

## **‘We didn’t arraign a minor’: Disclaimer strategies in the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission’s rejoinders.**

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### **Abstract**

*Crime-fighting institutions in Nigeria are those institutions constitutionally empowered to combat crimes in their different forms and shades. Extant studies on crime-fighting institutions in Nigeria have focused more on the Nigeria Police, with particular emphasis on police-suspect interactions. However, very little scholarly attention has been paid to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) saddled with the responsibility of fighting economic and financial crimes, particularly from the linguistic perspective. This study, therefore, from a linguistic lens, investigates disclaimer strategies in EFCC’s rejoinders, to demonstrate how the Commission deploys linguistic-discursive resources for institutional image repair. Data comprised 20 randomly sampled selected press releases (rejoinders) issued between 2019 and 2024, as elicited from the Commission’s website, and other online news or social platforms, including the Nairaland, the Pointblank news, The Vanguard, and Sun news online. With analytical insights from Dijk’s (2004) critical discourse analysis and Mey’s (2001) pragmatic act theory, findings show that refutation and deresponsibilisation, allusion to institutional professionalism, and indirect accusation are discursive disclaimer strategies which EFCC’s rejoinders are replete with. These discursive strategies ride on counterfactuals, lexicalisation, evidentiality, positive self-representation, and negative other-representation for pragmatic effects. Inherent in these discursive resources are the practs of blaming, enjoining, condemning, praising and threatening.*

**Keywords:** *EFCC, rejoinders, discursive strategies, Dijk’s critical discourse analysis, Mey’s pragmatic act*

### **Introduction**

Prominent among the various socio-economic issues Nigeria has had to battle with in its over sixty-four years of independence is corruption, largely rooted in financial crimes of varying dimensions (Oji, 2024). In fact, in Obuah’s (2010) view, corruption has remained a cancerous issue Nigeria is bedevilled with. It ranges from money laundering to cyber scam, embezzlement and mismanagement of public and private resources. For instance, Osmond et al. (2023: 80) note that

in Nigeria, money is laundered ‘through currency exchange shops, stock brokerage houses, casinos, automotive dealerships, and trade firms. Similarly, as noted by Okoye and Gbegi (2013), the activities of banks and government institutions in Nigeria are characterised by fraudulent transfers and withdrawals, illegal use of overdraft, granting of unauthorised loans, and illegal conversion of pension funds, among others. The spate of corruption in Nigeria explains why Transparency International, for instance, in 2006, ranked Nigeria 146 out of 163 countries on the transparency index, and in 2007 ranked 148 (Obuah, 2010). Undoubtedly, the prevalence of criminality/corruption in the Nigerian space and the urge to save the image of the country, especially in the comity of nations which uphold the principles of ‘systemic integrity’, must have informed former President Olusegun Obasanjo’s move and eventual establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (henceforth, EFCC), saddled with anti-graft responsibilities in the country.

Since its establishment, the EFCC has been involved in the fight against financial crimes and corruption in the country, investigating, arresting and prosecuting financial crime suspects in the country. However, in spite of its ‘efforts’ at ridding the Nigerian space of corruption or financial crimes, there have been reports of shady dealings, partiality, unprofessionalism, and involvement in violations of citizens’ rights in its operations. For instance, the leadership of the Commission has been described as lacking confidence and thus ineffective in fighting corruption (Nwoba & Nwokwu, 2018); lacking integrity (Enweremadu, 2010), and being a political tool in the hands of a ruling political party to witch-hunt political opponents and parties (Dike, 2005). A new dimension to this array of accusations in recent times comes in the form of public outcry, condemning the sense of unprofessionalism, shady dealings, extortion and exploitation by some officials of the Commission. In fact, there have been allegations from the general public of some EFCC operatives engaging in transactional interactions with cyber scammers, otherwise known as Yahoo Yahoo Boys, in the country. Accordingly, men of the Commission, under the guise of searching for cyber scammers, raid pubs, club houses, and hotels, during which they engage in anti-human rights practices, all with the intention of exploiting Yahoo Yahoo Boys.

Against this backdrop, the EFCC, through its spokespersons and representatives, usually releases rejoinders, disclaiming the various allegations against the Commission and its personnel. While extant studies, largely in law (Obuah, 2010); finance (Okoye & Gbegi, 2013; Ogbeiyuluumanhonlen, et al, 2020); sociology and economy (Yahaya, 2005); and public

administration (Bello & Cosmas, 2022), have explored aspects of the modes of operation of the Commission, its efficiency in fighting corruption, as well as its challenges, very little attention has been paid to the linguistic practice of the Commission. In particular, to the best of our knowledge, apart from Sunday and Fagunleka's (2024) exploration of an aspect of linguistic resources in the context of the activities of the EFCC, no serious research attention has been paid to the linguistic investigation of rejoinders by the Commission. In particular, no attention has been given to the exploration of the forms and use of disclaimer strategies in the Commission's rejoinders. This study, therefore, explores disclaimer strategies in selected rejoinders by the Commission, with a view to demonstrating how such strategies are used for positive institutional image projection, geared towards sustaining the confidence of the general public in the Commission.

### **The EFCC: Its establishment and objectives**

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) was established on April 16, 2003, under the administration of former President Olusegun Obasanjo (Bello & Cosmas, 2022). As noted by Sunday and Fagunleka (2024), the Commission was established partly in response to pressure from the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF), which had classified Nigeria among the countries not working within the purview of the international community's moves to combat money laundering. As claimed by Bello and Cosmas (2022), the EFCC was primarily given the mandate to prevent, investigate and prosecute persons involved in economic and financial crimes in Nigeria (Bello & Cosmas, 2022: 121). As such, the EFCC 2002 Act provides the legal framework for its operations and operationality. With this Act, the Commission is empowered to see to the investigation, prosecution and execution of financial and economic crimes against individuals, corporate bodies and national communities. Dike (2005) reports that, since its establishment, the Commission has been persistent in its investigation and prosecution of different kinds of crimes involving persons or systems charged with financial crimes. As such, the Commission reportedly has an impressive record of several cases of convictions on money laundering and oil pipeline vandalism (Akinpelu, 2021) and recovery of assets worth billions of Naira (Nzejekwu, 2011). In spite of its impressive fight against corruption and corrupt practices in Nigeria, the EFCC has been reported to be faced with a series of systemic problems and challenges (Bello & Cosmas, 2022). Some public analysts have argued that the Commission is more often than not an instrument of victimisation in the hands of the presidency (Bello & Cosmas, 2022). As observed in Bello and Cosmas (2022), there are arguments and insinuations that the political

interference and the immunity clause enjoyed by some elective political office holders in Nigeria have constituted a major impediment to the effectiveness of the EFCC in its fight against corruption. There are also insinuations and allegations of corruption and corrupt practices against members of the Commission. For instance, an acting Chairman of the Commission, who served between 2015 and 2021, was suspended by former President Buhari on account of allegations of corruption and power abuse (Bello & Cosmas, 2022). Apart from these researched and documented issues the Commission is contending with, there are arrays of public and institutional issues the Commission is faced with, largely informed by the public's perception of many operatives of the Commission as being corrupt, high-handed and unprofessional in their modus operandi. This explains why there have been constant and occasional calls and cries from different quarters for the need to overhaul the system and tame the perceived excesses and unprofessional tendencies of some officers of the Commission.

### **Exploring economic and financial crimes, criminality and the EFCC**

According to Ribadu (2004), economic crimes are defined as human activities pertaining to the violation of the economic laws of a country. They are illegal or immoral acts that have negative economic consequences and are punishable by law (Sunday & Fagunleka, 2024). Financial crimes, on the other hand, revolve around the illegal conversion of another person's property to one's personal use and advantage (Eiya & Otaloe, 2013). As reported by Ubeku (1991), the scope of financial crimes extends to embezzlement, theft or stealing of state funds. It also involves the siphoning and stashing away of funds in foreign banks. Perpetrators often see themselves as sharp, smart, intelligent and crafty (Ubeki, 1991, cf. Sunday & Fagunleka, 2024: 316).

Given the central role the EFCC plays in the fight against crime and criminality in Nigeria, scholars from different disciplinary perspectives have explored different phenomena in relation to the Commission. Prominent in this regard are Yahaya (2005), Obuah (2010), Okoye and Gbegi (2013), Osmond et. al (2023), Bello and Cosmas (2022), and Ogbeiyuluumanhonlen et al (2023), among others. Yahaya (2005) harps on the efforts of the EFCC in curbing financial crimes in Nigeria. Yahaya (2005) notes that, in spite of the EFCC's crime-fighting efforts, financial crimes remain a serious threat to Nigeria. This, accordingly, has hampered the country's growth and development. Obuah (2010) reinforces the observation by Yahaya (2005) that financial crimes remain unabated in Nigeria despite EFCC's activities. Obuah further argues that the nature of the country's political landscape is a major factor that has made the EFCC ineffective in its fight against financial crimes.

These studies have commendably foregrounded the issues affecting the efficiency of the EFCC. While the current study shares the same institutional context with Yahaya (2005) and Obuah (2010), it is radically different from these studies in that, while they (Yahaya, 2005, and Obuah, 2010) are situated within the financial and legal contexts, the current study is situated in linguistics. Within the disciplinary context of economics, Okoye and Gbegi (2013) examine the impact of fraud and financial crimes on Nigeria's economy. They conclude that fraud and related financial crimes have significant impacts on the country's economy. Bello and Cosmas (2022) and Osmond et. al (2023) support the views of Okoye and Gbegi (2013) on the impacts of financial crime on the growth of Nigeria's economy. As mentioned earlier, the current study, although it explores an EFCC-related phenomenon, is different from these studies in that it provides a linguistic dimension to the operations of the EFCC. Sunday and Fagunleka (2024), the closest to the current study, revolves around the identification and discussion of how social actors are discursively represented in news reports on economic and financial crimes. The current study, however, is essentially different from Sunday and Fagunleka's work in that, beyond the representation of social actors in crime-related news reports, the current study delves into how the EFCC deploys linguistic-discursive resources in disclaiming public allegations against the Commission and its personnel. Lazarus and Button (2022) analyse Twitter users' reports on the style of operation of EFCC operatives across the different regions of Nigeria. They observe that there is a disparity in the manner in which the operatives of the Commission handle crime suspects across the different regions of the country. For instance, they reported that, while offenders in the Southern part are made to face the full wrath of the law when arrested, offenders in the Northern part are treated with leniency. Lazarus et. al (2022) further maintain that the EFCC is guilty of discriminatory treatment of crime suspects across the country. While Lazarus and Button's (2022) and Lazarus et al's (2022) studies focus on accusations against the EFCC, the current study focuses on how the Commission deploys language resources to debunk and disclaim various accusations against it. In this regard, the current study falls within the same scope as other similar crime-related linguistic studies (Ajayi, 2016, 2019; Akinrinlola, 2016; Osisanwo & Adegbosin, 2023) (although these studies are accusatory in nature, subtly indicting some officers of the Nigeria Police, another crime-fighting institution, of being high-handed, discriminatory and sometimes unprofessional in their engagements with crime suspects). The current study, unlike the extant linguistic-oriented ones, is remediative in its approach, focusing on how the EFCC employs discursive resources to remedy

the negative image embedded in the accusations against it and its personnel. The questions then addressed in this study are: (1) what are the disclaimer strategies used by the EFCC in its rejoinders?; (2) how do the identified disclaimer strategies used to achieve the positive self-representation (projecting the positive image of the Commission), and negative other-representation (foregrounding the negative image of the perceived ‘enemies’ of the Commission); and (3) what pragmatic functions do the linguistic resources employed for disclaiming perform in the Commission’s rejoinders?

### **Analytical tools: van Dijk’s (2004) model of CDA and Mey’s pragmatic acts**

Weiss and Wodak (2002) argue that critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA) originates from classical rhetoric, text linguistics, socio-linguistics, applied linguistics and pragmatics. In the view of van Dijk (1998; 2001), CDA is a tool that construes language as a form of cultural and social practice. It is an approach that gives room for the description and interpretation of social life, as represented in talk and texts. Echoing the position of van Dijk, Fairclough (2001) submits that analysts using the CDA approach in their analyses are primarily concerned with teasing out the socio-cultural assumptions and ideologies inherent in all forms of language people deploy. Although there are different approaches to the CDA, van Dijk’s (2004) model, given its relevance, is favoured in this study. Dijk’s (2004) model of the CDA advocates two major discursive ideologies that affect language use, namely positive self-representation (semantic macro-strategy of in-group favouritism) and negative other-representation (semantic macro-strategy of derogation of the out-group) (Ajayi & Ademola, 2020). These two approaches are identifiable through: the analysis of actor description, authority, burden (Topos), categorization, comparison, consensus, counterfactuals, disclaimer, euphemism, evidentiality, example/illustration, generalization, hyperbole, implication, irony, lexicalization, metaphor, self-glorification, norm expression, numbergame, polarization, Us-Them, populism, presupposition, vagueness, and victimization (van Dijk, 2004). This analytical approach is used in this study to tease out elements of positive self and negative other representation in the sampled rejoinders.

In addition to van Dijk’s (2004) CDA approach highlighted above, this study also draws analytical insights from Mey’s pragmatic act theory. Mey's pragmatic act theory accounts for the workings of the contextual resources in the EFCC disclaimers/rejoinders, as well as explicating the pragmatic functions inherent in them. Mey (2001: 43) explains that context goes beyond mere reference. Accordingly, context is action. Context revolves around what things are for, what gives

our utterances their true pragmatic meaning, and gives room for them to be construed as true pragmatic acts (Mey, 2001: 43; Olajimbati & Adesina, 2021: 77). Conceptually, at the heart of Mey’s pragmatic act theory is the notion of pragmeme (situation-derived meaning). The notion of pragmeme is divided into two parts: the activity and the textual parts. This is schematically illustrated below:

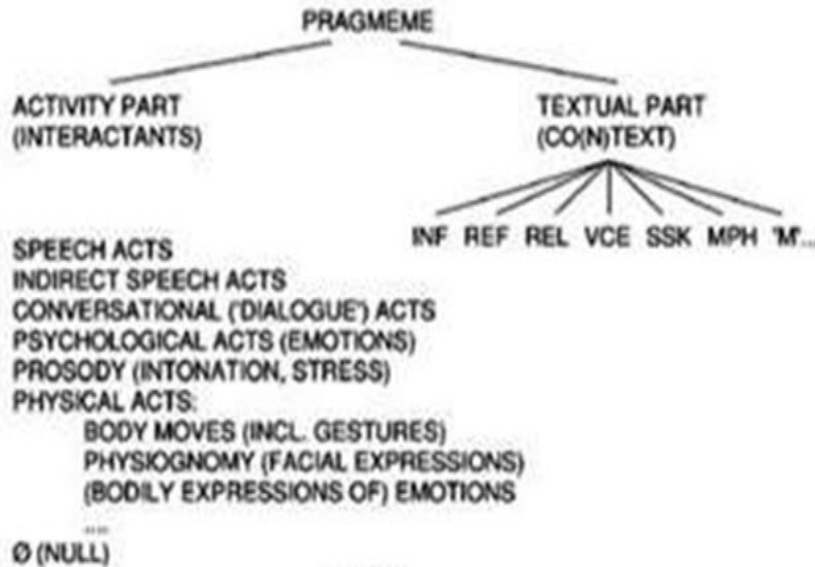


Figure 1: Mey’s Pragmatic Acts Model (2001:222)

As evident from the schema above, the activity part of pragmeme comprises speech acts, indirect speech acts, conversational (dialogue) acts, psychological acts, prosodic acts, and physical acts. The textual part is made up of context elements such as inference (INF), reference (REF), relevance (REL), voice (VCE), shared situational knowledge (SSK), metaphor (MPH), and metapragmatic joker (M). The cross-level relationship between the textual and the activity parts produces a pract or an allopract ‘which is an instantiation of a pragmatic act...every pract is at the same time an allopract’ (Mey, 2001: 221). Capone (2005) provides a further insight into the workings of the notion of pragmeme. He notes that understanding pragmeme is succinct on the societal dimension of utterance interpretation (Olajimbati & Adesina, 2021: 77). In his argument, Capone submits that utterance interpretation is beyond the meaning of the literal context. It involves how society understands such an utterance in a generalised situation understood by the participants in an ongoing interaction. Capone, however, emphasises the fact that utterances carry

literal meanings which cannot be totally neglected. Accordingly, meaning can be obtained in addition to the literal meaning through recourse to the situation or context wherein such utterances are produced. Our position in this study aligns with Capone's submission. We argue in this study that lexical choices with referential meanings act upon situational contexts to generate contextual meanings in the EFCC's disclaimer news reports. This analytical tool is useful in unpacking and contextualising the pragmatic functions of the discursive resources used in the identified disclaimer strategies.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts the qualitative research design. Data were elicited from over 20 purposively sampled press releases by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, released to disclaim and debunk accusations of unprofessionalism, corruption, brutalisation, and violation of human rights. Data were sourced from the Commission's website and other online news or social platforms, including Nairaland, Pointblank News, The Vanguard, and Sun News Online. The press releases covered the period between 2019 and 2024, during which there was a surge in public outcry against the activities and modus operandi of the EFCC in the country. Upon a critical perusal of the 20 initially sampled rejoinders, a pattern revealing a similar style, texture, and use of linguistic resources was established. Hence, to avoid repetition, five rejoinders were randomly sampled and presented as data for analysis. Data were subjected to pragmatic analysis, with particular reference to Dijk's (2004) critical discourse analysis and Mey's (2001) pragmatic act theory. While the former was useful in relating to the discursive resources for pursuing disclaimer in the releases, the latter was useful in teasing out the pragmatic functions of the linguistic-discursive resources deployed for achieving disclaimer in the texts. Odebunmi's (2006) shared cultural knowledge, in addition to Mey's pragmatic act theory, was also useful in engaging the cultural aspects of the sampled data.

### **Disclaimer Strategies in the EFCC's rejoinders**

This section of the study addresses the data presentation and analysis. The disclaimer strategies are thematically identified, and the discussion is guided by analytical insights from Dijk's CDA and Mey's pragmatic acts theory. Four disclaimer strategies, refutation (and deresponsibilisation), allusion to institutional professionalism, and indirect accusation are identified in the sampled data. These are discussed below.

## **Refutation and and deresponsibilisation**

In the submission of Tippett (2010), refutation engages, challenges, and remediates common misconceptions. Important components of refutation, in line with Guzzetti's (2000) submission, are 'the statement of a commonly held misconception, and explicit refutation of that misconception with an emphasis on the currently scientific explanation (Tippett, 2010: 3), although there is a possibility of a third one: a signal or cue that alerts the reader to the possibility of another conception (Maria & MacGinitie, 1987). Dereponsibilisation, on the other hand, revolves around the practice of avoiding responsibility. It is encoded in a text linked with 'weakened responsibility' (Caffi, 2007: 67). Accordingly, deresponsibilisation is often deployed by a speaker to avoid conflict or 'discursive crisis' (Caffi, 2007). Our conceptualisation of dere-responsibilisation in this study is likened to what we call 'passing the buck' in an unambiguous manner. These two strategies are used complementarily by the EFCC in their press releases, as evident in Excerpt 1 below:

### **Excerpt 1**

"In a press release dated July 11, 2023, the ages of all the convicts, including Odeh's, were not stated. For the purpose of clarity, Odeh is 19 years old. All the false narratives being bandied about in some section of the social media that he is seven years old should be ignored.

"The EFCC did not "parade" the convict, and it was a court of law that rightfully convicted him. Facts are sacred. Information about the offence, prosecution, conviction and sentence of Odeh is on all social media platforms of the EFCC. The public is enjoined to ignore any hoopla connected to his conviction."

<https://www.thecable.ng/we-didnt-arraign-a-minor-efcc-clarifies-conviction-of-19-year-old-internet-fraudster/amp/>

The excerpt above revolves around reports and accusations across different sections of the public, especially on different social media platforms targeted at the EFCC, condemning the purported arraignment of a suspected cyber scammer purported to be a minor. This accusation thrives on Nigerians' shared situational knowledge (SSK) of who a minor is and how such should be treated in the context of the law. A minor, alternatively referred to as a child, according to the Child Rights Act (section 277) (as enshrined in Nigeria's 1999 Constitution as amended), is a person under the age of eighteen years. Minors are underage, teenagers, young persons and adolescents (Onuche &

Onuche, 2021). Following this position of the law regarding a minor in the Nigerian context, the allegation levelled against the EFCC is a serious one that inferentially (INF) constructs the Commission as one that does not have regard for the country's constitution. Apparently, from the response of the Commission, it has been accused of 'parading' and 'arraigning' a minor. Making recourse to Dijk's notion of evidentiality, the Commission disclaims the accusation of parading and arraigning a minor, making evidential mention and reference (REF) to the suspect's age (19) to counter the notion that he is a minor. Evidentiality is also evoked where the Commission refers to 'social media platforms' where details concerning the offence, prosecution, and conviction of the said convict could be accessed. The strategic sequencing of the nominal choices: *offence, prosecution, conviction* and *sentence*, pragmatically foregrounds the Commission as one that has not taken the law into its hands, but one that has only allowed the judicial process to take its natural course.

In pursuance of the above, the Commission makes recourse to the tenets of dere-responsibilisation. In particular, it passes the buck of sentencing the accused, making reference (REF) to the court of law as being responsible for the conviction: 'it was a court of law that rightfully convicted him'. However, the Commission, although dieresponsibilises the act of parading or sentencing the said 'minor' as reported in the allegation it is responding to, demonstrates its identification with the conviction of the accused through lexicalisation as evident in its choice of the lexical resource 'rightfully'. The choice of 'rightfully' is predicated on the inference (INF) drawn from the Commission's position that the court followed every process of the rule of law, including giving the accused and his cohorts a fair hearing in arriving at their convictions. In this disclaiming exercise, the Commission operates within the ambit of Dijk's positive self-representation discursive phenomenon. As a follow-up to the 'setting the record straight' effort of the Commission, the Commission employs the practs of blaming and enjoining in addressing the media, and the masses/public, respectively. With respect to the former, the Commission blames 'some section' of the media of reeling out false information to the public, claiming the convict's age is 7 instead of 19. With regard to the latter, the Commission, practicing enjoining, enjoins the public to ignore the information reeled out by the 'blamed section of the media', and regard such as fake and untrue.

## **Excerpt 2**

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, has debunked as false, news making the rounds that one of its prosecutors was offered a bribe over the Malabu OPL 245 fraud case leading to the dismissal of the charges against a former Attorney General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, Bello Adoke and others by a Federal Capital Territory High Court.

Speaking on the alleged bribing of its official, the EFCC says, its intention to review or appeal the case “has no nexus whatsoever to the spew of speculations imputing compromise by parties to the charge, currently making the rounds in some sections of the media.” In denying the narrative of compromise, the anti-corruption agency further said, " The EFCC is not obliged to embrace such narratives as it neither accused any of the parties of any unsavoury conduct nor made any conclusive statements about any investigation on the matter.”

[Malabu Case: EFCC debunks allegations of bribery of its official, mulls appeal – The Sun Nigeria](http://sunnewsonline.com/malabu-case-efcc-debunks-allegations-of-bribery-of-its-official-mulls-appeal/)  
[\(sunnewsonline.com\)sunnewsonline.com/malabu-case-efcc-debunks-allegations-of-bribery-of-its-official-mulls-appeal/](http://sunnewsonline.com/malabu-case-efcc-debunks-allegations-of-bribery-of-its-official-mulls-appeal/)

The excerpt above centres around an allegation of bribery against a prosecutor representing the Commission in a corruption case against a former Attorney General of the Federation and Minister of Justice. According to this allegation, the bribery allegedly involving the Commission’s prosecutors explains why the case against the alleged Attorney-General and Minister of Justice was dismissed. In its response, the Commission employs refutation to disclaim the allegation, reinforcing its position to review and appeal the judgment. According to the Commission, the decision to appeal the case ‘has no nexus whatsoever to the spew of speculations imputing compromise by parties to the charge, currently making the rounds in some sections of the media’. Evidently from its response, the Commission had been accused of compromise, especially since its prosecutor had been fingered in a corrupt practice, a position it finds untenable, hence its strong refutation. In the refutation efforts, reference (REF) is made to some undisclosed ‘sections of the media’, as spewing out speculations and untrue information about EFCC’s stance on the said case. Correcting the misconception with an emphatic ‘scientific explanation’, the Commission,

employing Dijk's counterfactual discourse resources, claims that: "EFCC is not obliged to embrace such narratives as it neither accused any of the parties of any unsavoury conduct nor made any conclusive statements about any investigation on the matter." In this text, the Commission performs the pragmatic acts of absorbing, dissociating and distancing itself from claims being promoted on social media that it has compromised, hence the dismissal of the allegation against the alleged Attorney-General. Of course, the action of the social media promoters of this claim, when viewed within the confines of Mey's notion of pragmeme, is predicated on the shared situational knowledge among Nigerians that the political class often uses the instrumentality of the law to perpetrate all manner of corruption, possibly including twisting the course of justice.

### **Indirect accusation**

According to Castor (2015), accusations are statements or assertions that 'another has done something wrong' (p. 1). Accusations manifest in different forms, including indirect statements, questions, and nonverbal cues (Castor, 2015). As assertions, accusations erect social reality and profile actions as violations of the social and moral order. Accusations indict the agency, blaming or holding the questioned for wrongdoing. Accusatory discourse can manifest in ordinary day-to-day conversations and institutional discourse. In this regard, Ajayi (2016; 2019) mentions accusatory interrogatives as an information-seeking tool the Nigeria Police, as an institution, employs in police-suspect interactions. Evident in Castor's conceptualisation of accusation is that it could be direct or indirect. In the data sampled in this study, we see instances of indirect accusation. These are discussed accordingly.

### **Excerpt 3**

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, on Wednesday, said ex-Kogi State governor, Yahaya Bello, who is accused of N80.2bn fraud, had ridiculed the Nigerian justice system by failing to present himself for trial in court. The EFCC acting Zonal Director, Benin Zonal Command, Mr Effa Okim, stated this during a familiarisation visit to the Delta State Council of the Nigeria Union of Journalists in Asaba, Delta State capital. The EFCC is having a running legal battle with Bello over alleged N80.2bn fraud. Following a failed attempt to arrest him and his repeated absence from court for his arraignment, the EFCC declared Bello wanted, while the Nigerian Immigration also placed the governor on a watchlist. When asked on Wednesday why the EFCC had yet

to arrest Bello weeks after he was declared wanted, an irate Okim claimed that the ex-governor was being shielded by the system.

**“This is the last question I expected because the shame is on all of us. Is that a question I should answer alone? It’s not me, it is the Federal Republic of Nigeria,” the EFCC zonal director said. “That politically-exposed Yahaya Bello, whose crime has been traced to him by allegation and has been invited by EFCC to come and explain, and for months he is acting drama and we are all here wanting to ask questions! The shame is our own shame! “Can’t we catch him? We can, but do we go all out to catch him? Do we need to do that when he has his masters? Can’t they call him and tell him, ‘You are disgracing Nigeria’? What are you telling the world? Tell him to go and explain himself like others have done.“Where are the ministers? Where are Yahaya Bello’s colleagues, even in his hiding? So, Nigerians can’t tell him ‘This is not fair, go and report; they are not going to kill you’? But people are still eating and dining with him.”**

Okim said beyond legality, there was a moral aspect of the case. **“Where has morality gone before legality that we can’t summon that man and tell him to go and report himself to the EFCC? Some persons are writing, supporting him, while some are criticizing the commission. “The problem is our own problem that borders on Nigeria’s image. Our children are watching their parents behave like children. “To me, the truth has vanished. Even in Animal Farm, this will not happen, that a man who was part of the system that was a custodian of our culture, rules and laws can behave like this and you are asking questions. “The media should come out for the first time to harmonise, criticise that action and forget about prosecution but tell him to make himself available; thereafter we know what to do.”** Okim said the criminal justice system had been ridiculed by the actions of Bello, **“And because we respect the law, we want to go by the process, that we are inhibited that does not make us weak.”**

<https://pointblanknews.com/pbn/exclusive/n80bn-fraud-efcc-accuses-colleagues-others-of-shielding-yahaya-bello/>

The central figure in the excerpt above is Yahaya Bello, the immediate past governor of Kogi State (who governed the state between 2016 and 2024). Upon the completion of his tenure as governor, Yahaya Bello has been accused of mismanaging a huge amount of money to the tune of over eighty billion naira (80,000,000,000) by the EFCC. He has then been invited by the EFCC for questioning regarding the accusation, but Yahaya Bello has been evasive, using all kinds of strategies to evade the ‘long hand’ of the Commission. However, many Nigerians, making recourse to the shared situational knowledge (SSK) on how political actors in the country use their political connections and influence to bury off corruption cases against them in the country, have been using different platforms including the social media to accuse the political system of the country of ‘protecting’ Yahaya Bello. This is in line with the observation of Yahaya (2005) and Obuah (2010), who have argued that the political landscape of the country has greatly affected the efficiency of the EFCC. This is particularly in tandem with insinuations that the EFCC is a political tool that is only being used by the political party in power to witch-hunt political enemies; as such, any political office holder who is in the good books of the power of the day is shielded against the probing hands of the EFCC (Yahaya, 2005; Obuah, 2010).

In the particular ‘rejoinder’ interview presented above, a prominent zonal coordinator (representative) of the EFCC, simply captured as Okim, reacts to a subtly indicting question as to why it has been difficult to ‘arrest Yahaya Bello even two weeks after he has been declared wanted’. The representative of the Commission, understanding this question as one that has a tone of indictment and complicity, disclaims any sense of complicity on the part of the Commission, using several discursive resources. First, in line with Dijk’s conceptualisation, the representative employs the in-group identification first-person personal pronoun (object) discourse resource ‘*us*’ (as a disresponsibilisation strategy) to blame not being able to arrest the suspected culprit, Yahaya Bello, on the EFCC, and the general Nigerian system: ‘This is the last question I expected because the shame is on all of us. Is that a question I should answer alone? It’s not me, it is the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Ajayi and Filani (2014), Ajayi (2020), and Akinmameji (2020), for instance, have demonstrated how the pronominal system can be used in mapping in-group and out-group identity construction in discourse. In this process, language is used to achieve the ‘we versus them’ dichotomy in discourse. In this regard, the representative of the Commission, rather than accepting the blame, which is the Commission’s, spreads the blame and ‘shame’ on all and sundry, and particularly the

Federal Republic of Nigeria. To drive home his ‘spread-the blame-equally’ goal, he makes recourse to rhetorical questions as a linguistic resource to put the blame more on the ‘system’ than the EFCC. He asks: Can’t we catch him? We can, but do we go all out to catch him? Do we need to do that when he has his masters? Can’t they call him and tell him?”, among others in this regard. The inclusive ‘we’ represents the zonal coordinator and the EFCC as an institution, while the pronoun ‘they’ represents Yahaya Bello and his allies. In these questions, the zonal coordinator particularly blames ‘Yahaya Bello’s masters’, who are subsequently captured in the pronoun ‘they’.

Although the zonal coordinator has not mentioned specific names in his speech, using Mey’s SSK, Yahaya Bello’s masters could be inferred (INF) to be the ‘strong and powerful’ members of the political figures who have used their political influence to shield him from the EFCC. Relying on inference (INF), the zonal coordinator indirectly accuses some political bigwigs in the country of frustrating the efforts of the Commission to ensure Yahaya Bello is made to face the full wrath of the law. Here, the zonal coordinator practises indicting. He indirectly indicts the political system of the country rather than blaming the EFCC for the inability to arrest Yahaya Bello. The choice of lexical items such as ‘ministers’, ‘some persons’ and ‘people’ is a deliberate lexicalisation strategy to foreground the fact that some ‘powerful and influential’ figures in the Nigerian system, especially those in the corridor of power, are the ones making the job of the EFCC in arresting Yahaya Bello difficult.

Riding on Odebunmi’s shared cultural knowledge (SCK) among Nigerians of how typically in the past, many Nigerian cultures would not want to identify with a character in the shade of Yahaya Bello, because they valued honesty, integrity, good character and making wealth through decent and honest means, the zonal coordinator laments, and condemns Yahaya Bello’s allies, particularly querying how they have not allowed the sense of integrity and honesty encoded in the cultures of the various cultural groups in the country guide their handling of the Yahaya Bello case. By inference (INF), as could be teased out from the lamentation of the zonal coordinator, no man with conscience, integrity, and any sense of moral rectitude should identify with Yahaya Bello, but unfortunately, the reverse is the case. In the last line of the text, the zonal coordinator employs the positive self-representation discourse resource, depicting the EFCC as an institution that is not weak but one that respects the law ‘...we respect the law, we want to go by the process, that we are inhibited that does not make us weak’.

The choice of the verbal groups: *respect, go by the process, and are inhibited*, following Dijk's (2004) CDA, constitutes a pragmatic move to construct the Commission as a law-abiding, rule-guided, and constitutionally empowered institution which is only facing contextual limitations in carrying out its duties.

### **Allusion to institutional professionalism**

The word "professionalism" derives from the word profession (Evetts, 2011). Thus, according to Lester (2010:2), a profession 'is a reasonably well-defined occupation that meets a defensible set of criteria for being a profession, whether those are derived from a social construct, trait or sociological perspective'. Daniel and Rose (1991: 439) submit that professionalism suggests specialised knowledge which results from formal education and training. Essentially, professionalism is conceptualised in terms of the principles and values that guide public service delivery. Its attributes include loyalty, diligence, transparency, efficiency, effectiveness, impartiality, and commitment, etc., and these are achievable through formal processes of education and training (Daniel & Rose, 1991). As noted by Hughes and Hughes (2013), self-regulation is an essential component of professionalism.

As observed in our sampled data, allusion to institutional professionalism is another disclaimer strategy employed by the EFCC to disclaim accusations from the general public and sustain the public's confidence in it. This is illustrated below:

#### **Excerpt 4**

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) **has denied** allegations of brutality during a recent sting operation in Akure, Ondo State. In a statement issued on Sunday, EFCC spokesman Dele Oyewale, said the video evidence purporting to show brutality by its operatives was 'stage-managed' and 'false'. Oyewale's words: "The Commission wants the public to discountenance the trending video as it may have been stage-managed to achieve motives that are unclear. "The Commission will subject this video to forensic analysis to establish its falsehood and prepare a case against purveyors of this distasteful stunt. "The Commission wishes to state that no suspect was assaulted, brutalised or subjected to any dehumanising treatment during the Saturday operation. "It is also false that tear gas was fired at the crime scene. Our personnel do not use tear gas during sting operations. The Standard Operating Procedure of the EFCC **forecloses** the

use of brute force or unprofessional conduct in the course of any operation. The EFCC is **a civilised law enforcement agency** with optimal respect for human dignity and the rule of law.”

'Brutality claim during Akure raid false' — EFCC debunks video evidence - Vanguard News ([vanguardngr.com](http://vanguardngr.com))

The central focus of the text presented in Excerpt 4 revolves around the alleged unprofessional conduct of men of the Commission in Akure, Ondo State, Southwestern Nigeria. Both the conventional and social media were agog with reports and counter-reports of officials of the EFCC raiding a popular pub in the city, where they allegedly brutalised, assaulted, and violated the fundamental human rights of Nigerians in the pub. In an attempt to disclaim this allegation, the Commission, in its statement as captured in the bolded part of the excerpt above, denies the allegation and urges the general public to ‘discountenance’ same. Alluding to institutional professionalism, the Commission, employing Dijk’s positive self-representation, projects itself as an institution that knows what to do with the specific situation at hand. In particular, the Commission mentions the very video in which the ‘false’ message and images of the purported act of unprofessionalism being perpetrated by officials of the Commission are being bandied, will be subjected to forensic analysis to establish the ‘falsehood’ therein. With this claim, the Commission constructs itself as an institution that has both the technical and professional wherewithal to make informed judgments based on scientific processes. As such, it projects itself as a Commission that applies a sense of technical know-how instead of brawn in its operations. Using Mey’s pract, the Commission resorts to the pract of threatening where it states unequivocally that those behind the false videos in circulation would be dealt with, using the instrumentality of the law. In doing this, the Commission constructs itself as an institution that does not take law into its own hands, but one that makes recourse to the appropriate legal systems in the country to guide its actions and operationality. This is contrary to the commonly held notion (Mey’s SSK) among Nigerians that the EFCC is an institution that abuses its authorities, subjects people to victimisation, and ultimately violates people’s rights by engaging in indiscriminate arrests and mal-handling of suspects and non-suspects, alike.

Through lexicalisation involving the foregrounding of lexical choices such as ‘*brutalised*’, ‘*assaulted*’, or ‘*subjected to any dehumanising treatment*’, the Commission maintains its actions are not characterised by dehumanising treatments as claimed in the purported viral video. Making

recourse to Dijk's counterfactuals, the Commission reiterates: "The Standard Operating Procedure of the EFCC forecloses the use of brute force or unprofessional conduct in the course of any operation. The EFCC is a civilised law enforcement agency with optimal respect for human dignity and the rule of law". With this counterfactual discursive strategy, the Commission counters the claim being bandied around that its personnel are unprofessional, uncivil, and brutish in their public engagements. This discourse move aligns with Dijk's notion of positive self-representation. The inference (INF) drawn from the position of the Commission as described above is that the EFCC, contrary to the image of a lawless and unprofessional institution being constructed of it by some section of the Nigerian society, is a law-abiding and highly professional system. This sense of institutional professionalism also features prominently in the excerpt presented below:

### **Excerpt 5**

"For the avoidance of any doubt, the EFCC wishes to categorically state that it is compliant with all provisions of law, and has no intention to stoke misunderstanding over requests from the office of the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice. "Furthermore, the commission's mandate, operational philosophy, the conduct and pronouncements of its officials, do not countenance any activity on the fringes of the law. "It is therefore, untenable for there to be any suggestion that the commission or its principal officials are either in conflict with or readying for "showdown" with the AGF or other officials of government.

"Any such conflicts being paraded in the media exist only in the apparently fertile imaginations of corrupt elements, angling to knock heads together in furtherance of their own pro-corruption agenda.

[EFCC debunks face-off with AGF - Vanguard News](#)  
[\(vanguardngr.com\)](#)

In the excerpt above, the EFCC tries to disclaim the notion that the Commission is in a power tussle with the serving Attorney-General and Minister of Justice of the country. Against insinuations and allegations that the Commission was contesting an official request of the said Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, the Commission, in this rejoinder, constructs itself as such that is compliant with the provisions of the law, and as such does not have any reason to be

at loggerheads with the Attorney-General of the federation whose conducts are expectedly presumed to be guided by the provision of the law. Foregrounding a sense of institutional professionalism, which situates well within the context of Dijk's positive self-representation, the Commission refers (REF) to its mandate and operational philosophy.

Accordingly, by its institutional 'mandate and operational philosophy', the Commission and its officials conduct themselves, linguistically, operationally, and professionally in manners that do not contravene the law. In this regard, while employing the *positive self-representation* to project itself as being highly professional, the Commission employs the *negative other-representation* in constructing the individuals who are purportedly insinuating conflicts between the Commission and the Attorney-General. As such, negative lexical choices such as '*fertile imaginations*', '*corrupt elements*', '*angling to knock heads*' and '*pro-corruption*' are nominal groups deployed to construct these individuals and their interests. 'Fertile imaginations' connotes baseless insinuations; 'corrupt elements' describes the promoters of such insinuations as unscrupulous individuals whose words should not be reckoned with; 'knock heads' describes the insinulators as unreliable, and 'pro corruption' suggests individuals whose actions are against the collective growth of the nation.

In doing this, positive self-representation versus negative-other representation dichotomisation, the Commission practises condemning, criticising, and rebuking on the part of the purveyors of the debunked 'fake' information, and praising, lauding, and commending on its (the Commission's) part.

## **Conclusion**

The study set out to investigate disclaimer strategies in the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission's rejoinders. Working within the ambit of van Dijk's (2004) critical discourse analysis and Mey's (2001) pragmatic act theory (with the inclusion of Odebunmi's (2006) notion of shared cultural situation), the study identified refutation and deresponsibilisation, allusion to institutional professionalism, and indirect accusation as discursive disclaimer strategies EFCC's rejoinders are replete with. Refutation and deresponsibilisation combine to counter the information and allegations the Commission considers untrue. In particular, they are used in instances where the Commission is alleged to have usurped the authorities of other institutions (such as the court) in the country. This strategy allows the Commission to counter a 'wrong' position, provide the 'true' alternatives, and set the record straight. Allusion to institutional professionalism allows the

Commission to evoke the ethical principles guiding the modus operandi of its personnel. With this strategy, the Commission foregrounds its sense of methodicity, scientificity and above all professionalism. Indirect accusation is deployed to indict the Nigerian system for the perceived failure of the Commission. As such, the strategy condemns, albeit indirectly, the individual and institutional systems, making it difficult for the Commission to effectively carry out its constitutionally backed role of fighting financial crimes in the country.

These discourse elements ride on linguistic resources such as counterfactuals, evidentiality, positive self-representation, and negative other-representation. Inherent in these discursive resources are the practs of blaming, denying, enjoining, condemning, praising and threatening, which are pragmatically used by the Commission to positively project itself, and negatively project its perceived 'adversaries'. The study demonstrates how language plays a vital role in institutional image remediation enterprise. Although it sits well within the context of extant crime-fighting institutional discourse, it, unlike extant studies, which are largely indicting in orientation, is remediative in its approach.

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