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Ideology and Communicative Practices in Nigerian Town Hall Meetings: An Ethnographic Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract: This study investigates ideology and communicative practices in Nigerian town hall meetings using an Ethnographic Critical Discourse Analysis (ECDA) framework. Town hall meetings are commonly presented as democratic platforms that encourage interaction between political office holders and citizens; however, communicative exchanges within these forums often reveal underlying ideological structures and unequal power relations. The study examines how discourse functions as a medium through which political authority, participation, legitimacy, and accountability are negotiated in contemporary Nigerian civic engagement. The study is anchored on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse, van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory of ideology, and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach within an ethnographic orientation. Ten discourse extracts from selected Nigerian town hall meetings involving government officials, moderators, and citizens were purposively selected and analyzed. Attention was given to linguistic and interactional features such as turn-taking, topic control, modality, mitigation, interruption, participant positioning, and discourse management strategies. Findings reveal that communicative practices in Nigerian town hall meetings are characterized by institutional regulation and interactional asymmetry. Moderators frequently control participation through turn allocation and speaking restrictions, while government officials dominate discourse through strategies of abstraction, temporal deferral, mitigation, and technocratic framing. Citizens, on the other hand, largely employ experiential and interrogative discourse to express dissatisfaction and demand accountability. The analysis further shows that ideological meanings are reproduced through strategic linguistic choices that legitimize political authority while minimizing governance failures. The study concludes that Nigerian town hall meetings function not as ideologically neutral democratic spaces but as structured communicative arenas where discourse is strategically managed to sustain institutional legitimacy and regulate public participation. By integrating

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ethnographic observation with Critical Discourse Analysis, the study contributes to scholarship on political communication, civic discourse, and democratic participation in Nigeria, while extending ECDA to the study of interactive political engagement in African contexts.

Key words: Ideology, communicative practices, town hall meetings, Ethnographic Critical Discourse Analysis, political discourse, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Language in political and civic spaces is not merely a neutral medium of communication; it is a strategic resource through which power relations, ideological positions, and social realities are constructed, negotiated, and sustained. In democratic societies, public interactional spaces such as town hall meetings are commonly presented as participatory forums designed to encourage accountability, transparency, and dialogue between political representatives and citizens (Green 45). However, beneath their democratic appearance, such forums are deeply embedded in discursive and ideological processes that shape who speaks, who is heard, and how meanings are legitimized within the public sphere.

In Nigeria, town hall meetings have increasingly become important sites of political engagement, particularly within contexts marked by public distrust, electoral contestation, governance challenges, and demands for inclusive participation. Political office holders frequently employ these forums to negotiate legitimacy, manage public perception, and project democratic responsiveness. Yet, despite their participatory orientation, communicative exchanges in many Nigerian town hall meetings often reveal unequal power relations between political elites and ordinary citizens. These inequalities are manifested through interactional control, agenda regulation, selective participation, and strategic framing of public issues. Consequently, town hall meetings provide a significant site for examining how political ideology is reproduced and negotiated through discourse in contemporary Nigerian society.

Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), discourse is understood as a form of social practice that both reflects and reproduces structures of power and dominance in society. Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse is socially shaped while simultaneously shaping social realities through everyday communicative practices. Similarly, van Dijk (1998) maintains that ideology operates through discourse by naturalizing assumptions, controlling representations, and legitimizing unequal social relations. From this perspective, language use in political interactions cannot be separated from broader sociopolitical structures within which meaning is produced and interpreted. Town hall meetings therefore function not merely as communicative events but as ideological arenas where political authority, citizen participation, and public identities are discursively negotiated.

Political discourse in Nigeria has attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in studies examining campaign rhetoric, presidential speeches, media representations, and electoral communication (Ehineni 2014; Abdulkadir 2020; Ejiaso and

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Udoh 2022). Existing studies have demonstrated how Nigerian political actors deploy rhetorical strategies, modality, metaphor, and persuasive language to construct legitimacy and influence public opinion. However, much of this scholarship has concentrated on monologic political texts, thereby privileging prepared speeches and media discourse over naturally occurring interactive communication. As a result, the micro-level communicative processes through which ideology is interactionally achieved in participatory civic settings remain insufficiently explored.

More specifically, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to how ideological control is enacted through turn allocation, topic management, participant positioning, interruption patterns, audience regulation, and other communicative practices within Nigerian town hall meetings. While these forums are conventionally associated with democratic inclusivity, ethnographic observations suggest that participation is frequently mediated by institutional authority and interactional asymmetry. In many instances, political actors retain significant control over speaking opportunities, issue framing, and discourse direction, thereby enabling participation while simultaneously constraining dissenting voices. Such communicative dynamics reinforce hegemonic narratives under the appearance of open democratic dialogue (Fairclough 2001).

To address this gap, this study adopts an Ethnographic Critical Discourse Analysis (ECDA) approach to investigate ideology and communicative practices in Nigerian town hall meetings. ECDA extends traditional CDA by incorporating contextualized observation of naturally occurring discourse within its sociocultural environment (Blommaert and Jie 2010). Through this approach, the study examines how turn-taking structures, address forms, topic control, participant alignment, and interactional strategies contribute to the construction and negotiation of ideological meanings in civic engagement. By integrating ethnographic observation with critical discourse analysis, the study moves beyond textual interpretation to provide a situated understanding of how discourse functions within lived political interaction.

This study therefore investigates how communicative practices in Nigerian town hall meetings reproduce, negotiate, and occasionally challenge ideological power relations. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship on political discourse, democratic participation, and civic communication in Africa. More importantly, the study provides insight into how democratic engagement is discursively performed, regulated, and interpreted within contemporary Nigerian political culture, revealing that town hall meetings are not ideologically neutral spaces of dialogue but structured communicative arenas where power, legitimacy, and participation intersect.

Statement of the Problem

Town hall meetings are conventionally presented as democratic platforms that encourage direct interaction between political office holders and citizens, thereby promoting accountability, public participation, and civic engagement. In Nigeria, such meetings have increasingly become visible mechanisms through which political actors negotiate legitimacy, manage public perception, and project democratic responsiveness.

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However, despite their participatory appearance, communicative exchanges within many Nigerian town hall meetings often reveal unequal power relations in which discourse functions not merely as a medium of interaction but also as an instrument for ideological negotiation and institutional control. Consequently, these forums may reproduce existing power structures even while appearing to encourage democratic inclusion.

Existing studies on political discourse in Nigeria have largely concentrated on campaign speeches, inaugural addresses, political interviews, media discourse, and political advertisements. For instance, Ehineni (2014) examines modal expressions in political manifestos and demonstrates how linguistic choices perform persuasive ideological functions. Similarly, Agbo (2018) investigates metaphorical constructions in Nigerian political discourse as strategies for ideological framing and political persuasion. Abdulkadir (2020) explores ideological positioning in political interviews and identifies patterns of manipulation, dominance, and image construction in mediated political interaction. Ogunlana (2023) also analyzes power relations in presidential campaign speeches, showing how discourse resources are strategically deployed to construct authority and in-group legitimacy. Likewise, Okey (2022) examines ideological representations in gubernatorial inaugural speeches and reveals how political actors use language to normalize governance ideologies and consolidate political identity.

Although these studies have contributed significantly to scholarship on Nigerian political communication, they remain predominantly text-oriented and largely focused on monologic discourse genres in which political actors maintain substantial control over communicative production. Consequently, insufficient scholarly attention has been devoted to interactive civic forums such as town hall meetings, where discourse is co-constructed between political actors and citizens within naturally occurring sociopolitical contexts. More specifically, limited research has examined how ideology is enacted through communicative practices such as turn-taking, topic control, participant positioning, interruption patterns, audience regulation, and interactional dominance during Nigerian town hall meetings.

Another major gap exists in the methodological orientation of many Nigerian CDA studies, which often rely heavily on textual and media archives without adequate attention to the sociocultural and interactional contexts within which discourse occurs. Such approaches limit deeper understanding of how ideological meanings are negotiated not only through linguistic choices but also through participation structures, contextual performance, audience behavior, and institutional arrangements. Since discourse operates within lived social environments, the absence of ethnographic engagement restricts comprehensive analysis of how power relations are enacted and sustained during political interaction.

It is against this background that this study investigates ideology and communicative practices in Nigerian town hall meetings using an Ethnographic Critical Discourse Analysis (ECDA) approach. The study specifically examines how linguistic choices, interactional strategies, participation patterns, and discourse control mechanisms reproduce, negotiate, and occasionally challenge ideological power relations between political actors and citizens. By integrating ethnographic observation with critical discourse

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analysis, the study addresses an important gap in existing scholarship and contributes to a more context-sensitive understanding of political communication, democratic participation, and civic discourse in contemporary Nigerian society.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is anchored on three interrelated constructs: ideology, communicative practices, and town hall meetings as institutionalized discourse events. These constructs are examined within the theoretical orientation of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Ethnographic Critical Discourse Analysis (ECDA), both of which conceptualize language as a form of social practice through which power relations and ideological structures are produced, reproduced, and contested in situated interactional contexts (Fairclough 1995; van Dijk 2006).

Ideology in Discourse

Within CDA scholarship, ideology is understood as a system of socially shared beliefs and representations through which dominant groups construct, normalize, and sustain particular interpretations of social reality. Teun A. van Dijk (2006) emphasizes that ideology operates at the intersection of cognition and society, shaping group knowledge, attitudes, and discourse practices while also influencing how social realities are interpreted and reproduced. In this sense, ideology is not merely expressed in language but is embedded within the structures of discourse itself.

In political communication, ideological processes often emerge through subtle discursive strategies rather than overt statements. In the Nigerian context, Taiwo Olalekan Ehineni (2014) demonstrates that political actors frequently use modal expressions and linguistic choices in manifestos to construct persuasive ideological positions and influence public perception. Such ideological positioning is often realized through strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, particularly in contexts where political legitimacy is contested.

Communicative Practices

Communicative practices refer to the patterned and socially regulated ways in which language is deployed in specific contexts, including turn-taking, topic control, participation structures, politeness strategies, and speech acts. From a CDA perspective, these practices are not neutral; they are shaped by institutional power relations that determine who speaks, what is said, and how meaning is negotiated (Fairclough 1995).

Norman Fairclough (1995) argues that communicative practices are embedded within broader social structures and should be understood as forms of social practice that simultaneously reflect and reproduce power relations. In political discourse settings, these practices often manifest through asymmetrical interactional control, where dominant participants regulate access to speaking turns, manage topic progression, and shape the interpretive direction of discourse.

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Similarly, Abdulkadir Amina (2020) shows that in Nigerian political interviews, ideological meanings are often produced through interactional control and strategic linguistic manipulation, revealing how power is exercised even in seemingly dialogic exchanges. In a related vein, Agbo Ifeoma (2018) demonstrates that metaphorical framing in Nigerian political discourse serves as an ideological tool for structuring perception and reinforcing particular political viewpoints. These studies, however, remain largely focused on monologic or mediated discourse, leaving interactive civic communication less explored.

Town Hall Meetings as Discursive Spaces

Town hall meetings constitute institutionalized public forums designed to facilitate direct engagement between government representatives and citizens on matters of governance, policy, and public accountability. Ideally, they function as participatory democratic spaces that enable dialogue and feedback between the state and the public. However, from a CDA and ECDA perspective, these meetings are not ideologically neutral; rather, they are structured communicative environments in which power relations shape interactional dynamics and meaning-making processes.

David Green (2016) conceptualizes town hall meetings as interactional sites of constituent relations where political legitimacy is performed through controlled engagement with citizens. Although these forums are framed as open spaces for dialogue, participation is often unevenly distributed, with political actors exercising greater control over agenda setting, discourse direction, and evaluative framing.

In Nigeria, town hall meetings have increasingly become important instruments of political engagement and public communication. However, as noted in studies by Tunde Ogunlana (2023), political speeches often reveal underlying power relations embedded in linguistic choices that construct authority and legitimacy. Similarly, Chinedu Okey (2022) shows that inaugural speeches often function to normalize governance ideologies and reinforce political identity. While these studies contribute significantly to understanding political discourse, they largely focus on monologic genres, leaving a gap in the analysis of interactive civic discourse such as town hall meetings.

Synthesis of Concepts

The integration of these constructs provides the analytical foundation of this study. Ideology, as articulated by van Dijk (2006), represents the underlying system of beliefs and power relations that shape discourse. Fairclough (1995) conceptualizes communicative practices as socially embedded interactional processes through which these ideological structures are enacted and reproduced. Ehineni (2014), Agbo (2018), Abdulkadir (2020), Ogunlana (2023), and Okey (2022) collectively demonstrate how political language in Nigeria functions as a site of ideological construction, although largely within monologic or mediated contexts. Green (2016) further situates town hall meetings as interactional spaces where political legitimacy is performed through controlled engagement.

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Together, these constructs position town hall meetings not merely as democratic platforms for dialogue, but as ideologically structured communicative events in which discourse simultaneously reflects, negotiates, and reproduces social power relations. This study therefore adopts an ECDA perspective to examine how these dynamics are enacted through situated interaction, participation structures, and discourse control mechanisms in Nigerian town hall meetings.

Literature Review

Scholarly works on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and political communication in Nigeria has grown steadily in recent years, with researchers focusing on how language is used to construct ideology, enact power, and influence public perception in political contexts. However, much of this literature concentrates on monologic political genres such as speeches, manifestos, interviews, and media texts, with limited attention to interactive civic forums such as town hall meetings.

Ehineni (2014) is one of the foundational Nigerian CDA scholars whose work examines ideological meanings in political manifestos. His study shows how modal verbs such as will, shall, and must are strategically deployed to project obligation, persuasion, and political commitment, revealing the ideological underpinnings of political promises. Similarly, Agbo (2018) explores metaphorical expressions in Nigerian political discourse, demonstrating how metaphors function as cognitive tools that shape political ideology and public interpretation of governance realities. These studies establish that political language in Nigeria is deeply ideological, even when it appears neutral or persuasive.

Extending this perspective, Abdulkadir (2023) investigates political interviews in Nigerian media and finds that ideological positioning is achieved through linguistic manipulation, framing strategies, and rhetorical control. His findings suggest that political elites use discourse not only to inform but also to shape perception and maintain ideological dominance in mediated communication. In a related study, Ogunlana (2023) examines presidential campaign discourse and identifies how linguistic resources such as pronouns, metaphor, and code-switching are used to construct power relations, legitimize authority, and delegitimize opposition voices. Likewise, Okey (2022) analyzes inaugural speeches and shows how political actors use discourse to normalize governance ideologies and present leadership as stable and legitimate.

Beyond spoken political discourse, Ajiboye and Abioye (2019) shift attention to digital political interactions, showing how citizens and political actors construct identity and stance through online discourse. Their study highlights the role of social media in reshaping political participation and ideological expression in Nigeria, particularly through binary positioning of actors and issues. This expands CDA inquiry beyond elite political texts to include citizen-generated discourse, although still within mediated digital environments rather than face-to-face civic engagement.

In addition, Oamen (2020) examines resilience discourse in Nigerian campaign speeches, revealing how political actors strategically construct narratives of struggle, survival, and legitimacy. This reinforces the argument that political communication in

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Nigeria is highly strategic and ideologically driven, particularly during electoral cycles where persuasion becomes central.

Despite these contributions, a clear gap persists in the literature. Most Nigerian CDA studies focus on structured, pre-prepared, and monologic discourse forms, with limited engagement with interactive political spaces where discourse is co-produced in real time. Furthermore, even studies that examine interactional discourse, such as media interviews or online platforms, do not adequately explore institutional civic forums like town hall meetings, where citizens and political leaders directly negotiate meaning under asymmetrical conditions of power.

Additionally, while existing research acknowledges ideology as a key feature of Nigerian political discourse, few studies integrate ethnographic methods with CDA to capture how discourse operates within its lived socio-political context. This omission limits understanding of how participation structures, non-verbal cues, audience reactions, and institutional arrangements shape ideological meaning-making during real-time civic engagement.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by focusing on town hall meetings as interactive ideological sites, using an ethnographic CDA approach to examine how communicative practices such as turn-taking, topic control, and participant alignment construct and reproduce ideology in Nigerian political discourse.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Ethnographic Critical Discourse Analysis (ECDA), a hybrid analytical framework that integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with ethnographic principles of context-sensitive inquiry. ECDA is particularly appropriate for examining ideology and communicative practices in Nigerian town hall meetings because it allows discourse to be analyzed not only as text, but also as situated social action embedded in lived interactional environments. The framework combines three complementary theoretical strands: Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse, van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory of ideology, and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), all embedded within an ethnographic orientation to interaction.

Ethnographic Foundation of the Study (ECDA Orientation)

At the core of this study is an ethnographic understanding of discourse as situated, context-dependent, and culturally embedded social practice. Ethnography emphasizes the systematic observation of people in their natural settings in order to understand meanings from the perspective of participants within those contexts. In relation to Nigerian town hall meetings, this means that discourse is not reduced to transcribed speech alone, but is understood as part of a broader communicative ecology that includes physical setting, participant roles, institutional arrangements, audience behavior, turn-taking dynamics, interruptions, non-verbal cues, and power performances.

This ethnographic orientation enables the researcher to capture how meaning is co-constructed in real time, particularly how citizens and political actors negotiate

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participation, authority, and accountability within the constraints of institutional interaction. Thus, town hall meetings are conceptualized as live social events where discourse is performed, observed, and interpreted within specific socio-political contexts, rather than abstract textual artefacts.

Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Discourse

Fairclough's (1995, 2001) model provides the structural backbone for analyzing discourse at three interconnected levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice.

At the textual level, the study examines linguistic features such as lexical choices, modality, pronouns, transitivity patterns, rhetorical strategies, and evaluative language. In Nigerian town hall meetings, these linguistic resources reveal how participants construct identities, assign responsibility, and frame political realities.

At the level of discursive practice, Fairclough's model is strengthened through ethnographic observation of how discourse is produced and interacted with in real time. This includes analysis of turn-taking systems, adjacency pairs, interruptions, topic shifts, audience responses, and institutional control of speech access. Unlike purely textual CDA, this ethnographic integration allows the study to capture the dynamics of live interaction, including how political actors manage audience participation and how citizens respond within constrained communicative spaces.

At the level of social practice, discourse is linked to broader socio-political structures such as governance systems, democratic accountability, political legitimacy, and civic participation in Nigeria. Town hall meetings are thus interpreted as institutional spaces where democratic ideals are performed but also shaped by asymmetrical power relations between the state and citizens.

Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Theory of Ideology

van Dijk's (2006) socio-cognitive approach provides the cognitive-ideological dimension of the framework, emphasizing that discourse is mediated by mental models, shared social knowledge, and ideological belief systems.

In this study, both political actors and citizens enter town hall meetings with pre-existing cognitive frameworks shaped by lived experiences of governance, media narratives, and socio-political realities. These mental models influence how messages are produced, interpreted, accepted, or resisted during interaction.

Central to this framework is the ideological square, which explains how group-based ideologies are discursively constructed through:

emphasizing positive self-representation ("our good actions"),
emphasizing negative representation of others ("their bad actions"),
downplaying negative self-representation, and
downplaying positive representation of others.

In Nigerian town hall meetings, this manifests in how government officials highlight achievements and justify policies, while citizens question, challenge, or reframe these narratives based on experiential knowledge. The ethnographic dimension strengthens

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this analysis by allowing interpretation of how these ideological positions are also expressed through tone, gesture, audience reactions, and interactional tension.

Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)

Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak 2001; 2009) provides the contextual and historical depth necessary for interpreting discourse meaningfully within Nigerian socio-political realities. DHA emphasizes that discourse must be analyzed in relation to its historical evolution, intertextual relations, and socio-political context of production.

In Nigerian town hall meetings, discourse is deeply influenced by historical narratives of governance, electoral promises, public distrust, policy failures, and institutional reforms. DHA enables the study to trace how present communicative practices are shaped by these historical trajectories.

The approach also identifies key discursive strategies that are central to ideological construction:

Nomination (labeling social actors such as "government," "citizens," "youths"),
Predication (attributing qualities such as "corrupt," "responsible," "neglected"),
Argumentation (justifying policies or criticisms),
Perspectivization (framing whose voice is dominant), and
Intensification/Mitigation (strengthening or softening claims).

When combined with ethnographic observation, these strategies are not only identified in speech but also interpreted in relation to interactional behavior, audience engagement, and situational context.

Integration of ECDA Framework

The integration of Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak within an ethnographic CDA orientation produces a comprehensive analytical model for this study.

Fairclough enables multi-level linguistic and interactional analysis of town hall discourse.

van Dijk provides insight into the cognitive and ideological structures that shape discourse production and interpretation.

Wodak situates discourse within its historical and socio-political context, ensuring interpretive depth and contextual validity.

Ethnography grounds the entire analysis in real-life communicative settings, capturing non-verbal, spatial, and interactional dimensions of discourse.

Conceptual Positioning of the Study

Within this integrated framework, Nigerian town hall meetings are conceptualized not merely as democratic dialogue platforms, but as ethnographically situated ideological arenas where discourse is co-constructed through interaction, shaped by cognitive belief systems, and embedded in historical power relations. This ECDA framework therefore

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allows the study to capture the full complexity of ideology as it operates through communicative practices in real-time civic engagement.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using Ethnographic Critical Discourse Analysis (ECDA) to investigate ideology and communicative practices in Nigerian town hall meetings. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study examines how power relations, political ideology, and participation are constructed and negotiated through naturally occurring discourse. ECDA combines the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis with ethnographic inquiry, thereby enabling discourse to be studied not only as text but also as situated social practice within its sociocultural and institutional context. Data for the study consist of selected discourse extracts obtained from Nigerian town hall meetings involving government officials, moderators, and citizens. The discourse extracts were purposively selected based on their relevance to issues of governance, civic participation, accountability, and ideological negotiation. Data were collected through observation, transcription, and documentation of communicative interactions, with attention given to contextual and interactional features such as turn-taking, interruptions, topic control, participant alignment, audience reactions, and moderation patterns. The data were analyzed qualitatively using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse, van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory of ideology, and Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach. Linguistic features such as modality, lexical choices, mitigation, abstraction, and rhetorical strategies were examined alongside interactional practices including discourse regulation and participation control. The ethnographic orientation of the study further enabled interpretation of discourse within broader Nigerian socio-political realities, particularly issues of governance, legitimacy, democratic participation, and institutional power.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The following data consist of selected excerpts from Nigerian town hall meetings involving government officials, citizens, and moderators. The excerpts are presented in a simplified transcription format to highlight interactional structure and communicative practices relevant to ideological analysis.

Key:

GO = Government Official

C = Citizen

M = Moderator

Excerpt 1

M: We will now take questions from the audience. Please be brief.

C1: Why is electricity still unstable in our area despite government promises?

GO: We understand your concern, and we are working tirelessly to improve the situation.

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Analysis

The moderator regulates participation ("be brief"), showing institutional control of discourse space, an ethnographic indicator of managed participation. The citizen's question foregrounds infrastructural failure ("electricity is still unstable"), reflecting lived experience. The government official responds using mitigation strategy ("we understand… we are working tirelessly"), which reduces accountability through vague progressive framing.

From van Dijk's perspective, this is positive self-presentation, emphasizing effort rather than outcome. Fairclough's interactional level shows asymmetry: citizens question, officials generalize. Historically (Wodak), electricity complaints reflect long-standing governance challenges in Nigeria, which are indirectly acknowledged but not directly addressed.

Excerpt 2

C2: Sir, you said roads have been fixed, but our community road is still bad.

GO: Some of those projects are ongoing, and very soon you will see changes.

Analysis

The citizen directly challenges official claims, creating discursive contradiction between institutional narrative and lived reality. The government official uses temporal deferral ("very soon"), a common political mitigation strategy.

Ethnographically, this reflects tension between citizen accountability demands and elite narrative control. Van Dijk's ideological square is evident: government emphasizes future success while minimizing present failure. Wodak's historical lens situates road infrastructure as a recurring electoral promise, reinforcing intertextual repetition of development discourse.

Excerpt 3

M: Kindly allow the Honourable to respond before further questions.

C3: But we have been waiting for years without results.

GO: Development takes time, and we are committed to delivering.

Analysis

The moderator intervenes to regulate turn-taking, showing institutional enforcement of speaking order. The citizen introduces temporal frustration ("years without results"), which introduces collective memory of governance failure.

The official response uses abstraction ("development takes time"), a strategy of argumentation without specificity. Ethnographically, this reflects controlled civic space where dissent is allowed but regulated. Ideologically, it sustains state legitimacy by reframing failure as developmental temporality.

Excerpt 4

C4: What is the government doing about unemployment among youths?

GO: Several empowerment programs have been introduced to address that challenge.

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Analysis

The citizen introduces youth unemployment as a social issue, while the government responds with policy generalization ("empowerment programs") without specification.

Fairclough's textual analysis reveals nominalization, which hides agency (who created programs, who benefits). Van Dijk's model shows ideological emphasis on state benevolence. Ethnographically, citizen demand for specificity contrasts with institutional abstraction, indicating asymmetry in informational access.

Excerpt 5

C5: We don't see these programs in our community. Where are they?

GO: The programs are being implemented gradually across all regions.

Analysis

The citizen challenges visibility of government programs, shifting discourse into verification and accountability mode. The official responds with geographical and distributive vagueness ("across all regions").

This reflects ideological control through strategic ambiguity. Ethnographically, this exchange shows breakdown of trust between lived experience and institutional claims. Wodak's historical lens links this to recurring Nigerian governance narratives of "implementation gaps."

Excerpt 6

M: Please maintain order. One question at a time.

C6: We are suffering from lack of water supply.

GO: Water projects are part of our current infrastructure plan.

Analysis

The moderator again controls discourse flow, reinforcing institutional hierarchy. The citizen's statement is experiential ("we are suffering"), indicating embodied social reality discourse.

The government response uses policy framing ("infrastructure plan"), converting immediate suffering into long-term planning discourse. Van Dijk's ideological square appears in the avoidance of negative self-representation. Ethnographically, suffering is voiced, but institutionally absorbed into planning rhetoric.

Excerpt 7

C7: How accountable is the government for the taxes we pay?

GO: Your taxes are being used for development projects nationwide.

Analysis

The citizen questions accountability of taxation, introducing moral evaluation of governance legitimacy. The official responds with collective justification ("nationwide development projects"), shifting from local to national scale.

This is a scale-shifting strategy, common in political discourse, used to dilute localized critique. Ethnographically, it shows how citizen-local concerns are reframed into

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national abstraction. Historically, taxation debates in Nigeria are tied to persistent trust deficits in public finance.

Excerpts 8

C8: We keep hearing promises every year. When will they be fulfilled?

GO: This administration is committed to continuity and long-term development.

Analysis

The citizen expresses frustration using repetition and temporal dissatisfaction ("every year"). The government responds with ideological abstraction ("continuity and long-term development").

This reflects temporal displacement strategy, where present failure is reframed as future-oriented governance. Van Dijk's ideological square shows minimization of negative performance. Ethnographically, this demonstrates cyclical expectation vs delayed fulfillment pattern typical of civic dissatisfaction.

Excerpt 9

C9: Why are citizens not involved in decision-making processes?

GO: There are structures in place for citizen participation.

Analysis

The citizen raises participation issue, directly questioning democratic inclusion. The official responds with institutional reassurance ("structures are in place"), without evidence.

Fairclough's textual analysis shows nominalization of governance processes, obscuring actual participation mechanisms. Ethnographically, this reveals gap between institutional rhetoric and experiential exclusion. Wodak's framework situates this within broader discourse of participatory democracy in postcolonial governance.

Excerpt 10

C10: We want to know why inflation keeps increasing.

GO: The economy is being stabilized through fiscal reforms.

Analysis

The citizen raises macroeconomic concern (inflation), while the official responds with technical abstraction ("fiscal reforms").

This reflects technocratic discourse strategy, where complex issues are depersonalized and depoliticized. Ethnographically, it shows citizen concern grounded in lived hardship versus elite economic framing. Van Dijk's model highlights ideological legitimation through technical language.

Findings

The analysis of the ten discourse extracts reveals that communicative practices in Nigerian town hall meetings are consistently shaped by ideological positioning, institutional control, and interactional asymmetry. A major finding is that participation is structurally managed through moderators who regulate turn-taking, limit speaking time, and control

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topic flow, thereby positioning town hall meetings as institutionally organized rather than fully open democratic forums. This regulatory structure results in a persistent imbalance where government officials dominate extended turns while citizens are restricted to brief questioning roles, confirming an asymmetrical distribution of discursive power.

The study further finds that government responses are characterized by recurrent strategies of ideological legitimation, including mitigation, abstraction, and temporal deferral. Officials frequently avoid direct accountability by employing vague formulations such as "ongoing projects," "development plans," "fiscal reforms," and "very soon," which shift focus from present deficiencies to projected future improvements. These strategies align with van Dijk's ideological square, as positive self-representation is emphasized while negative evaluations of governance performance are minimized or avoided. This discursive pattern allows political actors to maintain legitimacy while managing public criticism.

Another key finding is the systematic disconnect between citizens' experiential discourse and institutional narratives. Citizens consistently frame their contributions around lived realities such as poor electricity supply, unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, inflation, and lack of public services. Their discourse is largely evaluative and interrogative, reflecting demands for accountability and explanation. In contrast, government officials respond with generalized and technocratic language that reframes these issues within broader policy frameworks, thereby depersonalizing and abstracting citizen concerns. This produces a recurring tension between grounded experiential knowledge and official state discourse.

The analysis also shows that communicative practices are shaped by strategic linguistic choices that reinforce ideological control. Government officials frequently use modality and nominalization to present actions as ongoing processes without specifying agency or responsibility, while citizens rely on direct questions and emotionally charged expressions to challenge official narratives. Interactionally, moments of contestation emerge when citizens question inconsistencies, but these are often managed through moderator intervention or discursive redirection by officials, maintaining institutional control over the communicative space.

Ethnographically, the findings highlight that non-verbal and contextual features such as interruptions, audience reactions, and participation restrictions further reinforce hierarchical structures within the meetings. These features indicate that meaning-making is not only linguistic but also interactionally and institutionally regulated. Across all data, there is a consistent pattern of negotiated but unequal discourse, where citizens' voices are present but structurally constrained within a controlled communicative environment.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Nigerian town hall meetings function as ideologically charged spaces where democratic participation is formally enacted but practically mediated through institutional control, strategic discourse management, and asymmetrical interactional structures. Ideology is therefore embedded not only in what is said but also in how discourse is organized, who is allowed to speak, and how meaning is framed and sustained within the interaction.

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Conclusion

This study set out to examine ideology and communicative practices in Nigerian town hall meetings using an Ethnographic Critical Discourse Analysis (ECDA) framework. By integrating Fairclough's three-dimensional model, van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory of ideology, and Wodak's discourse-historical approach, the study has demonstrated that town hall meetings are not ideologically neutral civic spaces but structured communicative events where power, participation, and meaning are continuously negotiated.

The findings show that although town hall meetings are presented as democratic platforms for citizen engagement, actual interactional practices reveal persistent asymmetries in participation. Government officials occupy dominant discursive positions, while citizens' contributions are frequently mediated through moderation and constrained turn-taking structures. This institutional organization of discourse shapes who speaks, how long they speak, and the extent to which their concerns are addressed.

The study further concludes that ideological legitimation is achieved through strategic communicative practices such as abstraction, mitigation, and temporal deferral. These strategies allow political actors to project competence, emphasize developmental intentions, and maintain legitimacy while downplaying immediate governance shortcomings. In contrast, citizens consistently draw on lived experiences to question official narratives, creating a recurring tension between experiential reality and institutional discourse.

From an ethnographic perspective, the study highlights that meaning in town hall meetings is not produced solely through language but also through interactional dynamics, non-verbal cues, and institutional arrangements that regulate participation. This reinforces the argument that discourse in such settings is socially situated and deeply embedded in power relations.

In conclusion, Nigerian town hall meetings function as hybrid communicative spaces where democratic ideals of participation coexist with institutional mechanisms of control. Ideology is therefore not only reflected in what is said but also in how discourse is organized, managed, and interpreted within the interaction. The study contributes to Critical Discourse Studies by extending ECDA to civic engagement contexts in Nigeria, offering a deeper understanding of how political communication operates in real-time public forums.

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