

# COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A Pragmatic Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's Speech on COVID-19 Pandemic

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#### **Abstract**

This paper is a pragmatic analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's speech in respect to the much dreaded COVID-19 pandemic. Using Searle's classification of the illocutionary acts, twenty-six (26) utterances are purposively sampled for this exercise; specifically, therefore, this paper investigates the illocutionary act(s) present in each of these utterances and the function(s) it performs. Findings reveal that the utterances sampled contain illocutionary acts, and the frequency of their occurrence (in terms of percentage representation) is presented thus: Assertives 12 (46%) used mostly for warning the Nigerian populace about both the reality and dangers of the pandemic, Directives 07 (26%) used primarily for ordering organs and institutions of Government to take urgent and cogent steps, Commissives 05 (19.1%) used for making certain tangible future promises, Expressives 02 (8%) used mainly to show empathy and Declarations 00 (0%) which are completely non-existent. Thus, giving the higher percentages of the Assertives and the Directives, it can be guessed that Nigerians are most likely to feel a sense of safety, assurance and direction, judging from the words of Mr. President.

**Key Words:** COVID 19, Pandemic, Speech, Speech Acts and Illocutionary Acts

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

### **Introduction**

In the wake of the global pandemic of 2019 in which advanced countries of the world like the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Germany, Italy, France and the likes were being ravaged by the dreaded COVID-19 virus which eventually metamorphosed into a full blown pandemic by 2020, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, had to address the nation in a live broadcast specifically on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 on the state of things: how the Corona Virus is affecting the world and how it is going to affect Nigeria as part of the global community. Consequently, this speech is quite different from a campaign speech or an inaugural speech because it is a speech that addresses a global challenge that has seen an unprecedented rise in mortality worldwide. To this end, this paper investigates the illocutionary acts present in the speech and their likely impact or effect on Nigerians and the institutions of government.

### **Pragmatics and Speech Acts**

The term Pragmatics has been seen from different perspectives in recent times. For instance, Yule (2010:1) sees Pragmatics as “the study of meaning communicated by the speaker (or writer) and interpreted by listener (or hearer)”. Schmitt (2002:74) however is of the view that Pragmatics is the science of the relation of signs to interpreters. Similarly, Verschueren (2003:7) is of the view that “Pragmatics as a general cognitive, social, cultural perspective on linguistic phenomenon in relation to their usage informs behaviour (where the string ‘cognitive, social, and cultural’ does not suggest the separability of what the term refers to)”. Apart from the emphasis on context, one of the core assumptions of Pragmatics is that it looks at meaning beyond what is said to what is implied. This validates the place of terms like implicature and inference in the study of Pragmatics. Also, Leech and Short (1987: 290) aver that “The pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is not derived from the formal properties of words and constructions, but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are used”. One way to do this is to use a Pragmatic theory like the Speech Act Theory to analyze a given utterance.

### **The Speech Act Theory**

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

The Speech Act Theory refers to a theory which analyses the role of utterances in relation to how the speaker and the hearer's behaviour in interpersonal communication tell on the communication process (Crystal, 2008:446). To a large extent therefore, for the Speech Act Theory to be termed successful, perhaps two or more people must be involved as this is one of the features of interpersonal communication as Piele, Rubin and Rubin (2005:5) observe that "...interpersonal communication involves the study of people and their interactions or relationships". Crystal (2008) further identifies three types of speech acts: locution, illocution and perlocution. Correspondingly, based on some of Austin's submission, talks about a threefold distinction: 'locutions', act of saying something... 'illocutions' are what is done in saying something.; and 'perlocutions' are what is done by saying something. Searle and Austin are some of the pioneer scholars as far as speech acts are concerned. For example, Bach and Harnish (1979:19), citing Austin's work, are of the view that there are three aspects of the illocutionary act that often accompanies an utterance:

*always to perform the act of uttering certain noises (a phonic act)  
always to perform the act of uttering certain vocables or words  
(a phatic act) generally to perform the act of using that  
[sentence] or its constituents with a certain more or less  
definite 'sense' and a more or less definite 'reference',  
which together are equivalent to 'meaning' (rhetic act).*

Shiffrin (1994:51), responding to Austin's proposition about what makes a speech act successful, is apt here too: "The circumstances allowing an act are varied: they include the existence of an acceptable conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect', the presence of 'particular persons and circumstances', the correct and complete execution of a procedure' and (when appropriate to the act) 'certain thoughts, feelings, or intentions". This is often dismissed as the felicity conditions. Yule (2010:50) further proposes that there are many other conditions: general conditions, content conditions, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions and essential conditions.

But then, "whereas Austin emphasized a conventional interpretation of speech acts, Searle emphasized a psychological interpretation (based on beliefs, intentions, etc." Sbisa (2007: 461-73). Thus, although there has been so much debate by the two authors whose works have been heavily relied upon for an insight into the concept of speech acts, this paper is tilted towards Searle's classification of the illocutionary acts as Mey (2001:120) highlights below:

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

**Assertives:** speech acts that commit a speaker to believing the expressed proposition e.g. reciting a creed.

**Directives:** speech acts that are to cause the hearer to take a particular course of action, e.g. requests, commands, advice

**Commissives:** speech acts that commit a speaker to doing some future action, e.g. promises and oaths.

**Expressives:** speech acts that express the speaker's attitudes and emotions towards the proposition, e.g. congratulations, excuses and thanks.

**Declarations:** speech acts that change the social sphere in accordance with the proposition of the declaration e.g. baptism or pronouncing someone husband and wife.

The reason for this is to examine the function of some of the illocutionary acts present in the speech of President Muhammadu Buhari, and also as Yule (2010:48) observes that the illocutionary act is performed through the communicative force of an utterance which is also generally known as the illocutionary force of the utterance. Mey (2001:139) however says that one should not believe a speech act to be taking place, before one has considered, or possibly created, the appropriate context.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Utterances are often considered at face value without any consideration whatsoever for their effect by a lot of people when reading or listening to a speech. Consequent upon this, they often stick to just the literal or every day meaning of the words they read or hear. In like manner, very few people and of course linguists consider the illocutionary force that accompanies an utterance and its effect. And because they are unaware, there is every tendency for the utterances in a text or in this case a speech not to be appreciated the way it ought to be. Another worst-case scenario is the tendency for a complete misinterpretation of the content of the speech by ignoring the illocutionary features of certain portions of the speech or in its entirety. This paper is therefore written to bring to the fore these linguistic features of utterances by doing a pragmatic analysis of Buhari's speech on the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Objectives of the Paper**

The objectives of this paper are spelt out thus:

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

- i. To show how the Speech Act Theory can be used in the analysis of a speech specifically Muhammadu Buhari's speech
- ii. To further use Searle's classification of the illocutionary acts as a basis for this analysis
- iii. To reveal the type of illocutionary act(s) present in selected utterances in the speech in conformity with Searle's classification
- iv. To reveal the function(s) of each illocutionary act based on Searle's classification

### Major Assumptions of the Paper

This paper is predicated on the following propositions:

- a. a President's speech could be accompanied by illocutionary force
- b. that this illocutionary force can be varied
- c. that Searle's classification of the illocutionary acts can help explain this variability
- d. that having isolated the utterances in the speech of President Muhammadu Buhari, these utterances can be classified according to the illocutionary force accompanying them most notably assertives, expressives, directives, commissives or declarations
- e. that the different illocutionary acts and their function can be termed successful only if they are correctly and appropriately used within a context in the speech
- f. that this successful status, if inherent, could be said to be thus in the light of the felicity conditions which appeared to have been upheld by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari.

### Significance of this Paper

To begin with, the students of English language and teachers studying and teaching Pragmatics respectively will, through this paper, know and demonstrate how Searle's classification of the illocutionary acts can be identified and assigned functions. For parents who are not linguistically inclined, this paper will also unveil to them the effects of certain utterances of Mr. President on them and Nigerians in general. Similarly, political office holders will find that people subject what they say at any given time to a thorough investigation and analysis. Hence, they are reminded on the need to keep to their words and also to be mindful of what they say in the public space. Furthermore, since the major content of the speech is directed at agencies, it is imperative for them to be guided

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

appropriately and accordingly. Finally, future researchers will find this as a useful reference point for carrying out similar investigation(s) in the future.

### Methodology

Twenty-six (26) utterances were randomly collected from the speech presented by President Muhammadu Buhari on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These utterances are collected randomly as stated earlier based on purposive sampling method. Each datum is collected and analyzed separately in three columns: utterance, speech type and function. The utterance is concerned with a given statement in the speech; the speech type is indicative of the type of illocutionary act present in the statement and the function is mostly about what it does in the context in which the statement has been used.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

**Table 1**

UTTERANCE	SPEECH TYPE	FUNCTION
1. From the first sign that Coronavirus or COVID-19 was turning into an epidemic and was officially declared a world-wide emergency...	<b>Assertive</b>	<b>Warning:</b> This utterance is a warning in that it has been predicted that COVID-19 is going to be devastating to the entire world.
2. The whole instruments of government are now mobilized to confront what has become both a health emergency and an economic crisis.	<b>Assertive</b>	<b>Claiming:</b> The President claims that every organ of Government is now deployed in tackling the menace of COVID-19.
3. Nigeria, unfortunately, confirmed its first case on 27th February 2020. Since then, we	<b>Assertive</b>	<b>Stating/Telling:</b> The President by making this statement states Nigeria's first experience and also gives the causality figures so far. This no doubt is

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

<p>have seen the number of confirmed cases rise slowly. By the morning of March 29th, 2020, the total confirmed cases within Nigeria had risen to ninety-seven.</p>		<p>informative as it tells the Nigerian populace who might have been in the dark.</p>
<p>4. We are in touch with these institutions as they work towards a solution that will be certified by international and local medical authorities within the shortest possible time</p>	<p><b>Assertive</b></p>	<p><b>Claiming:</b> He affirms that the Nigerian Government is up to date as far as information sharing and gathering about the virus is concerned both locally and internationally.</p>
<p>5. As individuals, we remain the greatest weapon to fight this pandemic. By washing our hands regularly with clean water and soap, disinfecting frequently used surfaces and areas, coughing into a tissue or elbow and strictly adhering to infection prevention control measures in health facilities, we can contain the virus.</p>	<p><b>Assertive</b></p>	<p><b>Insisting/Telling/Suggesting/Stating:</b> The President reiterates the significance of the “human factor” in the fight against the dreaded virus.</p>
<p>6. Since the outbreak was reported in China, our Government has been monitoring the</p>	<p><b>Assertive</b></p>	<p><b>Claiming:</b> As a statement of fact, the Government claims that they have been monitoring the</p>

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

<p>situation closely and studying the various responses adopted by other countries. Indeed, the Director-General of the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) was one of ten global health leaders invited by the World Health Organization to visit China and understudy their response approach. I am personally very proud of Dr Ihekweazu for doing this on behalf of all Nigerians.</p>		<p>trend of the virus right from its home of birth.</p>
<p>7. Although we have adopted strategies used globally, our implementation programs have been tailored to reflect our local realities. In Nigeria, we are taking a two-step approach. First, to protect the lives of our fellow Nigerians and residents living here and second, to preserve the livelihoods of workers and business owners to ensure their families get through</p>	<p><b>Assertive</b></p>	<p><b>Explanation:</b> in this utterance, the President explains how the preventive measures have been domesticated.</p>

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

<p>this very difficult time in dignity and with hope and peace of mind.</p>		
<p>8. To date, we have introduced healthcare measures, border security, fiscal and monetary policies in our response. We shall continue to do so as the situation unfolds. Some of the measures will surely cause major inconveniences to many citizens. But these are sacrifices we should be willing and ready to make for the greater good of our country.</p>	<p><b>Assertive</b></p>	<p><b>Telling:</b> The President informs the Nigerian populace, as it were, about the key areas where certain decisions have been taken.</p>
<p>9. In Nigeria’s fight against COVID-19 there is no such thing as overreaction or an under-reaction. It is all about reaction by the right agencies and trained experts. Accordingly, as a Government, we will continue to rely on guidance of our medical professionals and experts at the Ministry of Health, NCDC and other</p>	<p><b>Assertive</b></p>	<p><b>Insisting:</b> The Government insists that regardless of the news going around it has been proactive, and insists that it is all about reaction as the trend unfolds each day.</p>

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

relevant agencies through this difficult time		
10. As we are all aware, Lagos and Abuja have the majority of confirmed cases in Nigeria. Our focus therefore remains to urgently and drastically contain these cases, and support other states and regions in the best way we can. This is why we provided an initial intervention of fifteen billion Naira (15b) to support the national response as we fight to contain and control the spread	<b>Assertive</b>	<b>Telling:</b> Again, just like datum 5. the Government re-emphasizes the individual role of the masses as the surest way to combat this malaise.
11. We also created a Presidential Task Force (PTF) to develop a workable National Response Strategy that is being viewed on a daily basis as the requirements change. This strategy takes international best practices but adopts them to suit our unique local circumstances. Our goal is to ensure all	<b>Assertive</b>	<b>Explanation:</b> Here the Government explains how certain important agencies will carry out their duties at this critical time.

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

<p>States have the right support manpower to respond immediately. So far in Lagos and Abuja we have recruited hundreds of ad hoc staff to man the call centres and support our tracing and testing efforts</p>		
<p>12. Many other countries have taken stricter measures in a bid to control the spread of the virus with positive results</p>	<p><b>Assertive</b></p>	<p><b>Claiming:</b> Government claims that when compared to other countries, its measures are by all implications mild. Thus these measures should be welcomed with open arms.</p>
<p>13. I also requested, through the Nigeria Governors Forum, for all State Governments to nominate Doctors and Nurses who will be trained by the NCDC and Lagos State Government on the tactical and operational response to the virus in case it spreads to other states. This training will also include medical representatives from our armed forces, paramilitary and security and intelligence agencies. As a nation, our response must be</p>	<p><b>Directive</b></p>	<p><b>Requesting:</b> The Government exercises its powers by making certain important requests that should be treated as orders rather than just a plea.</p>

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

<p>guided, systematic and professional. There is the need for consistency across the nation. All inconsistencies in the policy guidelines between the Federal and State agencies will be eliminated</p>		
<p>14. For now, the best and most efficient way to avoid getting infected is through regular hygienic and sanitary practices as well as social distancing.</p>	<p><b>Directive</b></p>	<p><i>Advising:</i> though an advice, it functions as kind of order directive to the masses, and that is because making people wash their hands is more difficult than asking them to stay at home.</p>
<p>15. I also requested, through the Nigeria Governors Forum, for all State Governments to nominate Doctors and Nurses who will be trained by the NCDC and Lagos State Government on the tactical and operational response to the virus in case it spreads to other states. This training will also include medical representatives from our armed forces, paramilitary and security and intelligence agencies</p>	<p><b>Directive</b></p>	<p><i>Requesting:</i> Here too, the Government orders by way of request that the State Government should do the needful.</p>

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

<p>16. I am directing the cessation of all movements in Lagos and the FCT for the initial period of 14 days with effect from 11pm on Monday, 30th March 2020. This restriction will also apply to Ogun State due to its close proximity to Lagos and the high traffic between the two States. All citizens in these areas are to stay in their homes. Travel to fro from other states should be postponed. All businesses and offices within these locations should be fully closed during this period.</p>	<p><b>Directives</b></p>	<p><b>Ordering:</b> The Government hereby orders a lock down in Lagos, Ogun and the FCT.</p>
<p>17. Accordingly, the Hon. Minister of Health is hereby directed to redeploy all Port Authority employees previously stationed in the Lagos and Abuja Airports to key roads that serve as entry and exit points to these restricted zones. Movements of all passenger aircraft, both commercial and</p>	<p><b>Directives</b></p>	<p><b>Ordering:</b> He orders all health agencies through the office of the Minister of Health.</p>

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

<p>private jets, are hereby suspended. Special permits will be issued on needs basis.</p>		
<p>18. Furthermore, I have directed that a three month repayment moratorium for all TraderM oni, MarketMoni and FarmerMoni loans be implemented with immediate effect. I have also directed that a similar moratorium be given to all Federal Government funded loans issued by the Bank of Industry, Bank of Agriculture and the Nigeria Export-Import Bank.</p>	<p><b>Directive</b></p>	<p><b>Ordering:</b> The President orders payment to TradeMoni, MarketMoni and FarmerMoni and loans with immediate effect all in a bid to cushion the effect that the lock down is/might likely cause.</p>
<p>19. At this point, I will ask that all contributions and donations be coordinated and centralized to ensure efficient and impactful spending. The Presidential Task Force remains the central coordinating body on the COVID-19 response</p>	<p><b>Directive</b></p>	<p><b>Requesting:</b> The President also requested that all forms of monies generated from private or cooperate entities to the purpose of fighting this cause should be centralized specifically with the Presidential Task Force.</p>
<p>20. Regrettably, we also have our first fatality, a former employee of</p>	<p><b>Expressive</b></p>	<p><b>Deploring:</b> It was shocking to announce the demise of a former employer of the Government.</p>

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

<p>PPMC, who died on 23rd March 2020. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family in this very difficult time. We also pray for a quick recovery for those infected and undergoing treatment.</p> <p>21. We are very grateful to see the emerging support of the private sector and individuals to the response as well as our development partners.</p>		<p>And the Government is thankful for the kind of support extended by the private sector in this fight against the fatal COVID-19.</p>
<p>22. But these are sacrifices we should be willing and ready to make for the greater good of our country.</p>	<p><i>Commissive</i></p>	<p><i>Predicting:</i> The President seems to suggest that they will be sacrifices to make now and in the future; therefore, the citizens should oblige when the time comes.</p>
<p>23. We will use this containment period to identify, trace and isolate all individuals that have come into contact with the confirmed cases. We will ensure the treatment of confirmed cases while restricting further spread to other States.</p>	<p><i>Commissive</i></p>	<p><i>Predicting:</i> The Government also foresees that certain individuals will come into the country and that these individuals will be thoroughly screened.</p>
<p>24. Special permits will be issued on needs basis.</p>	<p><i>Commissive</i></p>	<p><i>Predicting:</i> Another likely thing to happen in the nearest foreseeable future is that certain</p>

**COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA**

		categories of persons will be issued permits.
25. For residents of satellite and commuter towns and communities around Lagos and Abuja whose livelihoods will surely be affected by some of these restrictive measures, we shall deploy relief materials to ease their plans in the coming weeks.	<i>Commissive</i>	<i>Predicting:</i> The Government also foresees hardship ahead in the future and therefore commits itself to meet the needs of the common man in this difficult time.
26. My fellow Nigerians, as a Government, we will avail all necessary resources to support the response and recovery	<i>Commissive</i>	<i>Predicting:</i> The Government promises to avail itself anytime in the future should the need arise. This is kind of promise in the future; therefore, futurity is being stressed here.

**Summary of Findings**

Table 2 is a percentage representation of all the utterances being twenty-six (26) that have been sampled for this paper mostly based on the number or times of occurrence of each type of illocutionary act that has been identified an utterance.

**Table 2:** Percentage of Utterance Population

<b>Type of Utterance</b>	<b>Frequency of Occurrence</b>	<b>Percentage of Utterance Population</b>
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## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

Assertive	12	46%
Directive	07	26%
Commissive	05	19.2%
Expressive	02	8%
Declarative	00	0%

### **Assertives:**

This type of illocutionary act constitute the largest that was made or used in the speech presented by President Muhammadu Buhari; consequently, from the table above, it represented about 46% of the illocutionary acts in the speech. *Assertives* commit the speaker to the truth of something being the case, and they are therefore statements of fact. The different types of function they perform include suggesting, putting forward, swearing, boasting, concluding etc. More appropriately, it was used for the following:

- i. To warn (about the pandemic)
- ii. To claim (how government's organs and machineries have been deployed)
- iii. To state (in terms of numbers and figures of items, people, causalities and otherwise)
- iv. To suggest (that the hygienic life style remains key)
- v. To explain (the proactive steps taken so far)
- vi. To insist (that Government is doing all and everything it can)

### **Directives:**

It is a statement that requires compliance or fulfillment of the utterance. They also try to make the addressees perform an action. The different kinds of function they are most likely to perform include asking, ordering, requesting, inviting, advising, begging etc. *Directives* account for the second largest group of utterances made in the speech, accounting for about 26% of the entire utterance population. It is not surprising for it to be rated high and second only to the *assertives*. It can be inferred therefore that at a time like this, people expect the government to be doing a lot of things mostly in terms of giving orders to military and health personnel who are at the front line of this battle. Besides, this will give the people a sense of confidence and trust on the government. And based on the number of *directives* used in this case, it can be suggested that they served the aforementioned function well.

### **Commissives:**

## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

They commit the speaker to doing something in the future. The different kinds of purposes they serve include promising, vowing, betting, opposing etc. The emphasis here is that most actions under this category are geared toward a certain time in the future. This is expected as the Nigerian populace needs to be informed about the way forward in light of this global pandemic. And so, the *commissive* also accounted for about 19% of the utterances sampled.

### **Expressive:**

They express how the speaker feels about the situation. The different kinds of duties an expressive performs include thanking, apologising, welcoming etc. Expressives account for only 8% of the total number of utterances made. It can be deduced that because of the seriousness of the matter, feelings are not expected to override the place of reason, logic and common sense. Feelings could infringe upon the seriousness of the matter, and therefore it was used only mildly as possible.

### **Declarations:**

This type of illocutionary act is completely absent in the speech of the President, and therefore accounts for 0% of the entire utterance population.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to investigate the illocutionary acts, using Searle's model, in the speech of President Muhammadu Buhari in light of the COVID 19 pandemic. Having met the felicity conditions, the President wheeled his powers in a manner considered appropriate and successful to say the least in this paper. This is not unconnected to the use of more *Assertives* and *Directives* in his first speech to the nation on COVID-19 in a live broadcast specifically on the 29th of March 2020 on the state of things. It can be guessed that the use of these illocutionary acts gives both assurance and direction with particular regard to the dreaded virus. It is therefore recommended that this kind of speech should be presented more often in a bid to allay the fears of the teeming Nigerian masses.

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## COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE PENDULUM FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF INSTRUCTIONAL SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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