

LANGUAGE, POWER AND POLITENESS: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF PROF. B. I. POPOOLA'S INAUGURAL SPEECH AS PIONEER VICE CHANCELLOR OF AFUED

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Abstract

In academia, maiden or inaugural speeches serve as symbolic displays of power, vision, and identity of the institution. This paper analyses the first speech of Prof. B. I. Popoola, the pioneer vice chancellor of Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo (AFUED), delivered on August 14, 2025, through a pragmatic approach. The paper is based on the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), where language serves a strategic function to play leadership, justify authority, and build solidarity. Following a qualitative pragmatic approach, the speech was divided into units to determine the speech acts, politeness strategies and power relations. The results show that commissives and expressives are mostly prevalent, which indicate dedication to change and a show of gratitude, respectively. Inclusive pronouns and positive politeness tactics encourage solidarity, whereas negative politeness is used to express respect to institutional powers. Mitigation and indirectness of power are the other moderations of authority in terms of servant leadership. This research draws a conclusion that opening speeches in the Nigerian graduate schools take a pragmatic form with the aim of authorising authority, marshalling stakeholders and developing institutional identity. It suggests comparative research among Nigerian universities to enhance understanding of the aspect of academic leadership.

Keywords: Academic leadership, Inaugural speeches, Politeness, Pragmatics, Speech acts

Introduction

Inauguration speeches in academic communities serve as symbolic but tactical speeches with the help of which new administrators can demonstrate perspectives, create authority, and build institutional identities. Outside their ceremonial purpose, such speeches serve as sites of leadership performance, with language used to legitimise power, mobilise stakeholders, and establish the direction institutions will follow in the future. According to Norman Fairclough (2014), institutional discourse acts as a channel for spreading information but also mirrors and reproduces the pre-established power relations.

In the field of higher education, inaugural addresses are structured and designed like political speeches, although they are brought into the framework and tone of the university setting and culture of academia. Such speeches, as Ekanjume-Ilongo and Thuube (2016) note, are performative acts that leaders use to create legitimacy and a sense of collective identity. They therefore stand at a junction between ritual, rhetoric and institutional communication and are at a disposition that is critical to all.

Of special significance is the maiden address of B. I. Popoola, who became the first substantive vice chancellor of Adeyemi Federal University of Education (AFUED) on August 14, 2025. His speech is a moment of not only the accession into office but it also forms a rhetorical and ideological standpoint on which the institution is to be based and the foundation on which its own identity and culture will be constructed. Contrary to the case of the successors, who come into power with established traditions, an innovative vice-chancellor is forced to build institutional meaning in their initial stages. This text is a day speech and a deep-rooted charter of vision because of this dual responsibility.

Given the significance of such speeches, much academic interest in Nigeria has been centred on the political inaugural discourse (Ibrahim, 2020; Omoera & Ogechukwu, 2016), whereas scholarly leadership discourse remains under-represented. This research fills this gap by discussing the strategic usage of language in the speech by Prof. Popoola to build authority, negotiate relationships, and establish institutional vision.

Statement of the Problem

Academic inaugural speeches are ceremonial and crucial in conveying authority, leadership and vision of an institution. Nonetheless, unlike the analysis and ample study of political inaugural speeches in Nigeria, their practical power and leadership tactics have lacked scholarly perusal. Such a gap can be seen in the example of the first speech of Prof. Popoola as the first vice chancellor of Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo (AFUED), which is of both historic and strategic nature. However, the role of language in such speeches has not received much detailed attention; hence, an essential component of institutional discourse has never been addressed.

Study Objectives

The research aimed at:

- Determine the speech acts that Prof. B. I. Popoola used in his first address as the vice chancellor of AFUED.
- Determine how power relations are mirrored in front strategies of address.
- Discover the practical purposes behind the language used in the address.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are the different kinds of speech acts adopted in the maiden address of Prof. B.I. Popoola?

How do the politeness strategies employed in the address reflect and manage power relationships between the speaker and the audience?

- What practical motives do the words of the address have?

2. Literature Review

Pragmatics as a linguistic phenomenon offers a very important guide on how contextually constructed meaning is built and how speakers determine language to reach communicative objectives beyond the literal meaning. The position that meaning originates not in the linguistic forms but rather in the combination of the intention of the speaker, the factors of the situation, and how listeners interpret them is agreeable to scholars like George Yule (2020) and Jacob Mey (2001). This view is most especially applicable to the institutional discourse, wherein utterances are communicative actions that have a purpose. These acts in the inaugural addresses are not just limited to information-giving but also exercise institutional tasks of authorising power, vision-making, and stakeholder alignment; hence, pragmatics is a suitable mode of analysis.

Intimately connected with pragmatics is how language is used in the creation and negotiation of power in institutions. The argument of Norman Fairclough (2014) is that discourse reflects and reproduces power relations, and frequently this power is presented in a form quite neutral or even polite. In the institutions of learning, an opening address is considered a good location where leaders are both demanding capabilities and authority and also acquiring legitimacy. This dual-purposeness is achieved by politeness strategies. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) show that speakers manipulate face by way of positive and negative politeness, especially in a hierarchical one. Developing this line of thought, Richard Watts (2003) theorises politeness as a resource that varies contextually and allows speakers to strike a balance between control and cooperation.

Newer research findings on academic leadership speech, including Jagede, Adegbite, and Ojo (2023), also demonstrate that the role of first speeches is not only as ceremonial speeches but also as an instrument of leadership positioning, branding of the institution, and engagement of stakeholders.

Speech act theory also sheds more light on the functional aspect of language in these contexts. The notion of utterances doing the actions was proposed by J. L. Austin (1962) and extended by John Searle (1969, 1979), who categorised speech acts according to speech acts that include assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. These typologies offer a methodological approach to the study of the way leaders can communicate institutional purposes and establish authority. According to Jenny Thomas (1995), analysis of a speech act will show the relationship between language use and communicative intent. Policymaking committees tend to project promises made in the policies, expressives seek rapport, and directives obtain action. Empirical research, including Ibrahim (2020), reveals that all these acts are the focus of authority negotiation in the public discourse, which reinforces their applicability to academic leadership communication.

Politeness theory is an extension of speech act theory, and it clarifies how such communicative acts are dealt with societally. Brown and Levinson (1987) acknowledge that there are positive politeness (focus on solidarity and inclusion) and negative politeness (focus on respect and deference) types. Drawing on this, Robin Lakoff (1990) and Janet Holmes (2000) point to the institutional stratification of politeness and workplace politics. Leadership in a university context is a process that requires interaction with various stakeholders; hence, these strategies are critical to uphold collegiality in the exercise of authority. Politeness is therefore not only a social but also a tactical tool for building leadership personality and institutional solidity.

Although there are excellent theoretical and empirical contributions of pragmatics, discourse analysis, and political communication, the current literature, as far as it exists, has focused mainly on political first-term speeches. Research by Omoera and Ogechukwu (2016), Ibrahim (2020), Jonathan Wilson (2015), and Paul Chilton (2004) vividly shows that introductory discourse is performative, whereby leaders legitimise power and shape shared vision. But this emphasis on political discourse, according to Adegaju (2005), has led to a lack of concern for academic leadership communication. Despite some emergent research, like Jagede et al. (2023), filling this gap, there is limited systematic pragmatic research of the opening speech of vice-chancellors.

The paper thus contributes to the existing theoretical basis of research and the growing bodies of literature through the analysis of an academic inaugural address in a pragmatic context. It adds to the increasing amount of research on the discourse of academic leadership by showing how such use of speech acts and politeness strategies result in the creation of institutional identity, authority negotiation, and mobilisation of stakeholders in the environment of the Nigerian university.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory as its theoretical anchors in order to provide a pragmatic analysis of Prof. B. I. Popoola's maiden address as the pioneer vice chancellor of Adeyemi Federal University of Education (AFUED).

Speech Act Theory

The speech act theory is a very helpful theoretical foundation to gain an insight into the performed actions with the help of language, initially developed by Austin (1962) and later extended by Searle (1969). Austin (1962) writes that when people speak, they are not just

uttering or speaking but also performing some acts such as promising, ordering, or showing emotions. Searle (1969) identified five broad groups of these acts, which are assertives (statements of the description of reality), directives (commands or requests in the context of influencing something about others), commissives (promises of the performance or action in the future time), expressives (utterances that demonstrate the psychological state of mind), and declarations (utterances that have some institutional or social status-change effect).

These categories are usually used in inaugural addresses in academic circles. As an illustration, the assertives can be utilised to elaborate the vision of the institution, the mandates to rally stakeholders, the commissives to express pledges, the expressives to show appreciation and the declarations to announce the inception of a new chapter in the history of the institution. In this way, the Speech Act Theory will enable the current research to consider the performative character of the speech used by Popoola, which emphasises how it was performed as an act of institutional leadership.

Politeness Theory

To supplement the view in the politeness theory, a theory established by Brown and Levinson (1987). The theory is interested in the way people as speakers manipulate face, the sense of self which is presented and which they wish to sustain in the interactions they are engaged in. The theory also differentiates between positive strategies of politeness (that tend to focus on solidarity and inclusiveness, appreciation, and focus on politeness as ensuring that politeness does not impose anything on others) and those of negative politeness (which attempt to cushion imposition, defer to the interlocutor, and offer the freedom of action to them).

About an inaugural address, politeness strategies from the aspect of leadership communication. The vice chancellor is expected to

command authority and, at the same time, should be able to create the feeling of community. For example, positive politeness can be fulfilled through appreciation and joint constructions of pronouns (we and our), whereas negative politeness can be realised through hedges and indirect requests or a humble tone. These approaches aid leaders in striking the right balance between exercise of institutional control and the necessity to assure unity among stakeholders, including staff, students, and partners (Holmes, 2000; Watts, 2003).

Power and Authority

The integrated combination of speech act theory with politeness theory provides effective means to analyse discursive representations of power and authority arrangements in the examples of academic inaugural addresses. Speech acts speak to the performative promises of leadership, whereas politeness theory talks about the invisible processes of executing power without being dictatorial. As it has been observed by Fairclough (2014) and Adegaju (2005), this synergy is especially pertinent to the Nigerian academic setting, where institutional integrity is realised through the capacity of leaders to share a clear vision, to win over cooperation, and to cultivate goodwill.

Therefore, the theoretical approach followed in this article offers a context by which the speech of Prof. Popoola can be viewed as more than a ceremonial delivery; it shows how, with the help of language, leadership can gradually be played out, with power leveraged and an identity formed through the contextual use of language.

4. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a pragmatic discourse analysis, to examine how language is used to

perform institutional and social functions. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) and Paltridge (2012), qualitative methods are also adept at the discovery of explicit and non-explicit meanings in texts and the manner in which the discourse functions in particular situations.

The analytical approach to the study of the interaction of speech acts, politeness strategies and power relations in the maiden speech of Prof. B. I. Popoola as the pioneer vice chancellor of Adeyemi Federal University of Education (AFUED) is pragmatic analysis. This method will allow determining the systematic explanation of how language decisions create leadership and institutional essence.

Data Source and Description

The data for this study consist of the full text of the maiden address delivered by Prof. B. I. Popoola on 14th August 2025 at AFUED. The speech, which contains almost 3,500-4,000 words, is a formal institutional speech that symbolises the taking of office.

Being a first-mover speech, the text serves two purposes simultaneously: becoming ceremonial (to show gratitude and recognise the stakeholders) and strategic (to state the vision, policies, and leadership course). The speech was received in written full form and was considered to be an authentic and self-contained dataset which shows communicative intentions and positioning aimed at the leadership of the vice chancellor.

Analytical Procedure

Analysis was done in a systematic, multi-stage process:

1. The division into pragmatic units.

The speech was divided into significant pragmatic units referring to thematic and functional delimitations, including recognition, institutional ruminations, policy utterances, instructions, and closing utterances. The units were considered analytic units.

2. Identification and Classification of Speech Acts

With the taxonomy advance by Searle (1969), utterances were divided into assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. This classification allowed the study to identify the way the vice-chancellor achieves acts like informing, promising, directing and legitimising the authority using language.

3. Analysis of Politeness Strategies

Based on the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), the paper found examples of the following:

- Positive politeness (e.g., using inclusive pronouns, solidarity signs, and common aims) and Negative politeness (e.g., deference, hedging, indirectness).
- This step assessed the appropriateness of balance between authority and relational sensitivity played by a speaker.

4. Power and Authority Relations Interpretation.

Speech act and politeness analysis results were combined to understand the linguistic strategies that shape institutional power and leadership identity and their stakeholder relationships. The discourse and power studies informed this interpretive stage.

Reliability and Validity

The study used the measures as follows to assure the methodological rigour:

Inter-Coder Reliability

The data were coded by a second, independent coder who is also trained in pragmatics to analyse a sample (about 30%). Comparisons of the categories of speech acts and politeness strategies did provide a high rate of agreement (over 85%), which increases the reliability and minimises possible subjective bias.

Use of Established Analytical Frameworks

To have consistency in results as well as theoretical validity, the study conformed to well-established theoretical frameworks – Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Contextual Validation (Triangulation)

The results were assessed according to current research on institutional and inaugural discourse, and it was possible to contrast the results with the established trends in academic and political speech situations. This increases the plausibility and extrapolation of the analysis.

In these processes, the methodology offers a systematic, transparent and theoretically based system of analysis of the linguistic use of strategies to develop power and authority as well as solidarity in the vice-chancellor's maiden speech.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

Speech Acts in the Address

The maiden speech of Prof. B. I. Popoola shows that not only do speech acts exist as structural categories, but they also serve as a process by which institutional authority, solidarity, and legitimacy are actually produced. Similar to the work by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), the utterances are performative and thus they define the identity of the uttering individual and the resultant institutional culture at AFUED.

a. Assertives

The assertive speech goes beyond an exposition of institutional facts; it strives to get the vice-chancellor situated into a collective historical account of institutional formation. For instance:

“I am deeply aware that the upgrade of this institution to a university was made possible by the collective resolve of some stakeholders.”

Though this seems to give spiritual acknowledgement to history, its more pragmatic role is more strategic: it reassigns the property of institutional change to the many, thus diminishing the prominence of personal power and placing the issue of leadership on a spectrum of common work. This rhetoric positing reinforced legitimacy by supporting the figure of the vice chancellor as a creation of an institutionally agreed assembly and not a solitary implementation.

Similarly:

“The exercise has ensured that we now have academic staff with clearly defined status from the very beginning...”

It is not merely that it announces progress but that it is a building of institutional stability which anticipates accomplishment and thus anticipates uncertainty and strengthens belief in the new order of administration. The assertive act is in this way a legitimising instrument and is stabilising the perception as much as it characterises reality.

b. Directives

Orders used in the speech are well crafted to not be coercive, yet engaging in mobilisation. For example:

“Let us work together — with mutual respect and a shared sense of purpose — to build an institution...”

Instead of being top-down teaching, this command transfers authority linguistically, mobilising the inclusive form of 'let us', undermining the hierarchy between the two parties. Pragmatically, it redefines obedience as participation whereby institutional hierarchy is made into collaborative governance. This tactic increases harmony since obedience would seem voluntary and shared as opposed to imposition.

c. Commissives

The commissive acts of speech form an important locus of the enactment of the aspect of leadership accountability. Their role goes

further, however, than the promise-making aspect, to the building of leadership identity. For example:

“We shall ensure the prompt payment of staff salaries and allowances.”

“This administration will clear all outstanding financial indebtedness to staff within the shortest possible time.”

These statements serve as performative activities binding the administration to the courses of action they shall undertake in the future and also giving the perception of responsible and reliable leadership. Strategic repeal of words like 'we shall' takes the agency out of the hands of an individual leader and puts it into the hands of the institution so that a collective executive identity is built. Such collectivisation can raise credibility; it seems that there is shared responsibility. At the same time, individual responsibility diffuses.

d. Expressives

Expressives are strategy instruments of aligning relations as opposed to emotional expression. For instance:

“I express my profound gratitude to every member of the Alumni Association...”

“I cannot but express deep appreciation to the Paramount Ruler of the Ondo Kingdom...”

Such acts of gratitude create a mapping of the institutional ecosystem of power and influence, as these acts of gratitude introduce recognition into several groups of stakeholders. In practical terms, such recognition lessens the possible resistance at a symbolic level since the prerogative of outside stakeholders is symbolically legitimised in a new, high-rated university model where legitimacy is yet to be cemented.

e.

Declarations

Institutional authority is most evident in the sort of declarations, in which, in this case, too, an authority is situated linguistically through performativity, not assertion. For example:

“As I assume office today as the first substantive Vice Chancellor of AFUED...”

This statement is not merely a proclamation of a position: it is an act of institutional change, which changes the administrative status into a performed reality. On a more profound plane, it is also an indicator of continuity between individual appointment and historical change, thus conferring the basis of power through a historically validated process as opposed to individual power.

Politeness Strategies

The politeness framework by Brown and Levinson (1987) is not only descriptive in this speech but also plays a crucial role in bargaining over power relations and building institutional solidarity.

a. Positive Politeness

Positive politeness strategies are propagated to establish a common identity which redefines leadership as a collective stewardship and not as a hierarchical control. For example:

“We must all rise above narrow interests and embrace the larger vision...”

“Let us walk this path together, united in vision...”

These utterances go beyond espousing cohesion; they actively recreate the offices of the vice chancellor as being incorporated into a group “we”. Such a linguistic inclusion decreases institutional distance and yields what can be viewed as distributed leadership in which a display of authority is rhetorically distributed to maximise acceptance and collaboration.

b. Negative Politeness

Negative politeness is a balance system, which maintains institutional hierarchy with minimum imposition. For example:

“Let me therefore express my profound appreciation...”

“I must especially thank our Pro-Chancellor...”

These forms of deference are strategic in recognition of power holders both within and outside the institution. This politeness does not make authority weaken since it shows it understands the aspects of hierarchy within the institution and cultural demands of reverence, especially in the Nigerian systems of academic governance.

Language and Power Relations

The dynamics between the speech acts and the politeness strategies indicate that there is nothing fixed or imposed in terms of power in this speech, but it is constantly negotiated by words. Power is established by commissives and declarations but also is watered down by inclusionary directives and thankful words. For example:

“This administration will not tolerate actions that have the potential to set back the hands of progress.”

Is counterbalanced by:

“I humbly ask for your full support, your ideas, your commitment...”

This contrast shows that power is constituted by a two-sided approach: the assertion of the institutional control on the one hand and the relational inclusion on the other. What has emerged is a directive and participatory type of leadership that fails to build on a coercive foundation and seeks reinforcement based on consent.

On a larger scale, the speech creates AFUED as a moral and institutional project to be shared. Language as a constitutive force does not merely provide a medium of communication but determines the way in which the institution is imagined, experienced and owned collectively.

Pragmatic Purpose of the Address

The pragmatic power of the speech is created by combining speech acts and politeness strategies into three mutually supportive functions:

- **Legitimation of Authority:** Declaratives and assertives bring about sustained institutional stability as well as quite a different one where the vice chancellor fits into an already proven system of governing an institution.
- **Mobilisation of Stakeholders:** Institutional participation is made a shared responsibility and not an imposed duty through the use of mobilisation of stakeholders' directives and an inclusive pronoun.
- **Leadership Identity Construction:** The interactions between commitment, gratitude, and mitigation form a leadership image that is both credible and participatory and morally based.

Conclusion

This study has offered a practical critical examination of the opening speech of the first vice-chancellor of Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo, Prof. B. I. Popoola, specifically in terms of speech acts, politeness strategies, and the development of power relations. These findings indicate that the address is not ceremonial but made in a strategic way to carry out various institutional purposes. The speech includes commissive acts and, in particular, promises of the welfare of staff, institutional reinvention, and building of an academic community, which project a progressive vision of leadership and instil accountability. Humility and relational alignment are enhanced through expressions of gratitude to God, the Governing Council, staff, students, and the host community, among other expressions. Assertives are used to introduce institutional

realities and successes, and the most common form of instigation is the directives, normally in an inclusively framed way that does not impose on the stakeholders. Declaratives, less in comparison, serve to legitimise authoritatively and announce a new phase of leadership.

Equally important is the use of politeness strategies that are used to bargain authority. Inclusive pronouns and appeals to unity are examples of positive politeness achieved to create such a shared institutional identity, which builds solidarity. Negative politeness occurs when the strength of authority is reduced by being deferential and respectful to the stakeholders and by sustaining harmony within institutions. A combination of these strategies discloses that leadership in this area is created through discourse by a keen equilibrium of power and comradeship. The language decisions made by the vice-chancellor present an ethical leadership personality that is participatory and approachable, whereby power is justified through inclusion, respect and a common cause.

In spite of these contributions, the study has its limitations as well. Its emphasis on one initial speech precludes the external applicability of the results to other organisations and situations. More than that, the analysis only relies on textual information without taking into consideration delivery characteristics like the tone, gestures, and the perception of the audience, which can also influence meaning and have an influence. It also limits the general assertions regarding trends in academic leadership discourse since the lack of comparative data.

Further studies can overcome these limitations by either providing comparative analyses of inaugural speeches within more Nigerian universities or considering other African contexts. Adding audience reception studies, multimodal analysis, or longitudinal research may be used to better understand how these speeches are construed and how their promises are followed up by the subsequent institutional practices. This would also shed more light on the role of

the relationship that exists between language, leadership, and the growth of institutions in higher education.

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