

**Generic Structure of ASUU's Correspondences: A Focus on Monday
Igbafen's 2021 ASUU-Led Industrial Dispute in Ambrose Alli
University, Ekpoma, Nigeria**

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Abstract

The conventional classification of literary forms into poetry, prose, drama, ballad, epic, among others, has given way to a more sociological approach, called genre classification. It lays emphasis on communicative events and the roles of such events. Given this current thinking in genre analysis, this study explains the generic classification of correspondences which the leadership of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) of Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma in Edo State (hereafter, AAUE) Chapter deploys as a tool during its strike action in 2021 to press home members' demand for better conditions of service. Based on the theory of generic structure analysis, the study explores ASUU's communicative discourse for qualitative analysis of its correspondences. The study is carried out from the perspective of discourse (language) analysis, with particular reference to AAUE-Chapter of ASUU's recent 2021 strike action, embarked on to press for the payment of members' several months of unpaid salaries and the non-remittance of more-than-a year check-off dues and other sundry deductions in the University. Findings showed that formal correspondences provided members of the union, including the stakeholders with the required information, aimed at resolving the conflict. The prominent pattern of discourse correspondence, includes declarative, imperative and interrogative sentence types, and/ or physical acts, to negotiate the cooperation of all concerned. A conclusion is therefore drawn that the peculiar features of ASUU's correspondences constitute effective subgenre means of communication.

Keywords: ASUU-AAUE, Correspondences, Genre analysis, Strike action.

Introduction

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (hereafter, ASUU), an affiliate of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) was formed in 1978, to succeed the Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT), formed in 1965. The inability of the NAUT to adequately meet the needs of academic staff in Nigerian public universities necessitated the formation of ASUU (ASUU). NAUT had merely focused on improvement in the conditions of service and the socio-economic and political well-being of some Nigerian Universities. According to Attahiru Jega:

NAUT hardly even took any noteworthy position on national issues. Ideologically, it seemed to be a middle class fraternity with viewpoints not too divergent from those of the post-colonial state. On the few occasions that it issued public statements, they tended to be conservative and sympathetic to the regime. (8)

Consequently, NAUT soon became unsuitable for the development of the university system in Nigeria because the socio-political and economic direction of the country should inspire the movement in the university system. This opinion is succinctly captured by Eskor Toyo, who attributes the motivating spirit behind ASUU's struggles to the character of the society itself and the bad faith of primitive bureaucracy and crude militarism. He notes that Military dictatorship had eroded deeply the basic freedoms in the society; academic freedom, and university autonomy were casualties of military dictatorship. The funding of education, and so of universities, became poorer. These conditions necessitated ASUU's formation, which marked the beginning of the decline in the oil boom, when the country faced the consequences of the failure by its rulers to use the oil wealth to generate production and a social welfare system. These factors required a changed orientation of the union of academics from 1980. ASUUs orientation became radical, more concerned with broad national issues, and stood firmly against oppressive, undemocratic policies of the country. In its early years, assault on academic freedom was the subject of ASUU's resistance throughout the 1980s.

Till date, both the federal and state governments have refused to implement most of the various agreements reached for autonomy and proper funding of Nigerian universities. This results in devastating effects on academic activities, and this failure has caused perennial strike actions, and academic activities are often disrupted or totally shut down for endless periods of time across campuses of Nigerian Universities. Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma is not exempted from poor funding as well as the battering of its autonomy by successive state governments in Edo State. In his opinion, Idris asserts that:

the cumulative opinions of ASUU veterans simply depict that, ASUU struggle especially in the 21st century has no deadline and is far from being over,... both the union and the membership should expect and prepare for series of struggles which may be in a sequence of: tough, tougher, toughest...., that available indicators show that plans aimed at strangulating access to public education or converting same from public property to private ownership is deeply entrenched, multidimensional, gigantic and to a good extent horrendous. So

aggressive pursuance, enduring resistance, turbulent social campaign, erudite intellectual engagements and adaption to tactical and innovative scepticism and escapism, the challenge would be crossed over. (n.p.)

To that end, ASUU has provided interesting opportunities for university system in terms of campaigning, activism and protests, including civil and advocacy actions. This article investigates Monday Igbafen's ASUU-led leadership's advocacy through the mechanism of the generic structure of language features in the correspondences issued to manage the 2021 struggle to press for the payment of members' months of unpaid salaries and the non-remittance of more-than- a year check-off dues and other sundry deductions in AAU-Ekpoma, Nigeria.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Moore and Tuckwell state that Generic Structure theory is a theory of the dynamic, bidirectional relationship between a text's structure and the relevant features of the context in which that text occurs (n.p.). In this regard, Alan Bell's theory is very apt in the analysis of our data. Audience Design is a sociolinguistic model, formulated and later elaborated by Allan Bell in 1984, which proposes that linguistic style-shifting occurs mainly in response to a speaker's audience. According to this model, speakers adjust their speech primarily towards that of their audience in order to express solidarity or intimacy with them, or away from their audience's speech in order to express distance. Generic structure, therefore, refers to the genre utilized in the discourse selected for this study. An examination of discourse genre in the work suggests strategies and linguistic constructions which define the correspondences on the of audience and design industrial dispute declared by ASUU, Ekpoma Chapter. The declaration brought about academic staff's staying away from their duty posts, and their refusal to render services assigned to them for the period they were on strike, as a result of non-payment of their salaries and allowances for several months.

Current studies in register analysis have shown that the traditional concept of genre is capable of more than one application. This study, therefore, is anchored on Bex's theory of generic classification which shares the view that genre is totally different from what it used to be, by divorcing it from its erstwhile interpretation as a literary classification into distinct forms of writing, like poetry, prose, drama, ballad, epic, among others. Instead, the concept is defined according to the social application of language in a class of communicative events (96). Considering genre in this sense, refers to a form of language used as instrument of power in the hands of speakers/writers, critics and even political leaders, to influence decisions, control available resources and direct the behaviour of readers, as well as their values and desires (Kalejaiye 645; Ihidero 131). Following this communicative approach, Swales posits that: ... A communicative event comprises not only the discourse itself and its participants, but also the role of that discourse and the environment of its production and reception, including its historical and cultural associations (46).

This shows that communicative event suggests the totality of human purposive interactions which grow out of their shared knowledge and interactional conventions (Lamidi 127). A communicative event that is culturally recognized can be carried out with its own theme, form and function to achieve a particular goal. All these constitute a genre. Accordingly, a genre is "an aggregation of communicative events that fulfil a common social function" (Bex 137). Bex, however, distinguishes between private and

public genres to the extent that private genres are limited to interactions between specific individuals, while public genres are institutional in the sense that it lacks the intimacy which is a major feature of personal interaction. The former and latter could therefore imply to letter writing format. According to Udofot and Ekpenyong, letters constitute a written communication or correspondence between two parties which follow social and academic conventions, and whose common features include: address, date, salutation, the text, the complimentary close and the writer's name (204). Letter writing as a typical example of a genre, comprises private and public genres, having two branches of personal and institutional forms. Personal letters have intimate style of presentation while institutional letters have formal style. The present study is eclectically discussed in form of semi-formal, with emphasis placed on the generic features of ASUU's correspondences to exemplify a subgenre of letters used to communicate with members during the 2021 strike action.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

The reports and letters issued by the leadership of ASUU, AAUE Chapter, during the 2021 Industrial dispute, which constitute the data for this study are qualitatively selected and analysed from the perspective of genre classification. This involves the three analytical procedures of description, interpretation and explanation of the selected data, thereby presenting a complete and detailed exploration of the concept under study, as well as an open-ended, flexible and subjective interpretation. The generic examination of the correspondences exposes the linguistic codes ASUU leadership employs as instrument to manage and direct the strike action in the institution. The available data for analysis mainly represent those that illustrate the cognitive actions taken against AAU's management and the state government, for lack of proper funding of the institution. Therefore, the generic features (language) of ASUU's correspondences are used as a tool to fight against staff's unpaid salaries and entitlements for several months, as follows:

a. The language of Salutation

Generally, salutation is a key component of correspondences. Therefore, salutation in ASUU's routine *Releases* during the 2021 strike action in Ekpoma branch was an endearing resource, which the union utilized to have personal touch with the members. All through ASUU's correspondences, eclectic saluting modes were explored, though with some level of semi formality, in order to avoid being highly officious or institutional in communicating with members and stakeholders. That approach was also meant to maintain a subtle format pattern that would achieve quick dissemination of information for sustainable cordial relationship between the union leadership and members. The extract below typifies features of saluting, which the union's correspondences expressed as a matter of routine.

Extract 1

"Dear Comrades and Compatriots", "Dear **Union members**" and "**Congress**"

(Igbafen & Coker. *ASUU- AAUE Strike Bulletin issues*, March 26, April 26 & May 3, 2021).

The utterances made in extract 1 typify ASUU regular leadership's style of saluting members and stakeholders at all fora, in order to endear itself to members, and carry them along in the struggle, because they are considered partners in the struggle. The employment of "Comrades and Compatriots" in the Union Releases,

suggested a sense of collectiveness which ASUU represents, and the phrase was repeatedly used to arouse the spirit of cooperation and understanding in accordance with Allan Bell's Audience Design Theory which sees a speaker/writer as adjusting his speech to soothe the audience in order to express solidarity or intimacy with them (240).

Furthermore, the employment of 'the Union' and 'Congress', which were interchangeably, steadily and repeatedly used as means of addressing members in the various correspondences, were utterances aimed at fostering unity among members of the union in the communicative events. The terms were used as synonyms to 'members' as expressions meant to emphasize the message of partnership. Specifically, the leadership of ASUU- AAUE explored the repeated utterances to invoke unity of purpose, and to plead for heightened co-operation, steadfastness, strength, resilience, zeal, and to convey a sense of active participation in activism during the struggle.

b. The Discourse in the correspondences

ASUUE's discourse in its correspondences revealed that the language was usually direct to the point, brief and contained a few sentences. This was partly due to the remote relationship the leadership attempted to share with members, with a strong desire to convey a specific message in a given letter. Such sentences were mostly, either declaratives- to convey information, or imperatives- to convey instruction to members, with a view to resisting the bad policies of the institution's Management in control.

The union leadership therefore adopted politeness strategies in its choice of sentence- types, to achieve the following aims: resisting members who engaged in anti- union activities; repudiating government and University Administration's repressive policies; and countering anti-union directives.

We shall examine these issues through the language features employed in the extracts, as follows:

i. Resisting anti- union activities

In his assertion, Idris is of the opinion that ASUU should employ "aggression, enduring resistance, turbulent social campaign and intellectual engagements" in prosecuting its struggle against injustices to its members. Accordingly, AAU- ASUU's leadership deployed forceful language resources to resist the nonchalant attitude and poor response of management to the plight of workers as expressed in the following extracts.

Extract 2

Be reminded that our current strike is a just struggle... to save our cooperative societies, welfare associations, and our collective commonwealth... Remember that the strike is total, comprehensive and indefinite/The Branch will take all legitimate steps to enforce compliance. Congress resolved to resist through legitimate means any attempt to undermine the ongoing strike undertaken to resolve the

crisis... (Igbafen & Coker. *ASUU-AAUE Strike Bulletin issues/Release of March 26, April 26 & May 9, 2021*).

Extract 3

The attention of the Union has been drawn to the anti- union directive issued by the Dean, Faculty of Management Sciences ... to our members to submit their sets of publication for assessment. The Union wonders what the Dean wants to do with the publications at this point in time when members are on strike. (Igbafen & Coker. *ASUU -AAUE Release of May 4*)

Extracts 2 and 3 profoundly deployed imperatives, which were direct utterances, used to encourage members to share the common aspirations of the struggle, which include the demand for several months of unpaid emoluments and savings due them. Therefore, while the industrial dispute lasted, ASUU leadership repeatedly utilized the following lexical items: **'total'**, **'comprehensive'** and **'indefinite'**, not only to define the scope of the strike, but also to declare and sustain a complete shutdown of academic activities on campus, in order to draw management's attention to the plights of staff, for quick resolution.

Similarly, the leadership of ASUU explored indirect commands, though couched in polite expressions of threats, to resist members who attempted to break the strike. For instance, *'The Branch will take all legitimate steps to enforce compliance...'* (extract2), portrayed ASUU leadership's use of civil language to admonish prospective violators, as well as to resist members and Management alike, who attempted to break the strike. The utterance, though subtle, helped to enforce the strike to the letter.

Furthermore, the expression; **'The Union wonders what the Dean wants to do with the publications at this point in time when members are on strike'** (Extract 3), reflected the warning and rebuke ASUU issued to some of its members. The exclamatory utterance was meant to frown at the anti- union activities of some senior members. The utterance exposed and criticized the uncooperative attitude of such members for public ridicule. Above all, the utterance served as an instrument of protection and reassurance for faithful and loyal members who were being threatened by management for taking part in the strike.

ii. Repudiating Government/University Administration's Repressive Policies and Directives

The fact that most Nigerian Universities have been going through series of struggles, is a proof of Idris' view that there are evidences showing that government's plans are aimed at strangulating access to public education or converting same from public property to private ownership (n.p). Thus, the AAU-ASUU strike was justifiably declared to protest deliberate under funding of the institution, including assault on academic freedom, by the state government. The extracts below portray radical language to fight against impunity in the institution.

Extract 4

Please, be reminded that YOU ARE NOT to attend any meeting of any kind during the strike.... / Congress advised members not to attend the scheduled emergency senate meeting for Thursday, May 20, 2021 and indeed any other meetings... / The outgoing Professor Ignatius A. Onimawo-led University Administration's extreme insensitivity to the plight of workers has further been confirmed by the actions of the outgoing vice chancellor... the people/workers wept, workers died as a result of the crisis of non- payment of salaries,...the Union took a bold step to picket its members who attempted to defy the directive and resolution of the union not to attend the 90th inaugural Lecture series... (Igbafen & Coker. *ASUU-AAUE Strike Bulletin issues/Release*, April 6, May 3 & 9).

Extract 5

.... the state Government has made some curious and unprecedented amendments in the laws of our University that is generating and provoking serious concerns... Flowing from the above is the appointment of an acting VC for the University. The Union is cognizant of these developments and is tracking same for possible appropriate response. Be rest assured that the Branch is in contact with our National Secretariat for guidance as events unfold. (Igbafen & Coker. *ASUU-AAUE Strike Bulletin issues*, May 12).

Extract 6

The directives of the university Administration and that of Government are not our union's directives, therefore any member acting on such directives is engaging in anti-union activity/ The attention of the Branch has been drawn to the itinerary of the new Acting VC... series of meetings with the provost, Deans and Directors ...while the Branch leadership is willing to meet the new Acting Vice-Chancellor over the sole reason for the ongoing strike, all other meetings for now are forbidden for members to attend... /...to resume work on empty stomach? (Igbafen & Coker. *ASUU-AAUE Strike Bulletin issues/Release*, May 20, 23 & April 26).

Extract 4 reaffirmed the fact that academic staff that are unjustly treated, embark on industrial action to resist their victimization, by maintaining a common front. Therefore, the extract was employed to reveal some information that ASUU leadership and its members shared collective understanding and vision, since the former were victims of injustices. The extract further expressed the conviction that members' clear understanding of the situation necessitated the strike. For instance, the utterance, 'Please, be reminded that YOU ARE NOT to attend any meeting of any kind during the strike' profoundly emphasized the uncompromising position of the union leadership. The capitalization of some letters in the extract, is a graphological device, employed to emphasize members' abstinence from work while the strike lasted. As a step further, the term 'picketing members' indicates that ASUU leadership resorted to

physical attempts to checkmating recalcitrant members who are bent on breaking the strike. Similarly, in the extract, the choice of the phrase: “*unprecedented*” and “*provoking serious concerns*” was used to reflect the spirit of activism; which represents the tool of resistance against bad policies.

The phrase was selected to convey the union’s dissatisfaction with the state government for amending the laws establishing AAUE, and to express the union’s anger at the university administration’s order, compelling staff to resume work without addressing contending issues during the period of strike. Again, the language choice in the extract, was used to convey members’ bitterness and strange experiences of tyranny, oppression, injustice and undemocratic practices in the hands of government and management, in the day to day running of the institution. Consequently, ASUU leadership’s choice of a rhetoric question: **‘We, to resume work on empty stomach?’** (Extract 6), suggests shock, and to interrogate the moral and legal justifications for calling the workers to suspend the strike action. ‘empty stomach’ is an emotional coinage, used in the extract to draw attention to the pathetic state of the workers, who were impoverished for lack of salary payment. Reference to the use of plural personal pronoun, ‘we’ in the extract, emphasized the need for team spirit and resilience among the members of the union in the struggle, in order to reject oppression and injustice. Therefore, considering the importance the union placed on collectiveness among members, ASUU leadership’s repeatedly employs ‘we’ and ‘our’ to remind members to sustain oneness as a binding force for the union to fight for their rights.

c) Appreciation and Assurances to Members

In the course of the struggle, ASUU leadership’s *Releases* are replete with praises and appreciation to encourage members, in order to sustain the struggle. The strategy is aimed at mitigating the pains and losses members might have suffered. In the extract below, expressions that communicate gratitude to members for their commitment are presented.

Extract 7

The Union commends members for their full compliance with the strike action and urges them to remain resolute as the struggle rages The Union especially commends our members who resisted the pressure and subtle threat of the outgoing ... University Administration to deliver inaugural lecture during our ongoing strike, and lauds members who stood firm.../ASUU, AAU, Ekpoma suspends strike (Igbafen & Coker. *ASUU-AAUE Strike Bulletin issues/Releases*, April 16, 26, May 3 & June 1).

The above extract captures ASUU leadership’s appreciation for members. **‘to remain resolute as the struggle rages’/ ‘commends our members who resisted the pressure and subtle threat’**, imply ASUU’S leadership’s acknowledgement and sympathy for members’ pains and suffering, as a result of the unfortunate lingering strike action. It also conveyed appeals to members, to have faith in their common course, and to demonstrate steadfastness and solidarity as the struggle lasted.

Finally, ASUU leadership did not spare the complimentary close in its correspondences. The following sets of closing remarks were employed in each of the correspondences:

Extract 8

United we bargain, divided we beg; A people united can never be divided/ Dare to struggle! Dare to win!!/ Aluta continua/ Victory is certain!

((Igbafen & Coker. *ASUU-AAUE Strike Bulletin issues/Release*, April 26, May 24, 25).

The above utterances are a set of lyrical compositions characteristic of labour movements, rendered to motivate members. In this context, apart from their being repeatedly featured in the union's write-ups to members, they were regular slogans sung and chanted by members after the close of each congress in order to drive a common message of enduring solidarity, strength, unity and steadfastness that binds members together for the survival of the union and goal attainment.

Conclusion

This study applies sociolinguistic approach to communication, which allows for interpretation of writer's meaning. The research method is descriptive, and geared towards identifying the kind of correspondences AAU-ASUU leadership explored in its write-ups concerning the 2021 strike action, while communicating messages to members and stakeholders. The correspondences served as the linguistic data for this study, and the theoretical framework served as tool for analysis. The findings revealed that ASUU leadership employed the language of salutation, information, resistance, appreciation and motivation, to direct and manage the struggle to a successful end. The struggle was conducted in a civil manner to confront and redress injustice workers face in the institution, especially the academic staff. Finally, the study shows that the success of a union leadership in an industrial dispute depends largely on the choice of words made, how they are used and the performance such words and sentences are associated with. Specifically, our findings revealed that Monday Igbafen's ASUU -led leadership consciously composed correspondences to prosecute the 2021 industrial dispute that reflected the rejection of obnoxious policies and injustices in the institution.

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