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## PRAGMATICS OF ACTORS' INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION IN SUSPECTS' CONFESSIONAL STATEMENTS IN NIGERIAN ONLINE NEWS REPORTS

Studies on suspects' confessional statements during interrogations abound. However, sufficient attention has not been paid to suspects' confessional statements as captured in newspaper reports, especially how suspects deploy discursive resources to frame inclusion and exclusion in crime. Thus, this study attempts to examine how suspects recruit context-sensitive linguistic devices in their confessional statements reported in Nigerian dailies and blogs. Seven inclusion/exclusion strategies are identified in this work. The study states that these linguistic strategies serve various functions, primarily to amplify or downplay the severity of the crime committed, and to demphasise the suspects' involvement in an attempt to pursue exoneration. Depending on the situation they find themselves in, suspects leverage these linguistic devices to construct narratives of guilt, ignorance, innocence, withdrawal, shared responsibility,

self-defense, and remorse. It will be interesting to see how future studies would incorporate a corpus-aided approach into this study.

Keywords: Suspects in Nigeria, confessional statements, inclusion and exclusion, online reports

## 1. Introduction

Confessional statements have become an integral part of criminal investigations and legal proceedings in Nigeria (Oyefeso and Ogunmoyero 2024). These statements are usually extracted from suspects involved in criminal investigations in police stations and court trials. They serve as primary sources of information for both legal proceedings and the public, portraying perceptions of guilt, innocence, and ignorance. However, it is worthy of note that the linguistic pattern of these confessions is usually not straightforward. Suspects are fond of employing a range of linguistic devices to maintain a balance between acknowledging involvement and minimising their responsibility.

Anjorin-Ojewole and Idowu (2024) reveal how suspects often flout Grice's Maxims—specifically the maxims of quantity and manner—to divert attention from incriminating evidence and reduce tension when they are being paraded. They further stressed how suspects manipulate language to create distractions and obscure their statements, with the ultimate goal of evading legal consequences. This suggests that the unique linguistic features within the police community contribute to the complexities of communication during suspects' confession. Corroborating this, Oyeleye, Sunday and Omole (2024) highlight certain discourse strategies employed by accused rapists to frame inclusion and exclusion during interrogations. These strategies are often aimed at influencing the investigator's perception and interpretation of the narratives, thereby serving the accused goal of face-saving, allegation-refuting, and offence-minimising. The study also describes the manipulative nature of the suspects to create a favourable impression, by using language to divert attention from their culpability. They do this by framing themselves as victims of false accusations or portraying the victim in a negative light to shift blame.

Suspects, aware of the potential consequences of their assertions, often strategically deploy linguistic devices to construct narratives that either amplify or diminish their involvement in the alleged crime. Sunday and Akinrinlola (2021) reinforce this by asserting that suspects acknowledge their disadvantaged position during interrogations and they consciously refute incriminating statements made by the police. In other words, suspects employ various strategies during police interrogations to manage their denials and avoid incrimination. These include explanatory and empathic denials. They do this by

attempting to protect their reputation and mitigate the perceived threat from the interrogating officer and shifting the focus from guilt to a collaborative dialogue. This underscores a narrative whereby suspects manipulate denial as a discursive strategy to invalidate the testimonies of officers and ultimately escape potential consequences. As posited in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that language is not merely a tool for conveying information but also a means of performing actions and constructing social realities (Lowry 2023), in the context of confessional statements, this translates to suspects utilising language to manage their self-presentation, negotiate their culpability, and potentially seek exoneration.

Online news reports, with their wide reach and rapid dissemination, have not only opened a new way of storytelling in the country; they also play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of criminal cases (Chukwu 2019). These reports often present confessional statements as direct evidence, influencing public opinion and potentially impacting legal proceedings. Specifically, actors may employ strategies of exclusion, such as passive voice constructions or impersonal pronouns, to distance themselves from direct involvement in the criminal act. Conversely, they may employ strategies of inclusion, such as first-person plural pronouns, to distribute responsibility among a group and minimise their individual answerability. The pragmatic functions of these linguistic strategies vary. They may serve to amplify the severity of the crime, thereby emphasising the need for justice and potentially influencing public sentiment. Alternatively, they may be used to de-emphasise the suspect's involvement, portraying them as a passive participant or an unwitting accomplice. These strategies can also be used to construct narratives of ignorance, portraying the suspect as unaware of the consequences of their actions, or narratives of withdrawal, suggesting a disassociation from the criminal act.

The examination of confessional statements in Nigeria has attracted scholarly investigation, with existing studies focusing on various aspects such as their admissibility (Emokpae and Abdulsalami 2024; Idem 2020; Ogunmodede 2023 and Ilesanmi et al. 2024), manner of recording (Obidimma and; Muojeke 2023 and Obiaraeri 2024), and police-suspect interaction (Ajayi, Akinrinlola and Adebayo 2024; Akinrinlola 2021a, b, c and d; Akinrinlola and Ajayi 2022; Sunday and Akinrinlola 2021; Akinrinlola, Ajayi and Ojo 2024). These works have explained the inherent complexities of these statements, which are often obtained under duress or in situations of stark power imbalance. However, there exists a gap in the existing literature regarding the pragmatic devices employed by actors to manipulate law enforcement agencies and the public within the confessions, particularly as they are presented to the people via online news platform. Aina's (2021), and Oyeleye, Sunday and Omole's (2024) works come closest to the current work in that they provide an exposition on the pragmatic strategies deployed in police-suspect interrogations. However, given the scope of the two studies, none of them mentions the pragmatic devices

employed by suspects to frame inclusion or exclusion during confessional statements in online news reports.

This research, therefore, aims to bridge the gap in existing literature by examining the pragmatics of inclusion and exclusion within these confessional statements as reported in online news in Nigeria, with premium attention on how context-sensitive linguistic devices are deployed to construct narratives of guilt, innocence, ignorance, denial and mitigated responsibility.

Considering the above context, the specific objectives of this study include; identification and analysis of the context-sensitive linguistic devices employed by actors in confessional statements within Nigerian online news reports, examining the pragmatic functions of these linguistic devices in constructing narratives of inclusion and exclusion, and investigating the way these pragmatic strategies are utilised to frame innocence, withdrawal, and ignorance.

## **2. Literature Review**

A plethora of studies have thoroughly engaged confessional statements in Nigeria from both linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives. From a legal point of view, Obidimma and Muojeke (2023) explain the key role that confessional statements play in the administration of criminal justice in Nigeria. The study drew insights from section 15 of the 2015 Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA) and section 13 of the Administration of Criminal Justice Law Act 2022 of Anambra State to provide exposition on types of confessional statements, manner of recording, procedure for obtaining and admissibility of confessional statements. Similarly, Omolaja (2021) examines the options for regulating the taking of confessional statements in Nigeria and the implication of non-compliance with the laid down procedure for obtaining confessional statements.

From a linguistic vantage, Aina (2021) examines the acts deployed by suspects while being interrogated, highlighting their use of informative linguistic act to supply the information requested throughout the interrogation. Suspects often provide voluntary statements in response to questions posed by Investigating Police Officers, which are key to gathering reliable information. The study emphasises the importance of understanding these interactions to enhance the analysis of confessional statements in legal contexts. In their study, Masip and Herrero (2013) explain how suspects accused of serious crime usually manipulate behaviour to appear not guilty during behaviour analysis interview. Findings from the study revealed that guilty respondents employed evasive tactics while those innocent provided consistent and detailed responses. The study however failed to mention certain pragmatic devices employed by suspects which may influence their responses.

Commenting on the credibility of confessional statements, Yildiz and Baert (2021) report that perpetrators' confessions often serve self-serving purposes such as obscuring truth and accountability rather than establishing them. They argue that confessional statements can simultaneously acknowledge wrongdoing while employing rhetorical strategies that mitigate the confessors' guilt. On manner of recording, Okedele (2024) describes the imposition of video recording of confessional statements a 'good difficulty'. He posits that mandating video recording of confessional statements will add credibility to prosecution of cases and ultimately improve the standard of the Nigeria Criminal Justice System. He however decries the huge amount of investment that will go into the provision of video recording facilities in many detention centers across Nigeria.

With regard to the linguistic devices deployed by actors in confessional statements, Oyeleye, Sunday and Omole (2024) highlight suspects' deployment of deception, emotional expressions, and excessive details (as pragmatic strategies) to manipulate investigators' perceptions during interrogations. It stresses the importance of recognising these tactics to enhance the effectiveness of investigations, as suspects often exploit socio-cultural factors to influence their narratives. The work also advocates for a shift from traditional interrogation methods to more result-driven interviewing tactics which can better help in uncovering the truth in confessional statements. Reinforcing this, Anjorin-Ojewole and Idowu (2024) assert that accused individuals often provide unnecessary details or obscure statements to distract investigators from incriminating evidence, thereby manipulating the interrogation process. The study contends that these pragmatic strategies serve as communicative tools for suspects aiming to reduce the punishment for the crimes they have committed. Considering the methodological outlook of the two studies (with sole focus on interrogations and confessional statements obtained in police stations), none of them investigated confessional statement from the perspective of online news reports.

Given the foregoing, it is evident that quite a number of scholars have critically examined confessional statements from different domains in Nigeria and even beyond. Studies (Aina 2021; Yildiz and Baert 2021; Oyeleye, Sunday and Omole 2024; Anjorin-Ojewole and Idowu 2024) have laid the foundation that actors often deploy certain linguistic devices during confessions. These studies are relevant to the current study in that they mention certain pragmatic strategies employed when suspects are being interrogated or paraded. However, the difference is that existing studies have largely focused on statements obtained in police stations and court trials; this current study investigates confessional statements from the angle of online news reports, with regards to how certain linguistic devices deployed by actors often influence the narrative. Summarily, existing studies have largely glossed over confessional statements as reported in

online news in the nation. It is against this background that this study examines the pragmatics of actors' inclusion and exclusion in confessional statements in Nigerian online news reports.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

In this study, aspects of the tenets of Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmatics Act Theory, henceforth MPAT, are employed as the theoretical anchor. His theory advocates for a modern view of pragmatics that is embedded in social and situational aspects of language use (Shappeck 2004). In respect to this, MPAT introduces the concept of 'pragmemes'. These are situation-bound prototypes of language use. These stress the importance of considering the dynamic interplay between situational context and linguistic expressions on one hand, and socio-cultural and societal factors on the other, when it comes to interpreting language use in context (Nodoushan 2017). MPAT is a departure from the traditional speech act theory, which primary focus is on grammatical correctness. Mey's approach prioritises the importance of understanding participants and the context to explain communication. The theory highlights the integration of verbal and non-verbal elements in communication, positing that meaning is realised through situated interactions and not in isolation (Agyekum 2021). MPAT explains that interactants produce speech acts, conversational acts, physical acts, psychological acts and prosodic acts during communication. All these are articulated in varied contexts: INF (inference); REF (reference); VCE (Voice); SSK (Shared Situation Knowledge); MPH (Metaphor); and M (Metapragmatic Joker). The metapragmatic joker refers to certain metapragmatic activities. A good example of metapragmatic activity are indexical expressions which are context-sensitive and so necessitates adequate mastery of the context of an utterance (Acheoah 2015).

Existing studies (Kecskes 2010; Akinrinlola 2016; Nodoushan 2017; Agyekum 2021; Aina 2021; Robbin and Adhlakun 2022; Fafiyebi, Agbeloba and Bamigboye 2023; Oyeleye, Sunday and Omole 2024) have employed the theory to analyse how language is used in specific discourse contexts. These include; situation-based utterances, police-suspect interactions, nation building, language of alms and begging, and sermonic discourse. Aspects of the tenets of MPAT are particularly useful for this study, as it provides a valuable framework for understanding language use in context, particularly how suspects employ certain context-sensitive devices in their confessional statements, and how these devices function to construct a narrative of ignorance, innocence, shared responsibility, withdrawal, and guilt.

#### 4. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate how suspects use linguistic devices to frame inclusion and exclusion in their confessional statements. The data for the study comprise news reports from Nigerian newspapers and blogs, which provide a rich source of information for our analysis. The data were collected from seven Nigerian newspapers and blogs, including *The Guardian*, *Vanguard News*, *Tribune Online*, *Neusroom*, *Nairametrics*, *Pulse NG*, and *Punch Newspapers*. The data culled from a pool of over twenty (20) reported cases of various crimes, such as theft, robbery, kidnapping, ritual killing, rape, and murder, spanning from 2016 to 2024. The recent timeframe of the data makes this research novel and contemporary. The data were easily accessible and obtained by searching the 'crime' category of the selected newspapers and blogs.

From the initial dataset, six reported cases of theft, ritual killing, robbery, and murder were purposely sampled from *The Guardian*, *Pulse NG*, *Vanguard News*, *Nairametrics*, and *Punch Newspapers*. These cases were selected due to the interesting ways in which actors deploy pragmatic devices to distribute responsibility and frame withdrawal, innocence, ignorance, and guilt. The selected news articles were thoroughly read and analysed using Jacob Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory as a guiding framework. Since the data are originally in English, there were no translation issues to consider. The analysis focuses on how suspects employ certain pragmatic devices to construct a narrative of inclusion and exclusion in their confessional statements. The limitation of the study lies in the data size. While the data offer valuable insights, it could benefit from a larger sample size. Similarly, a bigger sample size could capture the full context or nuances of confessional statements in Nigerian online news reports. This limitation notwithstanding, findings from the study provide a veritable template for further studies to explore.

#### 5. Data Analysis

With regard to the sampled data, suspects usually employ a variety of linguistic devices in their confessional statements to frame inclusion and exclusion in criminal activities. This section is devoted to the critical engagement of eight excerpts from six news reports from Nigerian dailies and blogs. We have identified various inclusion/exclusion strategies deployed by suspects in their confessions, including empathizing, denying, displacing, justifying, admitting, delineating, distributing, regretting and pleading. These will serve as the foundation for our data discussion. Given the overlapping nature of the various strategies foregrounding actors' inclusion and exclusion

in the sampled data, our analysis focuses on the identification, discussion and illustration of how these strategies are used to achieve the two in confessional statements.

### **5.1. Empathising: Empathetic involvement in crime and criminality**

When giving confessional statements during interrogation or parading, suspects may construct a narrative portraying themselves as reluctant participants in a criminal act. This strategic reference (REF) to empathy as the cause of their involvement in crime is an inclusion strategy used to signal their conditional involvement in a crime. In such situation, they appear to be motivated by empathy for their accomplice(s) or even someone that is not involved in the crime. They often present their actions as acts of loyalty or protection, shifting the focus from personal gain to a perceived moral obligation. This narrative is usually deployed by suspects to function as a defense mechanism.

#### **Excerpt 1**

"It was an unfortunate incident. We initially wanted to rob him, but when he did not stop, we had to jettison the idea before we were arrested by the police. My friend, Celestine needed N1.6 million to start up a business and we looked everywhere for loan, but there was nobody to give us...It was while we were looking for loan that somebody told us that we would need collateral to get a loan. We had wanted to use that Toyota Corolla as our collateral to get the money. Unfortunately, we were unable to rob the driver of his car"

Excerpt 1 presents an attempted robbery scenario involving two young men, Sule and Celestine. The incident happened at Anthony Village area of Lagos state. In his confession, Sule deploys the concept of empathy as a pragmatic device to justify his involvement in the attempted robbery. He attempts to tap into the interrogator's sense of compassion by mentioning his support for his friend's business as his motive for attempting the robbery. In essence, what he is saying is that he understands his friend's desperation, and he got involved in the robbery plan out of the desire to help him. Inferentially (INF), this appeal to empathy functions as a pragmatic strategy by the suspect (Sule) to construct himself as one that does not have criminal tendencies but only moved by a sense of empathy to help his friend out of his terrible condition.

The core of his confession rests on the context of his friend's financial desperation. Sule lays emphasis on the money Celestine (his friend/accomplice) needed to start his business. "My friend, Celestine needed N1.6 million to start up a business" and their efforts to secure a loan which proved abortive" and we looked everywhere for loan, but there was nobody to give us" This declaration constructs a narrative where the attempted robbery is presented as a desperate act born out of necessity but not a product of inherent criminality. This is further

echoed by Sule's mention of the "collateral" requirement for the loan. This suggests a legitimate, although failed, attempt to get money through conventional means. It presents a situation where the robbery is framed as an ill-conceived final solution to a pressing issue, rather than a premeditated crime. The suspect uses the plural pronoun 'we' to include himself in the criminal act. However, he quickly distances himself from the primary motivation by shifting focus to Celestine's need (business capital). By stating "My friend, Celestine needed N1.6 million" he presents himself as a supportive accomplice rather than an instigator. This explanation places the primary agency and motivation on Celestine, while Sule downplays his role as a mere extension of Celestine's need. To further distance themselves from being hardened criminals, Celestine states that "Unfortunately, we were unable to rob the diver of his car". This statement is paradoxical in nature. While it acknowledges their intent, it inferentially (INF) suggests a lack of competence or resolve on their part in executing the criminal act. In a clear attempt to mitigate their actions, he claims that "we had to jettison the idea before we were arrested". This means that they abandoned their criminal intent, suggesting a prevalence of a moral compass. This narrative frames them as individuals who ultimately abandoned their criminal intentions.

## 5.2. Denying: Outright denial of involvement

When confronted with the reality of their actions during interrogation, it is not unusual for suspects to deny their involvement in a criminal act. They employ various linguistic devices to argue for their innocence. Their ultimate goal is to exonerate themselves from the consequences of their actions.

### Excerpt 2

Adeleke said: "When I was on my way to remove my power bank, I mistakenly hit my elbow with the navy officer. He slapped me and gave me a headbutt. At that moment, we didn't know that he was a naval officer. After the fisticuffs, we took a bike and traced him. After catching up with him, I confronted him, but he refused to say anything. The friend of the naval officer used his elbow to hit Ayomide, it was at that point that Ayomide picked up the iron rod and started hitting him. I did not hit him at all, it was Ayomide that was hitting him. I was already out of Idoani in a bid to escape when my mother's elder brother called me to report to the station...The third suspect, Shagari Francis, 17, in an interview said: "I didn't hit the naval officer. I was just following them. I was arrested when my mother took me to the station to ask if I was part of them."

Excerpt 2 is a murder case. Three suspects were arrested for allegedly killing a naval officer in Ido-Ani, Ose Local Government Area of Ondo State. Adeleke engages in an act of self-distancing. Minimization and denial are rooted in his statement. In his explanation of the initial altercation that led to their retaliation,

he says "When I was on my way to remove my power bank, I mistakenly hit my elbow with the naval officer" This establishes a context of accidental physical contact. The linguistic choice "mistakenly" is carefully chosen to deny, mitigate and reduce his action to an unintentional event. Afterwards, he shifts the focus to the naval officer's reaction: "He slapped me and gave me a head-butt" Making recourse to the shared situational knowledge (SSK) of the context of provocation, he leverages the officer's aggression to construct a narrative of provocation. With the statement, Adeleke portrays himself as a victim of unprovoked violence. It is worthy of note that Adeleke's description of tracing and confronting the officer highlights his active participation (inclusion) in the criminal act. However, he is so quick to exclude (exclusion) himself from the fatal act. This is evident in his attribution of the violent attack to Ayomide: "It was Ayomide that picked up the iron rod and started hitting him. I did not hit him at all, it was Ayomide that was hitting him" This is a deliberate attempt to distance himself from the criminal act. He simply presents himself as a witness, not a perpetrator.

His declaration, "I was already out of Idoani in a bid to escape" shows that he knew a crime had been committed, and he was attempting to remove himself from the crime scene. This attempt at distancing himself from the location of the crime reveals a deliberate attempt to exclude his involvement in the violent act. Shagari, the youngest of the three suspects, adopts a strategy of passive presence, indicating that he was with them when the crime was committed but played no role in it. To achieve this, he employs a performative denial, "I didn't hit the naval officer" He uses the phrase "just following them" to portray his presence as merely observational without active participation. This statement is a concise denial of his involvement in the criminal act. He appeals to an external validation by saying "I was arrested when my mother took me to the station" This appeal functions as a pragmatic device aimed at bolstering his claim of innocence. Also, the statement frames him as a bystander rather than an active participant in the violent act. In other words, he attempts to remove himself from the context of violent action with his claim of being a passive observer. Shagari's narrative positions him as a victim of circumstance who was caught in the aftermath of a crime he did not commit.

Summarily, the two suspects employ pragmatic strategies (including SSK and lexicalization, and passivisation of presence for instance), to manipulate the contextual interpretation of their actions. While Adeleke leverages the shared context of the incident to distribute blame and minimize his involvement, Shagari completely dissociates himself from the violent act. With the help of MPAT, these statements are understood not to be merely isolated utterances, instead, they are deeply embedded in the social and legal context of a criminal investigation. Knowing full well that the stakes are high, the strategic use of language by the suspects in their confessions is inevitable.

### 5.3. Displacing: Displacement of ownership

During confessions, suspects may employ displacement of ownership, shifting ownership of an object of crime to someone or something else. In some cases, they attribute ownership of an incriminating instrument to an entity that is not involved in the crime. They do this in order to escape the potential punishment(s) associated with the possession of such objects.

Excerpt 3

"the gun that was recovered from us belonged to one of our friends. He is no more in Lagos. We were using it to protect ourselves from hoodlums in Apapa when we were working there"

Excerpt 3 is an attempted robbery case involving two young men, Sule and Celestine. The whole excerpt is Celestine's confession. Celestine introduces a third party when explaining how they obtained the gun in their possession. This narrative does not only mitigate their culpability, it also displaces their ownership of the gun. By submitting that 'the gun that was recovered from us belonged to one of our friends' he shifts the responsibility for the weapon to an individual who is not involved in the attempted robbery. This is a strategic move to create a narrative that they are not the original owners of the gun, and as such, they are not the primary culprits. The assertion, "he is no more in Lagos" further reinforces this argument. The friend's absence is key to the interpretation of Celestine's confession. It prevents a possible contradiction or rebuttal. Since the friend is currently not in Lagos where the incident happened, he cannot be questioned to verify or deny Celestine's claim. It is also observed that the identity of the friend is not revealed in his confession. Situating Celestine's confession within MPAT, his statement is not merely informative. It is an attempt to manage the situation, minimise his and his accomplice's involvement and influence the law enforcement agents' interpretation of their action (attempted robbery). He attempts to create a separation between themselves (he and his accomplice) and the gun by attributing its ownership to a distant friend. Celestine employs discursive choices to construct a narrative that serves his interest. Simply put, his statement reveals not only what he says but also what he wants to achieve by saying it.

### 5.4. Justifying: Justification through self-defense

In criminal cases, particularly those involving attempted murder or murder, suspects may claim self-defense as a justification for their actions. They typically argue that their actions were a last resort, taken in response to a perceived initial attack or threat from their victim. They present their actions as defensive, in a bid to minimise their guilt or establish their innocence.

#### Excerpt 4

“He later became violent trying to get to me and I was resisting and defending myself. At some point, he hit my head on the wall and I also retaliated...At some point, he was chasing me around the kitchen cabinet. I took a knife and stabbed his neck. I approached the door and he followed me. I stabbed him twice on the neck side. I threw the knife to the bed and he was going for it but I also went for it. He dragged the knife with me and it broke and he fell on the floor.”

Excerpt 4 presents a murder case. A 21-year-old female undergraduate (Chidinma) was arrested for killing her married lover. The incident happened in Lagos State. The entirety of Chidinma's confession is rooted in the context of self-defence. Her statement can be interpreted as a series of pragmatic acts designed to portray her violent actions not as aggressive but as a much-needed response to a life-threatening situation. The opening statement in the excerpt, "He later became violent" immediately sets the tone (VCE) for a narrative of victimhood and reactive behaviour. The phrase "became violent" frames the deceased as the initiator of the attack and establishes him as an aggressor. Also, Chidinma employs the phrase "resisting and defending myself" to present her actions as justifiable responses to the initial aggression initiated by the deceased. She attempts to describe her action as something anyone in her shoes would have done.

The use of the conjunction "and" links her late lover's violent act directly to her defensive response. All these are a carefully employed pragmatic strategy of self-preservation aimed at presenting and justifying her actions as not offensive. Her subsequent statement, "At some point, he hit my head on the wall and I also retaliated" further solidifies her self-defence narrative. The explicit act of physical attack on Chidinma "hit my head on the wall" presents a perceived threat. Her response, "I also retaliated" is presented as a direct consequence of this assault. The choice of the word "retaliated" while acknowledging her own violent action (inclusion in the violent act), carries a connotation of "an eye for an eye" It suggests a lack of initial intent to harm. Painting a shared situational knowledge (SSK) of an attack scenario, she aims to normalise her attack as a natural human response to being physically assaulted. Chidinma amplifies the sense of danger she might have felt by explaining how he was chased around by the deceased; "At some point, he was chasing me around the kitchen cabinet" This introduces an element of pursuit and restriction. It paints a picture of her being under duress and being confined to a particular spot. Her subsequent act of stabbing her victim could be understood pragmatically within this context of being pursued. This act, which would otherwise be interpreted as violent, is presented as a desperate measure taken in a situation where she perceived herself to be in danger.

While her act of "taking a knife" suggests a deliberate action, the preceding context of being chased around (the kitchen cabinet) presents this deliberation as an act of self-defence rather than a premeditated assault. Chidinma strategically presents his continued pursuit ("he followed me") as a reason for her further violent action (repeated stabbing). She initially attempts to distance herself from the knife by saying "I threw the knife to the bed" However, the victim's attempt to get it and the ensuing struggle for it are presented as evidence of the man's continued aggression, and the need to defend herself. While her statement provides an account of the events leading to the murder, a thorough look at it reveals the strategic use of language to frame her actions as the necessity of self-preservation, in the face of a violent attack.

### **5.5. Admitting: Direct admission of guilt**

During interrogation, suspects may directly admit to committing the offense they are accused of. In such cases, the police may offer incentives, such as reduced sentences or an acquittal, in exchange for a detailed confession. However, these promises often go unfulfilled, serving primarily to elicit a confession that can aid in the investigation.

#### **Excerpt 5**

"Yes, there is no need lying to you. I am a notorious armed robber. I specialise in snatching commercial motorcycles...I usually operate by disarming the rider with either a rod or strong stick after picking a motorcycle on charter to a lonely place...On the way, I would lie that my personal effect had fallen off from me and the rider would stop. I would then hold the rider unaware by using the rod or stick to hit the motorcyclist on his head or chest, drag him into the bush and zoom off with the motorcycle before he recovers, if he is lucky to be alive. I agree that I am wicked and a murderer. Anyone that kills is wicked and a murderer. I have committed grievous offences"

Excerpt 5 is a case of robbery. A notorious robber (Olayinka), who doubles as a serial killer, was arrested in Abeokuta, Ogun State. His opening statement, "Yes, there is no need lying to you. I am a notorious armed robber" functions as a direct assertive act. He clearly expresses a belief about himself, describing his profession as being "notorious". This is not a mere description; instead, it is a self-identification that carries huge social and legal weight. This opening declaration implies a decision to be truthful, thereby setting the stage for subsequent admissions of his guilt. The subsequent statement, "I specialise in snatching commercial motorcycles" opens the stage for the description of his mode of operation. He further provides details about his methods by painting a picture of his criminal activities. His choice of words leaves no room for ambiguity. They are direct assertions of his criminal identity. The use of words

like "disarming" "hit" "drag" and "zoom off" highlights the forceful nature of his violent actions. A key moment in his admission of guilt comes with the statement, "I agree that I am wicked and a murderer" This statement can have several interpretations. Firstly, the phrase "I agree that" functions as an acknowledgement, indicating his acceptance of the moral and legal implications of his actions.

By describing himself as "wicked and a murderer", he reveals his internal state and also acknowledges the despicable nature of his actions. This expressive act could be interpreted in several ways – as being genuinely remorseful, a strategic move to reduce his punishment, or simply an acceptance of the consequences of his crime. Furthermore, his declaration, "Anyone that the kills is wicked and a murderer" functions as a generalizing assertive act. He attempts to normalise his understanding of his crime, even while acknowledging its severity. However, it also subtly reinforces his admission of guilt by aligning his specific acts with a condemned category. The closing statement in the excerpt, "I have committed grievous offences" functions as a conclusive assertive act. It sums up the entirety of his confessed actions. The word 'grievous' further amplifies the severity of his crime. This closing statement solidifies his confession and highlights the suspect's understanding of the legal implications of his actions.

## **5.6. Delineating/distributing:**

### **Delineation of roles and distribution of responsibility**

Suspects often employ strategic language to delineate roles and distribute responsibility among the actors directly or indirectly involved in the criminal activities they are being accused of. They do this to minimise their own involvement and shift focus away from their actions.

#### **Excerpt 6**

"Ademola, said he was getting the human parts from dead bodies buried at the cemetery, before he graduated to killing – a job he had been doing for years...Ademola said he moved to killing people to harvest parts because his clients requested for fresh parts and not dead body parts. He said while he and some members of the gang would do the killings, he supplied the parts...Ademola said he usually supplied the parts to a 52-year-old man, Ahmed Wahab, aka Alfa Bororo, who operated from Badagry in Lagos State and Ogun, to supply his clients...According to him, a fresh human head is sold at ₦45,000 or ₦50,000 while a dry human head sells between ₦30,000 and ₦35,000, heart for ₦70,000 and hands for ₦50,000. Ademola also said that he had only killed two people, which included a friend he met through the social media, before he was arrested. He said before they killed anyone, the herbalist will be contacted to consult the oracle if the killing would be successful or would bring trouble. The suspect claimed that a traditional ruler in Badagry requested him to kill his son that was giving him problems"

Excerpt 6 is a case of ritual killing. Ten suspected ritualists were arrested in Lagos State. In the reported confessional statement in the above excerpt, Ademola carefully employs language to confess to his crimes and also to distribute culpability among various individuals. The opening part of his confession establishes a progression in his involvement, saying he initially "was getting the human parts from dead bodies buried at the cemetery, before he graduated to killing" By stating that he "moved to killing people to harvest parts because his clients requested for fresh parts and not dead body parts" he attempts to attribute the responsibility for the shift in his actions to the demand of his clients. The phrase "clients requested" inferentially (INF) positions Ademola as someone providing a service and responding to market demands, thereby deflecting some agency for the decision to murder. The suspect clearly highlights his role within the criminal activities. He stated that "while he and some members of the gang would do the killings, he supplied the parts"

By using the phrase "some members of the gang" he introduces his accomplices and diffuses responsibility beyond himself. He frames the gang members as participants in the killings and implies a jointly taken action where his primary role was distribution (of human body parts) rather than direct infliction of death. This division of labour strategically aims to create a distinction between the act of killing and the act of supplying. The details of the prices of different body parts – "a fresh human head is sold at ₦45,000 or ₦50,000 while a dry human head sells between ₦30,000 and ₦35,000, heart for ₦70,000 and hands for ₦50,000" – do not only highlights the transactional nature of his activities but also introduces his consumers who can be regarded as his accomplices. It portrays the sale of human body parts as a business with established market values and available consumers. His claim of killing only two people is meant to minimize his guilt. The use of "only" is a deliberate pragmatic choice to downplay the severity of his crime, even though the act of killing even one person is a serious offence. This quantitative claim is intended to lessen the scale of his culpability. To introduce another actor involved in the criminal activities, Ademola states that "before they killed anyone, the herbalist will be contacted to consult the oracle if the killing would be successful or would bring trouble" By describing the consultation of Oracle as a prerequisite, he posits that the decision to kill was partly guided or sanctioned by a higher authority (herbalist) and a belief system (the oracle). This again shifts the agency of the killings away from his own volition. Ademola's claim that a traditional ruler in Badagry "requested him to kill his son that was giving him problems" represents a significant attempt to shift responsibility to an outside actor. By attributing the request for murder to a respected figure that commands authority in the society, the suspect tries to portray himself as acting on the instruction of someone superior to him. He paints this picture in a bid to mitigate his own moral and legal culpability in the murder. Summarily, the suspect

embarks on explicit role descriptions and introduction of external influences to distribute responsibility and ultimately minimise his involvement in the criminal activities.

### **5.7. Regretting/Pleading: Performative remorse and pleading for leniency**

It is common for suspects to express regret over their involvement in a crime when giving confessional statements. They often present themselves as remorseful and sober, aiming to appear sincere. Oftentimes, this expression of remorse is followed by a plea for leniency, as they portray themselves as individuals ready to turn over a new leaf.

#### **Excerpt 7**

"I was arrested for armed robbery. When I was been transported to the Police Command in Osogbo, inside the police patrol van that I was conveyed, I stole a phone. I don't know that it is a police phone. I beg please don't vex...I told the police not to be angry with me. I don't know when I did that. I took the phone into the police cell without them knowing. I removed the SIM card, I want to use the phone to call my family because they don't know I have been arrested for armed robbery...I have been here for about two months. They later came to search me in the cell where I was and discovered the phone on me. Please tell them to forgive me. I won't do it again"

Excerpt 7 involves theft and robbery. A 23-year-old male suspect, Emmanuel, was arrested for armed robbery and stole a policeman's phone inside the patrol van en route to the station. Emmanuel's opening statement acknowledges his involvement in a criminal act: "I was arrested for armed robbery" This statement immediately frames him as someone involved in an illegal act. The subsequent part of his statement provides details on how he stole a police officer's phone. He expresses a lack of knowledge about the phone's ownership by stating, "I don't know that it is a police phone" The suspect constructs a context of ignorance to downplay the severity of his action. This also functions as a justification for engaging in theft. He attempts to present a narrative suggesting that he would not have stolen the phone if he had known it belonged to a police officer. The statement, "I beg please don't vex" is a direct appeal for a soft landing. It showcases the suspect's shared situational knowledge (SSK) and awareness of the potential consequences of his actions, particularly with respect to how suspects and criminals are treated in the Nigerian context. Emmanuel's narrative is designed to elicit sympathy from the law enforcement agency.

By expressing a desire to contact his family with the stolen phone, he humanizes himself and highlights a relatable motivation. Telling the police not to be angry with him is another sign of his remorse. His admission of wrongdoing,

"I took the phone into the police cell without them knowing" is tempered by the claim of not knowing when the act occurred: "I don't know when I did that" This construction of ignorance is meant to express his regret in engaging in a criminal act. He pleads for leniency by asking his audience to beg the police on his behalf: "Please tell them to forgive me" He also demonstrates a willingness to change by stating, "I won't do it again" This is intended to assure the law enforcement agents that the behaviour will not recur. While Emmanuel's confession appears remorseful, it is important to consider the potential motivations. His statement might be a deliberate attempt to manipulate the situation, rather than an expression of genuine remorse.

#### Excerpt 8

"I am now remorseful because, there is nothing as good as freedom. I have been in cell for many weeks now. It is painful that my friends that I spent the money I made through ignoble business have all rejected me. None of them have come to see me. Anytime I come out from this mess, I will use my tongue to count my teeth."

Excerpt 8 is a case of robbery. A notorious robber (Olayinka), who doubles as a serial killer, was arrested in Abeokuta, Ogun State. The opening part of the excerpt, "I am now remorseful because, there is nothing as good as freedom" following MPAT, is a psychological act that immediately establishes a context of regret. The suspect attempts to adjust his evaluative stance in response to the new reality of being locked up. The value of "freedom" once perhaps taken for granted by the suspect (as a result of his engagement in a criminal act), is now elevated due to its loss. The statement, "there is nothing as good as freedom" functions as a reasoning act, attempting to foreground the suspect's remorseful feeling in a universally valued concept. The narration about his prolonged detainment in the police station, "I have been in cell for many weeks now" serves as the experiential grounding for this realization, making the remorse feel more authentic and less abstract. The extended duration as evident in his use of "many weeks" emphasises the severity of his loss of freedom. This presents a narrative that the suspect has learned through suffering. Furthermore, Olayinka's statement, "It is painful that my friends that I spent the money I made through ignoble business have all rejected me" presents another point of view of this context of remorse constructed by the suspect. This statement performs two distinct functions: it expresses his pain and also serves as a complaining act directed towards his friends that have now left him. The phrase "ignoble business" hints that he was aware of the morally questionable nature of his actions, prior to his arrest. This adds a layer of self-awareness to his current situation. The rejection by his friends who benefited from his ill-gotten wealth, serves as a potent consequence, highlighting the social isolation that accompanies his loss of freedom.

This rejection is another form of punishment, perhaps even more acutely felt than the physical punishment of being detained in the cell. The statement, "None of them have come to see me" reinforces the suspect's abandonment and isolation. It provides a solid evidence for his expression of pain and complaint. This suggests that the relationship he had with his friend was transactional in nature, one that was built on the "ignoble business" he was arrested for. In that kind of relationship, loyalty is said to be contingent on material gain. This explains why he is left alone after his arrest. The closing statement, "Anytime I come out from this mess, I will use my tongue count my teeth" (*I will think carefully before I speak or act*), is an expression in Nigerian English that implies reflection and being cautious. A cursory look at the statement indicates a future commitment to carefulness and a sense of caution. However, a deep look at it signifies a commitment to learning from a negative experience and the suspect's alignment with socially acceptable behaviour.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has engaged a pragmatic analysis of language use in confessional statements in Nigeria. The study adopted Mey (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory to examine how suspects recruit context-sensitive linguistic devices in their confessional statements reported in Nigerian dailies and blogs. When giving confessional statements, there is a thin line between what suspects say and the underlying meaning of their utterances. Depending on the situation they find themselves in, suspects leverage these linguistic devices to construct narratives of guilt, ignorance, innocence, withdrawal, shared responsibility, self-defense, and remorse. Seven inclusion/exclusion strategies are identified in this work. The study states that these linguistic strategies serve various functions, primarily to amplify or downplay the severity of the crime committed, and to de-emphasise the suspects' involvement in an attempt to pursue exoneration. This practice aligns with what has been reported in forensic studies, including Shuy (1993, 1998), Ajayi et al. (2024), Akinrinlola and Ajayi (2024), and Oyeleye et al. (2024), for instance, on how suspects strategically deploy language in their confessional statements, particularly in playing down their involvement in crime.

This study is an extension of frontiers of studies on confessional statements and police suspect interactions in Nigeria. It foregrounds the critical role of pragmatic language analysis in understanding confessional statements, revealing that suspects often deploy context-sensitive linguistic strategies to shape perceptions of their culpability. For legal and forensic professionals, the study underscores the need to move beyond surface-level interpretations of confessions and consider the pragmatic goal(s) behind specific word choices, narrative structures, and inclusion/exclusion tactics. It will be interesting to see how future

studies would incorporate a corpus-aided approach into this study. This method will enable a more systematic and data-driven analysis of the linguistic devices deployed by suspects. In order to identify potential cross-cultural variations and universal pragmatic strategies in the construction of inclusion and exclusion in confessional statements, the scope of the study can be expanded to accommodate online news reports from other countries. In particular, in view of the limitation of the study, further studies can explore the phenomena from the corpus-assisted, cross-cultural and perhaps multimodal perspectives.

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