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Constructing the Immigrant Other: A Pragmatic Analysis of Political Rhetoric in Multicultural Democracies

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Abstract

In multicultural democracies like Nigeria, Libya, and South Africa, political rhetoric has become a strategic tool for shaping public attitudes toward immigration. This study examines how political actors pragmatically construct the immigrant "Other" in speeches that respond to changing national concerns and sociopolitical tensions. Using Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993) and Pragmatic Argumentation Theory (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004), the research analyses ten excerpts from each of three intentionally chosen political speeches—one from each country—to explore how language is used to frame immigrants as threats, burdens, or scapegoats. The analysis shows that speakers use diagnostic and prognostic frames that connect immigration with economic decline, insecurity, and cultural erosion. Through presuppositions, hedging, metaphors, implicatures, and modal expressions, political leaders craft persuasive narratives that justify restrictive policies and appeal to nationalist sentiments. These rhetorical choices reinforce binary oppositions like "us" versus "them," effectively legitimising exclusionary ideas and weakening democratic principles of inclusion. The study concludes that the pragmatic framing of immigrants in political discourse not only reflects existing power dynamics but also helps normalise xenophobia in African democracies. By revealing the strategic language practices in such rhetoric, this paper provides critical insight into the links between language, identity, and political power in postcolonial African contexts.

Keywords: Multiculturalism**,** political rhetoric, immigration, pragmatic framing, xenophobia

Introduction

Multiculturalism encompasses policy frameworks that actively promote the preservation of immigrants' cultural identities. These frameworks aim to alleviate the assimilationist pressures that often compel immigrant communities to forgo their cultural heritage. Notable examples of such policies include legal provisions for bilingual education, cultural dress exemptions, and recognition of dual citizenship, among others (Kymlicka, 1995, 2001; Modood, 2013). Vitikainen (2017) argues that multiculturalism has been used both as a descriptive and a normative term, as well as a term referring to particular types of state policies. As a descriptive term, multiculturalism

refers to the state of affairs present in contemporary societies: that of cultural diversity. However, affluent democracies substantially differ in their implementation of multiculturalist policies. Unsurprisingly, scholars suggest that multiculturalism is a key driver of domestic perceptions of immigration (Banting et al., 2006; Citrin et al., 2014; Sumino, 2014).

As a normative term, multiculturalism affirms cultural diversity as an acceptable state of affairs and provides normative grounds for accommodating this diversity. As a policy-oriented term, multiculturalism refers to a variety of state policies that aim to accommodate people's cultural differences—most notably, different types of culturally differentiated rights. Multiculturalism, as both a demographic reality and political ideology, has become a defining feature of African nation-states since independence. Many African societies are composed of diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups living within arbitrarily drawn colonial borders (Mazrui, 2000). However, the duality of migrants' existence is manifested in the fact that they become fully fledged subjects of the law of the host country, but live, for the most part, in the closed conditions of national "reservations" as a kind of "parallel" community, or "mini-state" (Council of Europe, 1990).

Additionally, intra-continental migration has expanded the multicultural fabric of African states, driven by economic aspirations, conflicts, and environmental pressures. For instance, countries like South Africa, Nigeria, and Libya have become hubs for immigrants from neighbouring countries seeking refuge, employment, or education (Adepoju, 2010). Democracy in Africa, though varied in practice, upholds constitutional principles such as pluralism, freedom of movement, and protection of minorities. Yet, these ideals are often undermined by exclusionary nationalism and populist discourses that portray immigrants as threats to national cohesion. This tension between the ideals of democratic inclusion and the political rhetoric of exclusion creates a complex environment in which immigrant identities are contested and negotiated (Branch & Mampilly, 2015). In such settings, language becomes a key resource for constructing social realities and legitimising political ideologies.

Brief Overview of Past Studies in Global and African Contexts

There is a growing body of literature that examines how multicultural policies intersect with political integration outcomes (Bloemraad, 2006; Bloemraad & Wright, 2014; Wright & Bloemraad, 2012). Scholarly attention has also increasingly focused on how immigrants are discursively constructed through political and media rhetoric. However, debates on immigration and political rhetoric converge on the central claim that immigration discourses are rarely neutral, but are strategically framed to advance specific ideological and political agendas. The construction of immigrants as "others" often emerges through rhetorical practices that combine framing devices with pragmatic argumentation strategies to legitimise exclusion, securitisation, or assimilation.

Goffman (1974) conceptualises frames as "schemata of interpretation" that allow individuals to locate, perceive, and label events within a meaningful structure (21). Building on this, Entman (1993) explains that framing involves "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making

them more salient in a communicating text" to promote specific "problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and/or treatment recommendations"(52). In immigration debates, framing devices such as metaphors, contrasts, and categorical labels are instrumental in constructing immigrants as threats, victims, or assets (Lakoff, 2004; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008). For instance, the metaphor of immigrants as a "flood" or "wave" frames immigration as an uncontrollable natural disaster, legitimising restrictive border policies (Charteris-Black, 2006).

Furthermore, studies in multicultural democracies show that political elites frequently exploit framing to polarise public opinion. Van Dijk (1998) demonstrates that elites employ "ideological square" strategies, emphasising the positive traits of the in-group while highlighting the negative attributes of out-groups. This discursive pattern creates an implicit hierarchy between citizens and immigrants. Similarly, Wodak (2015) argues that right-wing populist movements across Europe mobilise fear through securitisation frames, portraying immigration as an existential danger to cultural identity and national sovereignty. In the global North, research by Wodak (2015), van Dijk (2000), and Charteris-Black (2006) shows that politicians often employ metaphorical frames and discursive strategies to portray immigrants as invaders, criminals, or parasites. These constructions have real-world implications, influencing immigration policies and public sentiment.

In Africa, however, the scholarship is still emerging. Studies such as Nyamnjoh (2006) and Crush, Ramachandran and Pendleton (2013) examine xenophobic discourse in South Africa, linking it to post-apartheid anxieties over resources and identity. In Nigeria, Onuoha (2014) explores how political elites use anti-immigrant narratives to deflect from insecurity and economic mismanagement, while in Libya, Bøås and Hatløy (2008) trace the discursive shift from pan-African solidarity under Gaddafi to securitised narratives in the post-Gaddafi era. Despite these efforts, there remains a significant gap in pragmatics-oriented analyses that examine how language performs exclusion and why certain discursive forms persist in African political rhetoric.

Language, Immigration, and Political Meaning-Making

In many African democracies, political discourse has increasingly functioned as a powerful mechanism for shaping public perceptions of immigrants. Political leaders and influential public figures frequently deploy rhetorical strategies that represent immigrants as economic burdens, security threats, or cultural outsiders. Such representations are not accidental or neutral; rather, they constitute deliberate acts of discursive framing aimed at advancing specific political agendas. Through language, immigration becomes a symbolic site where anxieties about unemployment, insecurity, and national identity are redirected toward a constructed "Other," thereby mobilising nationalist sentiments, deflecting attention from governance failures, and legitimising restrictive migration policies.

Language plays a central role in this process by selecting and foregrounding particular interpretations of social reality. Entman (1993) argues that "framing involves highlighting certain aspects of perceived reality while marginalising others in ways that promote specific problem

definitions, causal explanations, moral judgments, and policy responses" (p. 52). Within political rhetoric on immigration, pragmatic resources such as metaphor, presupposition, deixis, implicature, and modality are routinely employed to reinforce binary oppositions between “us” and “them.” These linguistic choices normalise exclusionary narratives and often present xenophobic positions as acts of patriotism or national protection.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to political linguistics and critical migration scholarship within African contexts. While much existing research on immigration discourse focuses on Europe and North America, comparatively little attention has been paid to how similar discursive strategies operate in African democracies marked by postcolonial histories, fragile institutions, and complex migration patterns. By examining political speeches from Nigeria, South Africa, and Libya, this study offers a comparative perspective on how immigration is pragmatically framed across different sociopolitical environments on the continent.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of language in shaping political realities in multicultural societies where populist rhetoric can easily exploit ethnic and national divisions. At a time when anti-immigrant sentiments are intensifying globally, this research provides an important African perspective, demonstrating how global discourses of exclusion are locally reproduced, adapted, and legitimised through political language. By exposing the pragmatic mechanisms through which immigrants are constructed as threats or scapegoats, the study underscores the broader implications of political rhetoric for democratic inclusion, social cohesion, and power relations in contemporary African societies.

Research Framework and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-pragmatic research design to examine how political actors strategically employ language to construct immigrant identities in multicultural African democracies. Through the lens of Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) and Pragmatic Argumentation Theory (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004), the study interrogates rhetorical and argumentative strategies in selected political speeches from Nigeria, Libya, and South Africa.

Data Sources and Sampling

From each country, ten excerpts from three full-length political speeches were purposively selected, based on their thematic relevance, socio-political impact, and linguistic richness. The selected speeches include:

Nigeria: President Buhari’s UNGA Speech, 25 September 2018
South Africa: President Zuma’s SONA Speech, 12 February 2015
Libya: President Muammar Gaddafi’s AU Summit Speech, Tripoli, November 2010

These speeches were chosen due to their explicit framing of immigrants and the public attention they generated.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in two stages:

Stage 1: Framing Analysis (Based on Entman, 1993)

Each speech was analysed using Entman's four-part model:

1. Problem definition – How are immigrants and immigration presented as a problem?
2. Causal interpretation – Who or what is blamed for the issue?
3. Moral evaluation – What values are promoted or degraded?
4. Treatment recommendation – What solutions or policy actions are proposed?

This helped to identify the dominant ideological and emotional frames (for example, immigrants as threats, burdens, or deviants).

Stage 2: Pragmatic Argumentation Analysis (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004)

Each frame was examined for pragmatic markers and argumentative strategies such as:

Metaphors (for example, immigrants as "floods" or "invaders")

Implicatures (indirect meanings)

Presuppositions (unstated assumptions about immigrants)

Hedging (softening controversial claims)

Modality (use of must, should, may to suggest obligation or caution)

Topoi (commonplaces or argumentative warrants such as "security", "economic strain", "national interest")

Together, these strategies reveal how persuasive political rhetoric constructs and legitimizes exclusionary or discriminatory policies.

Ethical Considerations

All speeches are publicly accessible and are part of the official public record. The study ensures objective, critical analysis without misrepresentation of the speakers' intent. Excerpts and quotations from the speeches are properly cited and contextualized.

Critical Analysis

Framing and Pragmatic Construction of the Immigrant "Other" in Buhari's Discourse

Buhari's address reflects a multifaceted discursive strategy that frames migration as a derivative of global disorder while simultaneously moralising the need for regulation and control. In line with Entman's (1993) model, the president's rhetoric enacts the four primary frame functions—problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation—to construct migrants as both products of crisis and objects of governance. Each frame operates through strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004), balancing reasonableness with persuasive intent to reconcile humanitarian ethos with state interest.

The excerpts:

1. "A topical consequence of the current conflicts around the world is the irregular migration of affected people from the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Africa to Europe."
2. "Irregular migration is not a consequence of conflicts alone, but of the effects of climate change and lack of opportunities at home."

3. “The terrorist insurgencies we face in Nigeria and the Sahel are partly fuelled by the accumulation of resources, runaway fighters, and unregulated migration from the disintegration of Libya."
4. “Irregular migration puts strains on services in host countries and communities, and fuels anti-immigrant and racist sentiments in Europe.”
5. “We in Africa are grateful to countries who treat migrants with compassion and humanity – notably Germany, Italy and France.”
6. “Stemming irregular migration by addressing its root causes can only be effectively achieved through multilateral cooperation.”
7. “Migration is a constant in human affairs, but irregular migration must be discouraged and regulated.”
8. “The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is a step in the right direction.”
9. “We must collectively work to make governance and security better so that our young people will not need to risk their lives in search of greener pastures abroad.”
10. “We call upon all nations to treat migrants with respect and dignity, in line with our shared humanity.”

The opening frame in Excerpt 1— “A topical consequence of the current conflicts around the world is the irregular migration of affected people…”—situates migration within a global chain of causality, where conflict serves as the principal explanatory variable. Such causal framing deflects culpability from destination states and, instead, externalises it to “conflict zones.” Entman (1993) observes that causal frames typically “define agents responsible for causing and fixing problems” (52). Buhari’s linguistic choice of “consequence” implicitly transforms migrants into symptoms of geopolitical disorder rather than autonomous actors. As Goffman (1974) would argue, this “keying” of migration as fallout from war functions as an interpretive schema that guides audience perception toward empathy mixed with apprehension.

In Excerpt 2, Buhari extends the causal nexus to include “the effects of climate change and lack of opportunities at home.” The discursive move toward multi-causality reframes migration as an outcome of structural inequity—ecological, economic, and social. Yet, pragmatically, this expansion works as a strategic manoeuvre that legitimises multilateral responsibility while depersonalising migrants themselves. The president’s choice of nominalisations—“effects,” “lack”—conceals agency, a rhetorical feature that Fairclough (1995) identifies as central to ideological obfuscation in political discourse. The migrants are linguistically positioned as objects “acted upon,” not subjects acting, reinforcing the logic of intervention rather than empowerment.

The speech shifts dramatically in Excerpt 3, where Buhari claims that “terrorist insurgencies…are partly fuelled by…unregulated migration.” This action triggers what Huysmans (2006) calls the security frame, where migration discourse moves from humanitarian concerns to framing migration as a threat. By connecting “runaway fighters” and “unregulated migration,” Buhari uses argumentum ad consequentiam (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004)—a pragmatic technique that

appeals to negative outcomes to support restrictive policies. The link between mobility and terrorism portrays the immigrant "Other" as a hidden threat, thus justifying surveillance and control as logical policy responses. As Wodak (2015) states, such securitized language "normalises exclusion through the grammar of protection" (2); thereby framing deterrence as a moral obligation. The burden frame becomes pronounced in Excerpt 4: "Irregular migration puts strains on services… and fuels anti-immigrant and racist sentiments." Here, migrants are indirectly blamed for the social consequences of their displacement. The metonymic use of "strains" signals overcapacity and dysfunction, echoing what Charteris-Black (2005) identifies as the metaphor of burden—a recurring trope in political legitimation. Pragmatically, Buhari's argument follows a cause–and–effect scheme, asserting that migration produces social instability, and hence control is both practical and moral. The rhetorical balance of compassion and caution is maintained through mitigated modality ("fuels," rather than "causes"), demonstrating what Goffman (1974) would describe as frame alignment, designed to retain international legitimacy while satisfying domestic anxiety.

Buhari's subsequent appeals—such as gratitude to European countries showing "compassion and humanity" (Excerpt 5)—introduce a humanitarian frame that temporarily softens the securitised tone. However, the discourse remains asymmetrical: migrants are still depicted as recipients of benevolence. Such moral evaluation reinforces a paternalistic narrative in which African states express appreciation for Western "kindness," thereby reaffirming existing geopolitical hierarchies. In pragmatic terms, this exemplifies a value-based argumentation scheme, which van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) describe as appealing to "shared moral commitments" to bolster acceptability (p. 111).

Again, Adepoju (2008, p. 32) observes that "African migration flows are increasingly transnational in character, demanding regional and international responses rather than isolated national actions." This aligns with Buhari's assertion in Excerpt 6 that "stemming irregular migration…can only be achieved through multilateral cooperation," both invoking a solution frame that privileges collective responsibility over unilateral control. The hydrological metaphor— "stemming flows"—conceptualises migration as a natural yet threatening current, a pattern Lakoff and Johnson (1980) associate with the container metaphor of social order. Pragmatically, this reflects means–end reasoning: if cooperation is achieved, control follows. Moreover, the discourse of addressing "root causes" depoliticises migration, reframing it as a technical or managerial problem rather than a symptom of deeper social and political inequalities.

Finally, in Excerpts 9–10, Buhari re-centers moral obligation: "so that our young people will not need to risk their lives" and "treat migrants with respect and dignity." These statements close the rhetorical circle by merging responsibility and humanitarian frames, presenting Nigeria as both moral actor and global partner. Yet the presupposition remains that migrants lack agency—their lives depend on elite policy decisions. As van Dijk (1998) notes, such paternalistic framing "reproduces symbolic dominance through apparent empathy" (p. 68). The immigrant "Other" is

ultimately constructed as a dual figure—victim and burden—whose existence legitimises state regulation and moral posturing.

In sum, Buhari's discourse exemplifies how framing and pragmatic argumentation intertwine to reproduce ambivalence in African political rhetoric. Through alternating frames of empathy and control, he constructs a narrative that both humanizes and disciplines migrants, sustaining what Entman (1993) calls "frame resonance"—a moral logic that appears reasonable yet ideologically selective. This ambivalence is characteristic of multicultural democracies negotiating between humanitarian obligation and national security. The immigrant "Other," therefore, becomes a discursive instrument through which the state enacts its own moral authority and asserts policy legitimacy.

Framing and Pragmatic Construction of the Immigrant "Other" in Zuma's 2015 State of the Nation Address

Zuma's 2015 SONA was delivered amid heightened xenophobic tensions, service delivery crises, and economic hardship. Immigration was implicitly framed within issues of unemployment, crime, and social strain — often linking non-nationals to socio-economic instability.

The excerpts:

1. "Our country continues to experience the challenge of illegal migration, which places additional pressure on social services, housing, and job opportunities for our citizens."
2. "We must tighten border management to curb cross-border crimes and the inflow of undocumented persons who exploit loopholes in our immigration system."
3. "Communities have raised concerns that foreign nationals operate businesses in areas that should be reserved for South Africans."
4. "Government will intensify collaboration with neighbouring countries to address illegal migration and ensure that those who enter South Africa do so lawfully."
5. "We cannot allow criminal elements, whether foreign or local, to destabilize our communities."
6. "South Africa is part of the African continent and we remain committed to promoting peace, development, and cooperation with our neighbours."
7. "Unemployment among our youth remains a serious concern. We are introducing new policies to prioritise South Africans in critical sectors of the economy."
8. "We urge all communities to work with the government to report illegal migrants and to help maintain law and order."
9. "Our towns and cities are under strain from rapid urbanisation and unregulated migration, which undermine planning and service delivery."
10. "We must continue to engage SADC countries to manage migration flows in a way that benefits all, without compromising our national interests."

Jacob Zuma's 2015 State of the Nation Address (SONA), delivered at a time of acute socio-economic strain and intensifying xenophobic tension, provides an illustrative case of how political

rhetoric in a multicultural democracy construct and legitimises the immigrant "Other." Drawing on Entman's (1993) model of framing and van Eemeren & Grootendorst's (2004) pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, his speech reveals a strategic interplay of diagnostic and prognostic frames that define migration as a social burden, a moral danger, and a policy challenge. Zuma's rhetorical manoeuvring simultaneously appeals to national unity and security while sustaining subtle exclusionary discourses that rationalise restrictive migration control.

Zuma begins by problematising immigration through the burden frame: "Our country continues to experience the challenge of illegal migration, which places additional pressure on social services, housing, and job opportunities for our citizens." The repeated collocation of "illegal" with "pressure" evokes what Entman (1993) calls problem definition — the linguistic process by which particular aspects of reality are accentuated to construct a causal narrative. In this frame, immigrants are presented as the source of economic scarcity and competition. Such framing, according to Wodak (2015), functions ideologically by "transforming complex structural issues into moral crises centred on the figure of the foreigner" (p. 67). Pragmatically, Zuma's causal claim forms part of an argument from consequence, where the negative outcomes of immigration are foregrounded to justify state intervention.

In Excerpts 2 and 4, the diagnostic frame transitions to a prognostic or solution frame, marked by deontic modality and prescriptive logic: "We must tighten border management to curb cross-border crimes…" and "Government will intensify collaboration with neighbouring countries…" The use of modal verbs such as "must" and "will" signals obligation rather than choice—a rhetorical strategy that Chilton (2004) identifies as characteristic of security discourse, where actions are legitimised as moral imperatives to ensure state survival. This resonates with Gitlin's (1980) view that frames function as "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation" (p. 6), highlighting certain elements of social reality while excluding others to shape public perception. These framing choices reinforce what Goffman (1974) would term "frame alignment"—the strategic coordination of official discourse with public sentiment, here reflected in the popular belief that non-nationals threaten employment and security. Pragmatically, Zuma's speech thus follows a problem–solution argument scheme, blending rational appeals with emotional resonance to legitimise state control.

Zuma's rhetorical strategy further invokes what van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004) describe as strategic manoeuvring, the delicate negotiation between persuasion and reasonableness. His implicit argument structure can be reconstructed as follows:

(1) South Africa faces unemployment and crime;
(2) Irregular migrants contribute to these problems;
(3) Therefore, tightening immigration controls is necessary.

Although superficially logical, this reasoning rests on unstated presuppositions that attribute causality to migrants rather than to broader structural conditions. As van Dijk (1998) notes, such rhetorical inference exemplifies the ideological square, which emphasises the virtues of the in-

group ("citizens") while highlighting the vices of the out-group ("foreigners") (p. 267). The implicature that foreigners "exploit loopholes" or "destabilise communities" (Excerpts 2 and 5) operates pragmatically to shift blame for systemic governance failures onto outsiders.

The topos of threat and the topos of burden (Reisigl & Wodak 2001) permeate Zuma's argumentation. Statements such as "Our towns and cities are under strain from rapid urbanisation and unregulated migration" activate the spatial crisis frame, where migrants are positioned as forces undermining social equilibrium. Through metaphorical language like "strain" and "pressure," the president naturalizes scarcity, a discursive tactic that van Leeuwen (2008) terms rationalisation through necessity: the idea that exclusionary policies are simply responses to natural limits. The pragmatic effect is the moral neutralisation of xenophobia — discrimination reframed as prudent management.

Nonetheless, Zuma intermittently performs rhetorical equilibrium, as seen in Excerpt 6: "South Africa is part of the African continent and we remain committed to promoting peace, development, and cooperation." This invocation of continental solidarity represents what Fairclough (1992) calls an ideological contradiction, in which discourses of inclusion coexist with exclusionary practices. The balancing act mitigates overt hostility while reaffirming sovereignty. Such "face-saving" (Brown & Levinson 1987) enables the president to appear pan-Africanist without abandoning national protectionism. His conclusion, emphasizing the need to "manage migration flows… without compromising our national interests" (Excerpt 10), perfectly encapsulates this ambivalence: a diplomacy of inclusion constrained by the politics of fear.

Pragmatically, Zuma's argumentative style exemplifies what Wodak (2015) terms "bureaucratised xenophobia" — the transformation of ethnic suspicion into policy rationality. By embedding discriminatory topoi within the language of governance, his speech re-articulates xenophobic discourse as an administrative necessity. The immigrant "Other" emerges as a figure of disorder requiring regulation, a discursive construct that simultaneously unites citizens and displaces blame for socio-economic distress. As Entman (1993) observes, the potency of such framing lies in its selectivity — what is excluded from the narrative, such as the structural failures of post-apartheid capitalism, becomes invisible.

So, Zuma's 2015 SONA constructs migration as both an internal threat and an external test of sovereignty. Through framing and pragmatic argumentation, he naturalises exclusionary logics while maintaining a veneer of inclusivity. His discourse performs what Huysmans (2006) calls the politics of insecurity: a rhetorical process by which migration is recast as a moral, existential, and managerial crisis. This analysis demonstrates how political speech in multicultural democracies can embed xenophobic ideologies within the language of order, legality, and national interest — thereby legitimizing restrictive policy while disavowing prejudice.

Libya — Tripoli (Africa–EU Summit, Nov 2010): Framing the Immigrant Other

Data and methods caveat: The excerpts analyzed here are drawn from contemporaneous press and institutional reports of Gaddafi's statements at the Tripoli summit and related interviews (*Times of Malta*; *Reuters*; *The Telegraph*; *European Parliament* written records). No single, widely archived verbatim transcript is publicly available; thus, quoted lines are cited as reported in those sources. The analysis focuses on the discursive function of these utterances—how language constructs the immigrant Other—rather than treating each reported clause as a literal, unassailable transcription.

The excerpts:

1. "We should stop this illegal immigration. If we don't, Europe will become black; it will be overcome by people with different religions, it will change." — reported quote from Tripoli summit coverage.
2. "Stop the migration or Europe turns black."
3. "Thousands of people will invade Europe from Libya, and no one will be able to stop them."
4. "We will no longer be the coastguard for Europe unless paid."
5. "Europe runs the risk of turning black unless the EU pays Libya [€5bn]."
6. "We need support from the European Union to stop this army trying to get across from Libya."
7. "If there is no money, there will be no security, there will be no guards (on the borders)."
8. "We should stop this illegal immigration. If we don't, Europe will become black, it will be overcome by people with different religions, it will change."
9. "Libya intercepts thousands of sub-Saharan Africans each year… but says it is not fair that it has to shoulder the burden of defending the EU's borders."
10. "I told you it is eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth…" (threat framing in later 2011 rhetoric that echoes his 2010 posture about using migration/coercion as leverage).

Gaddafi's Tripoli remarks instantiate a rhetorically potent strategy that simultaneously securitizes migration and instrumentalizes migrants as diplomatic leverage. The repeated refrain—reported as "Stop the migration or Europe turns black" and variants thereof—performs a vivid problem definition: migration is cast as an existential civilizational menace (*Times of Malta 2010; Waterfield, 2010*). Under Entman's influential formulation, such a move selects and makes salient specific aspects of reality to promote a particular problem definition and treatment (Entman 1993). Here, the problem is not logistics or root causes; it is demographic and ontological: migration threatens Europe's identity.

From Goffman's perspective, these remarks instantiate a re-keying frame that transforms viewers' interpretive schema: what might otherwise be described as human mobility becomes an "invasion" or ontological transformation (Goffman 1974). The rhetorical potency of the key phrase— "Europe will become black"—relies on racialised hyperbole and apocalyptic projection. Lakoff and Johnson's observations about metaphor are instructive: metaphors do not merely decorate thought; they structure it, allowing speakers to render complex social processes as single, emotionally vivid

scenarios (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). The effect here is to compress varied migration phenomena into a single catastrophic image, thereby activating fear-based responses.

Pragmatically, the Tripoli discourse combines argument-from-consequence with argument-from-capacity. Gaddafi's purported lines— "Thousands of people will invade Europe … no-one will be able to stop them" paired with "we will no longer be the coastguard for Europe unless paid" (*European Parliament 2011; Reuters 2010*)—construct the following warrant: if migration will produce catastrophic consequences and Libya can prevent it, then Europe ought to remunerate Libya for that service. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst's pragma-dialectical model helps show how such a chain advances a standpoint (Europe should pay) via linked argument schemes while simultaneously engaging in strategic manoeuvring—escalating stakes to maximize persuasive leverage (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004). The moves are rhetorically effective yet analytically contestable: they depend on emotive amplification rather than empirically substantiated causal linkage.

The moral calculus of these statements prioritizes territorial preservation and identity protection over humanitarian duties. Viewing migration mainly as an existential threat justifies extreme, transactional solutions—paying for enforcement of migration routes—thus merging rights-based principles into commodified governance (Lavenex 2006; Collyer 2010). This instrumental use of human mobility aligns with what Lavenex describes when transit states regard migration control as a form of foreign policy currency (Lavenex 2006). Additionally, securitisation research shows that when an issue is rhetorically elevated to an existential threat, "extraordinary measures" become seen as acceptable (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde 1998). Gaddafi's rhetoric, therefore, serves both to define the problem and to legitimise exceptional policies.

Discursively, Gaddafi employs a small battery of pragmatic devices that intensify othering: militarised metaphors ("invade," "army"), collective nominalisations ("thousands," "illegal immigration"), and conditionality ("unless paid")—all of which compress human complexity into manageable policy objects. Reisigl and Wodak note that such linguistic strategies systematically facilitate exclusion by dehumanising and reifying social groups (Reisigl & Wodak 2001). In the Tripoli case, migrants are not only represented as a threat but are also re-cast as bargaining chips—an ethical inversion that erodes normative commitments to protection and due process.

Summarily, Gaddafi's Tripoli statements illustrate how speech acts can actively construct the immigrant Other as both threat and commodity. Applying Entman's frame functions alongside pragma-dialectical critique reveals a coordinated argumentative strategy: define crisis, attribute agency and capacity, moralize protection, and prescribe transactional treatment. The analytic implication for studies of political rhetoric in multicultural democracies is clear: when leaders securitize and commodify migration, they create discursive conditions ripe for normalizing exclusionary policies—thus contributing, through language, to the erosion of inclusive democratic norms.

However, a comparison of the three migration discourses across Muhammadu Buhari, Jacob Zuma, and Muammar Gaddafi highlights distinct rhetorical strategies shaped by national and regional contexts.

Buhari (2018), presented migration as a governance challenge, linking it to "the desperation of our youths" (Buhari, 2018, p. 3). His approach foregrounded national sovereignty, aligning with Akinyemi's (2013, p. 56) argument that Nigerian foreign policy is shaped by a "dual imperative of national interest and regional responsibility." Yet, as Mbembe (2001, p. 109) argues, African governance discourses remain haunted by colonial legacies that produce "zones of exclusion," a reality reflected in the leaders' speeches. And by emphasizing development over coercion, his discourse further reflects Castles, de Haas, and Miller's (2014, p. 45) position that migration stems from structural inequality. Nigerian scholars also stress that Buhari's rhetoric highlights reform and accountability (Falola, 2019).

In contrast, Gaddafi's (2010) discourse framed migration as a bargaining tool with Europe, warning that "Europe will be flooded with migrants" unless Africa was compensated, a strategy consistent with van Dijk's (1998, p. 43) point that political discourse often constructs migrants as threats. His coercive "gatekeeper" metaphor exemplifies what Wodak (2015) calls strategic manoeuvring in power negotiations.

Zuma (2015), however, adopted a dual stance, affirming African solidarity while warning that "illegal immigrants place an extra burden on the state" (Zuma, 2015: para. 6), a contradiction Neocosmos (2010) notes is central to South Africa's politics of citizenship. His discourse echoes Chilton's (2004) analysis of securitization, where migrants are simultaneously framed as "brothers" and "burdens". Taken together, the three leaders illustrate Adepoju's (2008, p. 45) view that African states employ migration discourse to assert authority and manage legitimacy.

Findings

Across the above contexts, the political leaders draw on diagnostic frames that attribute economic hardship, social insecurity, and cultural disruption to the presence of immigrants. Metaphors of invasion, burden, and contamination are employed to intensify perceived threats, while presuppositions present immigration as a problem beyond contestation.

Prognostic frames further justify restrictive immigration policies, often framed as essential measures to safeguard citizens' welfare and national stability. Pragmatic strategies such as implicatures and hedging enable politicians to suggest harmful associations without direct accountability, while modal verbs (e.g., must, should, cannot) create a sense of urgency and inevitability around exclusionary actions. These choices reinforce "us" versus "them" dichotomies that marginalize immigrants as outsiders and legitimize policies of exclusion.

A striking finding is the consistency of rhetorical techniques across different national contexts. Despite differences in political histories—economic volatility in Nigeria, post-revolutionary instability in Libya, and recurring xenophobic tensions in South Africa—the pragmatic strategies

employed reveal a shared pattern of othering, persuasion, and legitimization of exclusionary ideologies. Political rhetoric thus emerges as a central tool in the normalization of xenophobia within African democracies.

Recommendations

Political leaders must exercise greater discursive responsibility in framing immigration issues. Rather than instrumentalising migrants for populist appeal, political rhetoric should be guided by principles of truthfulness, inclusivity, and fairness, thereby reinforcing democratic values and intercultural understanding. Strengthening media literacy initiatives and establishing independent discourse-monitoring bodies can further help to identify, critique, and curb the normalisation of xenophobic or ethnocentric narratives in public communication.

Governments and political parties should also invest in training speechwriters, spokespersons, and media practitioners in inclusive pragmatic strategies that avoid the reproduction of dehumanizing or essentialist representations of migrants. Developing ethical communication guidelines and integrating inclusive framing principles into speechwriting manuals and public communication protocols can promote more responsible political discourse that reflects the multicultural realities of African societies.

At the policy and scholarly level, greater collaboration between linguistics, political science, and migration studies is needed to deepen understanding of how discourse shapes migratory realities. Special attention should be given to under-researched regions and marginalized migrant communities, whose experiences are often absent from dominant political narratives.

Finally, Pan-African dialogue on migration framing can be strengthened by integrating scholarly insights into policy-making processes, thereby advancing inclusive governance and regional solidarity. Given the increasing scale of intra-African migration, African Union–led dialogues should address not only migration policy but also rhetorical practices. Framing immigrants in terms of shared African heritage, social contribution, and human dignity can foster cross-border solidarity and help reduce localized expressions of xenophobia.

Limitations of the Study

This study focuses primarily on selected high-level political speeches as sites for examining the pragmatic construction of immigrants in multicultural African democracies. While this approach allows for close analysis of elite rhetorical strategies, it does not fully capture the broader discursive environment in which migration narratives circulate. Media framing, social media discourse, and public responses also play significant roles in shaping societal perceptions of immigrants. In addition, the study examines the intended rhetorical effects of political speech rather than audience reception. These limitations do not undermine the findings but instead point to important areas for further research that can complement and extend the present analysis.

Conclusion

This study has shown that political rhetoric in multicultural democracies such as Nigeria, Libya, and South Africa is deeply implicated in the pragmatic construction of the immigrant "Other." By deploying diagnostic and prognostic frames, political leaders discursively link immigration to insecurity, economic decline, and cultural erosion, while rhetorical devices such as presuppositions, implicatures, and modal expressions normalise exclusionary ideologies. The consistency of these strategies across diverse contexts underscores the centrality of language in legitimizing xenophobia and shaping migration policy in Africa.

In light of the above findings, it is imperative to cultivate more ethical and inclusive political communication that resists the instrumentalization of immigrants as scapegoats. Promoting media literacy, fostering Pan-African dialogue, and investing in inclusive pragmatic strategies can help counteract harmful narratives. Ultimately, by recognizing the power of language in framing identities and legitimising policies, African democracies can safeguard their multicultural fabric while strengthening democratic values of fairness, dignity, and solidarity.

Directions for Future Research

Future research can extend the insights of this study through more explicit methodological approaches. Longitudinal studies examining political rhetoric across multiple electoral cycles or periods of intensified migration would help trace how xenophobic framing evolves over time in response to changing socio-political and economic conditions. Ethnographic and community-based research could further explore how political discourses about immigration are interpreted, negotiated, or resisted by local populations and migrant communities themselves. Integrating audience reception, media framing, and social media discourse into pragmatic analyses would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how xenophobic narratives are reinforced or challenged in African societies.

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