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## You are Under Arrest: Language Use for Social Power Construction in Institutional Discourse

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### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the ways in which language is employed in the construction of social power in selected institutional discourses. Speech acts theory and Fairclough's concept of language and power serve as the study's theoretical anchor. Data were generated through (non)participant observations in a five-year fieldwork to examine the peculiarities in instantiating social power using specific terms in workplace interactions involving participants with unequal power derived from the social roles they perform within the scope of this study. During the period, institutional discourses that demonstrate the enactment of social power in medical, religious, political, legal, academic and security domains in Calabar Metropolis, South-south Nigeria, were closely observed and documented. The linguistic choices show institutional and power differentials in the rehearsal of social power among discourse participants where one wields more than the other(s). Social power, as demonstrated, is dynamic and excised using the domain's registers and enacted towards the punishment, reward, confinement, reformation, freedom or general wellbeing of the recipient. The study enriches the understanding of how social power holders rely on inferred authority and certification from their professional affiliations and work conventions to construct and maintain social power.

**Keywords:** Language use; Social power; Power relations; Social roles; Institutional discourse

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## 1. Introduction

This article studies the use of language in six discourse domains in Nigeria with the aim of accounting for how power and control are embedded in the way language is put to use. Each discourse domain uses language in peculiar ways. Thus, in socio-discursive encounters, these peculiarities often come into use either consciously or unconsciously. Language is the communicative medium of human activities, actively utilised in different discourse domains to perform several discourse functions which are strategically combined to establish social power and power relations. Social power, as against physical power, is concerned with the actual and (or) societal perception of the characteristics of a practiced social relation between two or more communication partners (Fiske and Berdahl, 2007). Social relations and roles in discourse contexts relatively direct the exercise of social power and power relations. Power relations are professional principles that legitimately allocate power to communication partners, shape social distance, build social networks, regulate message content and set discourse agenda (Liddicoat and Bryant, 2000; Uwen, 2023b). The quality and inferred amount of power fundamentally alters the way individuals think, speak and behave towards each other in social contexts. Those who possess social power are often considered to behave in a more variable manner and demonstrate it by their verbal and nonverbal acts (Brauer and Bourhis, 2016). The fact remains that there exists a symbolic parallel between the use of power and its execution by those who hold and control it. This control is realised by both having the knowledge and being able to strategically put language to use. This establishes how certain persons or their utterances have an influence on others.

Social power is conventionally meant to exert influence among discourse participants. Krippendorff (1989b) clarifies that the person who exerts influence over the other arising from some social factors does so because of what society holds them for. Elechi and Jaja (2020) corroborate Krippendorff's view by attesting that in human relationships, "there are those greater and those with less power, those who influ-

ence and those who are influenced". This suggests that the exercise of social power demands appropriate human actors as well as contexts. It is the social relations that indicate the asymmetrical relationships where social roles prescribe non-hereditary, subordinating and superior opportunities from where power is enacted among communication partners in situational contexts (Al Abdely, 2016). It is where appropriate situations meet with the appropriate participants that social power could be legitimately exercised. In the context of social power dynamics in workplace discourses, appropriate participants are those whose social roles legitimize their use of power wielding language in appropriate situations (in the contexts that call for the use of such language). This happens particularly when the person being influenced knows and accepts the same because they need something that the influencer could provide. It is this possession of 'something' and the 'need' for it that regulate behaviours in certain institutional discourse, depending on who has or needs what in a particular circumstance. Power is therefore dynamic and can be substituted depending on social roles and situations (Stolte et al., 2001). The situation and legitimised roles it elicits, are social indices that induce power play.

Power relations are shown in different institutional discourses and exercised through the manipulation of professional registers. Different studies in the security, banking, academic, religious, medical, political, legal, economic and marketing institutions have separately established how language is used to re-enact unequal power relations among participants (Ogundoyin, 2018). Security officials, managers, politicians, academics, judges, medical doctors, the clergy, advertisers and those in the power-wielding professions often manipulate linguistic resources to establish influence over their communication partners. The language used in these domains forms aspects of the identities of the practitioners (Uwen and Ekpan, 2022). Such patterns of social discourses are used to delineate the features of the discourses in different domains.

Scholarships on social power have focused on

specific domains of language use. For instance, managers use power strategies to enforce organisational values (Koslowsky and Stashevsky, 2005), transactional leaders use power to develop expectancies and expectations from subordinates (Eden, 1990), and in military sites, embedded linguistic and social practices are deployed to coerce soldiers into effectiveness and conformity (Mensah et al., 2023; Uwen and Eyang, 2023) and to instantiate linguistic power, and protect heritage and sovereignty (Nyamekye and Uwen, 2024). This implies that there are certain linguistic features that denote social power differentials to show how specific language choices contribute to power enactment. In this article, rather than paying attention to a particular discourse domain, we go a step further by investigating social power, its linguistic exploration by those who wield it and its communicative effects on hearer in six different purposively selected discourse domains. In this regard, the study aims to ascertain how individuals that are institutionally and societally conferred with the legitimacy to exert power deploy different linguistic features to realise it. To achieve this, the study set to answer specific research questions:

- a) What specific language(s) is used in exerting social power across institutional discourses?
- b) How do social roles and power relations influence social power among participants in institutional discourses?
- c) What other factors are deployed to shape discourses that index social power?
- d) How does the prior knowledge of such discourse tenets influence addressees' responses?

To pursue this, this study draws analytical insights from the theoretical provisions of speech acts and Fairclough's conceptualisation of language and power to establish the nexus between the way power is used and how language gives expression to power in the Nigerian sociolinguistic matrix. Although language is not power, an individual's mastery of and appropriate use of language has the capacity to give the user control over others. This explains how power is indexed in six micro contexts to provide clues on the indexation of the same in the macro contexts.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature in the field of language, power and control.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Fairclough's theory of language and power TLP and speech acts theory (SAT) are adopted to drive the analysis. They are considered germane for this study because they both account for how language gives expression to power and how power is exercised through the systematic use of language. Fairclough's (1989) TLP provides insights into the expression, maintenance and utilitarian value of social power exercised by one over other communication partners. Fairclough proposes that language shapes and positions the social structures of power by initiating, changing and maintaining power relations among participants. Fairclough (1992, 1995) emphasise that language is used as a strategy to create power, and that there is power in discourse (language) and power behind discourse (language). Aboh (2009) addresses this relationship in his study, confirming that language and power are an intimate conceptual pair. His position affirms that language is shaped by society and its structure, while power is entrenched within those structures. While tracing this relationship to Nigerian poetry, Aboh (2009) states that "language is the most basic social institution and thus, even in the freest and democratic society, it is intrinsically linked to power". The implication is that the lexical and syntactical structures in institutional interactions are embedded with power. The power in and behind language transfers the extralinguistic powers to the communication context (Hung and Deng, 2017). It is the context that exemplifies the rehearsals.

The social value of texts is high when applied in situational and institutional contexts where they appropriately index and construct mutual meaning-making based on the common systems of knowledge of the communication partners (Fairclough, 1995). The reflections of the common realities, experience and knowledge provide clues to the explication of meanings in certain discourse domains (Uwen, 2023a). This has a suggestive parallel; every discourse domain is constitutively constructed based

on certain belief systems, and these belief systems determine the ways discourse participants put language to use. Aboh (2009) argues that “power” is embedded in the linguistic construction of its users within the context of the cognitive knowledge on how social power is constructed and exercised in certain social contexts. Therefore, “language use is always simultaneously constitutive of social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and beliefs” (Fairclough, 1995). It is the societal ascribed identities, prescribed social roles and common cognitive knowledge of the essence of the discourse that stimulate varied effects in terms of linguistic choices, intentions, obedience and reaction. The display of the intended response arises from the perceived potential which is connected with the power wielder’s access to institutionalised information and expertise that conferred the authority and legitimacy to punish, reward or set free using language (Raven, 2008). At the micro level, it is the speaker’s possession of certain linguistically inferred qualities and authority that is perceived to influence the hearer. At the macro level, the authority dwells in individuals in institutions who use language as a social practice for the exercise of social power and the devised strategy in maintaining it (Hung and Deng, 2017; Aboh, 2013). Language, in this interactive context, performs cognitive, communicative, social, instructive and identity functions in meaning-figuration.

Central to the Austian speech act theory is how people do things with words and how people’s behavioural patterns are conditioned, controlled and determined by the use of words. Austin’s (1962) SAT describes speech acts in terms of the linguistic conventions that relate with specific utterances that are equivalent to actions; what the speaker says and the associated intentions of the speaker that stimulate appropriate (re)actions. Speech acts are expressed in the form of representatives (assertions, claims, etc.), directives (suggestions, requests, commands, etc.), commissives (promises, vows, offers, etc.), expressives (complaints, apologies) and declaratives (judges’ rulings, doctors’ declaration, etc.) depending on the context and participants. Austin (1962) and

Searle (1969) argue that the total speech acts bear complexities of meanings as performative utterances understood in terms of the functions in the context following certain conditions. Oishi (2006) describes these conditions as conventionality, actuality and intentionality. Austin (1962) explains the communicative relevance of these performatives in terms of the accomplishment of certain felicity conditions which follow conventional procedure by authorised persons using certain institutional language to instantiate power.

Applying the Austian felicity condition to their study, Uwen and Ekpenyong (2022) argue that there are formal communicative situations where there exists the speaker-hearer shared linguistic norms which conventionally speculates the utterance of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances which are taken as performing a specific speech act which has a conventional effect on the participants. Utterances in this context bear illocutionary meaning, conveying the social function of what is said while the perlocutionary category performs the social function of the effect of what is said in a given discursive context. TLP and SAT are relevant to this study because they account for the social power embedded in certain utterances that are made by authorised individuals in applicable social contexts to elicit the appropriate performance which may (positively or negatively) change the state of affairs of the addressee. In applying the theoretical principles of these theories to our study, we conjecture that discourse is a building block of a people’s socio-historical life.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach that involved a five-year (2018–2022) period of fieldwork with the focus on communication partners that express unequal power relations in institutional discourses in Calabar, South-south Nigeria. The research methods adopted were (non)participant observations and semi-structured interviews with the aid of audiotape recorders and field notes for the recording and documentation of data. Given that the

researchers are residents in Calabar, they have been regular (non)participant observers within the period of the research particularly on the nuances employed in the construction of social power in the sites where the data were generated. The exchanges were from judge-accused interactions, doctor-patient interactions, conversations involving police and suspects in arrest scenes and clergy communication with bride and bridegroom during the solemnisation of holy matrimony in Pentecostal Churches. Others were generated from the invocation of presidential prerogative of mercy to effect the release of prisoners, judge's interaction with other participants in courtroom setting and the interaction between external examiner and Ph.D. candidate during viva. In several instances, the researchers were (non)participants (observers and participants in circumstances that demanded either of them) given that the sites where the data were collected were easily accessible without (stringent) restrictions. Categorically, the authors were participant observers in doctor-patient and examiner-Ph.D. candidate's interactions in instances where they accessed medical facilities and defended their Ph.D. thesis and/or examined candidates. The authors gained access into the hospitals as patients and the defence hall as academics, candidates and/or examiners. Also, the authors maintained nonparticipant observations in other research sites: judge-accused, police-suspect and clergy-couple interactions, and invocation of presidential prerogative of mercy. Here also, the authors gained access as litigants and audience, co-tenants and or landlords in compounds that the police effect arrests, as congregants and as citizens who watched the use of presidential powers respectively. Here, the authors observed with keen interest and documentation of the data that suggest the exertion of social power. This accessibility gave the researchers the opportunity to maximise the platforms to collect and collate relevant data. In each domain, five recordings were but reduced because of overlapping meanings and to avoid redundancy. Fifteen participants were interviewed, however, because of similar and overlapping opinions, not all were used. Questions asked bothered on how social

is exercised in such domains, those authorised by virtue of their position to exercise social power, the specific expressions they use, the circumstances that the use of such expressions and how social roles shape such interactions. The (non)participant observations technique enabled the researchers to freely observe how participants' use the registers of the specific discourse domain to establish unequal power relations between interlocutors. The semi-structured interviews were complementary instruments that enabled the researchers to gain deeper insights in the interface between language use and power in the participants' social world. This approach gave the researchers access to relevant information and interpretation of situationalised contexts of language use according to domains. Participants in the different domains were asked questions concerning the specific language use that wields social power, how social roles and power relations influence power and how interactants understand and respond to such power wielding cues. The power wielding interactions in the different domains were recorded for a minimum of 45 minutes to cover the period social power was enacted among the communication partners which were later transcribed and reviewed. Field notes were used to document observations on the aspects of the interactions that reveal the contexts where social power was consciously expressed by the wielder and the corresponding response (reaction) from the hearer. The authors were careful in handling bias by abiding by research ethics. This was mitigated as we were passive observers and had not introduced subjectivity in eliciting comments from participants engaged in the semi-structured interviews. This positionality helped in validating the results and findings. These methods of data analysis eased the impressionability in the explanation of empirical data, ensure the methodological transparency and reliability and validity of findings. These methods helped in the generation of the relevant data. The research followed the specifications of the ethical standards of the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Participants were consulted and willingly gave consent before they were interviewed and recorded after being adequate-

ly informed of the essence and scope of the research. The data were then transcribed and appropriately coded for qualitative and descriptive analysis. The data analysis process follows the thematisation of data according to the domains they are derived. The qualitative analysis is a thematic one that allows the description of data in accordance with the themes they interpret. The choice of Calabar (where the researchers have experiential indexation of social power in different discourse domains) is intended to provide the basis for comparison for power relations in institutional discourse in other cities in Nigeria in particular, and the world in general.

## 4. Results and discussion

This segment of the study analyses the intersection between language use and the instantiation of social power. Social power in complex human social relations can be exercised in multiple social contexts. In this study, the exercise of social power is considered in religious, security, political and medical, legal and academic domains. These domains were selected due to the consistency in social power enactment in the discourses. The domains form a sample representative of the broader social power dynamics. The selected segments of interactions for analysis are the pastor-couple, police-suspect, presidential prerogative of mercy, doctor-patient, judge-courtroom participants and examiner-candidate. Particular attention is paid to the formulation and enunciation of social power in the interactions.

### 4.1 Social power in religious discourse

The key religious practices in Nigeria are Christianity, Islam and Traditional African Religion. Some Nigerians are very religious people, and they consciously and unconsciously demonstrate this religious inclination in their daily linguistic choices. The diversity of Nigeria introduced variations in religious beliefs, practices across different individuals, ethnolinguistic groups and geographical regions. The focus here is Christianity, particularly how social power is exercised in pastor-couple interaction

during the solemnisation of holy matrimony, a religious ritual of exchange of marital vows between would-be husband and wife. Christians believe that marriage is ordained by God. This is seen in the following Scriptures of the Holy Bible: Genesis 2:24, Mark 10:7; and Ephesians 5:31 says: “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall become one flesh”. Christian marriages are key events in churches, and are recognised and enforceable in Nigerian laws. This religious practice is based on “the understanding of many contemporary Christians and denominations of marriage as an institution originated by God, consisting of a monogamous and lifelong relationship between a man and a woman” (Van Eck, 2020). The tenets of Christianity prominently profess monogamy. However, the emphasis and practice may vary depending on the situated doctrines of some denominations and the sociocultural contexts they operate within Christianity. However, the focus is on denominations that strictly practice monogamous marriage with laid down procedures that the intending couples are made to follow. Such procedures include the performance of the demands of the parents (family) of the would-be wife which elicit their consent, and the acceptance of the marriage proposal by both families. The conclusion of these procedures precedes the church wedding where the formal pronouncement is made by the clergy in the solemnisation of holy matrimony between the man and the woman.

The declaration follows structured linguistic choices that simultaneously express social power and situate the social context of church marriage. The power in the language is evidenced in Assemblies of God’s *The minister’s handbook* (1980), and as practiced in Pentecostal Churches in Calabar, Nigeria. The linguistic re-enactment of social power, power relations and social roles between the pastor and would-be couple is situated in the interaction below: Excerpt 1

Pastor: ... will you take this man to be your lawful husband, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony, to love and to cherish, as

long as you both shall live?

Woman: Yes, I will.

Pastor: ... will you take this woman to be your lawful wife, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony, to love and to cherish, as long as you both shall live?

Man: Yes, I will.

*(The pastor thereafter enquires from the congregation if anyone has any genuine reason the couple should not be 'joined together' and in the absence of any, will go further to declare as follows).*

Pastor: ... before God and these witnesses, and by the virtue of the authority vested in me as a minister of the Gospel, I now pronounce you husband and wife in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy spirit. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.

As exemplified in the above exchange, the solemnisation of marriage is based on Christians' customs and must be administered by a duly chosen clergyman. The performance fulfills the appropriate circumstances, namely, the participants (the officiating clergyman, the bride and the groom, and other people who also serve as witnesses), the setting (Church) and the language which work together to satisfy the required felicity conditions. As Austin (1962) proposes, the marriage follows acceptable conventions and procedures, effected by the actual persons within the appropriate circumstance and correctly. The consensual response *I will* by the bride and groom construes the conventional procedure that calls for a pronouncement by the clergyman as well as carries the illocutionary acts of promise and commitment. Thus, the use of the epistemic modal operator such as "will" by the clergyman renders the couple's commitment to the factuality of the propositions explicitly dependent on both the couple's own knowledge and the congregation (witnesses and even God, the omnipresent witness). This modal operator conveys a message of unmistakable demand for total commitment and reverence for the institution of marriage

expected of the couple as Christians. The questions, as asked by the priest, are intended to enable him to carry on the solemnisation ritual. More strategically, the priest's linguistic choices "before God and these witnesses, and by the virtue of the authority vested in me as a minister of the Gospel" are among the felicity conditions that appropriate power to the priest to perform the illocutionary act of "pronounc[ing] you husband and wife". Also, the illocution, "by the virtue of the authority vested in me as a minister of the Gospel", serves not only as the minister's argumentative anchor, but also an evocation of the authority he wields that makes him the right person to perform the act of joining the intending couple as husband and wife. Significantly, the temporal deictic marker, "now", simultaneously changes the state of affairs and the social status of the participants; it is a change from single to married, to responsibility, respect, companionship and religious approval for the performance of conjugal bliss. In the Austian pragmatics, this act defines how "we do things with words". This means that the illocutionary force of the clergy transcends its linguistic borders to work on the discourse participants shared religious sentiments. All these social duties, though not expressly communicated by the officiating priest, are the implied social expectations of married people as well as the social conventions of Christianity.

Fairclough's (1992, 1995) power in, and power behind language is essentially activated and exercised within the mutual knowledge and systems of beliefs by the partners involved in the socio-discursive encounter. The verbal exchange bears the social and performative functions. The proclamation embedded in the verbal cues demands for a shift (or extension) in responsibility and social behaviour which are emplaced within the moral doctrines of Christianity. The proclaimed marriage, here, becomes the avenue to practice enshrined Christians' morality, especially on sexual relationship which is morally abhorred before marriage. A male Christian participant reported that the clergyman is empowered within the Christian moorings to also perform other illocutionary acts through verbal cues which

can bring about certain changes in the life of hearers. Another participant, a female Christian and member of Assemblies of God Church, mentioned that in the doctrines of the Church, the exercise of similar social power is instantiated during the baptism of converts, conversion of baptized members into full membership and the punishment of erring adherents who may be demanded to sit in specific seats at the back rows of the Church until they are restored and/or forgiven. According to her, in each of these situations, the pastor exercises his social power using appropriate words that affect a change in behaviour or status of the hearer.

#### 4.2 Social power in security discourse

Security agencies in Nigeria are the creation of laws established through specific Acts of the National Assembly by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). The linguistic patterns of the agencies are created to “facilitate the execution of the crucial safety and security-related responsibilities [and] express their collective professional orientation and ideology” (Uwen, 2020). These agencies perform essential duties, i.e., to keep Nigeria safe and secure. The agency selected for this study is the Nigeria Police Force (NPF). The NPF, among other functions, is statutorily empowered to prevent and detect crimes, maintain public safety, law and order, and protect the lives and properties of all persons (FGN, 2020). These functions empower the police to arrest, an act that is believed to instantiate the exercise of social power through the use of the force’s professional language. The duty to arrest is spelt out in FGN (2020) Part 7, Section 38 (1a); it stipulates that a police officer is empowered to arrest a suspect “whom he suspects on reasonable grounds of having committed an offence against a law in Nigeria or against the law of any country, unless the law creating the offence provides that the suspect cannot be arrested without a warrant”. This is typified in the police-suspect interaction below:

Excerpt 2

*(A team of armed police officers arrived with official vehicle parked closely to a fenced apartment. One*

*of the officers approached a young man walking towards a fenced building).*

Police officer: Please, gentleman, is this number 24 XXX Street, Calabar?

Passerby: Yes, how may I be of help?

Police officer: Don’t bother. Thank you!

*(While one officer waited in the van with the driver, three other armed personnel entered almost simultaneously into a middle-aged man’s balcony).*

Police officer: Is this the residence of Mr. XYZ?

*(The superior among the team asked, looking at the man with a photograph held in one hand and the right hand rested firmly on the rifle. The other officers stood side by side focused and determined).*

Suspect: Yes, it is.

Police officer: Are you Mr. XYZ?

Suspect: Yes, I am. *(trying to rush into the house but one of the officers quickly held him by the waist).*

Police officer: Mr. XYZ, that will be too dangerous to try. It only shows you are aware of the crime.

Suspect: Which crime?

Police officer: You are under arrest for attempted murder of Mr. XXX, who is also your tenant. You will have to go with us for further interrogation at the station.

Suspect: I am innocent. You see ...

Police officer: *(Interrupting)* You are advised to remain silent, or otherwise whatever you say may be used against you in the course of your prosecution in the court of law.

Suspect: Okay! Let me call my lawyer, take ...

Police officer: *(Interrupting)* You may do that along the way to the station.

*(He orders the two subordinates to drag him to the waiting van).*



The police officer(s) acted in accordance with the provision of FGN (2020), Part 7, Section 35 (2a), which stipulates that “the police officer, the person making the arrest or the police officer in charge of a police station shall inform the suspect of his rights to remain silent or avoid answering any question until after consultation with a legal practitioner or any other person of his own choice”. The police acted on the institutionally conferred authority arising from their training and membership of the NPF.

First, the use of the expression, “Don’t bother. Thank you!” by the police officer typifies the power differentials that hold between the police officer and other citizens, between a powerful person and a powerless person. The remark is a conclusive marker that denies the passerby from making further enquiry related to the police presence in the area. This is followed by the calculated deployment of face-threatening act directed at the suspect, “that will be too dangerous to try”, which implies that since the officer holds a gun, it will be a disastrous end for the suspect if he attempts to escape. This threat deflated the suspect’s attempt to escape arrest. Third, “You will have to go with us for further interrogation at the station”, as used by the policeman, does not suggest that the suspect has a choice. Rather, the modality (will) is used in its strongest form; it signals compulsion and an actual expression of the police officer’s social power, that is, to arrest and detain. The strategically recurrent interruptions of the suspect define his lack of power to express himself. This suppression of the suspect is further achieved by associative moves (the other policemen shoving the suspect towards the police van) and reinforced by the means of clear-cut silencing “You are advised to remain silent”. The non-verbal cue, i.e., the use of “force” to grab the suspect exemplifies how awareness of the power an individual wields gives impetus to and produces action within discursive encounters. *You are under arrest* is within the framework of the linguistic construction, exercise and maintenance of social power. The declarative initiates the translocation, restriction and subsequent confinement of the suspect for further interrogation. The police are

aware of this legal provision, and they deploy it on the suspect. The appropriateness of the arrest procedure, the scene, the language use and participants are within shared sociocultural knowledge.

The procedure of the arrest, as evidenced in the police-suspect interaction above, follows the laid down conditions. It is undertaken by the appropriate authorities who have the statutory mandate to effect the arrest of any person suspected to have committed a crime anywhere in Nigeria using the applicable verbal cues. A female police sergeant reported that the police is a statutory law enforcer whose social power extends to include the release of suspects to regain freedom upon confirmation of not being culpable of offences they were initially arrested for. She added that this kind of release is often affected by the fulfilment of certain bail conditions, and the power behind the language used by the authorised police officer to that effect. However, in this context, we observed an inherent social power imbalance exercised between the police and suspects. The power differentials are seen in the police being ‘powerful’ while the suspects appear ‘powerless’. These unequal social roles and relations also influence language use by both parties, that is, while the police applies offensive and power exerting language, the suspects adopt defensive strategies to cope with the situations. The application of power dynamics in language use is therefore instantiated in different contexts depending on the social roles communicated in language behaviours of the participants. A detained suspect who was released recently narrated that his temporary confinement was an aspect of the power of the police derived from their rules of engagement.

### 4.3 Social power in political discourse

The political domain is an active site for the play of power dynamics among political actors and their subjects. Among communication domains, “politics is an active site for, and an activity in relation to power” (Kattakayam, 2006). This is because the site commands the continuous stimulation of political leaders and their followers at regular conversational interface which demarcates the power relations

among the participants. The construal of power by politicians is perceived in how language is used within a given social context, framed by those who perform and exercise powerful roles (Fiske and Berdahl, 2007). The example used in this study to substantiate the practices of social power in political discourse is the exercise of the prerogative of mercy by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The office of the President of Nigeria is an especially powerful one, and the primary essence is to control power. Beyond “correcting perceived mistakes” through the evocation of the prerogative of mercy, it is a political strategy of fostering national cohesion. It is not about “justice delivery”. Rather, its underlying pragmatism is to present the one who exercises the power with a positive face before their indigents because they want to be seen as one who is peace-loving, and forgives an offender for the sake of national development. Especially in the context of build up to elections, it can work effectively as a means of canvassing votes for the performer’s sake, and by extension, the party. The prerogative of mercy is a serious political weapon, especially in Nigeria. The President derives the power from the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN) 1999 Chapter 6, Part 1, Section 175. It stipulates that the President may “grant any person concerned with or convicted of any offence created by an Act of National Assembly a pardon, either free or subject to lawful conditions”. The CFRN grants similar power to governors of the various federating states.

Excerpt 3

On April 14, 2022, President Muhamadu Buhari exercised the prerogative of mercy:

pursuant to the power to exercise the prerogative of mercy vested in the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in section 175(1-6) of the 1999 *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*, I, President Muhamadu Buhari through the National Council of States has on Tuesday, April 14, 2022 approved the pardon of 159 prisoners, two of whom are Joshua Dariye and Jolly Nyame, ex-governors of Plateau and Taraba States.

This pronouncement in the electronic media,

without necessarily being physically present before the prison authorities or the freed inmates, commanded the full exercise of power to actualise the release of the affected prisoners from the various correctional facilities in the country. That the President was not physically present to perform the illocutionary act explains that social power may be delegated, and may be exercised in the physical absence of the actual power wielder, and in such an instance, the full effect of the power is shifted to the language itself. In this context, the national pardon is actualised through the expressive power of language, in its appropriate utilisation by the appropriate authority. Importantly, the President’s direct reference to the constitution as captured in the expression, “pursuant to the power to exercise the prerogative of mercy vested in the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria” is to alert Nigerians that his act is not an abuse, but a democratic exercise of power which is encapsulated in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The referential anchor, “pursuant to the power”, details the relationship between transactional properties of language use and the social context, which indicates how social “institutional power is not merely described by the language, but created and recreated by it” (Aboh, 2009). The President consciously and linguistically recreates his power to align with its social context.

Brown and Gilman’s (1960) pioneering study explains how the choice of pronouns is affected by the relationship between speaker and listener. It can be deployed to illustrate power inequality and social distance between speakers. It can also be used to assert an individual’s authority or power. The explicit employment of the anaphora “I” alongside the definitive apposition, “President”, vividly illustrates the magnitude of the power the President exerts. The language we employ in any social encounter is never neutral free—it embodies the ideology, power and identity of the user. The President’s use of the deictic element “I” deeply indexes his social identity on the one hand and symbolises his consciousness of the degree of the power he exerts on the other hand. His awareness of the existence of such power informs

his verbal selection of “I”. He is also aware that Nigerians are conscious of his power and its controlling scale. Thus, his use of the power-wielding pronoun alongside its appositive element draws from such consciousness, and passes the message that the President demands with immediate alacrity the performance of the release of the inmates he has commanded in accordance with the constitutional power bestowed on him. A long-time politician informed the researchers that politicians’ goals are not limited to the wealth that may accrue to the office, but also the social influence inherent in the position one holds. He recounted that within the Nigerian constitution, the President and the governors are power bearers who exert monumental influence through their strategic use of language, which is imbued with the capacity to change the state of affairs of the citizens they superintend over.

#### 4.4 Social power in medical discourse

Medical discourse is a rich area of research in contemporary studies. Doctor-patient interactions are daily engagements in medical facilities which are targeted at the wellbeing of the patient. The exchanges in this category help in the exposition of the expertise of the medical professional in the course of rendering services. The (un)pleasant behaviours of doctors towards patients in terms of language use and the latter’s responses are combined to determine the power relations between the communication participants (Ukonu et al., 2020). The communication participants in this context take their concerns into consideration before the formulation of the messages they pass on to each other. While the discourse here targets at interactions that are solely beneficial for the patient’s wellbeing, we acknowledge that there are potential variations in the quality and effectiveness of such messages across different medical contexts and sociocultural milieus. The excerpt below demonstrates the power relations that exist between the doctor and patient in a medical exchange.

Excerpt 4

Doctor: (*Appeared not really bothered on the incon-solable patient placing his two hands on the*

*abdomen, then suddenly looked up, shifted the patient’s folder closer, probably read the content*). Oh Justice XYZ! You complained of severe pains and inflammation, a finger-shape pouch in the right, lower right side of your abdomen, around the navel region?

Patient: Eeh? Yes, sharp swelling with severe pains. It worsens if I attempt to cough, feel like throwing up.

Doctor: I queried appendicitis earlier. Have you done the confirmatory diagnosis I requested? Abdominal x-ray or computerised tomography?

Patient: Tomo ... what? I went with the paper you wrote. They (I) did what is there. (*Handed over the test results to the doctor*).

Doctor: (*Frowned*). I am sorry, you have complicated appendicitis (*speaking and writing simultaneously. Made a few calls on the phone*). We’ll have to do appendectomy immediately before the appendix is ruptured and spread infection. So, I have called the paramedics to set the theatre, we do that right away. So, you won’t go home any time today.

Patient: (*Almost apologetically*). Okay doctor. No problems, my son will ...

The medical register, especially as used by the doctor: *inflammation, abdominal x-ray, computerised tomography, appendicitis, appendectomy and paramedics*, localise the ailment within a frame. The choices are informed by the fact that doctor-patient interactions are often firmly tailored to the substance of the medical encounter. In the encounter above, the phenomenon of dominant and less dominant is exemplified in the doctor-patient interaction. The doctor’s directive *so, you won’t go home any time today*, and the patient’s helpless response, *okay doctor*, typifies the enunciation of power by the doctor and also an elicitation of undisputed submission on the patient’s part. The verbal codes are the linguistic choices that communicate the directive, and the non-verbal is represented by the frown, which denotes an unpleasant circumstance, i.e., the ruptured appendix.

The doctor's use of directives is an acute explication of the exercise of institutionalised power. The institution (hospital) under which he functions confers on him the authority to make people "do things" the way that need to be done. This power vested on him gives him the "right" to condition the patient's movement, "So, you won't go home any time today". This is not an appeal; it is a command, a directive which must be adhered to strictly. These are aspects of explicational strategies in the language of the medical domain (Ellah and Uwen, 2020). In this power play, the doctor is the dominant party, who by institutional provisions, dominates and determines the patient's verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

The doctor's opening comment, *Oh Justice XYZ!*, indexes shared background knowledge between the doctor and the patient. For instance, it reveals the identity of the patient as a judge/lawyer. Also, it provides insight into the patient's state of health. An intriguing aspect of this encounter is the dynamic shift in power. The judge, with absolute power in the courtroom, who has the power to detain is the one who is "detained" by a medical doctor. This has a suggestive parallel; it means that power is fluid, and exists within institutionalised boundaries. Invariably, the doctor can be detained by the pronouncement of the judge in a court encounter. This substantiates the indeterminateness of social power: it can be transformed, changed, substituted and is determined by the social roles of the participants involved in the interactive encounter. The doctor has the power to legitimately admit (as it is the case in this context) or discharge a patient based on the observed and/or diagnosed health condition. A paramedic confirmed that in terms of power relations in hospitals, the doctor's decision is sacrosanct, and must be followed to the later.

#### 4.5 Social power in legal discourse

Language use in the legal domain shows the dynamic deployment of appropriate jargons to communicate the procedures and rules in exercising power and power relations. Legal discourse is among other institutional discourses where pervasive power is ne-

gotiated, enacted and controlled within the specifications of such domains. In such a context, participants draw from their sociocultural dictates to employ linguistic choices that index discourse control and exertion of authority. This is because, apart from institutional discourse tenets, many cultures in Nigeria reverence those in the position of authority and accord them the deserved respect by carrying out instructions given by them. This exertion of gradable social power through language is understood among the major actors in legal interaction. The interaction between the judge and other participants below provides insights into how power is executed through language in courtroom discourse.

##### Excerpt 5

*(The Defendant was directed to the dock and he stood in same. The counsels for the defence and prosecution were engaged in a heated argument bothered on seniority, time of service and bail conditions which drew the attention and intervention of the judge).*

Presiding Judge (*fuming in anger while addressing counsels*):

Enough of this shameless display! This is my court and I shall not allow anyone turns it into a contest hall. Any more of such shameful and unprofessional argument, and I will invoke my powers and cite you for contempt, and I so mean it!

Prosecuting Counsel: My Lord, I sincerely apologise.

Defense Counsel: I apologise to the court, my Lord.

Presiding Judge: Good! (*Staring at the Defendant now*). From the argument, I have deduced that the Defense Council has a bail application which has just been served on the Prosecution Counsel and the Prose-

cution Counsel is not opposing it. What the Prosecution needs is just time to respond to it. Is that correct?

Counsels:

Yes, my Lord.

Presiding Judge:

This case is adjourned to 6<sup>th</sup> April, XXX to enable the Prosecution Counsel to the grounds on the application. I hereby order that the Defendant Mr. XXX be remanded in XXX Correctional Centre pending the determination of the bail application on the next adjourned date. *(Following this pronouncement, two officials of the Nigerian Correctional Service moved towards the Defendant, took him in their official van the facility).*

In the excerpt above, the power in language is used to instantiate power asymmetry in a courtroom setting. The Counsels' unprofessional argument is informed by their social power relations as lawyers. The Presiding Judge's invocation of his power as the chief moderator of court interactions simultaneously elicited an apology from the counsels and ended the heated argument. Upon clarification on the crux of the argument, the Presiding Judge invokes his power to adjourn the case and commit the Defendant to be remanded in the correctional facility pending the determination of the bail application on the adjourned date. Drawing on insights from TLP and SAT, language use in this context becomes a performative utterance from an authorised entity in the appropriate setting. The declaration is intended to, and has ultimately changed the state of affairs of the addressee who, as the Presiding Judge has ordered, will remain in confinement until the next sitting date. The use of declarative acutely explicates the judge's expression of power and control by using fitting registers of the profession. Judges, in this prerogative, "exercise absolute power to dictate, instruct, direct, regulate,

adjourn, rule, order and deliver judgments which transmit psychological impacts on the counsels, litigants and other participants" (Uwen, 2023b). It is expedient for us to, again, focus attention on the Presiding Judge's linguistic instantiation of power and its accompanying illocutionary force. The choice of the "I" personal pronoun serves two functions. In the first instance, it gives the judge a personal voice that distances him from other lawyers in the courtroom, and provides insight into how powerful he is above his colleagues in the legal profession. Second, it portrays the judge as one with the moral power as well as the obligation to decide what happens in the court he presides over. The judge's power and control are indexed in the active verb, "ordered". This "power-rimmed" verb puts an end to the squabble between the two counsels and the court session by adjourning the sitting to a future date.

#### 4.6 Social power in academic discourse

The aspect of academic discourse considered here is the power behind language used during dissertation defence. Academic discourse, as we have other domains of discourse, has its own register that both expresses power and control among participants depending on the social roles of the communication partners. Language use in the academic domain is characterised by technicalities and dynamism. For example, the language of classroom teaching, where social power is also somehow expressed, is technically different from the language of dissertation defence, which we present in this study. This is shown in the example provided below which highlights how power is instantiated between an examiner and a doctoral candidate.

Excerpt 6

*(The doctoral candidate defended his dissertation before a six-person panel; the defence also had lecturers and students in attendance. The candidate was asked to leave the defence room after the examination session. In his absence, the panel discussed the dissertation, the candidate's knowledge of the work and agreed that he should be awarded a doctoral degree in XYZ. After that, he was called into the de-*

fence room.)

Chief Examiner: (*Professor XXX clears her throat.*)  
Mr. XYZ, this panel discussed your work and unanimously agreed that the work is good for the award of a doctoral degree. This is after you must have satisfactorily undertaken the minor corrections. However, by the authority conferred on me as the Chief Examiner, I Professor XXX confer on you the Doctor of Philosophy in XXX. Congratulations, Dr. XYZ.

Other Examiners: (*simultaneously*) Congratulations, Doctor!

Dr. XYZ: (*Cleans misty eyes with the back of his hand*) Thank you, Ma. Thank you, Sir.  
(*Embraces supervisor and mumbled some words.*)

The above examiner-candidate's interaction illustrates the social power the external examiner wields in the award of Ph.D. degree that ultimately changes the status of the candidate and the way he is later addressed. In terms of the status of the candidate, he was known as a "Mr." before the bestowal of the Ph.D. degree. However, after the award, through the Chief Examiner's declarative use of language and the inherent perlocution, she changes the candidate's status from a "Mr." to a "Dr.". Also, the declaration by the Chief Examiner, pronounced within the academic setting, inaugurates the doctoral candidate into a body of academics; the pronouncement brings about a change on his social identity and social belonging. The change in the state of affairs (status) of the addressee effected by power in appropriately use of institutional linguistic choices by the addresser are combined to enact the basic principles of TLP and SAT.

Apart from the foregoing, the obvious and significantly displayed in the expression of power is the Chief Examiner's linguistic calibration. She first

uses the "we-pronoun" to share responsibility with other members of the panel in terms of the decision to award the candidate a Ph.D. degree; to give a sense of collectivity and to create involvement with the department the candidate is defending the dissertation. She, in the exercise of her institutionally conferred social power as the Chief Examiner, later, and deliberately employs the "I-pronoun" to indicate that she is the one who has the final say in the examination. This use of language expresses and sets the social the distance between other examiners and her in terms of social roles, language dynamics, social power and power relations. Despite the fact that other members of the panel are also professors like the Chief Examiner, she is the one who is institutionally recognised to exercise this specific power of pronouncing the approval for the award of the degree which will later be signed by the Vice Chancellor. She does so by creatively using the appropriate language in the appropriate circumstance. A male professor reported that this expression of power is also seen in her use of the deontic modal "must" while addressing the candidate. This indexation of power is procedurally structured which each process (defence, questions, answers, award of the degree, congratulatory cues, and so on). The process corroborates Der Herde, Alex and Alexandra's (2016) assertion that dissertation defence is a process that inaugurates the doctoral candidate into a body of experts which has an impact on the status of the candidate, showing the event as performance that describes the assessment and celebration. The authors argue that in the dissertation setting, and through the external examiner, the university delegates and reinforces its own authority to award doctoral degrees. This institutional re-enactment of social power by the university through its delegated authorities is achieved through the selection of the qualified persons (who in this case are professors in the disciplines chosen by the Ph.D. candidate) who employ the appropriate language of power to instantiate such delegation in the award of post graduate degrees. However, what determines the 'qualified persons' may vary across institutions regarding the qualifications, rank and experience of

the external examiner.

## 5. Conclusions

The study, as exemplified in the selected institutional discourse domains, has demonstrated the dynamics, differentials and pervasiveness in the expression of social power. The power in language and behind language as used in religious, security, political, medical, legal and academic discourses were examined, illuminating how power determines language use and how language, in turn, gives expression to power. As demonstrated in the sampled exchanges, social power is cognitively linked to, and appropriately interpreted by specific communication partners because of the established power relations, social roles, social relations and social ordered norms and practices in a given social context. Social power is not an aspect of wielder's inheritance or naturally attained, it is worked for and achieved through institutional certification and therefore earned. The wielder must formally undergo prescribed training and institutionally certified to carry out the rules of engagement from where power is legitimated and exercised. It is the legitimation that regulates the construction, negotiation and communication of social power through professionally related linguistic cues by the appropriate participants in the appropriate context. Once it is earned and deserved, it becomes an entitlement and a responsibility demonstrated as opportunities call for using the registers of the profession. The social context of its enactment, the physical setting, the social relations and roles of participants determine the (il)legitimacy in the application of social power and the corresponding (in)appropriate response. However, there are other contexts where the influence of factors such as enjoyment of certain privileges, social status, systemic inequalities, political positions, traditional tools and affluence could be other determinants of power dynamics. The use and exercise of power could also vary depending on the (organizational) personality who could employ soft or coercive power exerting strategies to achieve to achieve certain institutional objectives.

There are perceived differences in how participants' social and linguistic roles are manipulated in the exercise of social power that provide clues to linguistic stylisation and appropriation across domains. Social power demonstration in the use of language reveals the volume of power one wields in a downward, horizontal or upward communication traffic. Powerfulness, power appropriation and powerlessness in terms of its high and low in social interactions is not static, and can be substituted and changed depending on the situational context, power relations and the social roles between the communication partners. The commonality in social power cues is that they are expressed with the expectation of a subordinating response from the hearer. The wielder and actor do so for the benefit or as punishment (that is, positive or negative) for the hearer depending on the given circumstance. In terms of linguistic choices, social power is enacted to generate different outcomes such as punishment, confinement, freedom, reward, quality health, reformation and social order, among others.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, GOU; methodology, GOU and ENA; software, GAO and UEE; validation, GOU and ENA formal analysis, GOU and RA; investigation, GOU and ENA; resources, HIA and BBE; data curation, GOU and HIA; writing—original draft preparation, GOU and RA; writing—review and editing, GOU and ENA; visualization, ENA; supervision, ENA and GAO; project administration, BBE and HIA; funding acquisition, Not applicable. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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