



Essay

# “I Collected Money, not a Bribe”: Strategic Ambiguity and the Dynamics of Corruption in Contemporary Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This article explores the language of corruption in Nigeria. It uses Eisenberg’s Strategic Ambiguity concept to examine the extent to which Nigerian legislators and those who occupy the executive arm of the government employ ambiguous languages and actions to execute and defend corrupt practices, and how this institutionalizes the culture of corruption in contemporary Nigeria. The article further explores how ambiguous light punishment, outright non-punishment, state pardon of corrupt elites and the reward of corrupt elites with sensitive government appointments engender corruption in Nigeria. The article argues that while the elites engage in diverse corrupt practices and employ ambiguous words to defend their acts, the judiciary appears to defend rather than punish them. The paper discusses the implications of these findings, concluding that the war against corruption in Nigeria may not be effective, because as those who appear to be fighting corruption are themselves corrupt, the frameworks with which corruption is fought are strategically manipulated by the elites.

**Keywords:** anti-corruption; corruption; language of corruption; Nigeria; strategic ambiguity

## 1. Introduction

In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousand-fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers . . . we are ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations.

—(Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn [1], 1918–1956)

Corruption around the world, and most especially in developing countries, undeniably is one of the most topical discussions among scholars globally. Corruption is not only perceived to have dire consequences [2], but it is seen as “a disease of body politic” [3]. Corruption is highly prevalent in developing nations and is largely responsible for the appalling conditions of basic infrastructures and other social problems facing the African continent in particular [4]. This is because “corruption . . . has become, in almost all African countries, a common and routine element of the functioning of administrative . . . apparatus, from top to bottom” [5]. Although Agbiboa [6] contends that no country is totally free from corruption, he equally adds that some countries rank higher in terms of corruption than others. In the Nigerian context, it has become difficult to ignore the fact that corruption is not only a part of the government, but it is the object of government [7]. This is

why Oluwaniyi [8] argues that “corruption has become a widespread phenomenon in Nigeria, deeply permeating into its social fabric to the extent that it has now become a way of life for the majority of people in both public and private spheres.”

This extant hyper-corruption [9] in Nigeria is not just a social “canker”, but it reflects the decadence in the polity [10] orchestrated by a lack of leaders with the ability to institute and enforce moral restraints [4]. Although not every Nigerian is corrupt, it is notable that currently, “keeping an average Nigerian from being corrupt is like keeping a goat from eating cassava” [11]. In contemporary Nigeria, many acts of lawlessness such as kidnapping, daylight armed robbery, vandalism, etc., are ubiquitous, but these crimes are all linked to the fact that corruption has become institutionalised [12,13]. As Aluko [14] argues, when a society institutionalises corruption, it permeates into the value system, becomes normative and an embodiment of culture, and in turn manifest in people’s behaviours.

Although corruption has been part of every Nigerian government even before independence, Aluko [14] notes that the military junta that ruled between 1985 and 1993, nationalised the social malaise, making it “a permanent feature of the Nigerian polity.” This military government introduced the “settlement syndrome” (another term “used to describe all forms of corruption in Nigeria”) where no service is rendered without asking for *settlement* or a bribe [14]. This arguably gave rise to all forms of corrupt practices that hitherto did not exist in Nigeria. From this moment, corruption has become part of the Nigerian culture that “young ones are born into . . . , grew up in”, live with, and will “possibly die in” while the “aged are . . . re-socialized . . . to conform to it” [14].

Because of the fact that all forms of corrupt practices are present in Nigeria, many scholars (e.g., [6,8,15–18]) have made it a bona fide topic of discourse in contemporary scholarship. Again, while many of these scholars have focused on the impact of corruption on political culture [14], development and the economy [12,18], others have examined the prevalence of corruption in certain institutions [8], or how to control the malaise [16]. Furthermore, other non-Nigerian scholars [4,5] have studied corruption in Nigeria. Despite the fact that corruption in Nigeria has received scholarly attention, no study to our knowledge has examined explicitly the use of ambiguous languages by Nigerians to initiate, execute and defend corrupt practices and how this leads to the normalization of corruption in the polity. Although van den Bersselaar and Decker [4] noted that they discovered “a very specific development of language of corruption” in their study of Ghana’s and Nigeria’s post-colonial states, they failed to reveal this language(s) or explore its dynamics. It is against this backdrop that this paper is written.

Taking a point of departure from Eisenberg’s [19] concept of Strategic Ambiguity (SA), this paper explores the language of corruption in contemporary Nigeria. Precisely, the paper’s objectives are two folds. First, it explores how those who occupy the political spaces employ ambiguous linguistic resources to execute and defend corrupt practices. Second, it examines how corruption is rewarded in Nigeria via multiple ambiguous actions. The paper draws on the analysis of secondary data to provide a snapshot of the dynamic nature of the language of corruption and the activities of corrupt elites in Nigeria. Our analysis develops Richard Joseph’s study of Prebendalism in Nigeria [20], and Susan Rose-Ackerman’s study of corruption in government [21]. It unpacks the nature and meaning of strategically chosen words and actions employed to corruptly gain undue advantage in Nigeria to assay tentative sociological advances with regard to contemporary discussions on the demand-supply sides of corruption.

The study focuses particularly on how corrupt practices are executed and defended with linguistic resources in specific spaces by those who occupy the contemporary Nigerian legislative and executive spaces and how the judiciary appears to defend rather than punish them. The paper focuses on these sectors because while the legislators make laws, those in the executive arm handle the daily affairs of the country and those in the judiciary are supposed to uphold laws/justices. Therefore, these are very important sectors that determine the wellbeing (or otherwise) of the Nigerian society. The paper argues that the language of corruption in Nigeria is dynamically fluid (changes according to space and situation), advancing a novel contribution by viewing corruption through the lens of

Strategic Ambiguity concept. The rest of the paper is divided into three sections. The ensuing section conceptualizes corruption and lays out the theoretical foundation guiding the paper. Next is the discussion section that examines how Strategic Ambiguity is used in Nigeria to execute and defend corrupt practices. The concluding section points out some implications and suggests some remedies.

### 1.1. Conceptualization of Corruption

Several scholars have conceptualised corruption but, to date, there has been little agreement; a factor that can be attributed to the fact that “corruption is intertwined with ideological, moral, cultural and political perspectives” [18]. Indeed, Gephart [22] notes that several anthropological studies argue that the meaning of corruption is contextual. Therefore, using a method that succeeded in a setting to fight corruption in another context may be problematic [23]. Employing metaphorical language and extending Dennis Thompson’s [3] view on corruption as a disease of politic, Hellman [24] notes that “corruption is the disease-state of an institution or individual” while Burke [25] argues that corruption connotes “that something pure, or natural, or ordered has decayed or become degraded.” Hellman adds that before an official or even an organization is regarded as corrupt, “one needs an account of how the official ought to act or how the organization ought to function” [24]. According to Bayley [26], “corruption, . . . while being tied particularly to the act of bribery, is a general term covering misuse of authority as a result of considerations of personal gain, which need not be monetary.” Corruption is not only a misuse of power, but it is also a violation of the “principle of political equality” [27]. It involves “[a]ny act or omission in the discharge of duties by a government official . . . for the purpose of illicitly obtaining benefits for himself or for a third person” [28].

Corruption can be viewed from both private and public perspectives. It could be political [29], legislative, judicial, financial [25], institutional, etc. As Lessig [30] notes, “institutional corruption, is manifest when there is systemic and strategic influence which is legal, or even currently ethical, that undermines the institution’s effectiveness by diverting it from its purpose or weakening its ability to achieve its purpose, including, to the extent relevant to its purpose, weakening either the public’s trust in that institution’s inherent trustworthiness.”

To Blundo and Olivier de Sardan [31], corruption can be frowned upon as well as legitimised in the same setting. For example, in a civil service setting, a civil servant may refuse to accept a bribe from a giver but accepts to sign a document that contains illicit transaction for his boss in order to retain his post. This is why Transparency International’s [32] definition of corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” is encompassing.

Additionally, Punch [33] asserts that corruption occurs:

“when an official receives or is promised significant advantage or reward (personal, group or organisation) for doing something that he is under a duty to do anyway, that he is under a duty not to do, for exercising a legitimate discretion for improper reasons, and for employing illegal means to achieve approved goals.”

In this direction, Gephart [22] adds that “within corruption-promoting incentive structures, a supposed win-win situation emerges, from which both the bribed and the bribing actor benefit.”

In contemporary scholarship, there is general agreement that corruption has only negative consequences [16], but some scholars in the 1960s and 1970s regarded corruption as a necessary evil because it “can act as a lubricant to overcome excessive bureaucratic inflexibility, sluggishness, bungling” [34], especially where administrative bottleneck results in unnecessary delays. Similarly, Nye [35] notes that corruption can perform some seemingly positive functions in some situations, but agreed with Werlin [26] that “political corruption *is* the diversion of public resources to non-public purposes” [34]. Additionally, Stark [36] argues that in the US, the most corrupt practices take the form of “private gains from public office” but this often “provoke[s] normative concern.” To Zakiuddin and Haque [37]:

“Corruption is not identifiable as a single, separate, independent entity which can be isolated and destroyed. Corruption is a complex set of processes involving human behaviour and many other variables, some of which are difficult to recognise or measure . . . ”

Relatedly, De Sardan [5] notes that the “corruption complex” include all forms of “nepotism, abuse of power, embezzlement and various forms of misappropriation, influence-peddling, prevarication, insider trading and abuse of public fund.”

In the Nigerian context, corruption is occurring at an alarming rate, and this is why the study of it by local and foreign scholars has become imperative. Some of these scholars have also defined it accordingly. For example, Bello [38] notes that corruption is conduct or behaviour that deviates from moral or ethical standards, while Otusanya [18] listed extant corrupt practices in Nigeria (though not peculiar to Nigeria) to include inter alia: bribery, extortion, embezzlement, fraud and money laundering. Although corruption is rampant in contemporary Nigeria as noted, scholars have argued that this was handed down by the British Officials via the indirect rule system [39]. Although as indicated above, many scholars have studied or defined corruption, one central argument among them is that corruption is a violation of an established standard or norm, and this breach of standard has different costs [24]. According to Rose-Ackerman [21], some of these costs include poor infrastructure, poverty, poor health, etc. In fact, “ingrained corruption” not only “hold back state reform”, but it also hinders a nation’s progress in many ways [21]. Because corruption is a relative term [40], this paper will adopt Nye’s [35] definition as a guide that:

“Corruption is behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence. This includes such behaviour as bribery . . . , nepotism . . . ; and misappropriation (illegal appropriation of public resources for private-regarding uses).”

### 1.2. The Concept of Strategic Ambiguity (SA)

Clarity and openness are characteristics espoused by several scholars from the field of communication as the basis of effective communication [41,42]. However, Eisenberg [19], by contrast, argues that effective communication is not always determined by clarity. He notes that every organisation faces internal and external tension, within which the employment of some level of ambiguity becomes imperative for the attainment of its multiple goals [19]. The SA concept came into being in 1984 in his well-known *Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication* [19]. Eisenberg argues that because words and their meanings are often contextual, clarity and openness should not be the only criteria for determining effective communication.

Eisenberg [19] posited that “people in organizations confront multiple situational requirements, develop multiple and often conflicting goals, and respond with communicative strategies which do not always minimize ambiguity, but may nonetheless be effective.” Therefore, “organizations use ambiguity strategically to accomplish their goals” [19] because ambiguity is also functional in meaning-making [43]. Although clarity is imperative for effective communication as noted, it nonetheless may not achieve what ambiguity can achieve in some circumstances. Therefore, “clarity and ambiguity are two *important* features of languages: both are functional imperatives, and none is an end in itself. As clarity is a feature of messages, so is ambiguity, which is advanced, via a combination of the source, message and receiver factors” [44].

It is notable that Eisenberg’s contention is not that ambiguity should take the place of data or truth, “but rather that valuing ambiguity means appreciating different interpretations of meaning” [43], because in our daily interpersonal interactions, ambiguity is a natural occurrence, in that languages are inherently ambiguous. Eisenberg further argues that sometimes it may be risky to use clear or unambiguous words and symbols in organizational communication, especially when an organisation

is facing *tension* from the *internal* or *external environment* [45]. For this reason, such organisations may employ ambiguous words or symbols to facilitate the attainment of its multiple goals [46].

Although employing SA is mostly unethical [47], “it is functional, it is essential for organizations in turbulent environments where clarity may be risky, and it achieves what clarity may not in most cases” [44]. This is why Eisenberg and Witten [45] noted that openness in communication should be reconsidered. Irrespective of the fact that it is applied for the attainment of organisational goals, it has been argued that individuals can also employ SA for personal gains. For example, Alesina and Holden [48] demonstrated how politicians use SA to appeal to the electorate during a campaign by marshalling many bogus policies that may never be implemented. Other scholars have revealed that SA can be extended to actions and not just words because most times, words culminate in actions [44].

Several other scholars [49–52] have drawn on the concept of SA to explore diverse phenomena. While Leitch and Davenport [49] utilised SA to examine the change in the public sector, Aragones and Neeman [53] examined its uses among candidates in electoral competitions. Furthermore, Ulmer and Sellnow [54] utilised SA to explore the image making in organizations. Because corruption is often negotiated with ambiguous words and actions, the SA concept becomes germane to the study of how corrupt practices are initiated, executed and defended in the executive, legislative and judicial arms of the Nigerian government.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Strategic Ambiguities and Corruption in Nigeria’s Political Sector

Suffice to say that those who occupy the political spaces in the three tiers of the Nigerian government (federal, state and local) create room for the institutionalization of corruption via different SAs in several ways. This is because vague statements and actions are potent tools for attaining multiple goals [49]. One of the ways in which this is done is through vague public speeches or what Adetayo [55] called the “presidential lies.” Although politicians often speak “half-truths” and have “the preference for ambiguity” [53], this arguably has become a common occurrence in contemporary Nigeria. This appears to be strategically managed, because while the majority of Nigerians are illiterate, the erratic power supply (orchestrated by past corrupt leaders) hampers the followership of news on the electronic media.

A fairly recent example is the Presidential Media Chat<sup>1</sup> that was held on 14 May 2014. During the chat, the immediate past Nigerian president arguably employed ambiguous semantics. While answering questions from journalists on the issues of corruption in Nigeria, the president accepted that some Nigerian politicians steal from public funds [56], but argued that “what many Nigerians refer to as corruption is actually stealing. Stealing is not the same thing as corruption” [57]<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, his other statements suggested that the anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria should redefine corrupt practices. This is because the president noted that “over 70 per cent of what are called corruption (offences), even by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)<sup>3</sup> and other anti-corruption agencies, is not corruption, but common stealing” [58].

A few weeks after this media chat, the Chairman of the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC—a government anti-corruption agency), bolstered up the president’s statement, arguing that in Nigeria:

“Stealing is erroneously reported as corruption. We must go back to what we were taught at school to show that there are educated people in Nigeria. We must address issues as we were taught in school to do” [59].

<sup>1</sup> Presidential Media Chat is a media event where the press asks the president questions on the trend of events in Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup> No page number on this citation and similar others because they are articles from online sources.

<sup>3</sup> EFCC is an anti-corruption agency.

Scholars such as De Sardan [5] conceptualised corruption as all forms of “abuse of power, embezzlement and various forms of misappropriation . . . and abuse of public fund.” Ironically, the chairman of ICPC is a lawyer by profession, and this suggests that he should know what corruption is. Again, in Nigeria, both formal and informal social structures do not condone stealing. As such, it could be argued that the president and ICPC Chairman employed SA to shield corrupt political associates, especially because exposing them will directly affect public’s trust in the president’s government and political party. With such ambiguous statements coming from the president of a country and the Chairman of an agency that was established to fight corruption, it may encourage further abuse of public fund by political actors in the name of common stealing. This is why Deborah Hellman [24] noted that “a definition of corruption relies on a definition of the healthy functioning of a democracy.”

Earlier, the president, while delivering the Presidential Speech on 1 October 2012 during the ‘Independence Day’ celebration, said that:

“In its latest report, Transparency International (TI) noted that Nigeria is the second most improved country in the effort to curb corruption. We will sustain the effort in this direction with an even stronger determination to strengthen the institutions that are statutorily entrusted with the task of ending this scourge” [55].

Additionally, the president told Nigerians that the TI has recently ranked Nigeria’s effort in curbing corruption second after the USA [55]. Surprisingly, Adetayo [55] notes that, after two days of the speech, “the claim was found to be untrue with many accusing the president of telling a lie.” This was because the TI refuted the claim, stating that it “does not have a recent rating or report that places Nigeria as the second most improved country in the fight against corruption” [55]. In consequence, the president arguably applied another aspect of SA (ready-made excuses) by blaming the official who wrote his speech and ordered a probe. It should be recalled that Eisenberg [18] argued that ambiguity is functional. Also, Leitch and Davenport [49] noted that “vaguely worded . . . statements that allow multiple interpretations are examples of SA employed to promote unified diversity with both internal and external stakeholders.” Therefore, it can be argued that this was what the president employed to cover up his error. Why this is interestingly a strategic use of ambiguity, is that the same president (who ordered a probe) had earlier told worshippers in a church service (prior to the actual speech) about his achievement, one such being the rating by TI [55].

Why this prevarication is serious is that anti-corruption was one of the president’s agendas. This corroborates Adebani and Obadare’s [16] assertion that most of the “anti-corruption war in Nigeria has been either a storm in a teacup or one cynically designed and deployed only against opponents of the regime in power.” To date, the report of the probe has not been concluded or made public, and no meaningful apology has been tendered to Nigerians. Eisenberg and Witten [45] posited that openness is often risky in some situations. Thus, the president arguably manipulated his words to achieve the objective of scoring his administration high. This is one of the reasons why Achebe [60] excoriated Nigerian leaders, noting that “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership.”

To further prove that this was arguably a conscious use of SA, the president’s ‘Special Adviser on Media and Publicity’ (who is in charge of presidential speech) was a former Editor of one of the most respected Newspapers in Nigeria (The Guardian), yet claimed to have spoken in error. Scholars argued that politicians “are often purposefully expressing themselves in vague and ambiguous terms” [53]. As such, the president’s adviser strategically avoiding the untrue speech told Nigerians that:

The President’s message is that this administration is tackling corruption . . . People should focus on the message, namely that a lot of progress has been made and is still being made to tackle corruption . . . There are those who are looking for a way to water down the message [55].

Indeed, this may reinforce corruption in Nigeria.

## 2.2. Strategic Pardon of Corrupt Political Elites in Nigeria

Evidence shows that politicians not only employ ambiguous words, but their actions portray ambiguities. This can be seen in a fairly recent presidential pardon granted the former Governor of Bayelsa State in 2013. He was convicted for looting public funds when he was the governor between 1999 and 2005 [12,16]. According to the testimony, the former chairman of the EFCC gave to the US Congress on 19 May 2009, this man that was pardoned:

“Had four properties in London valued at about £10 million, plus another property in Cape Town valued at \$1.2 million. £1 million cash was found in his bedroom at his apartment in London. £2 million was restrained at the Royal Bank of Scotland in London and over \$240 million in Nigeria . . . ” [61].

He also jumped bail in 2005 and fled the UK to Nigeria, “disguising as a woman” [62]. To show the ambiguity in this pardon, when the pardoned was the governor, Mr. President was his deputy governor in Bayelsa state. This is why Edukugho [62] argued that “it was a payback time for President . . . to reward *him* with a presidential pardon as a political benefactor.” Why this is serious is that this stolen wealth often ends in banks abroad, robbing the Nigerian state of its capital [6], and thus endangering the lives of the majority of the citizens already living in abject poverty in the midst of plenty. This is why Rose-Ackerman [21], argued that corruption has dire consequences. It has been argued that SA is often “a conscious strategic decision” [53], and this is played out in this strategic pardon. In fact, when the pardon began to generate public outcries, the President’s spokesman averred that: “the President does not regret what he has done . . . [63].

This has serious implications, especially in a country where corruption is widespread, because other people may commit such offences hoping to receive pardon from people from their ethnic group. This is in agreement with Agbibo’s [12] assertion that such actions send a “wrong signal to the citizenry and *create* a soft landing for the culture of corruption.” To confirm that this pardon was politically motivated, the President in March 2014, selected the same man he pardoned to represent Bayelsa state at the National Conference organised to discuss national issues. Again, the man that was pardoned immediately become an active member of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP—the then ruling party), and was aspiring to contest for one of the senatorial positions in the recently conducted election in February 2015, before he was persuaded to drop such an ambition due to a large outcry it generated [64].

Although state pardon is not a Nigerian reserve, most pardons granted in Nigeria are often targeted at highly corrupt elites, arguably for selfish reasons, and this has a long history. During the regime of the former *military President*, the “punishment that a preceding government meted to public officials found guilty of corrupt behaviour”, was overturned [12]. A former Minister of Transport between 1979 and 1983 fled the country because the subsequent government accused him of embezzling one billion US dollars [65]. When he was pardoned, he returned to Nigeria and was celebrated like a warrior by people from his ethnic group. He immediately became active in politics (holding many posts) and in July 2013, the PDP appointed him as the chairman of the party’s disciplinary committee [66]. Similarly, in 1999, the then President pardoned the Speaker of the ‘House of Representative’ within a few months of his conviction for forgery and perjury [67]. Since the Speaker received his state pardon, he has been active in politics. Again, the then President who pardoned him also appointed him as the Chairman of the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Centre in 2005.

Another notable example is the case of the former Chairman of the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA), who was convicted in 2009 for contract splitting (contract splitting became a criminal offence in Nigeria in 2007), and many other criminal offences, yet given only two-year jail term. Again, his release in 2011 was celebrated with pomp and pageantry while his church Thanksgiving was attended by the

PDP dignitaries [68]. According to Oritse et al. [68], while reacting to his release, a prominent politician, “condemned the judgment that sent the PDP chieftain to prison”, saying that: “there is nobody in government who is not guilty of contract splitting.” Because of this rampant corruption in the Nigerian politics, Agbibo [6] contends that any politician who leaves office without embezzling public fund is often regarded as a fool by his people. The man that was pardoned has since assumed his position as one of the leaders of the PDP and was subsequently appointed into the highest decision-making body of the party [69]. Furthermore, the Supreme Court (the apex court in Nigeria) on 13 December 2013, reversed by setting aside his conviction. The court stated that:

“the contract splitting was not a crime known to the law in Nigeria *and argued* that the acts said to have constituted arbitrary acts resulting in abuse of office are splitting of contracts which were not offences known to law at the material time. The alleged conduct of ‘splitting of contract’ was not only outside of any written law but in fact, not an offence at the material time. The same goes for ‘conspiracy to split contract’ . . . [70].

In fact, this tactful action by the president, his party (of pardoning or exalting criminals) and the judiciary may strengthen the institutionalisation of corruption in Nigeria.

### 2.3. Strategic Ambiguity and Corruption in the Nigeria Judiciary

Although the data did not reveal a direct use of the language of corruption among the judiciary, it nonetheless showed diverse levels of ambiguities in the judicial process, and thus support Lessig’s [30] assertion that “ideology within the judiciary could be a form of institutional corruption, even without money changing hands”. In the Nigerian judicial system, corruption is widespread; thus, it is generally argued that justice is given based on how much one can pay. The rich and those who occupy political offices are scarcely guilty except they have stepped on the toes of powerful political actors. For example, in 2007, a Federal High Court in Asaba freed former Delta State Governor of 170 corruption count charges [71]. According to Shirbon [72], this was because he:

“Thwarted attempts by the EFCC . . . to prosecute him after he left office *and* obtained the transfer of his court case from the northern city of Kaduna to the Delta State capital Asaba, where a judge who was also his cousin dismissed all 170 charges against him.”

The judicial process was manipulated by appointing/assigning his cousin as the judge. According to Walker [63], this was because of an earlier agreement to bankroll the former president’s election because he “was promised the vice-president’s job, in return for his support”, but unfortunately, that plan failed. Luck ran out for him when the former president died in 2010 and the immediate past president (who was then the deceased’s vice president), took a special interest in his case, for standing on his way to becoming the vice president in 2007 [71]. The former governor immediately escaped to Dubai before being extradited to the UK where he was accused by the “British police of stealing \$250m (£160m) over eight years” as a governor [73] of which he pleaded guilty in 2012 and sentenced to a 13-year jail term [71]. This is the same offence the Nigerian court had freed him from earlier [74]. Indeed, as it has been argued, “SA, shields the powerful from close scrutiny in a way that protects them from conflict”, but “stakeholders are likely to react in a negative way if they identify this strategy in action” [49].

Another questionable judgement can be identified in a sentence given to the Deputy Director of Police Pension Fund, who pleaded guilty of stealing 27 billion Naira (over 167 million US dollars) of pensioners’ funds. A court sitting in Abuja in 2012 sentenced him to only two-year imprisonment and gave him an option of 750,000 Naira (\$4641) fine which he immediately paid [75]. This generated a public outcry in Nigeria, and many people have concluded that the fight against corruption is fallacious [76]. One of the implications of this light punishment is that many people may commit similar crimes because the punishment is not commensurate with the offence. Although those who occupy the judicial spaces have often blamed their lack of independence, they have failed to realise

that they are supposed to be the last hope of the common Nigerians. In the following section, we will demonstrate the dynamics of corruption and the use of SAs in the legislative arm.

#### 2.4. Strategic Ambiguity and Corruption in the Legislative Arm

In contemporary Nigeria, it has become increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that many of the nation's parliamentarians are corrupt. Irrespective of the fact that Nigerian Parliamentarians are the highest paid globally due to the fact they receive "pay packets in excess of \$1m (£600,000) a year" [77], they have frequently been accused of corruption. Since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, many lawmakers have been indicted for different corrupt practices. As noted, in 1999, the Speaker of the House of Representative was convicted of forgery and perjury [67,78]. Similarly, a member of the House of Representatives was "charged with conning a German businessman out of \$350,000" in 2003 [79].

Additionally, another female Speaker was forced to step down in 2007 after she was found guilty of gross financial misconduct because she spent \$5 million to refurbish her residential houses and to buy cars [80]. In the same vein, the Chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Health was in 2008 accused of receiving a bribe from the Ministry of Health to influence the ministry's budget [81]. Others include the cases of "N5.2 billion naira fraud in the rural electrification project" involving the Chairman, House Committee on Power; 44 million Naira bribe, the Director General of Security and Exchange Commission reported that the Chairman, House Committee on Capital Market demanded from her commission [82], etc.

Despite the prevalent rate of parliamentary corruption in contemporary Nigeria, some of the Members of Parliament (MP) have been vociferously claiming to be above board, and one such is a man who was popularly called *Mr. Integrity*<sup>4</sup> before the three million dollar bribe scandal started to unfold [82,83]. Because of the misappropriation of a 1.7 trillion Naira fuel subsidy (in some previous administrations), the House of Representative (the lower chamber of the legislative arm) set up a probe panel in 2012 to investigate the scandal [84]. Mr Integrity was appointed as chairman of the committee, but:

"hardly had the panel submitted its report when the Chairman of Zenon Oil . . . accused *him* of collecting \$500, 000 from him while the clerk of the panel . . . collected \$120,000 out of a total of \$3m demanded . . . " [84].

Although 'Mr Integrity' initially denied collecting any money [84], when the giver in what he described as "sting operation" [84] revealed that he had recorded the whole transaction with a secret camera, and went ahead to publicise the audio and video of the episode [83], Mr Integrity then admittedly recanted his words saying that "I collected money" and "not a bribe" [85] "as evidence to expose *the giver*" [84]. Indeed, it can be argued that this 'situational excuse' was a strategic use of ambiguity to defend a corrupt practice by the political elite. This illustrates that "the ability to deny a particular interpretation of a message is *one of the* roles of SA" [49]. Why did Mr Integrity, who originally listed "Zenon Oil" as one of the culprits in the fuel subsidy scandal, subsequently delist the company (arguably after receiving the bribe)? Why did he convince the House of Assembly and Nigerians that the company was listed in error? Why did he initially deny receiving any money, but owned up when the giver produced recorded evidence? It goes with Salisu's [11] assertion that "keeping an average Nigerian from being corrupt is like keeping a goat from eating cassava."

In Nigeria, giving or receiving a bribe is a criminal offence, but the constitutional immunities most Nigerian politicians enjoy position them as sacred cows. Indeed, to demonstrate that reducing corruption may be difficult in Nigeria, none of the law enforcement agencies subjected Mr. Integrity or

<sup>4</sup> He was given the name (Mr. Integrity) because he led the Integrity Group—a group that claimed to be free from corruption in the lower house of the parliament.

the man that offered the bribe to face trial for more than a year, until a radical Lagos-based lawyer threatened to sue the government for ignoring such a serious crime [76]. In most developed countries, any public servant indicted, resigns immediately to allow the full course of the law to be followed, but in developing countries such as Nigeria, such hardly ever happens. Rather, leaders use their position of immunity to manipulate the judicial process and hamper justice. Despite the magnitude of this scandal, Mr. Integrity continued to serve as an MP until the end of his tenure. This is why a former police officer, who after retirement became a Senator, starkly called many of his colleagues criminals, “stating that while he was in the police, he had ‘apprehended some of them’” [16].

### 3. Conclusions

Our findings contribute to knowledge by revealing how Nigerians employ different SAs to execute and defend corrupt practices. The study develops and strengthens Richard Joseph’s [20] argument that “prebendal politics” prevail in Nigeria. It is also notable that this study is limited by the fact that it drew on data elicited via secondary sources. Although this is the first attempt to explore the language of corruption in Nigeria, field research through the collection of primary data would have produced greater nuance on the language of corruption. Therefore, studies that elicit data across different sectors and regions of Nigeria should be conducted.

As our findings show, the languages of corruption are socially constructed to execute and defend corrupt practices; hence, they are dynamically fluid. The study demonstrates that corruption is embedded in the fabrics of the executive arm of the Nigerian government. It was revealed that diverse SAs permeate and embody the presidential speeches. Because language is one of the most viable means of communicating and transmitting culture, the culture of corruption risks being transmitted via linguistic resources to the younger generation. This is especially because this linguistic resource emanates from the leaders whose words and actions may have much influence on the led. As such, this contributes to the institutionalisation of corruption in Nigeria. Another implication of this study arises from the results that show how the presidential speeches are not trustworthy. Because institutional corruption often weakens public’s trust [30], future Nigerian leaders’ speeches risk being distrusted and ignored even when they may be honest. This is because people may generalise that Nigerian leaders always deliver false speeches.

Relatedly, the result which shows that *common stealing* is used to describe the act of looting public fund, the one that reveals that the former president suggested a new way of defining corruption to the anti-corruption agencies may encourage widespread corruption. This is particularly because, as it nebulously paints the picture of corruption, it may create room for further abuse of political power in the name of mere stealing. Importantly, it was identified that not only do Nigerian elites use ambiguous words and outright lies in their corrupt practices, but they equally employ ambiguous and questionable actions to defend or reward corrupt practices. As findings indicated that light punishment, outright non-punishment, questionable pardons and offers of sensitive positions to convicted criminals characterised the Nigerian polity, these are capable of creating soft landings for corruption in Nigeria. Again, these developments may further engender the institutionalisation of corruption in the country. This study, therefore, recommends the formulation and implementation of stricter rules against corrupt practices. This may be achieved by removing state pardon as a prerogative right of the president. Again, an emphasis on leadership by good example should be prioritised. Most importantly, the study suggests that known, convicted or pardoned corrupt individuals should be banned from any political appointments or from vying for any elective positions in Nigeria (even after being pardoned). This is likely to discourage corruption by encouraging those who occupy leadership positions to urge caution during their tenures.

The results of this study also suggest that hence the political elites lack the willpower to fight corruption because some of them engage in corrupt acts, an urgent step should be taken to enact laws that will remove the immunities political actors presently enjoy while occupying political spaces. This is because such immunities make it difficult to prosecute corrupt leaders even if sufficient evidence

shows that they are corrupt. As diverse corrupt practices are evolving in the country, the mandate of the anti-corruption bodies should be expanded to accommodate these deviant acts. All forms of abuse of entrusted power that are not currently part of the “Acts” establishing the anti-corruption agencies should be included in their mandate. Their activities should also be open to public scrutiny and independent monitoring, especially by non-governmental bodies. This may ensure that they carry out their functions more effectively. Indeed, as it was revealed that the lack of judicial independence facilitates the manipulation of judicial processes, urgent steps should also be taken to make this arm of the government independent. This will ensure that justices are not hampered.

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