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Power, Solidarity and the Language of Peace: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Official Responses to the #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance Protests in Nigeria

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Research Article

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Abstract

This article examines how institutionally conferred power and solidarity are discursively mobilised in official peace-oriented responses to two major Nigerian protests: #EndSARS (2020) and #EndBadGovernance (2024). Drawing on Johnstone and Andrus's (2024) framework of power and solidarity and on an analytical model of the rhetorical effects of power and solidarity in peace discourse (Kasimawo & Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2026), the study analyses nine publicly available speeches and statements by political actors. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of 126 power-related and 103 solidarity-related rhetorical effects reveals that legitimacy and influence dominate power enactments (46%), while emotional alignment and trust-building each account for 32% of solidarity enactments. The findings demonstrate that peace discourse is most effective when institutional authority is paired with inclusive, empathetic linguistic choices that reframe conflict as a shared problem. The article contributes to critical discourse studies by showing how power and solidarity function as constitutive resources in the discursive construction of de-escalation and by highlighting the ethical and practical stakes of language in conflict mitigation in the Global South.

1. Introduction

Conflicts and violence remain major challenges in contemporary societies, frequently aggravated by hate speech and polarising rhetoric (Jannamike, 2024; Oluwasanmi et al., 2022; UNOGPRP, 2019). Political conflict often arises when political processes are perceived as unfair, unresponsive or corrupt (Ogolo et al., 2025), or when conflict is deliberately instrumentalised to influence electoral outcomes (Birch et al., 2020; Harish & Toha, 2019). Language is central both to the escalation of such conflicts and to their mitigation (Chiluwa & Ruzaite, 2025).

Power and solidarity, realised through linguistic choices, are key resources in these dynamics (Johnstone & Andrus, 2024; Tannen, 1993). Recent work in peace linguistics has shown that institutionally conferred power, when combined with expressions of solidarity, can contribute to de-escalation (Kasimawo & Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2026; Curtis, 2022). Yet systematic analyses of how these resources operate in the official language of African governments responding to mass protest remain scarce.

This article addresses that gap by examining the discursive construction of power and solidarity in official responses to two significant Nigerian protests: the #EndSARS protests of October 2020 and the #EndBadGovernance protests of August 2024. It asks what types of power and solidarity relations are mobilised in texts that solicit peaceful resolution, which relations predominate, and what rhetorical effects they produce. The study combines Johnstone and Andrus's (2024) account of power and solidarity with an operational framework for analysing their rhetorical effects in peace discourse.

2. Power, solidarity and peace discourse

Peace discourse refers to the linguistic and communicative practices through which violence is prevented, conflict is de-escalated and social cohesion is fostered (Chiluwa, 2022, 2024; Hamid et al., 2025). It prioritises mutual understanding and shared moral identities over adversarial persuasion.

Johnstone and Andrus (2024) treat power as the capacity to control, influence or shape activity—an agency that may be institutionally conferred (by office or status) or situationally negotiated. Solidarity concerns the symmetrical dimensions of social relations and is realised through membership of speech communities, discourse communities or communities of practice. Both dimensions are continuously at play in interaction.

Building on this foundation, Kasimawo and Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2026) identify four principal rhetorical effects of power in peace discourse—legitimacy and influence (LI), boundary-setting and restraint (BSR), agenda control (AC), and moral authority (MA)—and four effects of solidarity—emotional alignment (EA), identity construction (IC), trust-building (TB), and de-escalation (DE). These categories provide the coding scheme for the present analysis.

Nigeria has experienced recurrent political conflict rooted in elite competition, weak institutions and identity politics (Fourchard, 2012; Orhero, 2020). The #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance protests represent moments in which official discourse was required to respond to widespread grievances while seeking to restore order. Examining the language of those responses offers insight into the discursive mechanisms of conflict mitigation in a postcolonial African state.

3. Methods

3.1 Data

Nine publicly available texts were selected for analysis. These comprise statements and addresses by political actors who possessed institutionally conferred power and who intervened discursively in the protests under study. For #EndSARS (2020): Hillary Clinton's call for restraint; Governor Sanwo-Olu's statements on peace and accountability; and President Buhari's national address. For #EndBadGovernance (2024): statements by Governor Sanwo-Olu (Lagos), Governor Fubara (Rivers), and Governor Adeleke (Osun). Texts were chosen because they explicitly solicit peaceful resolution and address statewide or national audiences.

3.2 Analytical framework

Each text was coded using the dual framework outlined above. Power relations were classified as institutionally conferred or situationally negotiated; solidarity was identified with reference to the relevant community (state, national or international). Linguistic realisations of power and solidarity were then assigned to the eight rhetorical-effect categories (LI, BSR, AC, MA, EA, IC, TB, DE). Frequency counts

were compiled and percentages calculated. Qualitative interpretation focused on how these resources functioned to frame conflict, construct authority and invite cooperation.

3.3 Ethics

The study analyses publicly available political discourse. No human participants were recruited or interviewed, and no private or sensitive personal data were collected. Formal institutional ethics review was therefore not required under the authors' institutional guidelines for secondary analysis of public texts. The research adheres to principles of responsible scholarship and accurate representation of sources.

4. Analysis

The nine texts yield a total of 126 power-related rhetorical effects and 103 solidarity-related rhetorical effects. Across the corpus, legitimacy and influence account for 46% of all power effects, followed by moral authority (31%), agenda control (15%) and boundary-setting and restraint (8%). Among solidarity effects, emotional alignment and trust-building each constitute 32%, de-escalation 20%, and identity construction 16%. These distributions already suggest a discursive preference for claiming rightful authority and fostering affective common ground rather than for explicit prohibition or radical identity reconstruction. The following narrative analysis illustrates how these resources operate in context.

4.1 International and federal-level interventions (#EndSARS)

Hillary Clinton's brief but widely circulated intervention exemplifies the mobilisation of internationally conferred institutional power. Her directive—"I'm calling on @mbuhari and the @hqnigerianarmy to stop killing young #EndSARS protesters"—enacts legitimacy and influence while simultaneously performing emotional alignment with the protesters' plight. The speech act is both an exercise of moral authority on the international stage and an attempt to reframe the Nigerian state's actions as illegitimate.

At the federal level, President Buhari's national address combines strong legitimacy claims with repeated appeals to national solidarity. The President positions himself as the constitutionally authorised guardian of order while inviting citizens into a shared project of national recovery. Moral authority is particularly prominent: the address frames restraint not merely as obedience to law but as a collective ethical responsibility. Agenda-control moves redirect attention from specific grievances toward the broader consequences of continued unrest, thereby attempting to shift the discursive terrain from rights-claiming to stability-maintenance.

4.2 Lagos State responses

Governor Sanwo-Olu's statements across both protest cycles illustrate a consistent pattern. In the aftermath of the Lekki shootings, he asserts institutional responsibility—"We will be committed to a full investigation... and people would be held accountable"—thereby enacting both legitimacy and agenda control. At the same time, he performs solidarity through reported physical proximity to the protesters ("I carried the EndSARS flags with them... we all had the rally together"). This combination of accountability discourse and embodied alignment serves to lower defensiveness while reasserting the state's capacity to respond.

In 2024, Sanwo-Olu's warnings against a repeat of the #EndSARS experience again blend boundary-setting ("Lagos won't allow...") with praise for peaceful conduct. The latter functions as positive reinforcement of de-escalatory norms and as trust-building: by publicly recognising the protesters' restraint, the Governor positions the state as responsive rather than purely repressive.

4.3 Rivers State responses

Governor Fubara's addresses are notable for their explicit affective stance. Statements such as "I feel your pain" directly enact emotional alignment, while repeated assurances that grievances will be conveyed to higher authorities perform trust-building and agenda control. Legitimacy is claimed through the governor's institutional role, yet it is continually tempered by expressions of shared suffering and common purpose. Boundary-setting appears mainly in the form of distinguishing legitimate peaceful protest from violence that would "destroy the state," thereby protecting the space for dissent while attempting to contain its escalation.

The official commentary on residents' peaceful conduct further reinforces de-escalation and identity construction: the protesters are credited with demonstrating "a genuine desire for positive change," thereby incorporating them into a cooperative narrative rather than an adversarial one.

4.4 Osun State responses

Governor Adeleke's interventions are particularly rich in the interplay of power and solidarity. He repeatedly claims legitimacy through institutional action ("I have instructed my team to organize a dialogue session") and moral authority through the portrayal of Osun as a model of peaceful, progressive governance. Agenda-control moves are frequent: the dialogue is framed as the proper, responsible channel for grievance articulation, thereby steering discourse away from street confrontation.

Solidarity resources are equally prominent. Identity construction is achieved through repeated references to "our people," "our dear state" and the collective "we" of government and citizenry. Emotional alignment appears in commendations of the youths' peaceful conduct and in expressions of shared aspiration for good governance. Trust-building is enacted both by promising to convey demands to the federal level and by listing concrete developmental achievements (bursaries, road construction, health-centre

renovation), which function as evidence of governmental responsiveness. De-escalation is achieved by framing the suspension of demonstrations as a mutual accomplishment rather than a unilateral imposition.

4.5 Cross-cutting patterns

Several patterns recur across the corpus. First, legitimacy and influence are almost never exercised in isolation; they are routinely accompanied by solidarity moves that soften hierarchical distance. Second, moral authority frequently serves as a bridge between power and solidarity: speakers present themselves as responsible, compassionate guides rather than as mere enforcers. Third, emotional alignment and trust-building are the dominant solidarity strategies, suggesting that affective common ground is treated as a prerequisite for successful de-escalation. Fourth, boundary-setting, though less frequent, is strategically deployed to protect the distinction between legitimate protest and violence, thereby preserving a discursive space in which solidarity can still operate.

These patterns indicate that effective peace discourse in the cases examined is not the absence of power but its careful calibration with inclusive, empathetic language. Institutional authority provides the standing to speak; solidarity resources provide the relational conditions under which that speech can be heard as cooperative rather than purely coercive.

5. Discussion

The findings confirm that language is not a neutral medium but a constitutive force in conflict settings (Chiluwa, 2024). Official peace discourse in the cases examined works by combining asymmetrical power resources—especially legitimacy and moral authority—with symmetrical solidarity resources—especially emotional alignment and trust-building. This combination allows speakers to direct behaviour while appearing responsive and inclusive.

Theoretically, the study advances critical discourse studies by demonstrating the interdependent functioning of power and solidarity as constitutive resources in the discursive construction of de-escalation. It challenges thin conceptions of solidarity that neglect linguistic practice (Peled, 2024) and shows that durable shifts toward cooperation depend on specific, analysable discursive moves.

Empirically, the predominance of legitimacy/influence and emotional alignment/trust-building suggests that Nigerian political actors, when seeking to mitigate protest, rely more heavily on claiming rightful authority and fostering affective common ground than on explicit prohibition or radical identity reconstruction. This pattern has practical implications for training in peace linguistics and for the design of official communication strategies.

Limitations include the relatively small number of texts, the focus on elite discourse, and the absence of reception data. Future research could examine protester counter-discourses, media mediation of official

statements, or comparative cases across African contexts.

6. Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry implications at theoretical, practical, pedagogical and policy levels.

6.1 Theoretical implications

The study reinforces the view within critical discourse studies that power and solidarity are not opposing forces but interdependent resources that speakers continuously calibrate. Peace discourse, far from being the mere absence of adversarial language, emerges as a positive discursive achievement that requires both the standing conferred by institutional power and the relational work performed by solidarity. This challenges residual dualisms that treat power primarily as domination and solidarity primarily as its absence. Instead, the data support a more nuanced understanding in which legitimacy, moral authority, emotional alignment and trust-building operate together to construct the conditions for de-escalation. The findings therefore contribute to ongoing efforts to theorise the language of peace as an active, analysable set of discursive practices rather than as a residual or purely ideal category.

Power and Solidarity as Interdependent Resources

The findings challenge residual dualisms in discourse studies that treat power primarily as domination and solidarity as its opposite or absence. Instead, the data show that power and solidarity function as interdependent, co-occurring resources. Speakers do not simply “use power” or “use solidarity”; they continuously calibrate the two. Legitimacy and moral authority (power effects) are almost always accompanied by emotional alignment and trust-building (solidarity effects). This supports a more dynamic, relational understanding of how social relations are discursively constructed in conflict settings.

Peace Discourse as a Positive Discursive Achievement

The study contributes to theorising peace discourse not as the mere absence of adversarial or violent language, but as a positive, analysable set of discursive practices. De-escalation is shown to be actively constructed through specific rhetorical moves (legitimacy claims + moral authority + emotional alignment + trust-building). This advances critical discourse studies by treating the language of peace as a constitutive force in its own right, rather than as a residual or ideal category.

Bridging Critical Discourse Analysis and Peace Linguistics

By combining Johnstone & Andrus’s (2024) framework of power and solidarity with an operational model of their rhetorical effects in peace discourse, the study strengthens the theoretical bridge between Critical Discourse Analysis and peace linguistics. It demonstrates that CDA tools can be productively

applied to the analysis of de-escalatory rather than only conflictual discourse, thereby expanding the empirical and conceptual scope of critical discourse studies.

Reframing Institutional Power in Conflict Mitigation

The predominance of legitimacy and influence (46%) and moral authority (31%) among power effects suggests that institutional power in peace discourse operates less through coercion and more through the construction of credible, responsible, and compassionate authority. This offers a theoretical refinement of how “power-with” (rather than only “power-over”) can be discursively realised in political communication, particularly in postcolonial African contexts.

Challenging Thin Conceptions of Solidarity

The findings support arguments (e.g., Peled, 2024) that solidarity is not merely a pre-existing social condition but is actively produced through linguistic practices that create mutual intelligibility, moral common ground, and affective alignment. Without attention to these linguistic mechanisms, theoretical accounts of solidarity remain incomplete.

6.2 Practical implications for conflict communication

For political actors, mediators, public communication officers and civil-society interlocutors, the results underline the strategic value of pairing institutional authority with inclusive and empathetic language. Claims to legitimacy are more likely to be heard as constructive when they are accompanied by recognisable expressions of shared concern and trust-building. Conversely, purely hierarchical or prohibitive language, even when institutionally authorised, risks reinforcing adversarial frames. Training programmes in peace linguistics and official communication could usefully incorporate explicit attention to the eight rhetorical effects identified in this study, helping practitioners recognise and deploy them more deliberately.

6.3 Pedagogical implications

In university curricula in discourse analysis, peace studies and political communication, the framework and findings offer concrete teaching resources. Students can be guided to identify legitimacy claims, moral-authority moves, emotional-alignment strategies and trust-building devices in real political texts, and to evaluate their likely effects on audiences. Such exercises bridge abstract theory and situated practice, and they foreground the ethical dimensions of linguistic choice in conflict settings.

6.4 Policy and institutional implications

At the level of institutional design, the findings support the integration of language-sensitive approaches into conflict-prevention and early-response mechanisms. Government communication units, national orientation agencies and inter-governmental bodies concerned with peacebuilding would benefit from protocols that treat discursive framing as a core component of crisis response rather than as an afterthought. In the Nigerian context specifically, the results suggest that official responses which combine clear institutional accountability with genuine affective alignment are better positioned to retain public trust during periods of unrest. More broadly, the study underscores the need for language policies and communication guidelines that recognise the constitutive role of discourse in either escalating or mitigating political conflict.

6.5 Ethical implications

Finally, the findings highlight the ethical stakes of official peace discourse. Who is authorised to define "peace," whose grievances are acknowledged, and whose voices remain marginalised are questions that cannot be separated from the linguistic choices examined here. By making visible the discursive mechanisms through which authority and solidarity are constructed, the study invites greater reflexivity among those who speak from positions of institutional power. Peace discourse that fails to address structural grievances risks functioning as containment rather than transformation; the careful calibration of power and solidarity documented in this corpus is therefore not only a technical achievement but also an ethical responsibility.

7. Conclusion

This article has shown that the interplay of power and solidarity in the language of official peace discourse is a significant mechanism of conflict mitigation. In the Nigerian cases examined, legitimacy and moral authority, paired with emotional alignment and trust-building, constituted the dominant discursive resources. Language can sharpen divisions or build bridges; systematic attention to how the latter occurs strengthens both scholarly understanding and practical capacity for peacebuilding. Further research on other conflicts, and on the reception of peace discourse by affected publics, is recommended.

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