

## A Pragmatic Analysis of the Song *This is Nigeria* by Falz

Emmanuel Oluwafemi Bamigbade, PhD

*Department of Linguistics and African Languages*

*Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria*

### Abstract

This study undertakes a pragmatic analysis of *This Is Nigeria*, a satirical song by Nigerian rapper Falz, with the aim of exploring how linguistic choices and musical elements function as tools of socio-political critique. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of speech act theory, discourse analysis, and the ethnography of communication, the research investigates how the song articulates collective frustrations concerning corruption, governance failure, youth disillusionment, religious exploitation, and systemic injustice in Nigeria. Drawing upon both the song's lyrics and visual representations in its music video, the analysis reveals how cohesive devices, constatives, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, and code-switching between English and Nigerian Pidgin are deployed to enhance clarity, inclusivity, and satirical potency. The study further discusses the ideological undercurrents of the song, noting its function as a mirror held up to Nigerian society, implicating all social classes and institutions in pervasive moral decay. While the song refrains from offering explicit solutions to the societal maladies it highlights, its stylistic choices and audience-oriented diction render it accessible and engaging to both literate and non-literate listeners. The paper also engages the reception of the video, including controversies arising from religious symbolism, to underscore the challenges of accommodating diverse ideological audiences. Ultimately, the study concludes that Falz's *This Is Nigeria* serves as a powerful instance of linguistic activism, harnessing the pragmatic resources of language and music to provoke social reflection and discourse. It contributes to the growing scholarship on music as a form of public discourse in African societies and demonstrates how popular culture can function as a site of ideological resistance and civic engagement.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, Nigerian Pidgin, Socio-political Satire

## Introduction

Music in Nigeria encompasses a wide variety of folk and popular genres, some of which have gained international recognition. The styles of folk music correspond to the diverse ethnic groups within the country, each possessing distinct techniques, instruments, and songs. Bronze carvings from the 16th and 17th centuries depict musicians and their instruments, illustrating the deep historical roots of musical tradition. Traditional Nigerian and broader African music is typically functional; it is performed to accompany rituals such as weddings or funerals, rather than for purely artistic expression. Although some Nigerians – particularly children and the elderly – play instruments for personal amusement, solo performances are generally rare. Music is closely linked to agriculture, and there are often restrictions on the use of certain instruments during various stages of the farming season (Omojola, 1995). Folarin Falana, born on October 27, 1990, in Lagos State, and better known by his stage name Falz, is a Nigerian rapper, actor, and songwriter. He is the son of Femi Falana, a Nigerian human rights activist and lawyer, and his mother, Funmi Falana, is also a lawyer. He completed his primary and secondary education at St. Leo's Catholic Primary School, Ikeja, and Olashore International School, Osun State, respectively. He is an alumnus of the University of Reading, England, where he earned an LLB honours degree in Law. He was called to the bar in 2012, after attending the Nigerian Law School. Falz began music as a hobby while in secondary school. He formed a music group with a friend called *The School Boys*. In 2009, while in high school, he released a compilation of some of his recordings as a mixtape titled *Shakara*.

This research was motivated by several achievements that Falz has made in the entertainment industry, which distinguish him from many of his contemporaries. For instance, in 2016, Falz won the 'Best Actor in a Comedy Series' award at the Africa Magic Viewer's Choice Awards for his role in Funke Akindele's TV series *Jenifa's Diary*. In June 2016, he was voted the winner of the 'Viewer's Choice Best New International Act' category at the BET Awards. In May 2018, Falz released the music video titled *This Is Nigeria*, which was inspired by Childish Gambino's *This Is America*. The video highlighted major societal issues affecting Nigerians, including corruption and bribery. Falz described his music as 'Wahzup Music,' a fusion of comic lyrics with contemporary hip-hop delivered in a faux Yoruba accent. On 18 November 2014, Falz was ranked ninth on NotJustOk's list of 'The 10 Most Gifted Rappers in Nigeria 2014.' According to Sheriff (2015), Falz's ability to maintain a coherent message while switching accents, infusing humorous punchlines, and presenting them in a way that keeps the listener engaged is nothing short of impressive. These and other features of both the artist and his song *This Is Nigeria* motivated this research.

## Literature Review

The domains of pragmatics include deixis, implicature, presupposition, speech acts, and aspects of discourse. Pragmatics can be analysed from two primary perspectives: the Cognitive-Philosophical view (also known as Anglo-American pragmatics) and the Sociocultural-Interactional view (or European-Continental pragmatics) (Haugh, 2008; Huang, 2007). The former is often referred to as the 'component view' and investigates the systematic study of meaning as derived from, or dependent on, language use (Huang, 2008, p. 341). This approach focuses primarily on topics such as implicature, presupposition, speech acts, deixis, and reference. In contrast, the latter perspective adopts a functional approach, intersecting with fields such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatic variation, and other branches of the social sciences. This view is also commonly known as 'empirical pragmatics.'

Levinson (1983) views pragmatics as an inferential process. According to him, we can derive highly detailed inferences from sequences of utterances when combined with background assumptions about language use. To participate effectively in ordinary language usage, one must be able to make such calculations, both in production and interpretation. This ability is independent of individual beliefs, feelings, or personal language habits, although it may rely on relatively abstract and regular principles. Pragmatics, therefore, can be understood as the description of this inferential capacity as it operates across particular languages and language in general.

Blacking (1969) defined music as sound organized into socially acceptable patterns. In a similar vein, Blacking (1973) described music as “humanly organized sound.” While musical formalists may concede that music can express emotions and suggest sonic analogues of dynamic relations, they argue that, unlike language, musical meaning lacks intersubjective reference. In their view, musical meaning is vague, private, and arbitrary. Consequently, they maintain that music possesses no semantics and is therefore fundamentally different from language.

Style may refer to either some or all of the linguistic habits shared by a group of people at a particular time or over a period. According to Crystal and Davy (1969, pp. 9–10), style encompasses the choices speakers make within the linguistic code. Similarly, Osgood (1960, p. 293) defines style as an individual’s deviation from normative structures appropriate to the communicative situation, these deviations constituting the stylistic properties of the utterance—namely, those structural features for which there exists some degree of choice.

In the context of music, style refers to the characteristic features of how music—whether from a particular era or genre—is performed or expected to sound. This includes its musical content, such as expected patterns, expressive techniques, and conventional mannerisms. Terms like *Baroque* and *Classical* denote distinct musical styles, each recognized by its characteristic idioms. More specifically, musical style can be defined as the particular technique or manner in which something is created, performed, or expressed.

Within the domain of pragmatics, constatives are statements or assertions (Austin, 1965). Constatives describe truth and falsity; they depend on factual accuracy and can only be evaluated against real-world references. A constative represents the expression of a belief, along with the expectation that the hearer will adopt or continue to hold that belief. Constatives are categorized into various subtypes, including assertive, predicative, retrodictive, descriptive, ascriptive, informative, confirmative, concessive, dissentive, disputative, responsive, suggestive, and suppositive forms. According to Austin (1965), a constative utterance performs the following functions: a. It conveys a message. b. That message can be evaluated against the real world and deemed true or false. c. A failed constative is one that is false, unclear, or devoid of referential meaning.

## Data Analysis

The data for this study were elicited from the selected song by Falz, *This Is Nigeria*. These data were transcribed and subjected to a descriptive analysis. The analysis covers cohesive expressions, the visual setting of the video, the song’s thematic message, its underlying ideology, speech act patterns, and diction. Cohesion refers to the way in which words and syntactic features link individual sentences and clauses to ensure textual unity and meaning. In the data, the ideas expressed in the song are

interconnected, allowing the listener to understand later points in relation to earlier ones. For instance, in the introduction:

*“Extremely poor, the medical facilities are poor. We operate a predatory, neoclassical capitalist system, which is founded on fraud and exploitation, and therefore, you are bound to find corruption. Many criminal cases are settled in the police station.”*

In this excerpt, understanding the phrase “extremely poor” in relation to the condition of the health sector is dependent on the logical progression of ideas about governance and systemic corruption. Similarly, another instance of cohesion appears in verse one, lines 9 to 13:

*This is Nigeria  
Just because I’m on TV now  
Person wey no get work  
Is checking to see  
If my watch is original*

In this example, the unfolding of ideas through linked actions and consequences—envy, unemployment, and materialism—illustrates the cohesive progression of thought. The song’s effectiveness in conveying its message relies heavily on this internal textual cohesion, which enhances decoding and interpretation.

A music video serves as a visual aid that enhances the interpretation of a song. It not only adds entertainment value but also deepens the song’s narrative and emotional impact. The visual component of a music video distinguishes it from an audio recording alone, as it conveys additional layers of meaning the artist intends to communicate. The video for *This Is Nigeria* combines both narrative and performance elements. It qualifies as a narrative video due to the structured storyline that unfolds before and during the musical performance. Simultaneously, it incorporates performance features through dramatized sequences and direct address by Falz, who intermittently appears to deliver the lyrics as a narrator. The use of jump cuts and cross-cuts reinforces this dual style, linking performance with narrative commentary.

In general, the narration in a music video involves several elements: characters, narrative events, iconography, setting, and technical or audio features. These components will be discussed collectively, as the focus of this aspect of the research is on the characters, narrative events, and setting. The characters are not explicitly identified; they are unnamed and do not speak but instead act silently as Falz delivers the lyrics. Thus, the characters will be analyzed in relation to the narrative events portrayed in the video.

As the introduction of the song reveals the situation of Nigeria—low and poor standards of living—two men are shown riding a bicycle. This depicts the condition of many average Nigerian youths who, due to unemployment, have turned to informal jobs such as commercial motorcycle riding (*Okada*) to survive. Youths are also portrayed fighting over trivial issues, representing the prevalence of restiveness and disillusionment.

A Fulani man is shown murdering a farmer, portraying the herdsman as an aggressor rather than the peaceful figure often idealized. This scene reflects real-life violent conflicts in regions like Benue State. Another scene shows a young man destroying property on a road, symbolizing thuggery and chaos often linked to transportation unions such as the NURTW.

*Emmanuel Oluwafemi Bamigbade*

Dancers appear wearing hijabs, a traditional head covering worn by Muslim women. These dancers symbolize the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram. This representation alludes to the intersection of religion, gender, and national insecurity.

A pastor is seen praying for a woman while placing his hand on her chest, satirizing corrupt religious leaders who exploit and abuse their followers. While Nigeria is considered deeply religious, Falz critiques religious hypocrisy by asserting that “everybody be criminal.”

In another scene, a snake is shown swallowing money while a woman collects some of it, symbolizing an infamous case in Nigeria’s civil service where officials claimed that money went missing because it was swallowed by a snake.

A young man is depicted receiving an oversized cheque from a reality show, a clear reference to *Big Brother Naija* (BBNaija), which Falz critiques as a distraction from national crises. A politician is shown holding a ballot box, referencing electoral corruption and vote manipulation.

Scenes of older men spraying cash on young women portray the prevalence of transactional sex and sugar-daddy relationships. Erratic electricity supply is symbolized by individuals using generators, while others carry weapons, referencing insecurity in certain regions.

A so-called ‘Yahoo boy’ flaunting wealth appears, indicating the glorification of internet fraud among youths. Toward the end, Falz is shown socializing with friends before SARS officers arrive and harass them. One boy is released after his father bribes the police, while others are beaten. This dramatization reflects class-based inequality and corruption in law enforcement.

A senior police official is shown struggling to deliver a coherent speech, referencing the real-life embarrassment of former Inspector General of Police, Idris, during a televised address. Finally, the video ends with an image of a torn Nigerian flag—an emblematic summary of national decay and disillusionment.

The video’s setting appears to be a constructed studio environment with stylized segments rather than a single real-life location, allowing for symbolic visual storytelling across diverse themes.

### **Analysis and Discussion of the Message in the Song**

It is important to recognize that the information conveyed through music is often structural, intra-musical, and intrinsic. While music can express emotions and mirror dynamic relationships through sound, it typically lacks the referential precision found in linguistic meaning, which implies intersubjective, shareable content. In this sense, musical and linguistic meanings are functionally analogous but not equivalent. *This Is Nigeria* communicates powerful social commentary directed at multiple segments of Nigerian society. These include the government, which has failed to deliver the dividends of democracy; the youth, some of whom engage in internet fraud and transactional sex instead of legitimate employment; religious leaders, who exploit vulnerable congregants; and civil servants, who often shirk their responsibilities while engaging in corrupt practices. Falz’s assertion that “everybody be criminal” underscores the widespread nature of moral decay in society. lections?

In verse one, lines ii to v of the song, Falz begins by satirizing aspects of Nigerian youth culture—specifically, envy and idleness. A jobless individual is portrayed scrutinizing a celebrity's wristwatch, questioning whether it is authentic. This subtly

critiques a materialistic culture and hints at societal frustration among unemployed youth.

Lines vii to ix reference civil servants and highlight institutional corruption. Here, Falz alludes to the infamous case of Philomena Chieshe, a clerk at the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), who claimed that a mysterious snake swallowed 36 million naira in her care. This example underscores that corruption is not limited to politicians but extends to public service workers.

Lines xi to xv address corrupt political elites. Despite being widely known for embezzlement and involvement in violence, these figures continue to contest elections. The line “Police station dey close by 6, security reason” critiques the inefficiency and inadequacy of security institutions. It raises the rhetorical question: *Who, then, is protecting the people?*

Verse two shifts focus to the religious sector, exposing issues of spiritual manipulation and moral hypocrisy. Lines xxiii to xxvi depict a pastor placing his hands on a female congregant's chest under the pretence of casting out demons. This scene critiques religious leaders who exploit their followers emotionally, sexually, and financially. Falz suggests that religious institutions, though respected, are not exempt from the pervasive moral decay in Nigerian society.

Line xxvii, “No electricity daily o,” highlights the chronic lack of power supply. The accompanying visual of citizens relying on generators critiques the state's failure to provide basic infrastructure. Falz further references a speech by President Buhari in which he suggested that Nigerian youth are lazy. In lines xxix to xxx, Falz rebuts this notion, portraying youth who juggle multiple jobs to survive:

*“Your people are still working multiple jobs / And dey talk say we lazy.”*

Lines xxxiii to xxxv address ongoing violence in northern Nigeria, particularly attacks by Fulani herdsmen. The lyrics point to government inaction and a lack of justice for affected communities. Falz also questions the state of Nigerian democracy in lines xxxvi to xxxviii, suggesting that it functions more as a political illusion than a people-centered system:

*“This is democracy / Political hysteria.”*

Lines xxxix to xliii turn attention to the normalization of internet fraud, popularly called *yahoo yahoo*. Falz critiques the celebration of quick wealth and the resulting moral erosion:

*“Yahoo yahoo don tear everywhere now / And we act like it's so cool.”*

The final verses depict harassment by SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad), referencing real-life instances of police brutality and extortion. The portrayal of a father bribing the police to free his son underscores systemic inequality—wealth buys protection, while the poor face violence and imprisonment.

### **The Didactic Nature of the Song**

*This Is Nigeria* is a satirical song that critiques various social and institutional problems within Nigerian society. While it effectively exposes these societal ills—such as corruption, poverty, insecurity, and religious exploitation—it does not offer explicit solutions or pathways for reform. The song highlights numerous challenges but adopts a descriptive rather than prescriptive tone.

The outro of the song features commentary from Falz's father, renowned human rights lawyer Femi Falana (SAN). Rather than proposing concrete remedies, his remarks further emphasize the depth of the country's systemic decay, especially in relation to financial mismanagement and religious institutions. For example, he criticizes churches that accept money from poor congregants only to invest it in private ventures, such as universities their own members cannot afford to attend.

While Falz successfully captures the breadth of Nigeria's dysfunction, his work has been critiqued for its lack of actionable suggestions. One might argue that true satire should not only mirror society's flaws but also provoke discourse on change. Thus, the absence of proposed solutions limits the song's transformative potential, even as it achieves broad public awareness.

### Speech Act Analysis

Searle (1975, p. 16) states that "speaking a language is performing speech acts—acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, or making promises." According to speech act theory, all utterances in a communicative setting perform functions beyond mere expression; they act upon the listener in various ways.

The lyrics of *This Is Nigeria* exemplify both illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. That is, Falz's utterances are not mere locutions (basic statements) but are intended to perform specific communicative functions and produce effects on the audience. The illocutionary force lies in the song's embedded critique—accusing, warning, describing, and challenging societal practices. The perlocutionary effect refers to the listener's reaction—provocation, reflection, anger, or even public discourse—triggered by the performance.

Falz's speech also contains constative elements, as defined by Austin (1965). Constatives assert propositions that can be evaluated as true or false. For example:

*"Fulani herdsmen still dey slaughter / Carry people, dey massacre"*

These lines constitute factual statements grounded in verifiable socio-political realities. Thus, Falz's speech acts serve expressive, critical, and truth-evaluable functions, reinforcing the pragmatic depth of his lyrics.

The ideology underpinning *This Is Nigeria* is socially progressive and critical in orientation. The song is modelled on *This Is America*, originally performed by American rapper and actor Childish Gambino. Inspired by its satirical and politically charged tone, Falz adapts the concept to reflect Nigerian realities, arguing implicitly that Nigerians deserve a similar mirror held up to their societal conditions. In general terms, ideology refers to a set of fundamental beliefs concerning political, economic, social, and cultural structures, shared by an individual or by groups within a society. In this context, Falz's song conveys an ideological stance that critiques systemic dysfunction and advocates moral accountability across all sectors of Nigerian life—from government and religious institutions to civil society.

The diction employed in *This Is Nigeria* is intentionally accessible and unpretentious, enabling broad comprehension across diverse segments of Nigerian society. Falz makes deliberate use of Nigerian Pidgin (popularly called *Naija*), a variety widely understood by both literate and non-literate populations. By combining Nigerian Pidgin with Standard English, Falz uses code-mixing to enhance the song's inclusivity and resonance.

This stylistic choice reflects linguistic versatility and reinforces the satirical tone of the song. For example, in the lines:

*"Just because I'm on TV now / Person wey no get work / Is checking to see / If my watch is original"*

Falz juxtaposes English with Pidgin in a natural, conversational flow, making the critique more relatable. This blending of codes not only expands the song's reach but also softens its confrontational message through humour and informality.

Furthermore, while the song is not overtly humorous, the use of familiar language and code-mixing injects a subtle satirical wit that tempers the gravity of the issues addressed. The diction, therefore, is both functional and rhetorical, serving as a bridge between serious critique and popular engagement.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that Falz's language choices in *This Is Nigeria* are carefully tailored to achieve maximum resonance with his audience. The selection of diction, code-mixing, and stylistic tone is influenced by his intent to communicate socio-political critique in an accessible manner. While the song addresses serious themes such as corruption, insecurity, religious hypocrisy, and inequality, it does so in a way that remains engaging to a broad demographic, including both literate and non-literate audiences.

Although Falz is a trained lawyer, his deliberate avoidance of technical legal language reflects a strategic attempt at audience accommodation. By using everyday language and Naija (Nigerian Pidgin), he aligns with the linguistic realities of the majority of Nigerians. This approach demonstrates sociolinguistic sensitivity, wherein the form of expression is adjusted based on the perceived linguistic competence and cultural context of the audience.

Additionally, the use of Naija, a hybridized linguistic variety, reflects a long-standing tradition in Nigerian popular music that prioritizes mass accessibility over elitist language norms. Falz's code-switching enables him to balance satire and critique with relatability and entertainment.

However, the song is not universally accepted. The scene featuring girls in hijab performing dance moves sparked controversy, particularly from the Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC), which accused the video of promoting religious insensitivity. This incident illustrates that while the song employs a style that aims for inclusivity, stylistic choices can still result in ideological divergence and cultural tension.

Using Adeniyi and Bamigbade's (2017) binary model, which describes convergence and divergence in audience reception, the song can be seen as simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. It converges with the general public through linguistic familiarity and accessible satire, but diverges from specific ideological or religious groups through provocative imagery.

Ultimately, *This Is Nigeria* achieves wide public engagement not only through its content but through the strategic manipulation of style, language, and media. Falz's ability to balance critique with humour, and commentary with musical appeal, underscores his success in creating a song that functions as both art and activism.



## References

- Adeniyi, K., & Bamigbade, O. E. (2017). Customised Ibadan-Yoruba. *Linguistik Online*, 80(4), 3–20.
- Austin, J. L. (1965). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.
- Blacking, J. (1969). The value of music in human experience. *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, 1, 33–71.
- Blacking, J. (1973). *How musical is man?* University of Washington Press.
- Cook, N. (2001). Theorizing musical meaning. *Music Theory Spectrum*, 23(2), 170–195.
- Crystal, D., & Davy, D. (1969). *Investigating English style*. Longman.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). Academic Press.
- Haugh, M. (2008). Anglo and non-anglo approaches to impoliteness. In D. Bousfield & M. A. Locher (Eds.), *Impoliteness in language: Studies on its interplay with power in theory and practice* (pp. 351–369). Mouton de Gruyter.
- Huang, Y. (2007). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Omojola, B. (1995). *Nigerian art music*. Institute Français de Recherche en Afrique (IFRA).
- Osgood, C. E. (1960). The cross-cultural generality of visual-verbal syntactic relationships. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 52(2), 293–296.
- Searle, J. R. (1975). Indirect speech acts. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts* (pp. 59–82). Academic Press.
- Sheriff, O. (2015). Falz biography and songs. *Naija Quest*.