

# Pragmatic Strategies of Separatist Movements in Framing Democracy and Governance in Africa

Dr. Emmanuela Uzoma Asadu

Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria.  
Email: drnuella077@gmail.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9200-2186>

## Abstract

This study examines the pragmatic strategies used by separatist movements in Africa to frame democracy and governance, focusing on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria and the Ambazonian movement in Cameroon. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Speech Act Theory, the research explores how these groups employ assertives, directives, and commissives to construct ideological narratives, delegitimize state authority, and mobilize support. The data consist of seven excerpts each from four full-length addresses: two speeches by IPOB under Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and two broadcasts by Ambazonian leaders. In each, rhetorical framing, victimhood narratives, and resistance discourse are strategically deployed to justify demands for self-determination. The study highlights how these movements manipulate democratic ideals and governance failures to strengthen their legitimacy. By analyzing their linguistic choices and discursive patterns, this research provides insights into the role of language in separatist struggles and its implications for political stability in Africa.

**Keywords:** *Pragmatics; Separatist Movements; IPOB; Ambazonia; Democracy.*

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

The reconfiguration of nationhood and identity in Africa has resurfaced with force in recent decades, often manifesting through the rise of separatist movements. These movements, while rooted in historical and structural grievances, are increasingly defined by their strategic use of discourse to contest the legitimacy of the state and to reconstruct the meaning of democracy and governance. Building on this, they carefully deploy chosen linguistic and rhetorical strategies to craft persuasive narratives—narratives that do not merely reflect their discontent, but actively reframe democratic ideals and governance practices in ways that rationalize and legitimize their secessionist claims (Blommaert, 2005; Fairclough, 2013). As Wodak (2009) notes, such discourse “is never innocent”—it is “laden with power, ideology, and purpose,” often designed to shape public perception and mobilize support both locally and internationally.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), under the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu, has sustained a strategic use of language and media to challenge the legitimacy of the Nigerian state, framing it as unjust and systematically biased against the Igbo ethnic group (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2019, p. 95). Similarly, Anglophone Cameroonians have long complained of discrimination and exclusion, arguing that the Cameroonian administration has favored French over English, effectively reducing English speakers to a ‘second-class citizenship’ and treating the Anglophone regions as a colonial appendage” (Hanson, 2025, p. 3). These groups construct their demands through communicative acts that reframe national narratives, presenting secession as a democratic imperative grounded in self-determination.

Pragmatics, as the study of meaning in context, offers a powerful framework for interrogating how these movements employ language to perform acts, generate implicatures, and convey resistance through indirectness, presupposition, and rhetorical structure (Levinson, 1983; Thomas, 1995). One of the basic ideas in Pragmatics is what Grice (1975) called 'implicit meaning' — the meaning that is inferred in conversation that arises when speakers simultaneously communicate implicitly. It focuses on how speakers modify their language usage in specific social and cultural contexts to meet their communication objectives (Verschueren, 1999). Rather than the meaning of words themselves, pragmatics deals with non-literal elements of meaning, such as presuppositions, inferred meanings, and speech acts (Levinson, 1983). Recent studies in political discourse analysis have highlighted how actors manipulate meaning to construct ideological boundaries and legitimize dissent (van Dijk, 1998; Chilton & Schaffner, 2002). This research situates itself within that tradition, drawing attention to how IPOB and Ambazonian discourse strategically frame governance failure and democratic exclusion as justifications for separatist claims. In doing so, they do not merely react to the state but actively reshape public understanding of legitimacy and national identity.

### Statement of the Problem

Although research shows a corpus of political and sociological research on African separatist movements, there is a paucity of studies that systematically examine how these actors deploy pragmatic and discursive strategies—grounded in Speech Act Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)—to reshape core political concepts. According to Austin (1962), “to say something is to do something” (p. 94), yet little attention has been paid to how utterances by groups like IPOB and Ambazonia perform ideological “speech acts” that go beyond protest and enter the realm of political construction. Similarly, Fairclough (1995) emphasizes that “discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned” (p. 132), suggesting that separatist rhetoric actively reconfigures notions of democracy and governance rather than merely reflecting them

Existing scholarship tends to treat separatist language as propaganda or mere grievance-venting, neglecting the layered performativity of commissives, directives, and assertives. For example, when IPOB leaders issue declarations of self-rule, they enact commissive speech acts that “commit the speaker to a future course of action” (Searle, 1969, p. 23), yet no study has parsed how such moves bolster claims to legitimate sovereignty. Ambazonian manifestos likewise, frequently employ forceful directives—such as “You must rise up!”—that function as illocutionary acts designed to mobilize collective identity. These directives perform more than literal meaning; they carry intentional implicatures of resistance embedded within performative pragmatics (Yule, 1996).

Second, from a CDA standpoint, scholars like van Dijk (2001) argue that discourse both “maintains and resists social power” (p. 352). However, there is scant research on how separatist movements harness discursive strategies—such as presuppositions and implicatures—to delegitimize state authority by casting governments as “neo-colonial oppressors” (Adegoju, 2009, p. 78). By neglecting these pragmatic maneuvers, we lack insight into how “dominant ideologies are naturalized” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 150) within ethnic nationalist narratives. It is observed that these separatist movements under study do not merely articulate grievances; they construct narratives in which the state becomes illegitimate, and democracy is redefined as self-rule divorced from territorial unity. However, the lack of scholarly focus on the linguistic architecture of these movements creates a critical gap in our understanding of how their language strategies shape their ideological appeal, maintain internal

coherence, and influence political stability within contested regions. In Nigeria, "IPOB separatist agitation appears as language of aggression... as well as threats" (Chiluwa et al., 2020, p. 193); the Nigerian state is as well seen as a predatory actor, which frames governance as a zero-sum game between the oppressor and the oppressed. Similarly, Akinwotu (2025) shows that Ambazonian manifesto evokes ancestral sovereignty and moral legitimacy as he asserts "We have an obligation – dead or alive – to bequeath to our children a nation that they can call theirs, something we have been deprived of for too long"(p. 112).

Finally, an integrated Speech Act–CDA approach is essential to understand how IPOB and Ambazonia reframe democracy itself. As Mey (2001) reminds us, "Pragmatics is the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding" (p. 3), yet no research has yet charted how these movements redefine democracy from "electoral representation" to "ethnic self-determination" through strategic illocutionary framing. This gap hampers both scholarly comprehension and policy responses to separatist discourses that may undermine regional stability. By interrogating the performative force of separatist utterances (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) within their broader socio-political discourse (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001), this study addresses a critical lacuna in our understanding of how language constructs and legitimizes demands for self-rule in Africa.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this research is to examine the pragmatic strategies employed by separatist movements in Africa, with particular focus on how IPOB and Ambazonian leaders linguistically construct and frame democracy and governance.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- 1) Identify and analyze the core pragmatic strategies used by IPOB and Ambazonian leaders in articulating their political agendas.
- 2) Investigate how specific speech acts—such as assertives, directives, and commissives—are deployed to establish narratives of legitimacy, marginalization, and resistance.
- 3) Examine how implicature, presupposition, and intertextual references influence public perceptions of state governance, democratic failure, and national cohesion.

### **Significance of the Study**

By focusing on the pragmatic dimensions of separatist discourse, this research extends existing scholarship on political communication in Africa. It demonstrates how separatist leaders reconfigure democratic ideals by strategically deploying language as a tool of resistance and identity formation (Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Opeibi, 2008).

Understanding these rhetorical mechanisms is vital for policy makers, conflict negotiators, and scholars of democracy. This study provides nuanced insights into how language becomes a battlefield for legitimacy, making it essential for those engaged in governance reform and peacebuilding to consider the communicative dynamics of separatist rhetoric.

## Scope and Delimitation

This study is limited to the discursive practices involved in the speeches of —the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria and the Ambazonian movement in Cameroon. The data consist of seven excerpts each from four full-length addresses: two speeches by IPOB under Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and two broadcasts by Ambazonian leaders. IPOB and Ambazonia have been chosen for their prominent deployment of rhetorical framing, victimhood narratives, and resistance discourse grounded in democratic ideals. Within a pragmatic framework, Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory and Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis are employed as analytic tools. However, the legal, military, and economic dimensions of separatism are not the primary focus; rather emphasis is placed on the linguistic performance of political ideology and how it intersects with governance and legitimacy.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research is anchored in two interrelated theoretical paradigms: Speech Act Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Together, these frameworks provide a robust analytical lens for exploring how language functions not merely as a vehicle of expression, but as an instrument of political action, ideological construction, and resistance in separatist movements.

### Speech Act Theory

Originally developed by Austin (1962) and further expanded by Searle (1969), Speech Act Theory posits that utterances are not only carriers of information but also perform actions. Every speech act involves a locutionary act (the literal utterance), an illocutionary act (the speaker's intent), and a perlocutionary act (the effect on the hearer). In the context of separatist movements, language is not neutral; rather, it is deployed strategically to perform acts such as asserting group identity, mobilizing resistance, or delegitimizing state authority.

Leaders of IPOB and Ambazonia frequently use assertives to present their historical and political claims as factual (e.g., "Biafra existed before Nigeria"), directives to urge collective action (e.g., "Join the protest," "Boycott elections"), and commissives to promise a better governance model under secession (e.g., "We shall restore justice to our people"). These acts function pragmatically to persuade, provoke, and mobilize both internal and international audiences (Aliu, 2021; Searle, 1969).

### Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

CDA, as formulated by Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (1998), treats language as a form of social practice. It focuses on the power relations embedded in discourse, particularly how texts construct, maintain, or challenge ideological structures. CDA is especially useful in analyzing the discursive framing of democracy and governance by separatist groups, who use rhetorical devices to highlight state failures, amplify ethnic marginalization, and frame secession as a legitimate democratic response.

In the case of IPOB and the Ambazonian movement, CDA allows for the unpacking of recurrent discursive themes such as victimhood, injustice, and self-determination. These discourses invoke topoi of justice and morality, portraying the state (or its allies) as oppressors and presenting the movement as inherently righteous and morally superior. As Chela Sandoval noted, revolutionary topoi offer a means by which resistance movements locate themselves as moral actors, standing against a dominant power defined by oppression and injustice (Sandoval, 2000). So, CDA helps identify how these movements recontextualize Western

democratic ideals like freedom and human rights to validate their cause in both local and international fora.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This qualitative study employs a case-comparative design, focusing on IPOB and the Ambazonian movement as distinct yet comparable separatist projects. By situating the research within discourse-driven pragmatics, it integrates Speech Act Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how language constructs ideological narratives around democracy, governance, and state legitimacy.

### Data Samples and Method of Collection

The primary discourse data are randomly selected from official speeches, press releases, and communiqués by IPOB (e.g., Nnamdi Kanu’s European Parliament and courtroom speeches) and Ambazonian leadership (e.g., Sisiku Ayuk Tabe’s Independence Day messages).

Sampling focuses on the speeches ideological richness, rhetorical sophistication, and relevance to demands for democratic self-determination.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Separatist Movements in Africa: A Historical and Political Overview

It is reported in 2017 that the world’s most active armed conflict zones involved disputes related to self-determination, with an estimated civilian death-toll of over 20 million, and there were over 60 ongoing self-determination conflicts in the world. (Williams, 2017, as cited in Berlin, 2017, p. 62). African separatist movements are often born from deep historical cleavages and political marginalization. African Secessionism has, however, been defined and stratified into four categories namely: “aspirational” if “understood as the solution to a broader crisis underwritten by marginalization, identity, or representation”; “as grievance” when “promises [are] made and broken” in post-colonial history; “as performance and posturing” if “used for political leverage”; and finally “as disenchantment”, when separation “does not necessarily bring about a solution to one’s problems” (Schomerus, Englebort and De Vries, 2018, p. 4). They believe that it is a complex political phenomenon; its proponents usually invoke the right to self-determination while the foundations of the claims to secession usually lie in political grievances, sentiments of marginalization, historical narratives, and economic projects. The State most times clamp down on these groups by way of arrest, intimidation or indefinite incarceration of the Secessionist leaders and activists. Government still explore other ways including “creating their own factions of secessionist movement to cause division, offering improved development in secessionist areas or political appointments for secessionists” (Schomerus et al., 2018:9).

Forniès (2022) reports that in Northern Africa, Sahrawi demands for a referendum on self-determination have continued to be unheard by occupying power Morocco, which in recent months has intensified its repressive actions in the territory. Also in Libya, some Amazigh towns in the Nafusa mountain range have essayed a self-styled cultural autonomy that has not been recognized by either government of the fragmented nation (Zurutuza 2019), while some in the eastern Cyrenaica region have voiced demands for federalization. Self-determination demands in Amazigh-majority Kabylia have been met with continued repression by Algerian

authorities. Following mass protests starting in 2016, some sectors in north Morocco's Rif have proposed to re-establish the Rif Republic that had been active in the 1920s. In Sudan, a 2020 deal is expected to bring a measure of devolution to war-ravaged Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile regions (Marsden 2020).

However, Forniès (2022) further reports that Southern Africa has been relatively calm if compared to other subregions in the continent. Even though, some secession demands can be mentioned. With Namibia's Caprivan self-determination calls mostly dormant for years now, an "upsurge of pro-Mthwakazi ethnic consciousness" has taken place in Zimbabwe's western provinces of Matabeleland. A number of political organisations and parties have since 2000 been established, demanding Matabeleland's secession from Zimbabwe, more especially since 2017, grounding their discourse on perceived discrimination of the Ndebele people by the Shona, who constitute the majority in the country (Hadebe 2020, p. 155-180). Meanwhile in South Africa, several Afrikaner and/or Boer groups have unsuccessfully voiced demands for the re-establishment of separate political entities for the populations they seek to represent—mostly whites and coloureds. Since 2016, the Cape Independence Party has been more vocal in its calls for a referendum on the secession from South Africa of what they call the Cape nation. The Ambazonian crisis in Cameroon, which escalated after the 2016 imposition of French-language judges and teachers in Anglophone regions, exemplifies this trajectory; the government's forceful response pushed peaceful protests into armed rebellion (International Crisis Group, 2022). A strike by lawyers began in October 2016, followed by teachers in November protesting the appointment of Francophone magistrates and educators in the Anglophone Northwest and Southwest. The government's crackdown escalated the crisis into armed insurgency. Over a million Cameroonians have since been displaced, and thousands killed, embodying a long-simmering resentment against francophone domination (The Guardian, 2025). In Nigeria, IPOB revived the Biafran secessionist project using digital media, popular mobilization, and public speeches—a resurgence grounded in perceived political and economic exclusion of the Igbo. A 2020 study by Esther Ajiboye analyzed polarised online discourse surrounding IPOB, linking digital discourse intensity to perceptions of political and economic exclusion among the Igbo (Ajiboye, E. 2020).

Further research highlights that IPOB's resurgence leveraged social media and internet broadcasting to amplify grievances and mobilize support across diasporas and domestic networks (Madueke, O. 2024). There are lots of perceived political and economic exclusion as they are foundational to the secessionist resurgence. Scholarly accounts report that Igbo communities have long experienced and endured severe systematic marginalization from Nigerian federal institutions via discriminatory quota systems, inequitable revenue allocations, and exclusion from political patronage—which significantly fueled IPOB's ideological appeal (Akama, H. E. 2024). These conflicts underscore how colonial legacies intersect with contemporary governance failings to fuel separatist demands.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Here, the assertives, directives, and commissives these Separatist Movements that is, (IPOB and Ambazonia leaders), employ in their speeches are identified and critically analysed to explain how they use rhetorical framing, victimhood narratives, and resistance discourse to strategically deploy and justify demands for self-determination; how they equally construct ideological narratives to delegitimize state authority, and mobilize support. Seven excerpts are selected from each of these speeches. The first speech is addressed by Radio Biafra Director

and IPOB Leader Nnamdi Kanu at World Igbo Congress. The second one is his speech at European Union Parliament. From Ambazonia leaders, Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe – 2017 End-of-Year Speech and Ambazonian Acting President – Independence Day Speech are analysed as well.

## EXCERPTS FROM SPEECH A

### IPOB – Mazi Nnamdi Kanu Speech at World Igbo Congress Convention, Los Angeles, USA

1. "Nigeria was not a united country and will NEVER be a united country."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Rhetorical framing – portraying Nigeria as inherently fragmented.

Effect: Delegitimizes Nigeria's unity and justifies Biafra's separation.

2. "To refresh our memories, Nigeria is a country made up of three distinct nations with mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed and irreconcilable value systems."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Victimhood narrative – implying cultural incompatibility and historical imposition.

Effect: Constructs an ideological dichotomy between Biafra and Nigeria.

3. "The British colonial masters forcefully merged Biafra with the other two nations..."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Victimhood narrative and historical grievance.

Effect: Blames colonialism and sustains the claim of illegitimate union.

4. "Biafra restoration is here, all you have to do is put in your efforts."

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Resistance discourse – call to collective action.

Effect: Mobilizes support through agency and urgency.

5. "We have brought Biafra restoration into global discourse..."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Rhetorical framing – portrays IPOB as diplomatically effective.

Effect: Gains credibility and strengthens movement's legitimacy.

6. "Let us not fail our children, our unborn generations..."

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Emotional appeal and moral imperative.

Effect: Reinforces collective duty and sustains support.

7. "May Chukwu Okike Abiama bless all of you and bless the nation of BIAFRA."

Speech Act Type: Commissive (Implied commitment to spiritual leadership)

Function: Constructing ideological unity through religious framing.

Effect: Merges religious and political identity.

### **Nnamdi Kanu at the European Union Parliament**

1. "The Government of Nigeria is... giving land to Fulani herders... which belongs to Biafran farmers."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Victimhood narrative – dispossession and injustice.

Effect: Justifies Biafra's need for self-rule.

2. "This torment must end."

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Resistance discourse – condemning the state and calling for change.

Effect: Encourages emotional response and urgency.

3. "Biafra is entitled to resolve its own future and security."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Rhetorical framing – asserting the right to autonomy.

Effect: Aligns with international self-determination norms.

4. "IPOB has always called for creative solutions..."

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Strategic positioning – presenting IPOB as reasonable.

Effect: Counters accusations of extremism.

5. "Nigeria... is a failed state."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Delegitimization of the Nigerian state.

Effect: Justifies secession on grounds of dysfunction.

6. "Biafran voices are not heard."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Victimhood narrative – international neglect.

Effect: Appeals for international recognition and support.

7. "Africa's peaceful future will be revealed through Biafra."

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Utopian vision – promise of transformation.

Effect: Idealizes Biafra and positions it as a regional solution.

**AMBAZONIA – Leaders' Speeches****Speech 3: Sisiku Julius Ayuk Tabe – 2017 End-of-Year Speech**

1. "We have been subjected to oppression, subterfuge, discrimination..."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Victimhood narrative – accumulation of grievances.

Effect: Constructs a moral case for self-determination.

2. "Ambazonia has never been part of La République du Cameroun."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Rhetorical framing – historical independence claim.

Effect: Undermines the legitimacy of Cameroonian sovereignty.

3. "We are a people and we deserve to be free."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Identity assertion and entitlement.

Effect: Aligns with UN self-determination norms.

4. "We must defend our homeland by all legal means."

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Resistance discourse – call for lawful defiance.

Effect: Legitimizes resistance without inciting violence.

5. "We will never accept being treated as second-class citizens."

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Promise of defiance.

Effect: Reinforces determination and resilience.

6. "We are emboldened, not broken."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Rhetorical framing of strength.

Effect: Motivates supporters and affirms agency.

7. "The world must recognize our plight and support our cause."

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Global appeal.

Effect: Seeks international legitimacy.

**Speech 4: Ambazonian Acting President – Independence Day Speech**

1. "Every day, I wake up to the humiliation and genocidal onslaught against you, my people..."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Victimhood narrative – intensifying urgency.

Effect: Establishes moral high ground.

2. "They have been burning our villages..."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Detailing state violence.

Effect: Delegitimizes Cameroonian authority.

3. "They plotted to eliminate our leaders..."

Speech Act Type: Assertive

Function: Resistance narrative – framing leadership as targeted.

Effect: Creates martyrdom sentiment.

4. "Ambazonia will be hotter for the occupier in 2019."

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Threat and promise – strategic defiance.

Effect: Signals escalation and resolve.

5. "We will shift the game plan from defense to offense."

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Tactical commitment.

Effect: Inspires militant preparation.

6. "We cannot fail and we will not fail."

Speech Act Type: Commissive

Function: Motivation and resolve.

Effect: Builds collective confidence.

7. "We 8 million strong... must fight for our homeland or live without a nation."

Speech Act Type: Directive

Function: Call to existential action.

Effect: Emphasizes urgency and moral imperative.

Further, more Speech Acts like the directives are used for mobilization and call for immediate actions.

In Kanu's 2018 speech in Israel, he commands:

"I want the people of the Middle Belt to rise and join IPOB... we shall hunt everyone down to avenge the death of IPOB members... we will not stop until Biafra is fully restored." This use of directives ("rise and join," "we shall hunt," "we will not stop") actively mobilizes in-group solidarity and frames resistance as a moral imperative. Similarly, Ayuk Tabe—while incarcerated—urges supporters:

“Tell them that we will go to Buea... come rain or shine... Tell them to take good care of the needy of the struggle...”. Here, directives appeal to perseverance and solidarity, transforming passive listeners into active contributors.

Also, Commissive Speech Acts are equally employed to show commitments to the cause and reaffirm their stand on keeping to made promises.

Kanu assures continuity with “we will not take part in any election until we get a referendum... this is not negotiable” . This commissive performative commits IPOB to its secessionist strategy, reifying their ideological stance. Likewise, Ayuk Tabe’s message—“we commit to NEVER waver until we achieve... LIBERTY and SOVEREIGNTY” —solidifies long-term dedication and underlines that their cause transcends individual agendas. Expressive speech acts construct victimhood and resistance. Kanu’s portrayal of Nigeria as the “Zoo state” that attacked him and even killed his dog expresses grievance and animosity . This expresses outrage and constructs the Igbo as victims of state cruelty. Ayuk Tabe frames Anglophone suffering:

“We have endured for sixty years... Amidst the pain, the sacrifice and the suffering... We are fighting for the soul of a great nation.”

These expressives evoke empathy and construct a collective identity centered on victimhood and moral high ground.

### Strategic and Critical Discourse Analysis of Separatist Speeches

This section presents a synthesized analysis of the pragmatic and critical discourse strategies deployed the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Ambazonian movement—in their public speeches and broadcasts. Through the lens of Speech Act Theory and Fairclough’s (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this analysis captures how language functions as a tool for ideological construction, resistance, and the framing of self-determination narratives. The tables below highlight both the strategic speech acts used and the dimensions of CDA, further integrating more examples directly drawn from the speeches.

**Table 1: Strategic Deployment in Both Speeches**

Strategy	How It's Used
Rhetorical Framing	The Separatist leaders redefine Nigeria and Cameroon as colonial relics or failed states to delegitimize authority.
Victimhood Narratives	They highlight oppression, cultural erasure, violence, and historical injustice to legitimize grievances.
Resistance Discourse	The leaders mobilize support through expressions of resilience, urgency, and collective responsibility.
Speech Acts Used	Assertives (truth claims), Directives (calls to action), and Commissives (promises and commitments).

The strategic use of language by these separatist leaders involves framing the state as illegitimate and dysfunctional, mobilizing supporters through emotional and ideological appeals, and invoking historical injustices to legitimize claims for independence.

Rhetorical framing positions the central governments as oppressive forces; victimhood narratives reinforce a sense of shared suffering; and resistance discourse motivates collective action. The use of speech acts—assertives, directives, and commissives—serves to advance these communicative intentions.

**Table 2: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Aspects of the Research**

CDA Dimension	Description	Example from Data
Text	Analyzes lexical choices, sentence structures, and rhetorical strategies used in separatist speeches.	"Nigeria is a failed state" – delegitimizing authority via assertive act (Kanu, 2019).
Discursive Practice	Focuses on how the texts are produced, distributed, and consumed. Separatist speeches are disseminated via social media and international forums.	"Africa's peaceful future will be revealed through Biafra" – disseminated through EU parliament speech (Kanu, 2019).
Social Practice	Examines the broader social and ideological context of the discourse. Reveals power struggles, historical grievances, and identity construction.	"We have been subjected to oppression..." – situating Ambazonian discourse in postcolonial resistance context (Ayuk Tabe, 2017).

Fairclough's CDA framework further enriches this analysis by uncovering how discourse operates within broader power structures. At the textual level, speech acts are shaped through strategic vocabulary and syntactic choices. At the level of discursive practice, the widespread dissemination of these texts through digital and international platforms amplifies their reach and reinforces separatist ideologies. Finally, the social practice dimension reveals how these discourses emerge from, and contribute to, entrenched systems of marginalization, resistance, and identity politics. Together, the strategic use of speech acts and the CDA lens provide a comprehensive understanding of how language serves both communicative and ideological functions in separatist movements.

### The Role of Language in Political Struggles

Language serves both as a weapon and a boundary marker in separatist movements. Ambazonian activists use metaphors—such as “journey” and “animal” images—to symbolize oppression and resilience, intensifying rhetorical impact across online platforms (Echitchi, 2023). Similarly, IPOB online and offline communications thrive on polarized “us vs. them” discourses, employing assertives, directives, and figurative language to vilify the Nigerian state and galvanize support (Chiluwa, 2018; Hate-speech study, 2020). Both movements harness language to construct legitimacy, mobilize action, and reframe state institutions as inimical to their democratic aspirations.

Both leaders use presuppositions rooted in history. Kanu's claim that “I am not a Nigerian...I already renounced Nigeria in 2015” presupposes the non-legitimacy of the Nigerian state. Ayuk Tabe, too, asserts historical injustice by stating that Southern Cameroonians were “robbed of our nation's outright independence ... On 1 October 2017... our statehood was restored”. These presuppositions reinforce their narrative of rightful heritage and moral authority.

The leaders also employed implicatures and strategically reinterpreted democratic principles to advance their political objectives. Kanu's insistence on referendum participation implies that Nigeria denies basic democratic involvement (“without referendum nothing will happen in Nigeria”).

This implicates state illegitimacy. Ayuk Tabe's statement—“It is either total independence for Ambazonia or resistance forever” —creates an implicature of exclusivity: no middle ground within current structures. These implicatures manipulate democratic ideals—self-determination, participation—towards separatist claims.

The use of metaphorical languages and euphemisms are also seen in the analysed separatist discourse. Kanu's use of "hunt" evokes imagery of a righteous military campaign . Ayuk Tabe uses the "road," "mountain," and "tribulation" to describe the journey towards sovereignty . Such metaphors intensify emotional engagement and crystallize an inherently moral struggle.

## FINDINGS

This research reveals that both separatist movements used strategic speech acts to legitimize their claims. The speeches by IPOB and Ambazonian leaders are rich in assertives, directives, and commissives. Assertives are used to make truth-claims about marginalization and historical injustice (e.g., "We were independent before Nigeria existed" – Kanu, 2016). Directives urge supporters to act, such as observing sit-at-home protests or resisting state violence, while commissives promise future liberation, thereby mobilizing and sustaining hope (Ayuk Tabe, 2017). The separatist leaders frame Nigeria and Cameroon not as sovereign states but as neo-colonial constructs or failed colonial amalgamations. This reframing transforms the separatist struggle into a decolonization project, situating it within the broader discourse of anti-imperialism and democratic self-determination (Fairclough, 1995). For instance, Ambazonian leaders refer to Cameroon as a "foreign occupying force" (Sako, 2018).

Further findings reveal that victimhood narratives are employed to justify resistance. The leaders deploy victimhood narratives, highlighting state-sponsored violence, neglect, economic deprivation, and systemic marginalization. This creates a moral high ground for the movements, as evident in Kanu's 2017 EU speech: "Our people are being slaughtered by the very state that swore to protect them." Such narratives build emotional legitimacy and attract sympathy from international audiences (Chiluwa, 2012). Their resistance discourses serve as a mobilization strategy as both IPOB and Ambazonian leaders infuse their speeches with calls to defy, resist, and dismantle unjust systems. The Movements discourse often romanticizes martyrdom and struggle, framing it as a sacred duty or covenant. For example, Sako (2018) declares: "No amount of bullets will kill our dream of a free Ambazonia."

And finally, CDA as applied in the research apparently reveals power asymmetry and ideological contestation. Through CDA, it is evident that these movements use language to challenge hegemonic narratives and delegitimize the state's authority. Their discourse repositions the separatist identity from "rebels" to "freedom fighters" and casts the central government as the oppressor. This reflects Van Dijk's (2006) notion of "discursive reproduction of dominance."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to address the complex interplay between separatist rhetoric and governance challenges in Africa, several interlinked strategies should be pursued. Dialogue and mediation must replace militarized suppression. Genuine engagement between governments and separatist actors, preferably under trusted regional or international mediation, may create pathways for sustainable solutions, such as federalism or structured autonomy. It is imperative that the state re-evaluates its constitutional arrangements to accommodate the demands of historically marginalized groups. Inclusive governance that ensures equitable distribution of resources, adequate political representation, and cultural recognition can significantly de-escalate separatist tensions (Agbede, 2020).

States must also move beyond securitization and invest in counter-discursive strategies rooted in truth, transparency, and justice. Rather than engaging in propaganda, governments can promote narratives that foster unity while addressing historical injustices. Transitional justice mechanisms, community reconciliation initiatives, and clear institutional reforms can bridge trust deficits. The media, both local and international, also plays a central role. There is a pressing need for more responsible reporting that avoids inflammatory labels such as "terrorist" or "secessionist" which can inflame ethnic divisions. A discourse-sensitive approach to reportage is essential to reducing polarization and misinformation.

And further, empowering local civil society groups and supporting intercultural education can foster dialogue across ethnic lines. Education that promotes mutual respect and critical understanding of other cultures can dismantle the narratives of exclusion that separatist discourse often capitalizes on. Programs designed to enhance intercultural competence and multilingual literacy will help reshape public consciousness and nurture peaceful coexistence.

## CONCLUSION

Separatist discourses are not merely linguistic performances but acts of political resistance grounded in historical memory, identity, and collective trauma. This study has examined how separatist movements in Africa—specifically the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria and the Ambazonian independence movement in Cameroon—strategically deploy language to frame issues of democracy, governance, and marginalization. Through a discourse-pragmatic lens, it becomes evident that these groups utilize assertives to claim truth about oppression, directives to galvanize action, and commissives to promise liberation, thereby performing key illocutionary acts that shape group consciousness and mobilization.

Speech act theory, as articulated by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), offers a potent framework for understanding how these utterances go beyond mere statements—they enact reality. For instance, when a leader proclaims that “Nigeria has failed Biafrans,” it is not just an assertion but a performative act of delegitimizing the state while constituting a new socio-political identity. Similarly, directives like “rise and defend your land” function to mobilize and legitimize civil resistance.

From a critical discourse perspective, Fairclough’s (1992) model underscores how language use by separatist leaders is not neutral but ideologically driven. These movements embed their narratives within discursive strategies such as presupposition, intertextuality, and rhetorical framing, presenting their struggle not as rebellion, but as restorative justice. Presuppositions—such as the assumed illegitimacy of postcolonial borders—often go unchallenged and help cement the narrative of rightful secession. Furthermore, the study shows that indirectness, metaphorical allusions, and appeals to ancestral authority help create implicatures that resonate deeply with their audience’s shared experiences of marginalization. For instance, the phrase “the zoo must fall” (frequently used by IPOB) may seem metaphorical, but pragmatically it is an indirect and coded performative rejection of the Nigerian state’s legitimacy. Such expressions illustrate how resistance discourse is crafted not just in content but in form.

In sum, this research underscores that language—far from being a passive medium—is a weaponized tool in the political arsenal of separatist groups. Through pragmatic strategies and critical discourse techniques, these movements reshape the contours of democracy and governance in Africa. By fusing speech act theory and CDA, this study demonstrates that

understanding political language in secessionist contexts requires close attention to both what is said and how it is said, as well as the power structures and ideologies it seeks to challenge.

## References

- 1) Adegoju, A. (2009). Rhetoric in conflict-related discourse: A pragmatic exploration of the strategies used in selected Nigerian newspaper articles. *Nebula*, 6(4), 118–143.
- 2) Agbedo, C. U. (2020). *Language and identity politics in a multicultural state: The Nigerian experience*. Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press.
- 3) Ajiboye, E. (2020). Polarisation as a socio-cognitive resource in discourse: Ideological strategies in Biafra separatist online discourse. *Journal of Discourse & Society*, 31(2), XX–XX.
- 4) Akama, H. E. (2024). Political exclusion and the resurgence of ethnic nationalism in Nigeria: A study of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). *Caritas International Journal of Political Studies and International Relations*, 1(1).
- 5) Akinwotu, E. (2025, January 15). ‘The fight is existential’: Cameroon’s anglophone leaders lead a revolution from behind bars. *The Guardian*.
- 6) Aliu, Q. A. (2021). Language and conflict: The pragmatics of the Indigenous People of Biafra’s agitation. In A. Ademilokun, P. A. Onanuga, F. Oamen, & B. Alfred (Eds.), *Critical discourse analysis and the linguistics of social media interaction* (Vol. 2, pp. 242–252). College Press.
- 7) Ayuk Tabe, J. (2017). *Declaration speech of the Interim Government of Ambazonia*. Retrieved from <https://www.ambazoniagov.org>
- 8) Berlin, I. (2017). *Unilateral non-colonial secessions: An affirmation of the right to self-determination and a legal exception to the use of force in international law* (Master’s thesis, Western University). Western University Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/4777>
- 9) Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse: A critical introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- 10) Chilwa, I. (2012). Social media networks and the discourse of resistance: A sociolinguistic CDA of Biafra online discourses. *Discourse & Society*, 23(3), 217–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926511433470>
- 11) Chilwa, I., & Ajiboye, E. (2019). The discourse of ethnic identity and separatism in digital communication: The case of Biafra online discourses. *Discourse & Society*, 30(2), 177–201. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926518801074>
- 12) Chilwa, I., Taiwo, R., & Ajiboye, E. (2020). Hate speech and political media discourse in Nigeria: The case of the Indigenous People of Biafra. *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 16(2), 191–212.
- 13) Chilwa, I. (2012). Social media networks and the discourse of resistance: A sociolinguistic CDA of Biafra online discourses. *Discourse & Society*, 23(3), 217–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926511433470>
- 14) Chilton, P., & Schaffner, C. (2002). *Politics as text and talk: Analytic approaches to political discourse*. John Benjamins.

- 15) Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Longman.
- 16) Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Routledge.
- 17) Fairclough, N. (2015). *Language and power* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
- 18) Forniès, D. (Ed.). (2022, January). *A report on secessionist movements in Africa and human rights violations*. CIEMEN. <https://www.ciemem.cat/>
- 19) Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). Academic Press.
- 20) Hadebe, S. (2020). The ethnicization of political mobilization in Zimbabwe: The case of pro-Mthwakazi movements. In S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni & P. Ruhanya (Eds.), *The history and political transition of Zimbabwe*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 21) Hanson, L. (2025, March 10). Cameroon: How language plunged a country into deadly conflict with no end in sight. *Time Africa Magazine*. <https://timeafricamagazine.com/cameroon-how-language-plunged-a-country-into-deadly-conflict-with-no-end-in-sight/>
- 22) International Crisis Group. (2022, August 2). *Cameroon's Anglophone crisis at the crossroads* (Africa Report No. 250). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/250-cameroods-anglophone-crisis-crossroads>
- 23) Kanu, N. (2016). *Radio Biafra broadcasts and speeches*. [Various transcripts archived by Biafra Television and Radio Biafra]. Retrieved from <https://radiobiafra.co>
- 24) Kanu, N. (2017, September). *Speech at the European Parliament, Brussels*. Biafra TV Broadcast. Retrieved from <https://biafratv.co>
- 25) Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
- 26) Madueke, O. (2024). Social media use and the Biafra separatist conflict in Nigeria. *Democracy and Security*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2024.2443853>
- 27) Marsden, D. R. (2020). Is the Juba Peace Agreement a turning point for Sudan? *Chatham House*. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/09/juba-peace-agreement-turning-point-sudan>
- 28) Opeibi, T. O. (2008). Language, politics and democratic governance in Nigeria: A sociolinguistic perspective. In S. Obeng (Ed.), *Issues in Political Discourse Analysis* (Vol. 2, pp. 207–226). New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers .
- 29) Sako, S. I. K. (2018). *State of the Revolution Address by the President of the Interim Government of Ambazonia*. Retrieved from <https://ambazoniagov.org>
- 30) Sandoval, C. (2000). *Methodology of the oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 31) Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.

- 32) Schomerus, M., Englebert, P., & De Vries, L. (2019). Africa's secessionism: A breakdance of aspiration, grievance, performance, and disenchantment. In L. De Vries, P. Englebert, & M. Schomerus (Eds.), *Secessionism in African politics: Aspiration, grievance, performance, and disenchantment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 33) The Guardian. (2025, January 15). *The fight is existential: Cameroon's anglophone leaders lead a revolution from behind bars*. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jan/15/the-fight-is-existential-camerouns-anglophone-leaders-lead-a-revolution-from-behind-bars>
- 34) Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics*. Longman.
- 35) van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. Sage.
- 36) van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Politics, ideology, and discourse. In K. Brown (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics* (2nd ed., pp. 728–740). Oxford: Elsevier.
- 37) van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Discourse and manipulation. *Discourse & Society*, 17(3), 359–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926506060250>
- 38) Verschueren, J. (1999). *Understanding pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- 39) Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. Sage.
- 40) Wodak, R. (2009). *The discourse of politics in action: Politics as usual*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- 41) Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- 42) Zurutuza, K. (2019, May 23). The Amazigh: Libya's third actor? *Nationalia*. <https://www.nationalia.info/dossier/11217/the-amazigh-libyas-third-actor>