* for persuasion is still under-researched. It appears that little is known on how these twittering contenders' speech acts constructed persuasion. Thus, this study endeavours to bridge some gaps in research by analysing how speech acts construct persuasion in Buhari and Atiku's tweets during the 2019 campaigns.

## Methodology

The design of this study is qualitative discourse analysis. This design is deemed appropriate because it enables the analysis of language above the level of the clause or sentence, and the analysis of how linguistic resources interact with social contexts of language use and the intentions of the language users (Jones, 2012; Paltridge, 2012). Moreover, the study draws on Pragmatics

approach (Cutting, 2002; Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983) to analyse election campaign tweets as specific genres performed by candidates with the intention of persuading voters to vote in their favour.

Furthermore, in keeping with techniques of qualitative research (see Dornyei, 2007; Matthews & Ross, 2010; Merriam, 2009), the study analyses 140 purposive samples, 70 each collected from the official Twitter handles of Buhari ([https://twitter.com/MBuhari/with\\_replies](https://twitter.com/MBuhari/with_replies)) and Atiku ([https://twitter.com/atiku/with\\_replies](https://twitter.com/atiku/with_replies)) between October, 2018 and February, 2019, which was the campaign period.

Therefore, following Dornyei (2007) and Creswell (2012), two levels of analysis are conducted to address the two objectives of the study. The first-level analysis focuses on identifying speech acts in the tweets, and it applies Searle's (1979) framework. This framework identifies five Speech Acts as: *Assertives (AST)*, *Directives (DIR)*, *Commissives (COM)*, *Expressives (EXP)* and *Declarations (DEC)*. See Table 1 below:

**Table 1:** Searle's (1979) Framework of Speech Acts

Speech Acts	Description	Examples	
<b>Assertives</b>	<p>This speech act is realised when communicators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ describe states of affairs or events;</li> <li>➤ assert propositions to be true/false;</li> <li>➤ use verbs such as affirm, state, conclude.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- asserting</li> <li>- stating</li> <li>- reporting,</li> <li>- denying</li> <li>- claiming,</li> <li>- concluding</li> <li>- describing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- insisting</li> <li>- predicting</li> <li>- boasting</li> <li>- complaining</li> </ul>
<b>Directives</b>	<p>This speech act is performed when communicators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ attempt to make their audience do something;</li> <li>➤ use verbs such as command, request, ask, challenge, beg, invite, or order.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- instructing</li> <li>- requesting</li> <li>- ordering</li> <li>- suggesting</li> <li>recommending</li> <li>- commanding</li> <li>- challenging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- questioning</li> <li>- inviting</li> <li>- advising</li> <li>-</li> <li>- forbidding</li> </ul>
<b>Commissives</b>	<p>This is realised when communicators use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ speech acts to commit themselves to some actions in the future;</li> <li>➤ verbs such as promise, pledge, swear, threat guarantee, vow, warrant, or undertake.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- promising</li> <li>- guaranteeing</li> <li>- offering</li> <li>- swearing</li> <li>- threatening</li> <li>- pledging</li> <li>- vowing</li> <li>- volunteering</li> <li>- refusing</li> </ul>	
<b>Expressives</b>	<p>This speech act is performed when communicators:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- congratulating</li> <li>- condoling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- praising</li> <li>- blaming</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ express certain attitudes about state of affairs;</li> <li>➤ use verbs such as congratulate, detest, regret, accuse, regret, deplore, apologise, thank, or appreciate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- greetings</li> <li>- thanking</li> <li>- compliments</li> <li>- leave-taking</li> <li>- apologising</li> <li>- welcoming</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- accusing</li> <li>- condemning</li> <li>- pardoning</li> </ul>
<b>Declarations</b>	<p>This speech act is realised when communicators use:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ speech acts that change the state of affairs in the world and perform an action using certain verbs such as announce, sentence, and name.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- naming</li> <li>- appointing</li> <li>- announcing</li> <li>- declaring</li> <li>- pronouncing</li> <li>- resigning</li> <li>- sentencing</li> <li>- firing from job</li> </ul>	

The second-level analysis examines how speech acts are utilised to construct persuasion in the tweets. Thus, this analysis takes into consideration: (a) the political campaign context and the persuasive intention of the twittering candidates, and (b) how entire tweets and streams of tweets function as units of persuasive discourse. Moreover, in an attempt to achieve in-depth understanding, Teun van Dijk's (2006; 2011) *Rhetorical Strategies* are applied to determine the kinds of rhetorical tactics that to construct persuasion in these tweets. See Table 2 below:

**TABLE 2:** van Dijk's (1998, 2006, 2011) Rhetorical Discursive Strategies

Negative Topics (NTO)	Agency (AGY)	Euphemism (EUP)	Metaphor (MET)
Positive self-presentation (NSG)	Topic vs. comment organisation (TvC)	Evidentiality (EVI)	National self-glorification (NSG)
Level of description (LEV)	Focus (FCS)	Illustration/Example (EXM)	Norm Expression (NEX)
Degree of Completeness (DEG)	Actor Description (ACD)	Generalisations (GEN)	Number Game (NUM)
Granularity (GRA)	Authority (AUT)	Hyperbole (HYP)	Polarisation (POL)
Implications	Burden	Irony	Populism

(IMP)	(BUR)	(IRO)	(POP)
Presuppositions (PRE)	Categorisation (CAT)	Lexicalisation (LEX)	Victimisation (VIC)
Denomination (DEN)	Comparison (CPR)	Metaphor (MET)	Argumentation (ARG)
Predication (PRD)	Counterfactuals (CTF)	National self-glorification (NSG)	Vagueness (VAG)
Modality (MOD)	Disclaimer (DLM)	Norm expression (NEX)	Consensus (CSS)

## Results and Discussion

### The dominant Speech Acts in Buhari-Atiku campaign tweets

The first-level analysis reveals that *assertives* are the most dominant speech acts in both President Buhari (61%) and Atiku Abubakar (43%) campaign tweets during the 2019 elections. They are followed by *commissives* (15%) in Buhari's tweets, and by *directives* (27%) and *expressives* (19%) in Atiku's tweets. Table 3 below presents these findings according to the two candidates:

**Table 3:** Speech acts in Buhari and Atiku Campaign Tweets

Speech Acts	Buhari		Atiku	
	Frequency	Percentag e	Frequenc y	Percentag e
1. Assertives	94	<b>61%</b>	63	<b>43%</b>
2. Directives	17	11%	39	<b>27%</b>
3. Commissive s	23	<b>15%</b>	16	10%
4. Expressives	15	10%	28	<b>19%</b>
5. Declarations	04	3%	01	1%
	153	<b>100%</b>	147	<b>100%</b>

Thus, these results mean that both Buhari and Atiku in their campaign rhetoric on Twitter similarly rely on assertions, utterances that make or counter claims, describe or report situations, assert or refute propositions, state facts, etc. Therefore, the finding of this study on preponderance of *assertives* in political persuasion corroborates those of many previous studies such as Minoo et al., (2018, President Obama's speeches), Ayeomoni and Akinkuolere (2012, President 'Yar'adua's speeches), Altikriti (2016, President Obama's speeches), Boakye (2014, Ghanaian Presidents' speeches), Koussouhou and Dadjo (2016, President Jonathan and President-elect Buhari speeches), Sameer (2017, President El-Sisi's speech), Natsheh (2019, President Trump's tweets), Faiz et al., (2020, President Trump's speeches), and Natsheh and Atawneh (2021, President

Trump's tweets). These studies similarly report the dominance of assertives in their data, which suggests that this illocutionary force remains the most effective rhetorical tool that political persuaders exploit in both offline and online genres. It enables them to intensify their opponents' weaknesses while downplaying their own weaknesses; emphasise their successes while de-emphasising those of the opposition.

Moreover, other results from the analysis indicate some differences between the two candidates. These results show that while Buhari prefers *commissives*, Atiku prefers *directives* and *expressives*. Buhari's preference for *commissives* is similar to those of Nigeria's President Jonathan as reported by Abuya (2012), Egyptian President El-Sadat as revealed by Sameer (2017), Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan as found by Akram et al., (2020), and Malaysia's and India's Prime Ministers Najib and Modi as discovered by Ramanathan et al., (2020). In addition, findings have been consistent that political persuaders harness *commissives* to make promise, express future commitments or determination, in attempts to persuade their audience.

On the other hand, Atiku's preference for *directives* is similar to those of Malaysia's Mahathir as reported by Alkhirbush (2016), President Obama as revealed by Altikriti (2016), President Biden as reported by Ahmed and Amir (2021), Leaders of Malaysia and Singapore during the MCO as found by Krishnan et. al., (2021). This consistency in findings indicates that *directives* are often used by political persuaders to construct persuasion. They are often used for *urging the audience to perform actions* that ultimately benefit the persuaders. Notably, this study observes that Buhari and Atiku's rhetoric, through these speech acts, mostly focuses on the key issues in this election: the economy, unemployment, security, corruption, poverty, infrastructure, and electoral credibility. The following section examines how they utilise these speech acts for persuasion in their tweets:

### **How the dominant Speech Acts in Buhari-Atiku tweets construct persuasion**

The second-level analysis discovers that *Buhari* and *Atiku* utilise the dominant speech acts to construct persuasion in their Twitter campaign discourse. It has been observed that, to support their rhetoric, the two contenders take advantage of different rhetorical discursive strategies such as presupposition, positive Self-presentation, negative Other-presentation, evidentiality, metaphor, hyperbole, lexicalisation, implication, agency, norm expression, number game, authority, counterfactuals, and populism. The results are interpreted, discussed, and illustrated according to the dominant speech acts as follows:

#### **Assertives**

Assertives are the speech acts communicators use to assert propositions or what they believe to be the case or not. They are used in stating, claiming, predicting, describing, concluding, denying, and reporting (Searle, 1979; Levinson, 1983). The results in **Table 3** show that both Buhari and Atiku similarly rely on *assertives* in their Twitter campaign rhetoric. However, the researcher observes that while Buhari utilises assertives to portray himself as a successful leader with huge achievements and strong moral values, Atiku draws on them to counter Buhari's claims by downplaying his achievements and discrediting his discourse. Buhari's assertives persuade the voters to 'follow' him 'to the NEXT LEVEL of prosperity and progress', while Atiku's persuade them to support him to unseat Buhari for his failure and 'get Nigeria working again'.

Let us take some examples from President Buhari's discourse. Buhari takes advantage of *assertives* to claim that his administration is succeeding in improving Nigeria's infrastructure and security. His discourse exhibits rhetorical discursive strategies of positive Self-presentation, metaphor, hyperbole, lexicalisation, evidentiality, and populism. Using these strategies, he portrays himself positively as a successful leader who has achieved a great deal in providing infrastructure and securing. His good performance is vividly depicted by the metaphor of *yielding fruit* and his hyperbole of *every part of Nigeria*. His ideas are also enhanced through lexicalisation, which enables the use of lexis such as *stable, gains, prosperity, progress, and successes*. These words, because they have positive connotations in the context of governance, convey a great deal of positive impression about the president's performance in the last four years. In addition, Buhari validates his claims through evidentiality, when he refers to the Boko Haram insurgents and the Northeast where they had had field day before his emergence as President to subdue their activities and secure many towns and villages. See example 1 below:

### Examples 1

<p><b>(01)</b> In security, the people of the Northeast are in the best position to comment on the <i>gains</i> we have made in the fight against terrorism [AST].  <b>(02)</b> They <i>lost</i> local LGAs [to] Boko Haram, schools and roads were closed, commercial flights halted, and religious festivals observed in <i>fear</i> and <i>terror</i> [AST].</p>	<p>Muhammadu Buhari, Oct 26, 2018</p>	<p><b>EVI, PSP, LEX, POP,</b></p>
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On the other hand, Atiku exploits assertives to counter Buhari's claims of success in governance. In his discourse, the challenger emphasises that the APC government have actually failed to deliver on 'whatever they promised'. He deploys the strategies of negative Other-presentation, evidentiality, lexicalisation, and hyperbole. Using negative Other-presentation, he portrays Buhari as a failed leader who cannot fulfill campaign promises. This argument is supported by evidentiality, where he refers specifically to security, job creation, economy, and fight against corruption, to highlight areas where Buhari has failed. The use of lexicalisation enables him to amplify his ideas through repetition of the words *promise* and *fail*. His assertives also support the deployment of hyperboles of 'the poorest country in the world today' and 'most insecure ... time in our history', which further exaggerates the impression conveyed on Buhari's failure in governance. See example 2 below:

### Examples 2

<p><b>(01)</b> In terms of corruption, Nigeria is worse of today than we were in 2014 [AST]. <b>(02)</b> In terms of economy, we are the poorest country in the world today [AST]. <b>(03)</b> In terms of insecurity, we are most insecure than at any other time in our history [AST]. <b>(04)</b> Let's get Nigeria Working Again [DIR].</p>	<p>Atiku Abubakar, Dec 5, 2018</p>	<p><b>NOP, EVI, HYP, LEX, IMP, NEX</b></p>
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Therefore, the two contenders similarly utilise assertives and discursive strategies in constructing persuasion. But while Buhari's discourse leverages on positive Self-presentation, Atiku's emphasises on negative Other-presentation. Buhari's discourse projects him positively as a successful leader who has improved Nigeria's security and infrastructure, but Atiku's discourse counters Buhari's claims and portrays him negatively as an incompetent and failed leader who cannot fulfill campaign promises on security, job creation, economy, and the fight against corruption.

These findings are consistent with those of Altikriti (2016), Boakye (2014), Natsheh (2019), Natsheh and Atawneh (2021), where political persuaders were found to manipulate assertives for projecting positive lights upon themselves and negative lights upon their opponents. As the findings show how Buhari employs assertives to make claims that project himself as a successful leader in order to encourage the audience's confidence and hope, the study by Altikriti also found how Obama in his speeches used assertives in a similar way by emphasizing messages of change and hope under his administration. This has also been reported by Boakye from the analysis of Ghanaian presidents' inaugural speeches, where new presidents relied on assertives to sculpt messages of positive change and hope in the new governments.

On the other hand, as the findings show how Atiku uses assertives to counter Buhari's claims and project him negatively as an incompetent and a failed leader, both Natsheh (2019) and Natsheh and Atawneh (2021) discovered how Trump took advantage of *Representatives* in his campaign tweets to present his opponents negatively. Therefore, assertives speech acts have been shown to be crucial in constructing political persuasion.

### **Directives**

Directives speech acts are used by communicators to urge their audiences to carry out certain actions. They are used to express what communicators want their audiences to do (Searle, 1976, 1979). As seen in **Table 3** above, *directives* are the second most preponderant speech acts found in Atiku's tweets (27%). The study further observes that Atiku employs *directives* to urge his audience to carry out actions that will benefit him politically, such as to join his campaign activities on Twitter or Facebook, vote Buhari out of office, and vote in his favour. Evidence from the data suggest that Atiku's most-featured *directives* are performed through the metaphorical sentence 'Let's Get Nigeria Working Again', which implies that, like a machine, Nigeria no longer works and the voters are called upon to contribute in fixing it. He always uses this command sentence to close his tweets with a kind of leave-taking call, a kind of final bond he wishes to share with the voters, a kind of final crescendo that will leave the voters in a heightened emotional state that will linger long in their minds. He uses these directives to encourage the voters that 'Let's vote Buhari out of office for his incompetence and failure'. Therefore, Atiku would begin by employing *assertives* to highlight Buhari's *incompetence* and *failure* as a tactic to discredit him, then finally hit the voters with these *directives* as a kind of 'call-to-action' strategy (**Example 3** below). To take an example, this use of directives is displayed by Atiku when he encourages the voters to not vote for President Buhari again for his incompetence and failure to create employment opportunities. While supporting his claims and preparing his audience's minds for the directives, Atiku uses numerous rhetorical strategies. In the first place, he intentionally uses the strategy of focus to draw their attention to the issue of unemployment in Nigeria. This allows him to

emphasise Buhari's negative agency of not creating jobs for Nigerians. It also allows him to use implication and present Buhari negatively as a leader who has failed to keep campaign promises. There is also the strategy of counterfactuals, where Atiku emphasises how large number of Nigerians would continue to be without jobs 'if something is not done'. He also uses *hyperbolic metaphors* of 'rocket' and 'time bomb' to depict the severity of the unemployment situation in Nigeria under Buhari.

Moreover, Atiku additionally deploys the strategies of positive-Self and populism by creating a persona of an intelligent politician who is well-versed in Nigeria's unemployment figures. His good sense manifests from his ability to employ number game (4 years, 7 million, 21 million) and evidentiality (62%), which validate his claims. It can therefore be seen that the most dominant strategy in these Atiku's tweets is negative Other-presentation, where he concentrates on presenting Buhari negatively as a failed leader, while presenting himself as a competent candidate and a better choice. He finally applies his directives to achieve the strategy of *norm expression*, which enables him to urge Nigerians what to do – vote Buhari out of office. See **Example 3** below:

### Example 3

**(01)** Over the last 4 years, the number of unemployed Nigerians has rocketed from 7 million to over 21 million, most of whom are our youths in their most productive period of their lives & many of whom have studied hard but cannot find a job [AST]. **(02)** Let's Get Nigeria Working Again [DIR].

2019

Atiku Abubakar, Feb 4,

FCS,  
EVI,  
NUM,  
HYP,  
IMP,  
NOP,  
MET,  
LEX,  
PSP,  
POP,  
NEX

Finally, this finding on Atiku's use of *directives* to construct political persuasion appears consistent with those of Alkhirbash (2016), Ahmed and Amir (2021), Krishnan et. al., (2021), and AlBzour (2022). That is, similar to Atiku's use of *directives* to urge Nigerians to vote Buhari out of office for his failure, these studies have been consistent that political persuaders utilise *directives* to urge their audiences to perform actions or behave in certain ways. Alkhirbash showed how Malaysia's Mahathir drew on *directives* in his speeches to urge the Muslim world to get united and to reject war. Ahmed and Amir discovered how President Biden in his inaugural speech deployed directives to implore the American people to follow all guidelines and regulations relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. Krishnan et. al. revealed how Malaysian and Singaporean prime ministers in their Movement Control Order (MCO) announcements relied on directives to persuade their citizens to comply with all rules and guidelines during the Covid-19 pandemic. AlBzour found that President Trump in his tweets on January 6, 2021, took advantage of directives to persuade his unconditional supporters who assaulted the Capitol. Therefore, directives speech acts have also been critical in constructing political persuasion in both offline and online genres.

## Expressives

Expressives speech acts are used by communicators to express their feelings or psychological attitudes. They are used for criticizing, accusing, blaming, deplored, praising, appreciating, apologising, or thanking (Searle, 1976, 1979; Yule, 1996). As seen in **Table 3**, *expressives* are the third most dominant speech acts in Atiku's tweets (19%). Further analysis discovers that the challenger leverages on these speech acts for accusations and attacks on President Buhari. He uses them to accuse Buhari of engaging in anti-democratic actions, violating the constitution and rule of law, suppressing freedom of speech, and planning to disenfranchise Nigerians for his political agenda.

This is seen, for example, in Atiku's delegitimising discourses on: (a) Buhari's suspension of Chief Justice Walter Onnoghen, (b) the shifting of Presidential and National Assembly Elections, and (c) the sealing of Daily Trust Newspaper offices in Abuja and Maiduguri by the Nigerian military. On each of these incidents, Atiku brings *expressives* into play to accuse the president of acting against the constitution and the rule of law, and of attacking democracy and its institutions. Consequently, each of these incidents brings about *frame contestation* between Buhari and Atiku's rhetoric. For instance, while Buhari uses *assertives* to explain and justify his decision by referring to Justice Onnoghen's corruption charges and the subsequent order of his suspension from the Code of Conduct Tribunal, Atiku relies on *expressives* to accuse that the suspension is a deliberate action by Buhari to influence the 2019 election results (see Malah et al., 2025).

Consequently, Atiku's rhetoric takes advantage of expressives to exhibit discursive strategies of negative Other-presentation, agency, negative topic, lexicalisation, populism and hyperbole. His negative-Other manifests when he projects negative image on Buhari by presenting him as a leader who takes official decisions without complying with the constitutions, laws, and based on unscrupulous intent. This strategy is further enhanced by agency, which Atiku employs to emphasise Buhari's active involvement in negative actions, a behaviour that obviously presents Buhari as a leader who breaches Our accepted norms and values. The rhetoric is further intensified by lexicalisation through the use of the negative words: *anti-democratic act* and *act of desperation*, used to refer differently to Buhari's action. Atiku then uses the word *repeatedly* in a hyperbole which exaggerates the high frequency at which the president breaches accepted norms and values. In sum, these findings suggest that Atiku's expressives are mainly used for negative Other-presentation. See example 4 below:

### Example 4

(01) This act of desperation is geared towards affecting the outcome of the 2019 Presidential elections [EXP]. (02) Indeed, it is not just the CJN that has been "suspended", it is the Nigerian Constitution that has been infracted &, in effect, suspended, under the guise of suspension of the CJN [EXP].

Atiku Abubakar, Jan 25, 2019

NOP,  
AGY,  
MET,  
LEX,  
IMP,  
NTO

Finally, similar to the findings of this study, many previous studies on speech acts for political persuasion in tweets such as Natsheh (2019), Spago et al. (2019), Adawiyah et al. (2020), and Natsheh and Atawneh (2021) reported consistent findings about the vital roles of *expressives*. However, most of these studies have also shown how political tweeters differ in their utilisation of these speech acts. For instance, while the current study has shown that Atiku in his tweets uses *expressives* for accusations in attempts to portray Buhari negatively, studies exploring Trump's tweets such as Natsheh, Spago et al., and Natsheh and Atawneh revealed that the President employed *expressives* to achieve similar aims but using different methods such as insulting, attacking image, or castigating his opponents. Adawiyah et al. discovered how Indonesian Presidential contenders Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto exploited *expressives* not for accusations or insults but for establishing interpersonal relations with their citizens. Therefore, while *expressives* are key in building political persuasion on Twitter, political persuaders manipulate them differently to accomplish different persuasive styles and approaches.

### Commissives

Commissives speech acts express the communicator's intended future action(s). In other words, communicators use *commissives* to commit themselves to certain actions in the future (Searle, 1976, 1979). As shown in **Table 3**, these speech acts are the second most dominant in President Buhari's campaign rhetoric on Twitter during the 2019 election. The study further observes that Buhari's *commissives* express commitment, determination and promise to eliminate corruption, eradicate looting and squandering of public resources, and change Nigeria's sordid situation of rampant electoral malpractice.

Let us take the issue of electoral malpractice for illustration. For decades, precisely from 2003 to 2011 when the PDP conducted three consecutive general elections in 2003, 2007, and 2011, most Nigerians raised concerns that the candidates they actually voted for were not the ones declared as winners, that election results were manipulated. This even led to nationwide post-election violence in 2011, when hundreds of lives were lost! So, Buhari's rhetoric utilises *commissives* to promise and persuade Nigerians that he will bring this to an end. He reiterates his commitment to ensure free, fair, and credible elections that Nigerians dream.

Moreover, Buhari in his discourse intentionally deploys different rhetorical strategies in attempts to persuade his audience that he will end this anti-democratic act. Key among these strategies include: focus, agency, implication, positive Self-presentation, negative Other-presentation, lexicalisation, and populism. He uses the strategy of focus to remind Nigerians about the negative agency of the PDP politicians – their active involvement in rigging elections. He also uses implication to present them negatively as bad politicians who cannot allow credible elections, and therefore who cannot be trusted. He then contrasts himself with the PDP by presenting himself positively as a leader who, despite political ambition, is determined to ensure honesty, fairness, and credibility in Nigeria's electoral processes. His ideas are also enhanced by the strategy of lexicalisation through repetition of the words *free*, *fair*, and *credible*, which enables him to create positive impression of himself. In addition, Buhari's discourse suggests the strategy of populism. It is a populism tactic when he attempts to arouse the voters' emotions of anger and distrust toward the PDP, then portrays himself positively as someone intending to correct this wrong. This tactic is aimed to boost his popularity. Example 5 below illustrates this from Buhari's tweets:

### Example 5

(01) As I welcome you into 2019, I also reiterate my many promises and declarations that the general elections will be **free, fair and credible** [COM].

Muhammadu Buhari, Jan 1, 2019

PSP,  
POP,  
LEX

Finally, the findings of this study on the use of *commissives* by President Buhari to express commitment and determination to improve electoral credibility in Nigeria in attempts to rebuild hope and persuade voters for his re-election, corroborate the findings of Abuya (2012), Ramanathan et al. (2020), and Akram et al. (2020). These studies have similarly reported utilisation of *commissives* for persuasion by political leaders. Abuya revealed how Nigeria's President Jonathan in his Inaugural Speech utilised commissives to reassure Nigerians of his commitment to fulfil campaign promises, in a strategy of building confidence and support for his new administration. Ramanathan et al. found how Najib and Modi, the Prime Ministers of Malaysia and India, used commissives in their campaign tweets to express commitment to invest their best abilities in governance, implement measures that would ease their citizens' burden, and develop economically robust nations. Akram et al. discovered how Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan utilised commissives in his Victory Speech to promise improvements and a happy future for Pakistan. In addition, the strategy of talking about a hypothetical future to obtain persuadees' support has been a common tactic among political persuaders (see, Oddo, 2011; Reyes, 2011; Malah & Taiwo, 2020; Malah, 2021; Malah et al., 2025b). Hence, the findings of the current study corroborate those of many previous studies on the use of commissives to construct political persuasion.

### Conclusion

This study concludes that the findings have a number of implications for *speech acts*, *persuasive strategies* and *political persuasion* on Twitter. First, the results indicate that both President Buhari and his challenger Atiku Abubakar similarly rely on *assertives* for building persuasion in their 2019 campaign tweets. But while Buhari's assertives mainly exhibit *positive Self-presentation* to project the image of a successful leader who deserves to be trusted again, Atiku's concentrate on *negative Other-presentation* to portray Buhari as a failed leader who need be voted out. The implication of this revelation is that, irrespective of the incumbency factor, *assertives* remain the most-effective speech acts for constructing political persuasion on Twitter.

Secondly, the results show how Buhari deploys significant *commissives* to express promise and commitment on eliminating corruption, ensuring judicious management of Nigeria's wealth and credible elections. This implies that *commissives* enable the incumbent to not only revive his positive reputation but also renew voter confidence and encourage continuous support. Thirdly, Atiku additionally deploys *directives* and *expressives*. The directives are exploited by Atiku to encourage the voters to reject Buhari for his incompetence and failure, but to vote for him for his capabilities. He puts expressives to use in accusing Buhari of being a dictator, anti-democratic, violator of the constitution, a desperate leader who disenfranchises voters for his political agenda. The implication of this is that the challenger employs more speech acts and more persuasive

strategies in his attempt to undermine Buhari's legitimacy and erode the voters' trust and confidence in him. Hence, this study has revealed that speech acts are vital tools that political candidates exploit during campaigns to construct persuasion on Twitter.

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