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“Coronavirus is Enemy, Formidable and Opportunistic”: Pragmatic Acts in Selected Covid-19 Political Speeches in Nigeria

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Abstract: Political speeches are fundamental instruments used by political office-holders to address pressing social and political issues. Existing works on Nigerian political speeches regarding COVID-19 have primarily focused on the speeches of former Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, with limited attention paid to the COVID-19 speeches of other notable Nigerian politicians. This study, therefore, examines pragmatic acts of persuasion in selected COVID-19 political speeches of Governor Babatunde Sanwo-Olu (GBS), Dr Osagie Ehanire (DOE) and Prof. Yemi Osinbajo (PYO) on COVID-19 precautionary measures. The qualitative analysis of the data was supported by the theoretical principles of Mey’s (2001) Pragmatic Acts. Data were purposively selected because of their significance to the study’s aim and objectives. While PYO’s speech was retrieved from his website on <https://www.yemiosinbajo.ng>, GBS’s speech was accessed on the Facebook page of the Ministry of Physical Planning and Urban Development (MPPUD), Lagos State. DOE’s speech was retrieved from YouTube and was later transcribed for ease of analysis. Data were subjected to pragmatic analysis. Seven practs were identified in the COVID-19 speeches: assuring, advising, pleading, reporting, informing, appreciating and stating. These practs were used to strengthen listeners’ conviction, emphasise proactiveness, show exigency, encourage alertness, create awareness, sustain moral values, and spell out the reality of COVID-19, respectively. The pragmatic resources of speech act, inference (INF), reference (REF), relevance (REL), metaphor (M), shared situation knowledge (SSK) and shared cultural knowledge (SCK) were utilised by the political actors to solicit compliance with COVID-19 precautionary measures by Nigerian citizens.

Keywords: COVID-19, pragmatic acts, persuasion, political speeches, precautionary measures, Nigerian politicians

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Zusammenfassung: Politische Reden sind ein grundlegendes Instrument politischer Amtsträger, um dringende soziale und politische Probleme anzusprechen. Bestehende Arbeiten zu nigerianischen politischen Reden in Bezug auf COVID-19 konzentrierten sich vor allem auf die Reden des ehemaligen nigerianischen Präsidenten Muhammadu Buhari und widmeten den COVID-19-Reden anderer namhafter nigerianischer Politiker nur wenig Aufmerksamkeit. Diese Studie untersucht daher pragmatische Überzeugungsarbeit in ausgewählten politischen Reden zu COVID-19 von Gouverneur Babatunde Sanwo-Olu (GBS), Dr. Osagie Ehanire (DOE) und Prof. Yemi Osinbajo (PYO) zu Vorsichtsmaßnahmen gegen COVID-19. Die qualitative Analyse der Daten wurde durch die theoretischen Prinzipien von Meys (2001) Pragmatic Acts unterstützt. Die Daten wurden aufgrund ihrer Bedeutung für die Ziele der Studie gezielt ausgewählt. Während PYOs Rede von seiner Website unter <https://www.yemiosinbajo.ng> abgerufen wurde, war die Rede von GBS auf der Facebook-Seite des Ministeriums für Raumplanung und Stadtentwicklung (MPPUD) des Bundesstaates Lagos verfügbar. Die Rede des DOE wurde von YouTube abgerufen und später zur einfacheren Analyse transkribiert. Die Daten wurden einer pragmatischen Analyse unterzogen. In den Reden zu COVID-19 wurden sieben Praktiken identifiziert: versichern, beraten, bitten, berichten, informieren, würdigen und darstellen. Diese Praktiken wurden verwendet, um die Überzeugung der Zuhörer zu stärken, Proaktivität zu betonen, Dringlichkeit zu zeigen, Wachsamkeit zu fördern, Bewusstsein zu schaffen, moralische Werte aufrechtzuerhalten und die Realität von COVID-19 darzulegen. Die pragmatischen Ressourcen Sprechakt, Schlussfolgerung (INF), Referenz (REF), Relevanz (REL), Metapher (M), geteiltes Situationswissen (SSK) und geteiltes kulturelles Wissen (SCK) wurden von den politischen Akteuren genutzt, um die nigerianischen Bürger zur Einhaltung der Vorsichtsmaßnahmen gegen COVID-19 zu bewegen.

Schlüsselwörter: COVID-19, pragmatische Handlungen, Überzeugungsarbeit, politische Reden, Vorsichtsmaßnahmen, nigerianische Politiker

Resumen: Los discursos políticos son instrumentos fundamentales que utilizan los funcionarios políticos para abordar cuestiones sociales y políticas apremiantes. Los trabajos existentes sobre los discursos políticos nigerianos relacionados con la COVID-19 se han centrado principalmente en los discursos del expresidente nigeriano Muhammadu Buhari, con una atención limitada a los discursos sobre la COVID-19 de otros políticos nigerianos notables. Por lo tanto, este estudio examina los actos pragmáticos de persuasión en discursos políticos seleccionados sobre la COVID-19 del gobernador Babatunde Sanwo-Olu (GBS), el Dr. Osagie Ehanire (DOE) y el Prof. Yemi Osinbajo (PYO) sobre las medidas de precaución frente a la COVID-19. El análisis cualitativo de los datos se basó en los principios teóricos de los Actos

Pragmáticos de Mey (2001). Los datos se seleccionaron deliberadamente debido a su importancia para el propósito y los objetivos del estudio. Mientras que el discurso de PYO se recuperó de su sitio web en <https://www.yemiosinbajo.ng>, el discurso de GBS se accedió en la página de Facebook del Ministerio de Planificación Física y Desarrollo Urbano (MPPUD), Estado de Lagos. El discurso de DOE se recuperó de YouTube y luego se transcribió para facilitar el análisis. Los datos se sometieron a un análisis pragmático. Se identificaron siete prácticas en los discursos de COVID-19: asegurar, aconsejar, suplicar, informar, apreciar y declarar. Estas prácticas se utilizaron para fortalecer la convicción de los oyentes, enfatizar la proactividad, mostrar exigencia, alentar el estado de alerta, crear conciencia, sostener valores morales y explicar la realidad de COVID-19, respectivamente. Los recursos pragmáticos de acto de habla, inferencia (INF), referencia (REF), relevancia (REL), metáfora (M), conocimiento de la situación compartida (SSK) y conocimiento cultural compartido (SCK) fueron utilizados por los actores políticos para solicitar el cumplimiento de las medidas de precaución de COVID-19 por parte de los ciudadanos nigerianos.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, actos pragmáticos, persuasión, discursos políticos, medidas de precaución, políticos nigerianos

1 Introduction

The fact that language and politics are intrinsically related cannot be overemphasised. Language is a significant tool that political office holders employ to unfurl their ideologies, philosophies, intentions, and achievements. The relationship between language and politics is further accentuated by Opeibi (2009: 4), who affirms that “language and politics, like Siamese twins, are inextricably linked”. In conducting political affairs, language has, therefore, taken the forefront among other means of communication, and this can be reflected through diverse political activities in various political forums, such as the delivery of political speeches, political manifestoes, political interviews, and so forth. Oftentimes, politicians, through their political speeches, especially via different media platforms, address political issues and unravel different political and social puzzles. These speeches are typically formal, prepared in written texts, methodical and coherent, reflecting certain stances and ideologies of these political leaders on sundry themes, and often aired to the entire populace. It is, therefore, fitting to conclude that political speeches and political affairs are intertwined. Politicians’ arguments are commonly replete with rhetorical strategies (Blumenau & Lauderdale, 2022), which are otherwise known as strategies of persuasion. Their political speeches are frequently characterised by contents that evoke persuasion; this is because the validity and acceptance of their argu-

ments are largely hinged on the strength of these persuasive elements (linguistic or paralinguistic) deployed.

Political actors thus assume the roles of rhetoricians to concretise and substantiate their arguments before the masses using various persuasive devices. These devices could be tropes, contrastive pairs, parallel structures, historical accounts, moral appeals, logical statements, politeness strategies, and so forth. Research has shown that pragmatic acts are common devices that politicians adopt in their speeches to impress, persuade and win the hearts of listeners (Osisanwo, 2017; Ugoala and Israel, 2020; Ajayi and Akinrinlola, 2021; Akano, 2022). Pragmatic act, as examined by Mey (2001), is concerned with individuals, their actions and the context of their actions. It transcends individual speech acts, that is, just doing things or performing actions with words. It goes further to address situated speech acts, that is, how participants' actions and languages are contextualised in such a way that a discourse will be appropriately interpreted and comprehended by the audience.

Since its emergence, the COVID-19 disease, also known as Coronavirus, as a result of the dire traits inherent in it, has attracted the interest of researchers from diverse fields of studies. The virus was discovered in Wuhan City in China, around December 2019 and was named Coronavirus by Chinese researchers. It is a transmissible and pathogenic viral disease caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which killed eighteen hundred and infected over seventy thousand persons within the first fifty days of its outbreak (Shereen et al., 2020). It is a dreadful disease that is capable of sending countless lives to a journey of no return in no time, if proper precautions are not taken. In other words, it is a communicable disease with a relatively high mortality rate. Since Nigeria is one of the African countries that are vulnerable to the disease owing to poor health facilities (Marbot, 2020), it becomes imperative for Nigerians to be stringent with certain precautionary measures identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to prevent the virus. Put differently, mitigation techniques like maintenance of social distancing, consistent use of nose masks and hand sanitisers, regular washing of hands before and after eating and after using the toilet, isolation of COVID-19 victims or suspected COVID-19 victims, among others, are expected to be embraced to escape the merciless attack of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Efforts have been made by different categories of people, especially medical personnel, in Nigeria to prevent and find a lasting remedy to the infectious virus. Political leaders holding sundry political positions in several societies locally and globally, using heterogeneous methods and instruments, have also joined the COVID-19 publicity team by creating awareness via various media platforms on the danger and the required safety measures to surmount the social threat. The most common instrument often employed by these political actors is political speech. In response to the swift spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria, political speeches have been

delivered by some key Nigerian political leaders to expose the populace to the gloomy reality associated with the virus. Thus, this study investigates how selected Nigerian political officeholders have helped to sensitise and persuade Nigerians towards observing COVID-19 protocols by investigating the pragmatic acts performed in their speeches. The political actors concerned are: Babajide Sanwo-Olu (Executive Governor, Lagos State, Nigeria, 2019 till date), Dr Osagie Ehanire (Former Minister of Health, Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2019–2023) and Prof. Yemi Osinbajo (Former Vice President, Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015–2023). The following research objectives guide the study: i) to identify the pragmatic acts in the selected speeches of Nigerian political leaders ii) to discuss the pragmatic resources deployed in the pragmatic acts and iii) to explicate the pragmatic functions of the pragmatic acts identified in the political speeches.

2 Problem Statement and existing Scholarly Documentations

Scholars in multifaceted disciplines worldwide have engaged the COVID-19 discourse since the outbreak of the virus in 2020. Existing scholarly engagements of the discourse have been undertaken on COVID-19 and technology (Zhao et al, 2021; Ogirima, Arulogun, & Adigun, 2022); COVID-19 and sociology (Mattheewman & Huppatz, 2020; Chahar, et al 2021; Joab-Peterside, 2021; COVID-19 and medicine (Cirrincione et al, 2020; Goner, Hasanogiu & Aktas 2020; Vetter et al, 2020; Roy, Dhillion, Habib, & Pugazhandh, 2021; Vasireddy et al, 2021); COVID -19 and education (Duraku & Hoxha, 2020; Abidoye & Abidoye, 2021; Abimbola, Ishabi, & Aramide, 2021; Anyika, Anikelechi & Thobejane, 2021) and other disciplines.

From the linguistic angle, the COVID-19 discourse has been widely researched by scholars from different linguistic dimensions. For instance, Osisanwo (2022) underscores the representational strategies, the discourse structures and discourse strategies deployed in selected newspapers in representing COVID-19 and associated participants. In a similar vein, Adeoti (2023) explores a pragmatic investigation of how meanings are interpreted in selected newspapers' coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study reveals that the Nigerian media made commendable efforts regarding the coverage of the pandemic, which has helped to create awareness among the public. To ascertain the relevance of lexical choices in communication, Sismat (2021) examines the significance of language used during the COVID-19 pandemic in influencing effective communication and concludes that word choice is essential in ensuring that COVID-19 information is understandable and relevant. From the multimodal discourse perspective, Unuabonah and Oyebo (2021) carry

out a multimodal discourse analysis of political protest in Nigerian coronavirus-related internet memes. It was found out that memes are instruments for projecting the negative representation of the Nigerian government. Exploring the COVID-19 virus from the sociolinguistic domain, Asif, Zhiyong, Iram and Nisar (2021) attempt a linguistic analysis of neologisms related to COVID-19, while Obiorah (2021) identifies the roles of the Nigerian indigenous languages in COVID-19 discourse. Furthermore, a functionalist approach was adopted by Inyima, Nwosu, and Dona-Ezenne (2022) to investigate the linguistic impact of COVID-19 discourse on the Nigerian variety of the English language on the Nairaland platform, and the result obtained from the study unveils that COVID-19 disease has significantly influenced the character of Nigerian English in manifold ways. The preceding studies appear phenomenal in that they have made significant contributions to the research on COVID-19 from diverse linguistic areas. However, studies on pragmatic acts in Nigerian COVID-19 political speeches have been sparsely examined.

It is noteworthy that scholars have extended their research strength to the analysis of divergent political speeches within and outside Nigeria in alignment with this present study. For example, studies have been conducted on the pragmatic analysis of ex-presidents', (Goodluck Jonathan and Barrack Obama) inaugural addresses (Josiah and Johnson 2012); pragmatic analysis of the victory and inaugural speeches of late Nigerian president, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (Ayeomoni and Akin-kuolere, 2012); pragmatic acts in the inaugural speeches of President Muhammadu Buhari and selected governors in Nigeria (Osisanwo, 2017; Osisanwo and Adeyemo, 2024). It is interesting to know that some intellectual linguistic investigations have set a pace for this study concerning pragmatic acts in COVID-19 speeches. Put differently, research works on pragmatic acts and the COVID-19 pandemic have been explored by linguists concerning the present study. For example, Ugoala and Israel (2020) investigate the practs in the first official speeches of presidents Muhammadu Buhari and Nana Akufo-Addo on COVID-19, adopting Mey's pragmatic acts as the theoretical anchorage. They conclude that practs, realised by the tools of shared situation knowledge, inference and reference, help to discern the thematic focus in the speeches. In a similar vein, Omotunde (2020), focusing on the relevance of pragmatics in President Muhammadu Buhari's first COVID-19 address to Nigerians on 29th March, 2020, expounds four types of meaning as reflected in the president's speech, utilising the tenets of Grice's conversational implicature, Austin's illocutionary acts and context. Furthermore, Ajayi and Akinrinlola (2021) investigate the pragma-multimodal functions of COVID-19 memes in the Nigerian context using Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts and Kress' (2010) multimodality. They found out that context plays a significant role in the sensitisation campaigns against the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Slightly similar to Ugoala and Israel (2020) is Akano (2022), who underscores the rhetoric and persuading practs in Nigeria's former president, Muhamma-

du Buhari's (PMB) broadcasts on Coronavirus, drawing insights from Aristotle's rhetoric and Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts. Akano discovers that Muhammadu Buhari's official broadcasts are laden with pragmatic acts of thanking, commending, assuring and requesting to persuade the masses towards observing the COVID-19 protocols to curtail the rapid spread of the disease. Still on PMB, Adebomi (2023), using Douglas' rhetorical pragmatics, accounts for the discourse strategies in President Muhammadu Buhari's (PMB) COVID-19 speeches. She finds out that PMB employs eight discourse strategies that fall within Aristotle's *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*, together with tropes to establish Nigerians' need to comply with COVID-19 safety measures. The summary of Akano (2022) and Adebomi (2023) is that PMB heavily relies on some linguistic and pragmatic strategies to plead for compliance with COVID-19 protocols in his COVID-19 speeches.

From the foregoing reviews, it has been confirmed that some intellectual investigations have set a pace for this study with respect to pragmatic acts in COVID-19 speeches. However, emphasis is mostly placed on the COVID-19 political speeches of former Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari. In other words, COVID-19 speeches of other Nigerian politicians like GBS, DOE and PYO have not really enjoyed substantial documented analysis. The dearth of research on these speeches has influenced the drive for the present study. Hence, this study investigates pragmatic acts in selected COVID-19 political speeches of Governor Babatunde Sanwoolu, Dr Osagie Ehanire, and Professor Yemi Osinbajo on the compliance with COVID-19 precautionary measures by Nigerian citizens to curb its spread. A systematic examination and analysis of these three speeches will not only fill the identified gap in literature but also provide more concrete information on COVID-19 persuasive discourse by broadening the readers' perspectives on the dynamics of persuasion from the lens of pragmatics, since this study captures a joint assessment of three political speeches on COVID-19.

3 Pragmatic Acts Theory

This study is anchored on Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts. Pragmatic Acts Theory (henceforth PAT) was propounded by Jacob Mey and was introduced to cater for the inadequacies of the speech act theory. As averred by Mey (2001: 214), "the speech act theory is individual-oriented rather than societal-centred". PAT, on the other hand, emphasises "the general situational prototype (pragmeme) rather than rules for individual speech acts (Osisanwo, Atoloye and Akintaro, 2024:56) in meaning construction and interpretation by participants in a discourse. This theoretical framework is adopted as the basis for the analysis of the data to investigate the pragmatic acts in the selected political speeches, thus providing readers with the interpreta-

tions of the speeches as regards the COVID-19 virus and its prevention. Additionally, the choice of PAT helps to examine the pragmatic functions of the pragmatic acts adopted in the speeches. Basically, PAT is concerned with the context of utterances, which is a determinant of what participants in a discourse can say and what they cannot say (Mey, 2001). The diagram below indicates the pragmatic act model, which explains what pragmatic act entails and, precisely, its features:

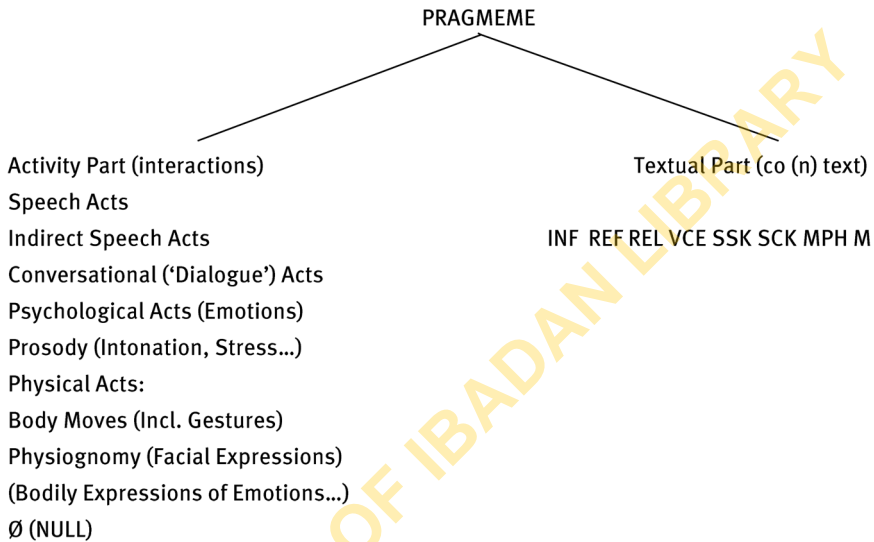


Figure 1.0: Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmeme

In the above diagram, pragmeme comprises two parts: the activity part (meant for the interactants or discussants) and the textual part (the context within which interactants or discussants operate). The combination of the features in the activity part and the textual parts produces PRACT or ALLOPRACT. The activity part houses speech acts, indirect speech acts, conversational (dialogue) acts, psychological acts, prosody and physical acts. The textual part accommodates elements like: “INF” representing “inference”, “REF” representing “reference”, “REL” for “relevance”, “VCE” for “voice” SSK for “shared situation knowledge”, MPH for metaphor and “M” for metapragmatic joker (Mey 2001). Odeunmi (2006) considers the “Shared Cultural Knowledge” (SCK) contextual tool appropriate in the textual part since interactants sometimes need to understand one another’s cultural backgrounds or cultural differences before making sense in a discourse. The NULL sign in the schema indicates that all the above elements are possible in an encounter, and they are called PRAGMEME. The study specifically accounts for the resources of speech act, psychological act, inference, re-

ference, relevance, shared situation knowledge and shared cultural knowledge in the pragmeme because of their relevance to the COVID-19 discourse examined. In addition, these resources help to explicate the different practs deployed by the politicians in their speeches to reinforce their persuasion.

4 Methodology

Three COVID-19 speeches (one for each) of Governor Babatunde Sanwo-olu (GBS), Executive Governor of Lagos State; Dr Osagie Ehanire (DOE), former Minister of Health of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; and Professor Yemi Osinbajo (PYO), former Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, were sourced from the internet using the purposive sampling technique. PYO's speech, which is about 1,347 words, was delivered 22nd January, 2021 at the NCDC National Reference Laboratory Inspection, Gaduwa, Abuja and was retrieved from <https://www.yemiosinbajo.ng>; GBS's speech, consisting 1,387 words, was delivered on 11th July, 2021 and was retrieved precisely on the Facebook page of the Ministry of Physical Planning and Urban Development (MPPUD), Lagos State, posted 12th July, 2021; while DOE's speech, comprising 794 words, was delivered on 10th December, 2022 at the Presidential Task Force Press Briefing. DOE's speech was collected on YouTube, after which it was translated into written form for ease of analysis. The political speeches of the three political actors were selected based on their relevance to the aim and objectives of this study, as they are embedded with linguistic and pragmatic techniques that underscore persuasion, with the primary intention of persuading Nigerians towards preventing the COVID-19 pandemic through compliance with COVID-19 protocols. Moreover, the choice of the speeches was based on the fact that they have not enjoyed significant documented analysis, despite the fact that they address pertinent themes on the coronavirus disease, and were delivered by prominent Nigerian politicians whose impacts towards curbing the virus cannot be sidelined. The qualitative method of data analysis was used and was anchored on the tenets of Jacob Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts. The analysis does not focus on numerical or statistical details; it is simply descriptive in nature. The data were subjected to pragmatic analysis as identified and elucidated in the analysis and discussion of findings section.

5 Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This section examines the persuasive practs (pragmatic acts of persuasion) deployed by GBS, DOE and PYO and their various pragmatic functions. It takes into

account the pragmatic resources and how they are deployed towards campaigning for the need to obey the stipulated COVID-19 rules and regulations that are considered necessary for the safety of Nigerian citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, this section discusses the findings of the study as examined in the data presented for analysis.

5.1 Assuring to strengthen listeners' conviction

One of the practs of persuasion employed by the political actors in their speeches is the assuring pract. Assuring is simply the act of giving confidence in the trustworthiness of something. It also means to show the certainty of an occurrence or an action in a way that does not give room for doubt or unbelief. GBS, DOE, and PYO employed the assuring pract to strengthen the conviction of the masses that the Coronavirus disease, albeit dangerous, can be defeated when they make compliance with the COVID-19 protocols their topmost priority.

Extract 1

Let me assure us that victory over COVID-19 is much closer today than any other point in our recent history. GBS

Extract 2

We are confident that we will be getting a second batch of vaccines very soon to kick-start the second phase of vaccinations. GBS

Extract 3

Lagos state will continue to work with all our partners across government and the private sector to ensure that we permanently triumph over this virus. GBS

In extract 1, GBS assures Lagosians that they are almost completely defeating COVID-19, as their victory is near. The assurance is authenticated through the comparing speech act, by his comparison of the COVID-19 victory of the present with “any other point in our (the state’s) recent history”. This is an inference (INF) that the Lagos State government has been intensifying positive efforts to ensure that the virus is surmounted. In addition, GBS’s reference (REF) to COVID-19 is meant to demystify some people’s belief that the existence of COVID-19 is mythical. In extract 2, GBS assures the listeners by unfolding the confidence the Lagos State government has in getting quick access to the second batch of the COVID-19 vaccines, which would help to prevent the spread of the virus. This statement is an inference (INF) that vaccination is one of the reliable antidotes for COVID-19. Hence, it is GBS’ subtle and indirect way of reminding and also convincing the masses to get vaccinated. In extract 3, GBS again strengthens his words of assurance by emphasising the reso-

luteness of Lagos State to fight and overcome COVID-19 through the state's liaison and partnership with relevant private and public organisations. The three extracts above apparently depict an assuring pract meant to convince the listening audience that the virus is vincible only if the COVID-19 prevention rules are strictly adhered to by everyone. GBS' words of assurance are considered relevant (REL) to the masses since they emphasise the prevention of Coronavirus which can help forestall future disaster.

Extract 4

We shall continue to engage states constructively for better coordination and outcomes. DOE

Extract 5

We are working with the WHO and GAVI led covax facility and other stakeholders, to ensure that Nigeria will access quality vaccines, when they are deployed. DOE

Extract 6

We will also continue to explore all avenues of getting access to additional vaccines and in that connection met with H.E. the Ambassador of the UAE to Nigeria, at the Ministry of Health, to discuss cooperation in access to vaccine technological and production. DOE

Like GBS, DOE's speech is also laden with words of assurance, which are meant to raise the hope of the listeners regarding the victory over COVID-19. Extracts 4 and 5 lay bare the determination of the Nigerian government to continue to work diligently to fight against the cruel virus. In extract 4, DOE assures the audience of the plan of the Nigerian government to engage states "for better coordination and outcomes". In extract 5, his reference (REF) to top-notch organisations like WHO and GAVI and reference (REF) to the Ambassador of the UAE to Nigeria in extract 6, is to bolster his words of assurance. The three extracts are presented with appealing tones, which are expressed to create a feeling of assurance and confidence and to create a positive psychological act in the listeners by making them believe the virus would soon be surmounted through the responsibilities and efforts of the Nigerian government. Furthermore, it can be observed that the shared situation knowledge (SSK) of the COVID-19 disease between the speaker (DOE) and the audience renders DOE's assuring statements relevant (REL) to the discourse.

Extract 7

We will come through this period of our history as we have come through all previous seasons of adversity, by working together, protecting each other, believing in each other and committing to seeing better days ahead for our nation. PYO

Extract 8

We will not relent until we assert control over the critical phase of this pandemic. PYO

PYO, in extracts 7 and 8, reels out words of hope and encouragement to support the fact that the COVID-19 virus can be completely vanquished. The use of the modal auxiliary verb “will” in extract 7 is an inference (INF) that COVID-19 is truly defeatable only if everyone works in unison to fight against it. The phrases: “working together”, “protecting each other” and “believing in each other” imply that the struggle to combat the virus is not a one-man business, but a collective responsibility. Similarly, in extract 8, the modal auxiliary ‘will’ is an inference (INF) that the Nigerian government is ready as Freddy to threaten the world’s sturdy threat (COVID-19). The nominal group, “critical phase”, as identified by PYO in extract 8, describes the threatening and unpalatable situation that the country is battling with. Moreover, it is an inference (INF) that the nation is in a crestfallen situation as a result of the awful experiences and effects of the virus. Here, PYO’s speech is considered relevant (REL) to the context of the situation because it addresses an issue that primarily concerns the public, and he also foregrounds the need for urgent intervention to alleviate the spread of the thoughtless virus (COVID-19).

5.2 Advising to emphasise proactiveness

The advising pract is employed by the political actors to persuade Nigerian citizens to work diligently and harmoniously by obeying the COVID-19 precautionary measures to prevent the widespread of the virus across the nation. Advising is an act of giving counsel in such a way that the attitude of an individual is changed, shaped or reinforced. The advising pract is used by the politicians to emphasise the need for Nigerian citizens to be proactive.

Extract 9

Having triumphed over the first and second waves of the pandemic, we must find within ourselves new reserves of energy to quell this emerging third wave before it snowballs out of control. GBS

Extract 10

Therefore, I would like to reiterate that this is not the time to get tired or complacent; instead, we must be re-energised to battle this invisible and seemingly relentless enemy. GBS

In extracts 9 and 10, GBS advises the listeners to gather enough strength and energy to fight the third wave of the COVID-19 virus. He advises them on the need to be “re-energised” and not to relent towards the fight against the disease. In extract 10, the reference (REF) to COVID-19 as ‘a seemingly relentless enemy’ is a metaphor (MPH) that implies that the virus is an outright powerful foe ready to devour whosoever it comes across. The advising pract is indeed relevant (REL) to the society’s present

situation, as the listening audience all have the shared situation knowledge (SSK) of COVID-19's outbreak and its dangerous nature. The politician employed the advising pract to keep Nigerians' hope alive and to also prepare them to take necessary anticipatory actions as regards the protection from the virus.

Extract 11

Until vaccines are available, our best bet is still the appropriate use of face masks, physical distancing, hand sanitizers and observance of respiratory hygiene, for prevention and control. DOE

Extract 12

We must avoid unnecessary travels and crowded places. DOE

Extract 13

In that connection, it is not too early to advise strongly against throwing caution to the wind during the upcoming Xmas and New Year's holiday. DOE

In extract 11, DOE, applying the contextual tool of metaphor (M) refers (REF) to the use of face masks and other safety measures as the nation's "best bet", that is, the appropriate and reliable ways to prevent the spread of the virus before the arrival or the availability of the COVID-19 vaccines. The reference to "vaccines" is an inference (INF) that vaccination is one of the most effective precautionary measures that can curb the rapid spread of the Coronavirus. DOE simply understands that a coarse attitude may not be suitable to convince the masses towards adhering strictly to COVID-19 control measures. Therefore, he resorts to giving candid advice by using it as an avenue to remind Nigerian citizens about their duties and obligations regarding the prevention of the virus. In extract 12, DOE advises strongly against engaging in unnecessary travel and staying in places that are crowded. The advice is made potent through the modal auxiliary verb "must", which is an inference (INF) that COVID-19 can easily be contracted through travelling and association with places that are crowded. In extract 13, listeners are advised to celebrate wisely during the Christmas and New Year holidays. The shared knowledge (SSK) of the exuberance and merriment connected to Christmas and New Year's seasons could have necessitated DOE's deliberate reference (REF) to "the upcoming Xmas and New Year's holiday" to accentuate the fact that COVID-19 is not restricted by holidays. In addition, it is a subtle way to remind the audience to be extremely conscious of their actions and activities during the festive periods. In other words, they are expected to be mindful of the pandemic and not to be carried away by the usual merriment associated with festive seasons. The essence of the advising pract by DOE is to encourage proactiveness among the masses regarding COVID-19 prevention.

5.3 Pleading to show exigency

Another pract employed by the politicians to persuade the masses of the need to obey the COVID-19 precautionary measures is the pleading pract. Pleading is simply an act of making a plea or an appeal to someone to accept your opinions or views.

Extract 14

Please, endeavour to protect yourselves and others and still obey the measure at Xmas. DOE

Extract 15

I urge all Nigerians to comply ultimately... PYO

DOE switches to the pleading pract by appealing to his audience to emphasise the exigency of the need to be protected from the virus in extract 14. He uses the word “please” to depict a serious tone and to urge his listeners to be intentional about protecting themselves by obeying COVID-19 safety measures during Xmas (Christmas). His emphasis on “Xmas” is most likely drawn from the inference (INF) that the masses are not likely to take the precautionary measures seriously during the yuletide, since the period is often characterised by celebration. Hence, DOE pleads with the masses to be conscientious as they celebrate. The above is an inference (INF) that protection against COVID-19 is an antidote to the virus, as it is the relevant measure needed to overcome the virus. In extract 15, PYO pleads with Nigerians to ultimately obey the COVID-19 rules and regulations. His use of the lexical verb “urge” signifies his love and concern for his fellow Nigerians. Additionally, PYO’s reference (REF) to himself, using the first-person personal deixis “I”, depicts the seriousness and sincerity in his plea. Furthermore, the pleading pract is meant to ensure the desired psychological act on the audience, which would persuade them to consider the pleas of these political actors. The pleading pract also portrays the speakers as humble and sincere politicians. Although they have the right to mandate and give standing commands to their listeners, they are not ignorant of the fact that introducing fierceness and rigidity might impede the achievement of the goal of their speeches (persuading the listeners to obey COVID-19 safety measures), as human beings naturally respond negatively to coercion. Again, the pleading pract is relevant (REL) to the discourse since both the speakers and the listeners understand the reason for the discourse; in other words, the interactants all have the shared situation knowledge (SSK) of the COVID-19 prevention discourse.

5.4 Reporting to encourage alertness

Giving reliable reports is also another pract employed by the political actors to persuade the audience towards obeying COVID-19 protocols. Reporting is the act of providing the details of an event or incident to an individual or a group of individuals. It could also be referred to as an act of passing across information to an individual in a more comprehensive way, backed up by proofs and evidence such as facts, statistics, and so on, to make a speaker's message authentic and credible before the listeners. The political leaders give relevant reports on COVID-19 to keep the listeners on their toes and also make them see the urgent need to protect themselves against the virus. These reports are characterised by specific names, statistics, numerical figures and dates to trigger the listeners' alertness.

Extract 16

The US, UK and other countries are going through very difficult times, and we do sympathise with them. GBS

Extract 17

From the beginning of July, we started to experience a steep increase in the number of daily confirmed cases, with the test positivity rate going from **1.1% at the end of June, 2021** to its current rate of **6.6% as at 8th of July, 2021**. GBS

Extracts 16 and 17 depict the reports of the state of things in Lagos state as regards the COVID-19 pandemic. Extract 16 is a report of the hard times faced by the inhabitants in the UK (United Kingdom) and in the US (United States). The reference (REF) to these countries (UK and US) is to buttress the fact that COVID-19 is real. Furthermore, that these countries, despite their technological strength and sui generis medical facilities as opposed to Nigeria, are going through tough times as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19 is an inference (INF) that COVID-19 is highly lethal (that even developed countries are struggling with the virus). In extract 17, GBS reports the current state of Lagos state as regards the rate at which the virus is being contracted by updating the masses with statistics of COVID-19 records and dates. For instance, the percentage of confirmed COVID-19 cases between June and July is reported to be "1.1% at the end of June, 2021" and "6.6% as of the 8th of July, 2021." The reports are completely relevant (REL) to the speech as they are what the citizens are eager to know about, since both the speaker and the listeners already have a shared knowledge (SSK) of the subject of the discourse. Thus, the reporting pract is adopted by GBS to ensure that the listeners are abreast of the fatal danger of the virus and to purposely persuade them not to lose their guard but maintain COVID-19 protective measures.

Extract 18

Last week, we recorded 1843 against 1,235 two weeks before that and 1,126 the week before that. In the past 24 hours, 474 new confirmed cases and 2 deaths were recorded, with an indication that this week's figure will beat last week's. DOE

Extract 19

As at today, we have crossed 70,000 mark with a total of 70,669 confirmed cases of which 65,242 have been treated and discharged. DOE

Extract 20

Sadly the number of deaths has now reached 1184 as against 1,167 two weeks before. DOE

In extracts 18–20, DOE provides a report on the number of COVID-19 cases that have been recorded over a particular period and, sadly, the number of deaths recorded. In his report, DOE compares the COVID-19 reports of the previous week with the previous two weeks before, predicting that the following week's COVID-19 cases would be more than the previous ones: "Last week, we recorded 1843 against 1,235 two weeks before that and 1,126 the week before that." His report further spotlights the high mortality rate of COVID-19 when he says, "In the past 24 hours, 474 new confirmed cases and 2 deaths were recorded...". This statement also suggests that the virus is profoundly pandemic. The reference (REF) to 65,242 treated and discharged victims of COVID-19 in excerpt 19 is an inference (INF) that the virus, though dangerous, is curable if treated. Unfortunately, in extract 20, DOE's report has it that 1,184 people had been sent on a journey of no return as a result of the virus. The last report is indeed a subtle reminder to the listeners and an inference (INF) that they need to be more rigorous in their maintenance of the COVID-19 mitigation techniques to avoid untimely death. The reports are thus relevant (REL) since they serve as eye-openers to Nigerians on the status quo regarding the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.

5.5 Informing to create awareness

Information is powerful, and it helps humans to be aware of a particular situation. Informing is an act of communicating knowledge to someone, thereby creating awareness about a particular thing or situation. Politicians use the informing praxis to persuade citizens to embrace COVID-19 protocols. They provide the masses with pieces of information about COVID-19 to create awareness and to spur them to take action where necessary.

Extract 21

The Lagos State Health Facility Monitoring and Accreditation Agency (HEFAMAA) is providing monitoring and surveillance and has been mandated to apply heavy fines and other punitive measures on all facilities found to be in violation of these. GBS

Extract 22

One of the major tenets of our mitigation strategy against the 3rd wave is our vaccination campaign, similar to other parts of the world. GBS

GBS, as stated in extract 21, informs the public about the efforts of the Lagos state government towards fighting COVID-19 by making reference (REF) to the Lagos State Health Facility Monitoring and Accreditation Agency (HEFAMAA) that has been “providing monitoring and surveillance”. To further enable the public to place a high premium on the obedience of the COVID-19 precautionary measures, GBS informs the public about the penalty attached to the violation of any of the COVID-19 rules and regulations. The mention of “heavy fines” and “other punitive measures” by GBS is to further reinforce the necessity to abide by the COVID-19 preventive measures. The reference (REF) to the Lagos State Health Facility Monitoring and Accreditation Agency (HEFAMAA) is an inference (INF) that the decision to punish anyone who goes against the COVID-19 laws is no joke. Therefore, it is appropriate for the citizens to be informed of the new policy in order not to be caught unaware. Extract 22 informs the public about the Lagos state vaccination campaign, which is meant to combat the 3rd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, this information is an inference (INF) that the 3rd wave of the COVID-19 pandemic is not a fallacy but a reality. Furthermore, it is an inference (INF) that vaccination is an essential remedy to curbing the deadly virus; hence, there is a need to get vaccinated to prevent the virus.

Extract 23

To prepare ourselves, I have directed that all isolation and treatment centers, which were hitherto closed due to reduced patient load, to be prepared for reopening and the staff complement put on alert. DOE

Extract 24

The first set of candidate vaccines are ready to be rolled out in Europe and the USA, and a Technical Working Group led by the National Primary Health Development Agency is working on evaluation of prospective vaccines and Nigeria's vaccine needs. DOE

In extract 23, DOE informs the public that the isolation and treatment centres would be prepared for reopening for people to have access to them. This is an inference (INF) that the Nigerian government is a concerned and considerate one and that DOE is most likely a protective and caring leader, that is, one who is ready to put everything in place to ensure the safety of the populace. Only a caring leader would

be concerned about reopening all isolation and treatment centres. In extract 24, DOE informs the public about the COVID-19 vaccines, which would be ready after they have been properly evaluated by the appropriate agencies. Specifically, DOE's connection of the "evaluation of prospective vaccines and Nigeria's vaccine needs" with a "Technical Working Group led by the National Primary Health Development Agency" is an inference (INF) that the vaccines are to a large extent going to be reliable and effective, and also to subtly remind his learners the importance of COVID-19 vaccines in controlling the spread of the virus. The information is relevant (REL) because it serves as a strategy to keep the citizens on guard as regards the vaccination process, especially at a time when the Coronavirus is spiralling out of control.

Extract 25

The Director-General has regularly updated me formally and informally on your work and especially at the monthly National Economic Council meetings where we hold briefings on our response to the challenges to public health and safety created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures that we are taking to protect our country. PYO

In extract 25, PYO informs the NCDC staff about their efforts towards preventing the COVID-19 virus, as informed by the Director-General. This is a strategy to encourage them to be more proactive and alert to COVID-19 issues/news around. Furthermore, the reference (REF) to the monthly National Economic Council meetings, which serves as an avenue for discussing the safety measures to prevent COVID-19 in PYO's statement, is an inference (INF) that the Nigerian government is not folding its arms but showing regular concerns and making efforts to ensure that the virus is surmounted.

5.6 Appreciating for sustaining moral values

The political actors, through the appreciating pract, help to persuade the public to continuously comply with COVID-19 precautionary measures. Appreciating is an act of showing gratitude or being thankful and grateful for what an individual has done for you.

Extract 26

At this point, I would like to thank all the members of the Incident Command Structure for their resilience in the management of this never ending pandemic, and also the Federal Government through the Presidential Steering Committee, for all their support and collaboration. GBS

Extract 27

Thank you. DOE

Extract 28

So, to all staff of the NCDC and Public Health Teams across the States, thank you for the excellent work that you do. PYO

One of the ways of encouraging others to do more commendable and enviable work is to show gratitude (appreciation), that is, appreciating their past and present works and activities. The appreciation becomes potent and penetrating when it is done publicly. In extract 26, GBS makes specific reference (REF) to the Incident Command Structure and the Federal Government through the Presidential Steering Committee and commends their remarkable work towards the prevention of the COVID-19 virus. He does this to portray himself as a grateful leader and as one who is very interested in any positive effort that will curb the Coronavirus.

At the end of DOE's speech in extract 27, he also deems it fit to appreciate the entire populace for listening to him. This is an inference (INF) that DOE is most likely a humble and courteous leader. His reference (REF) to 'you', that is, the listeners, is an inference (INF) that he recognises and appreciates the public's willingness to have listened to his speech. In addition, he has the shared cultural knowledge (SCK) of the expected show of appreciation after delivering a speech, which serves as a way of placing value on his audience. The appreciating pract portrays DOE as a man who is familiar with the norms of speech delivery and also helps to project his moral values to the Nigerian citizens.

In extract 28, PYO appreciates "...the NCDC and Public Health teams across the states..." for their efforts towards preventing the COVID-19 virus. With the appreciating pract, he makes reference (REF) to all the "staff of the NCDC and Public Health Teams across the States" for their efforts. The essence of this is to encourage them to keep working diligently to prevent the spread of the virus. The underlying truth is that when people are appreciated for their good deeds, there is a tendency for them to do more extraordinary deeds. This thus explains the Yoruba proverb that says, "he who appreciates the gift of yesterday will receive more gifts". This proverb is understood by PYO, perhaps because of his cultural background (a typical Yoruba man). His consciousness of the need to appreciate others is a strategy to "get more" from them and also to sustain his moral values.

5.7 Stating facts to spell out the reality of COVID-19

When speakers want to make their speech persuasive, they tend to make their expressions, assertions, and claims appear credible by stating relevant facts. GBS and DOE state some facts to influence the thoughts and decisions of the Nigerian citizens for them to obey the COVID-19 protocols.

Extract 29

Without the cooperation of the public at large, we stand the risks of losing both lives and livelihood, on a devastating scale. GBS

Extract 30

The enemy is formidable and opportunistic. GBS

From extracts 29–30 of GBS’s speech, one can bring out factual statements that are capable of convincing and persuading the entire populace, especially the Lagosians, to maintain the necessary COVID-19 precautionary measures. In extract 29, GBS states that COVID-19 would keep destroying lives if the entire public fails to cooperate. This is an inference (INF) that collective obedience to the COVID-19 protocols would prevent the spread of the virus. In extract 30, another factual statement made by GBS to persuade his listeners to take the COVID-19 precautionary measures very seriously is that the virus is an “enemy”. The use of the affirming act, “The enemy is formidable and opportunistic,” by GBS is meant to declare the unyielding attributes of the virus. In addition, it is a metaphor (MPH) that implies that Coronavirus is awful, difficult to defeat and ready to take advantage of the lackadaisical attitudes of the masses if they do not comply with COVID-19 safety protocols. GBS buttresses his claim with adjectives that are terrifying: “formidable” and “opportunistic” to emphasise the horrific nature of the virus.

Extract 31

Every one of us has a role to play in the effort to prevent the explosive spread of this infection in Nigeria. DOE

In extract 31, DOE expresses the fact that the prevention of the COVID-19 virus is everyone’s responsibility. This is an inference (INF) that the virus cannot be controlled or prevented completely without the collective efforts of everyone in society. This fact is stated to open the eyes of listeners to the reality that all hands must be on deck to fight against the disease, as it is now evident that the virus is among Nigerians. This statement is thus relevant (REL) to the discourse since everyone already has the shared knowledge (SSK) of the unbearable havoc caused by the virus.

6 Discussion of Findings

The study investigates how three popular Nigerian politicians (GBS, DOE and PYO) deploy practs of persuasion to convince Nigerian citizens of the need to comply with COVID-19 mitigation strategies. Seven practs of persuasion are identified in the political speeches of the politicians. They are: assuring to strengthen listeners’ conviction; advising to emphasise citizens’ proactiveness; pleading to show exigency; re-

porting to encourage alertness; informing to create awareness; appreciating for value sustenance; and stating facts to address the reality of COVID-19. The assuring pract is reflected in GBS, DOE, and PYO's speeches using the tools of psychological act, inference (INF), reference (REF), relevance (REL), shared situation knowledge (SSK), and shared cultural knowledge (SCK); the advising pract is employed by GBS and DOE using the tools of REF, INF, MPH (metaphor) and SSK to encourage proactiveness among the citizens; the pleading pract used by DOE and PYO is supported with the tools of INF, REF, and psychological act to emphasise the exigency of compliance with COVID-19 precautionary measures; REF, INF, REL, and SSK are used to unveil the reporting pract by GBS and DOE to encourage alertness. For the informing pract, two pragmatic tools of REF and INF are utilised by the three politicians to create awareness and sensitise the masses on the prevention of the COVID-19 virus; the appreciating pract is explicated with the pragmatic elements of INF, SCK and REF by the three politicians to sustain their moral values and political prestige. The stating pract, noticeable in the speeches of GBS and DOE, unfolds the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is achieved through the tools of INF, REF and REL to explain the pract. The identified practs indicate that context plays a crucial role in understanding the persuasive messages of the political actors to Nigerians on issues that are related to compliance with COVID-19 rules and regulations.

Although the speeches of the aforementioned three political actors are tilted towards the same goal (to ensure that Nigerian citizens comply with the COVID-19 rules and regulations for their safety), there are some notable differences in their styles and strategies. For instance, in the assuring practs of the political actors, even though they all present their words of assurance to convince their readers that COVID-19 is not a Gordian knot, their techniques of assurance are slightly different. While GBS' assuring pract showcases his utmost confidence that COVID-19 is surmountable, DOE subtly links his assuring pract with the need for collaboration and collective efforts as substantial ways to overcome the virus. PYO's strategy corresponds with DOE's in that he (PYO) also emphasises the need for unity and citizens' collective activities towards their protection against the pandemic. While the advising pract of GBS focuses on the general conduct of citizens to prevent the virus, DOE's is more specific and direct as he carefully identifies some of the activities to be embraced and avoided during the COVID-19 period – 'avoiding unnecessary travels', 'use of face masks', 'use of hand sanitizers' and so on. DOE's specific attention to the do's and don'ts during the COVID-19 period could be connected to his role as a minister of health and as a medical practitioner who is obviously up to speed on COVID-19 preventive techniques. The pleading pract, which is only deployed by DOE and PYO, is used to underscore the seriousness and urgency of the subject matter (prevention of COVID-19 through compliance with its protocols). From the analyses, findings reveal that GBS speech is marked by a confident tone, driving home the

progress being made against COVID-19 to discreetly reel out the achievements of the government towards conquering the virus. He frequently uses comparisons to instil positivity and hope, assuring his constituents that victory was near and appealing to collective confidence. His style includes an energetic urging of citizens to be proactive, especially in facing and combating new waves of the virus. Contrastingly, DOE adopts a more factual approach characterised by concrete actions and collaborations with health organisations. His assurances are closely linked to the specifics of governmental measures, emphasising the importance of individual responsibility alongside communal health strategies. His advice is grounded in practical recommendations related to adherence to health guidelines, urging citizens to take their personal safety seriously.

PYO's speech is different in that he emphasises unity and community responsibility in his assurance and advice. He constantly frames safety as a shared responsibility among citizens and the government, which fosters a sense of collective action. When pleading with the public, PYO uses an emotional appeal to invoke a sense of national duty, while GBS accentuates urgency, especially during festive periods, depicting an understanding of cultural and social contexts that could undermine or pose a great challenge to citizens' compliance. Regarding the reporting and informing practs, GBS frequently incorporates statistics and factual updates to accentuate the seriousness of the COVID-19 crisis, encouraging compliance through transparency. The focus of DOE is on providing accurate health data that reveal the progression of the virus and the government's responses, maintaining public attentiveness to health guidelines. Conversely, PYO's approach in informing features broader governmental strategies, thus connecting the conveyed data with narratives of cooperative action among citizens. In terms of appreciation, GBS expresses gratitude towards healthcare workers and the public, reinforcing community spirit as a driving force behind compliance. For DOE, he specifically acknowledges actions taken by government bodies and healthcare professionals, showcasing collaborative efforts in combating the pandemic. PYO embraces a more personal tone in his expressions of gratitude, recognising and acknowledging various sectors of society, which humanised his political discourse and created a more relatable message. From the analyses, it can be inferred from the speeches of the political leaders that the fight against COVID-19 is not a bed of roses; it requires deliberate efforts from all and sundry (both the leaders and the led). It, therefore, becomes expedient for the leaders to deploy significant persuasive strategies (practs) to motivate people (Nigerians) to prioritise their safety to turn the tide against COVID-19.

7 Conclusion

This study has identified and investigated the pragmatic acts employed by three selected Nigerian politicians towards ensuring the compliance of the masses with COVID-19 precautionary measures. This goal was achieved by the politicians through the use of seven practs of assuring, advising, pleading, reporting, informing, appreciating, and stating, with specific reference to the tools of speech act, psychological act, relevance (REL), inference (INF), reference (REF), metaphor (M), shared situation knowledge (SSK), and shared cultural knowledge (SCK) to validate their messages to their listeners. This study re-echoes the insight of Adebomi (2023) that the language of persuasion is central to influencing the decisions of people to obey COVID-19 rules and regulations, especially because of the daunting and opportunistic peculiarities of the virus. Furthermore, the findings of this study uphold the argument of Adeoti (2023) that pragmatics enhances the apt interpretation and comprehension of a discourse (in this case, Nigerian politicians' COVID-19 speeches). The understanding of the COVID-19 political speeches of GBS, DOE, and PYO is therefore bolstered through the deployment of persuasive practs that emphasise the dreadfulness and formidability of the virus and the relevant COVID-19 precautionary measures that are essential for the safety of men, Nigerians to be precise.

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