



IMPOLITENESS AND SMEAR CAMPAIGNS IN 2023 NIGERIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

BRILLIANT RICHARD

Department of English and Literary Studies,
University of Africa, Toru-Orua, Bayelsa State.
brilliant.richard@uat.edu.ng; donakpo4you@gmail.com
07030945496

Abstract

This study examines the deployment of impoliteness and smear strategies in the discourse of the 2023 Nigerian general elections. The study conflates Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory (1996, 2011) and Entman's Framing Theory (1993) to explain how linguistic choices function both as face-threatening acts and as persuasive frames that shape public perception of political actors. The study aims to identify the lexical choices political actors utilised to express impoliteness and smear their opponents, as well as to determine the dominant impoliteness strategies used during the campaigns. The study adopts a qualitative research design and employs purposive sampling to select relevant data from campaign speeches, media reports, and social media discourse related to the 2023 elections. The dataset comprises five political utterances from key political figures. Findings reveal that politicians deliberately employed highly evaluative lexical items, derogatory labels, metaphors, sarcasm, and insinuations to delegitimise rivals and shape voter perception. Among Culpeper's impoliteness strategies, positive impoliteness emerged as the dominant strategy, frequently used to ridicule opponents and damage their public image. The study concludes that impoliteness functioned as a strategic rhetorical resource within Nigerian electoral discourse, often shifting attention away from policy debates to personality-driven attacks.

Keywords: Framing Theory, Impoliteness, Nigerian Elections, Political Discourse, Smear, Campaigns.

Introduction

Elections in Nigeria have always been intense, emotional, and sometimes divisive. Over the years, politicians and their supporters have deployed language as offensives to discredit opponents and win public sympathy (Opeibi, 2009; Adegaju, 2015). In the 2023 general elections, this practice seemed even more widespread, with political actors using insults, mockery, and smear tactics to damage the reputation of rivals and influence voters (Obadare, 2023). Impoliteness in politics generally refers to language choices that are rude, insulting, or designed to provoke or embarrass others (Culpeper, 2011). Smear campaigns could be further intensified by spreading negative claims, sometimes without evidence, to reduce the credibility and public image of opponents (Anstead, 2017). In Nigerian politics, these strategies have become part of campaign culture, often overshadowing policy discussions and constructive debates (Ajibola & Agbalajobi, 2020).

Various factors in Nigeria's political environment account for the prevalence of impoliteness and smears. One factor is the high level of political competition and the winner-takes-all nature of Nigerian elections, where losing means losing access to resources and influence (Ibrahim, 2023). Another factor is the rise of social media platforms like X, Facebook, and WhatsApp, which makes it easier to spread negative messages quickly and widely. Politicians, their spokespersons, and even regular citizens now use these platforms to damage opponents, circulate damaging rumors, and create trending hashtags that shape public opinion.

Historically, Nigerian politics has often been shaped by ethnic, religious, and regional divisions (Agbaje, 1999). During campaigns, politicians sometimes exploit these divisions, using offensive language or false accusations to stir fear and suspicion among voters (Adegaju, 2015). The 2023



elections reflected this trend. Hence, the aim of this study is to identify the lexical choices used to express impoliteness and smear opponents and to evaluate the major impoliteness strategies deployed during the 2023 general elections

A few empirical studies on political discourse (Ajibola & Agbalajobi, 2020; Ojo & Lateef, 2021; Ibrahim, 2023), which have extensively documented negative campaigning, hate speech, and the rise of online insults, respectively, have systematically analysed the rhetorical structures of impoliteness and smear on the 2023 Nigeria general elections using Culpeper's framework, or linked these micro-level strategies to broader narrative frames guided by Framing theory. This gap is precisely what this present study intends to fill.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study conflates Culpeper's impoliteness strategy (1996, 2011) and Entman Framing theory (1993). Combining these frameworks help explain both the linguistic choices political actors make to attack opponents and the broader narrative structures that shape how voters interpret these messages. Impoliteness Theory by Jonathan Culpeper (1996) builds on Brown and Levinson's ideas but focuses more directly on communicative behaviour that is intentionally face-aggravating. Culpeper defines impoliteness as communicative strategies designed to attack face, and often intended to cause social disruption or offense.

Culpeper (1996) made an important contribution to the study of language by identifying five main types of impoliteness strategies people use when they want to offend or hurt someone's feelings in conversation. These strategies show that impoliteness is not always random; it can be done deliberately and for specific reasons. They include *bald on-record*, *positive*, *negative*, *sarcasm or mock as well as withhold impoliteness*. These five impoliteness strategies help us understand how politicians used words not just to communicate, but to smear, hurt, mock, or control others. It reminds us that language is a powerful tool, and its effect depends on how and why it is used. The study also drew insights from Entman (1993) framing theory to strengthen the analyses and to show how impolite expressions are embedded in larger communicative frames that influence what voters see as relevant or true. For example, smear campaigns, frame opponents as corrupt, incompetent, or dangerous, shifting focus away from policy debates toward personal attacks. Through framing, impoliteness becomes part of a persuasive narrative that constructs opponents as unworthy of public trust.

Literature Review

Studies on political discourse in Nigeria and elsewhere have provided valuable insights into how language shapes electoral contests. Adegoju (2015), for example, in his critical discourse analysis of President Goodluck Jonathan's declaration of intent speech, drew on Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (1997) to explore how rhetorical strategies and negative other-presentation subtly delegitimise rivals. Using qualitative textual analysis, Adegoju discovered that rhetorical questions, religious references, and appeals to unity were deployed to frame President Jonathan, positively against opponents implicitly constructed as divisive. While insightful, Adegoju's study centered on formal campaign speeches from a single candidate and an earlier election (2011). In contrast, the present study extends the analysis to the 2023 elections and focuses on how impoliteness is overtly expressed through lexical choices and rhetorical strategies, particularly across digital platforms.

Similarly, Opeibi (2009) investigated campaign discourse during the 1993 presidential elections, guided by Systemic Functional Linguistics and van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach. Using qualitative analysis of newspaper reports and campaign texts, he found heavy reliance on negative other-presentation, ethnic appeals, and direct insults. Opeibi's findings confirmed that impoliteness and ethnically charged language are long-standing features of Nigerian campaigns. In the context of more recent elections, Ajibola and Agbalajobi (2020) conducted a mixed-method study of hate speech in the 2019 Nigerian general elections, combining content analysis and interviews. Their research, rooted in CDA, revealed that political actors used hate speech to reinforce ethnic and religious divides, framing opponents as existential threats to national unity. While they highlighted the discursive construction of in-groups and out-groups, the study focused broadly on hate speech without systematically applying Culpeper's typology to identify specific impoliteness strategies or their lexical realisation.



Ibrahim (2023), reflecting specifically on the 2023 Nigerian elections, observed that social media significantly amplified impolite language and personal attacks, overshadowing substantive policy debates. His analysis, however, was descriptive, focusing on trends and consequences without a detailed theoretical or linguistic framework. The present study builds on Ibrahim's observation by systematically applying Culpeper's impoliteness strategies to analyse the types and structures of offensive language, and using framing theory to explore how these messages shaped voter perceptions. Similarly, Ojo and Lateef (2021) analysed online political discourse in Nigeria, finding that Facebook posts often contained personal insults and negative ethnic references. Their study, however, was largely descriptive, lacking a clear theoretical grounding in impoliteness or framing theory. The present study explicitly uses these frameworks to add analytical depth. Together, these empirical works reveal that while scholars have documented negative campaigning, hate speech, and the rise of online insults, few have systematically analysed the lexical choices and rhetorical structures of impoliteness using Culpeper's framework. Even fewer have done so in the context of the highly digital, polarised, and recent 2023 Nigerian elections. This gap is precisely what this present study intends to fill.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the use of impoliteness and smear campaigns in the 2023 Nigerian elections. To focus on the most relevant data, this study employs purposive sampling technique. Data were collected from authentic and accessible sources. Official political speeches were obtained from party websites, campaign rallies, and televised debates. Social media content was gathered through systematic hashtag tracking and keyword filtering, targeting posts that contained offensive, confrontational, or disparaging language. Newspaper articles were sourced from online archives and media databases to include both factual reporting and opinion-based pieces. All selected materials were organised and, where necessary, transcribed into written texts to ensure uniformity and ease of analysis.

Results

Data one: Dino Melaye (PDP)

"Tinubu is not fit. I challenge him to a medical examination and Atiku will do same. We want to see if Tinubu's pronouncement of agbado, cassava and 50 million youths to be employed in the army and people tweeting on WhatsApp are mere statements or they were made out of mental imbalance."

Punch, November 6, 2022

Negative Impoliteness

This excerpt demonstrates negative impoliteness, which Culpeper (1996) describes as a strategy used to attack a person's negative face, that is, their desire to be independent, respected, and free from imposition or humiliation. Negative impoliteness is used to undermine the hearer's sense of personal freedom, dignity, and autonomy, often through ridicule, intrusion, or blatant disrespect.

First, Dino Melaye opens the attack with the bold claim:

"Tinubu is not fit."

This is a direct attack on Tinubu's personal competence and physical or mental ability, especially in the context of running for political office. By declaring him "unfit" without qualification or evidence; Melaye seeks to deny Tinubu the dignity of being taken seriously as a candidate. It is a face-threatening act (FTA) that offers no mitigation or politeness marker. Rather than expressing concern or questioning respectfully, the statement is outright dismissive.

Again, he used a challenging tone and public provocation:

"I challenge him to a medical examination and Atiku will do same."



This part of the statement introduces an element of public confrontation. Challenges are often meant to question someone's integrity, ability, or truthfulness in front of others, and this is not different. Dino positions Atiku (his preferred candidate) as someone confident in his own mental and physical health, while framing Tinubu as someone who might be hiding something. It is a power move that seeks to strip Tinubu of control over his own public image, and therefore, it violates his negative face.

Sarcasm or Mock Politeness

Sarcasm is also clearly used, especially towards the end of the quote.

"...or they were made out of mental imbalance."

While this sounds like a genuine concern for someone's health on the surface, the context and tone show that it is not meant sincerely. It is mock politeness used sarcastically to deride, not to care. The speaker pretends to be concerned about Tinubu's mental health, but it is really a strategic insult framed as a polite suggestion.

This fits Culpeper's explanation that sarcasm appears polite but is actually an attack. It also requires shared understanding between speaker and audience to recognise the hidden insult behind the surface politeness.

Positive Impoliteness

Culpeper describes positive impoliteness as attacking someone's need for inclusion, approval, or belonging. While the main focus of the statement is on Tinubu's competence and mental state, Melaye's mocking tone and exaggerated references, "*agbado*," "*cassava*," "*WhatsApp*" also work to exclude Tinubu from the circle of rational, respected politicians.

The implication is that, this man is not one of us; he does not make sense, and moreover, he is laughable.

Such language reduces Tinubu's social credibility and makes him an object of public ridicule, which threatens his positive face; his desire to be liked, admired, and included in the political community.

Data Two: Dino Melaye (PDP)

Aso Rock is looking for a healer, not a patient. Nigerians don't need another president that will be visiting London every week and cause us economic and social distractions.

Punch, November 6, 2022

This utterance exemplifies a calculated deployment of Culpeper's impoliteness super strategies. While Bola Ahmed Tinubu is not named, health-related framing and the reference to presidential medical trips clearly point to him. The intertextual nod to former President Muhammadu Buhari's frequent medical visits to London deepens the sting of the attack.

Off-Record Impoliteness

The phrase "Aso Rock is looking for a healer, not a patient" operates as a metaphorical and indirect insult. The identity of the "patient" is left unstated, but the Nigerian political audience is expected to infer that this is a veiled reference to Tinubu, whose health has been a persistent topic of public debate.

This avoidance of explicit naming, allows Melaye to launch a face-threatening act (FTA) without taking on the full weight of direct confrontation. Instead, the audience's shared knowledge supplies the missing link. This strategy is characteristic of an off-record impoliteness, where the insult relies on implication rather than direct accusation.

The metaphor of "healer" versus "patient" also sets up a binary frame; the desirable leader (a restorer of the nation) is contrasted with an undesirable one (a dependent, ill individual). This contrast does not merely imply unfitness; it smears the target's image by painting him as a liability rather than an asset to the presidency.

Data Three: Bola Tinubu (APC)

All he (Obi) could do was boast that he saved money. But I tell you it is a wicked parent that holds money in his hand yet allows his children to starve. Likewise, it is a heartless governor who holds back



money when people go hungry, and schools, roads and clinics go into disrepair. Neither the city-dweller nor the farmer prospered under him. In the end, he refused to save the people because he preferred to save money. The truth of the difference between my leadership and that of Mr Obi lies in one observation. Although Lagos is crowded and Anambra has ample space, more people left Obi's Anambra seeking a better life in Tinubu's Lagos than left Lagos believing Obi had established a blueprint for growth in Anambra. My people, you cannot entrust your future or that of our nation to Mr. Sell Everything Atiku or Mr Stingy Obi. But you can trust Mr. progressive good governance Tinubu! Chanel's live TV, January 7, 2023.

Negative Impoliteness

In this speech, Tinubu uses emotionally charged language to attack Obi's character and moral judgment. For instance:

"It is a wicked parent that holds money and allows his children to starve."

"It is a heartless governor who holds back money when people go hungry..."

These comparisons do not merely question Obi's economic policies. Instead, they present him as cruel, selfish, and inhuman. Such descriptions are extreme moral judgments, comparing him to a bad parent and accusing him of indifference to suffering. By suggesting that Obi allowed suffering out of stinginess, Tinubu is not engaging in policy critique but attacking Obi's sense of responsibility, empathy, and basic human decency. This is a direct face-threatening act targeted at Obi's integrity and reputation.

Positive Impoliteness

Positive impoliteness is aimed at damaging a person's positive face; their desire to be liked, respected, and socially approved. We see this clearly in:

"Neither the city-dweller nor the farmer prospered under him."

"He refused to save the people because he preferred to save money."

"More people left Obi's Anambra for Lagos than the other way around."

"Mr. Stingy Obi"

These expressions undermine Obi's achievements, reduce his legacy to failure, and mock his identity. Referring to him as "Mr. Stingy Obi" is a labeling tactic meant to stick an insult to his public image. It positions him as ungenerous, selfish, and unfit for leadership.

Furthermore, implying that people fled Anambra under his leadership suggests that he made life unbearable for them. This challenges his reputation and social value, key aspects of positive face.

Sarcasm / Mock Politeness

Sarcasm or mock politeness involves using apparently polite or respectful language to disguise an insult or to ridicule. For instance, "the truth of the difference between my leadership and that of Mr Obi lies in one observation..." sounds objective or comparative, but it is used sarcastically to humiliate Obi. The speaker pretends to offer a reasonable comparison but then concludes with a damaging contrast that paints Obi as a failed leader whose state people were desperate to escape. The sarcasm deepens with:

"Mr. Sell Everything Atiku or Mr. Stingy Obi... but you can trust Mr. Progressive Good Governance Tinubu!"

The use of these mocking nicknames, followed by a self-promoting slogan, shows mock politeness. The speaker is not trying to sincerely discuss other candidates; he is ridiculing them while branding himself positively. Culpeper notes that such mock politeness is used to ridicule while protecting the speaker from direct confrontation, often cloaked as "jokes" or "honest talk."



Bald on-Record Impoliteness

While the speech is mostly metaphorical and sarcastic, there are moments of direct, unsoftened attack, such as:

“He is a wicked parent...”

“He is a heartless governor...”

These are blunt accusations delivered without any softening language. They are not hedged or framed as opinions. They are stated as facts, leaving no room for polite disagreement. This directness makes them examples of bald on-record impoliteness, especially since they carry heavy moral weight.

Data Four: Bola Tinubu (APC)

As I stand before you, there are few of us left running. One says he is Atiku. How many times has he been running? He is always on the run and this time, tell him to go and sit down. Enough is enough! The other one, he thinks na statistics we go chop. His line of arithmetic, no Indian can solve it. To mention his name is a disgrace to me. Wrong arithmetics, wrong statistics, that's not what Nigeria needs.

The Nation, 26 November, 2022

Bald On-Record Impoliteness

Tinubu delivers his criticisms directly without any mitigation or politeness markers. The instructions to “tell him to go and sit down” and the phrase “enough is enough” are stark, unfiltered imperatives aimed at publicly dismissing Atiku Abubakar’s political ambition. Similarly, declaring that “to mention his name is a disgrace to me” about Peter Obi is an overt insult that strips away any pretense of respect. These unvarnished statements are deliberate face-threatening acts designed for a rally audience, where blunt attacks can energise supporters.

Positive Impoliteness

This strategy undermines the opponents’ desire to be liked, admired, or included in the political community. Tinubu portrays Atiku as a serial loser, “always on the run” suggesting incompetence and political redundancy. For Peter Obi, the smear centres on portraying him as impractical and disconnected from real needs, mocking his emphasis on data with the rhetorical jab “na statistics we go chop?” and claiming his mathematics is so flawed, “no Indian can solve it”. Both framings diminish the opponents’ image before the public, recasting them as either politically exhausted or intellectually absurd.

Negative Impoliteness

Tinubu also threatens his opponents’ autonomy and authority by delegitimising their right to run for office. Telling Atiku to “sit down” symbolically removes him from the race, while the phrase “enough is enough” frames him as someone whose continued participation is a burden to the nation. Regarding Obi, the statement that “to mention his name is a disgrace to me” does not just reject him, it symbolically erases his relevance in the speaker’s political space, reducing his status to that of an unworthy contender.

Sarcasm/Mock Politeness

Tinubu’s mockery of Obi’s use of statistics carries an undercurrent of sarcasm. While on the surface, it may sound like commentary on policy focus; the exaggerated claim that “no Indian can solve it” is a facetious overstatement meant to ridicule rather than a genuine critique. This kind of humour-tinged derision allows the insult to be framed as banter while still delivering a damaging blow.

Data Five: Peter Obi (Labour Party)

“That is why we want people to follow us. Everybody knows our age. They know where we were born. They know the school we attended. We have classmates. Some people, nobody has seen people who went to school with them. We must change this.”

My Nigeria, 18 November, 2022



This statement makes use of off-record impoliteness as the dominant strategy, with elements of positive impoliteness. Bola Ahmed Tinubu is never named, but the indirectness is deliberate, the remarks tap into an already circulating public controversy about Tinubu's age, educational history, and identity records. The audience is expected to connect "some people" to Tinubu without needing explicit identification.

Off-Record Impoliteness

The most striking feature of Obi's attack is that it is framed as a general observation rather than a direct accusation. By saying "Some people, nobody has seen people who went to school with them," Obi invites the audience to supply the missing subject themselves. In Nigerian political discourse, the issue of Tinubu's school records and identity is well known, so the target is obvious to those listening.

This is a textbook case of off-record impoliteness, where the insult is cloaked in plausible deniability. Obi can claim he spoke generally, yet the contextual clues ensure that the intended target's face is still threatened. The indirectness here serves a dual purpose; it shields Obi from accusations of outright personal attack while still planting doubt about Tinubu's credibility and truthfulness.

Positive Impoliteness

Positive impoliteness comes into play through exclusion. Obi sets up a contrast between his own transparency ("Everybody knows our age... where we were born... the school we attended... we have classmates") and the alleged opacity of "some people."

By highlighting his own openness, Obi symbolically elevates himself and his group into an in-group of honest, trustworthy leaders. In turn, he places Tinubu in an out-group of leaders whose identities are shrouded in suspicion and secrecy. This denies Tinubu the positive face-want of being admired, respected, and trusted as a legitimate leader.

The framing is not just about personal biography, it attacks Tinubu's moral integrity and suitability for public office, implying that a leader who cannot present verifiable personal history is unfit to lead.

Positive Impoliteness

By highlighting his own transparency, "Everybody knows our age... where we were born... the school we attended... we have classmates," Obi creates an in-group of credible, trustworthy leaders and places himself firmly within it.

Conversely, Tinubu is implicitly cast into an out-group of leaders with suspicious, unverifiable pasts. This denies Tinubu the positive face want of being admired, respected, and accepted as a legitimate leader. The attack is moral as much as it is factual, implying that honesty and openness are prerequisites for leadership, and Tinubu fails that standard.

Here too, intertextuality strengthens the jab: the words resonate with the public's memory of debates over whether Tinubu actually attended the schools he claims, making the exclusion sting even more.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of selected political utterances from the 2023 Nigerian General Elections reveals a patterned and deliberate use of lexical choices and rhetorical structures that align closely with Culpeper's impoliteness strategies, while simultaneously functioning as smear techniques. These strategies were not incidental; they were calculated moves to erode the opponent's credibility, moral standing, and political viability in the public eye.

Across party lines, politicians deployed highly charged lexical items, such as "mental imbalance", "disgrace", "stingy" etc. that directly targeted the personal identity, competence, and moral integrity of opponents. Many of these words carried strong evaluative meaning, designed not only to insult but also to frame the opponent. Furthermore, metaphors work in tandem with hyperbole, exaggerating traits to an absurd degree, as in Tinubu's remark that Obi's arithmetic was unsolvable "even by an Indian," or Melaye's depiction of Aso Rock looking for a "healer, not a patient."



Imperatives were also common, especially in bald on-record impoliteness, where opponents were ordered to “go and sit down” or implicitly told they were unfit to serve. These grammatical choices leave no room for negotiation, reinforcing the speaker’s authority.

Interwoven into these strategies were intertextual references to past leaders and prior political events, for example, invoking Buhari’s frequent medical trips to London when criticising Tinubu’s health. These references drew on shared public knowledge, making the insult resonate more strongly with audiences familiar with Nigeria’s recent political history.

Conclusion

Impoliteness and smear campaigns were deliberately used as political tools in the 2023 elections. They were not random, but carefully chosen to weaken opponents and build support among followers. This shows that Nigerian politics is still heavily centered on personality attacks rather than issue-based debates. The study concludes that though these strategies can make politicians popular with their supporters, they also damage democratic values by creating division, discouraging serious debate, and reducing trust in the system. Furthermore, the social media has become an agency that provides easy dissemination of smears and hate speeches in Nigerian election discourse.

References

- Adegoju, A., & Oyeboode, O. (2015). Humour as discursive practice in Nigeria’s 2015 presidential election online campaign discourse. *Discourse Studies*, 17(6), 643–662.
- Agbaje, A. (1999). Political parties and pressure groups. In R. Anifowose & F. Enemuo (Eds.), *Elements of politics* (pp. 191–208). Lagos: Sam Iroanusi Publications.
- Ajibola, I., & Agbalajobi, D. T. (2020). Hate speech and Nigeria’s 2019 general elections: Implications for democratic stability. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 14(2), 65–75.
- Anstead, N. (2017). Data-driven campaigning in the 2015 United Kingdom general election. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 22(3), 294–313.
- Chilton, P. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Culpeper, J. (1996). Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25(3), 349–67. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(95\)00014-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(95)00014-3)
- Culpeper, J. (2005). Impoliteness and entertainment in the television quiz show: The weakest link. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 1(1), 35–72. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jplr.2005.1.1.35>
- Culpeper, J. (2011). *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence* (Vol. 28). Cambridge University Press.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Towards clarification of a fractured paradigm. *McQuail's reader in mass communication theory*, 390, 397.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse* (pp. 9-14). London: Edward Arnold.
- Ibrahim, J. (2023). Social media and political discourse in Nigeria’s 2023 general elections. *Journal of African Elections*, 22(1), 45–63.
- Obadare, E. (2023). Moral accusations and smear politics in Nigeria’s 2023 elections. *African Affairs*, 122(488), 345–368.
- Opeibi, B. O. (2009). *Discourse, politics and the 1993 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria: A re-invention of June 12 Legacy*.
- Ojo, E., & Lateef, A. (2021). Online political discourse in Nigeria: Ethnic insults, personal attacks, and democracy. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 13(2), 213–230.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1997). What is political discourse analysis? *Belgian Journal of Linguistics*, 11(1), 11–52.