

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**

This study examines the generic classification of correspondences, which the leadership of Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), 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. The study identifies and discusses the social and academic conventions and common features that characterize formal and semi-formal forms of written communication or correspondence, with particular reference to the Academic Staff Union of Universities, Ekpoma Chapter, to include: address, date, salutation, the text, the complimentary close and the writer's name. The study attempts eclectic approach to analyse the features of ASUU's correspondences. The theory that guides the study is anchored on generic analysis of correspondences which distinguishes between private and public genres; to the effect that private genre is limited to interactions between specific individuals, while public genres are institutional, because it lacks the intimacy which is a major feature of personal interaction. Therefore, the paper explores ASUUE's communicative discourse, through the analysis of its correspondences. Findings showed that formal correspondences in AAUE's correspondences provided members of the union stakeholders with the required information aimed at resolving the conflict, by focusing on the prominent sentence forms of discourse in the correspondences such as declarative, imperative and interrogative.

**Keywords:** Generic Classification, Formal Correspondence, Semi Formal Correspondence, ASUU-AAUE, Strike Action

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**Introduction**

Organizations, institutions, Companies and Internet users produce a large amount of correspondences every day. This paper aims at selecting the correspondences the Academic Staff Union of Universities (hereafter, ASUU) utilizes in the performance of its task to reach out and sensitize members of the Union on issues affecting them. The Academic Staff Union of Universities, an affiliate of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) was formed in 1978 to succeed the Nigerian Association of University Teachers (henceforth 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. 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 in specific public universities became poorer. These conditions necessitated ASUU's formation, which marked the beginning of decline in the oil boom, when the country was faced with 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. ASUU's 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 has resulted in devastating effects on academic activities and this failure has caused perennial strike actions and academic activities are often disrupted or totally shutdown for unpredictable periods of time across campuses of Nigeria Universities. Ambrose Alli University Ekpoma is not an exception, because of poor funding and eroded autonomy by successive state governments in Edo State. At a meeting of ASUU Idris asserts that:

*The cumulative opinions of ASUU veterans simply depict that, ASUU struggle especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 adaptation to tactical and innovative scepticism and escapism, the challenge would be crossed over. (n.p.)*

To that end, ASUU has provided interesting powerful opportunities for university system in campaigning, activism and protests which include civil and advocacy actions. In Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State, staff had been owed several months of salaries and allowances by Management, with reckless abandon. The leadership of Academic Staff Union of Universities, Ekpoma Chapter then declared a trade dispute, calling on its members to proceed on indefinite and total strike action to press home members' demand for better welfare in the institution. The use written communication (correspondences) to direct members' actions was aimed at resolving the impasse between Management and the local chapter of the Union.

Therefore, this study investigates the effectiveness of language use, as a tool during the strike action in 2021, to press home members' demand for better conditions of service. The study identifies and discusses the social and academic conventions and common features that characterize formal and semi-formal forms of written communication or correspondence. The study shows that the Monday Igbafen's ASUU-led leadership is an advocate for better working conditions in AAU- Ekpoma, through the mechanism of language features in the correspondences issued, to manage the 2021 struggle, which was declared 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.

### Review of Related Literature

The paper focuses on the generic classification of ASUU'S correspondences to its members, which account for the careful use of language strategy, in order to demonstrate the union's capacity in communicating the import of its messages to the readers. Generic classification of correspondences is anchored on the field of discourse, the understanding of which presupposes vast amount of general knowledge of the world. This means that theories and methods to be applied must be essentially communicable, learnable and applicable. This informs why the idea of rhetoric in ASUU'S correspondences, suggestive of creative use of language whose concept remains basically to encourage and persuade. The rhetorical perspective of ASUU'S correspondences is described as political oratory that has been directed toward the future about public affairs. (Aristotle in Herrick, 1997). Herrick also notes that rhetoric "always advises about things to come, that political oratory and debate fall under this category and that deliberative is especially concerned with the possible and impossible..., and so necessity becomes its special plea". On his part, Garver (1994) observed that rhetoric has the characteristic method of reasoning from examples and so a concern with consequences and success dominates an utterance either spoken or written. Huntington (1963) asserts that a good persuasive argument is a carefully timed performer unlike a work of exposition which allows and often invites the reader to pause and study some part of it at his leisure. Such argument gives the illusion of a controlled, generally increasing momentum. This implies that in persuasive utterances as suggested in ASUU'S correspondences, the purpose of the speakers' speech is not so much as to

induce or enable us to remember the parts of his argument, but to inspire us. The discourse primary appease are concerned with what we should choose or what we should avoid.

### Theoretical Framework

Current studies in register analysis have shown that the traditional concept of genre is capable of adopting more than one theory. This study however anchored on Bex's theory of generic classification which explicates the text, 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). 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 includes 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 functions to achieve a particular goal. All these constitute a genre. Accordingly, a genre is "an aggregation of communicative events that fulfill 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 inform of semi-formal, with emphasis on the generic features of ASUU's correspondences to exemplify a subgenre of letters used to communicate with members during the 2021 strike action in .....

#### **Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

There ports 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.

#### **Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion**

The available data for analysis mainly represent those that illustrate the cognitive actions taken against AAU's management and the state government for the lack of

proper funding to the institution. Therefore, the generic features (language) of ASUU's correspondences are used as a tool to fight against staff unpaid salaries and entitlements for several months as follow:

#### **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 of the study, which the union utilised 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 style of saluting members and stake holders at all form of gathering in order to endear itself to members and carry them a long 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 body represents and the phrase was repeatedly used to arouse the spirit of cooperation and understanding in accordance with 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 emphasise 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 and zeal to convey a sense of active participation in activism during the struggle.

### **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 its members in 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 (2024) opines that ASUU should employ “aggression, enduring resistance, turbulent social campaign and intellectual engagements” in prosecuting its struggle against injustices to its members (ASUU. “History and Struggles of ASUU”). Accordingly, AAU-ASUU’s leadership deployed certain language resources, replete with forceful skills in its struggle as shown 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 common wealth... Remember that the strike is total, comprehensive and indefinite. The Branch will take any legitimate steps to enforce compliance.. Congress resolved to resist through legitimate means any attempt to undermine the on-going 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 utilised 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 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.*’ (extract 2), portrayed ASUU’s leadership 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 criticised 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 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 underfunding 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 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 90<sup>th</sup> 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 cognisant of this development 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 on-going 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 victimisation thereby 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 emphasised the uncompromising position of the union leadership. The capitalisation of some letters in the extract, is a graphological device, employed in emphasises to the 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 management 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 today running of the institution. Consequently, ASUU leadership 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 emphasised 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 significance placed on collectiveness among members by the union, the ASUU leadership repeatedly employs **'we'** and **'our'** to remind members in sustaining 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, the ASUU leadership *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 on-going 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 appreciation for its members **‘to remain resolute as the struggle rages’/‘commends our members, who resisted the pressure and subtle threat’**, this implies ASUU’s leadership acknowledgement and sympathy for its members’ pains and suffering as a result of the unfortunate attitude of the state government that led to strike action. It also conveyed appeals to members, who have faith in their common course to demonstrate steadfastness and solidarity as the struggle lasted.

Finally, the 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 as set of lyrical compositions characteristic of labour movements rendered to motivate its 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 endurance, solidarity, strength, unity and steadfastness that binds members together for the survival of the union and goal attainment.

#### Conclusion

This study, from the perspective of sociolinguistic approach to the interpretation of communicative event of the writer’s meaning, it was revealed that the employment of persuasive grammatical structures, through correspondences as instrument, AAUE- ASUU’s leadership was empowered to reach out to its members effectively, during the 2021 strike action. The strategy successfully communicated messages to members and stakeholders.

Also, the correspondences served as the linguistic means through ASUUE Leadership conveyed member’s reactions to the management for amicable resolution. The language employed enabled ASUUE leadership to manage the struggle to a successful end, and for members to conduct themselves in a civil manner to confront and redress injustice workers faced in the institution, especially the academic staff.

Finally, the study showed that the success of a Union’s 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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