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**Panhandlers as Rhetors:
Discourse practices of peripatetic beggars in southwestern Nigeria**

Abstract. This paper is a study of language in a distress situation. A beggar's discourse is an amalgam of several implicit but perceptible discourse practices resulting from the beggar's need to preclude defective il/locutions and negotiate a favourable preparatory condition. It indicates further that there is defense for beggar's utterances and that, beyond the fundamental act of demanding charity, Nigerian beggars, driven by the exegeses of their wider society, insinuate such discourse conventions as vindication, justification, and argument that serve in putting audiences in an amenable mental frame and activate them to give.

Introduction

Beggars form a group whose utterances target the emotions of prospective benefactors and which are capable of changing their sense of reasoning. Apparently panhandlers deploy language, endowed with copious resources for expressing psychological states and social circumstances (Collinge 1990:876), which become images of thought, a measure or a prediction of mental states, and present and past experiences, a "means by which we control, create and preserve" (Pratt and Traugott, 1980:1) to evince and evoke feelings. Constrained by the need to subsist in their diverse distressed situations and the necessity to induce their benefactors, most of whom might not be insufficiently better off than they are, or who may not be large-minded enough, to

give liberally, beggars choose their language in such a distinctive way that makes it susceptible for linguistic research. Unfortunately, work in this area, particularly in the field of linguistics, are rare, both in and outside Nigeria, hence the motivation for the present study.

Categories of beggars and attitude to panhandling in Nigeria

Beggars in Nigeria can be categorized of as: the ‘fine’, the ‘sit-at-place’, the ‘*babiyala*’, and the ‘ceremonial’ beggars. The fine beggars are psychological beggars: they use language to deceive, tell important and unimportant lies, hush up under the garb of religion, flaunt affectations, and when the situation permits, take to petty stealing. In this category are found school drops-out, unemployed youths, people who have failed in their careers, and disarmed bandits. They dress normally and this makes them fit in, even in social gatherings. One characteristic of this group is that they change places very often; as soon as they are known a such in a particular place, they fail in their market must change their location.

The ‘sit- at- place’ beggars are ‘complacent’ beggars. They select specific places especially restaurants, holy places, and points where goods commonly reserved for the affluent, e.g. apples, juice drinks, etc., are sold, expecting benefactors to come and give to them at will. They allow their condition to speak for itself, using fewer or no words at all. In this category are the old and the critically handicapped. Beggars who sit at holy places are often patronized by individuals who judge it *de rigueur* to fulfill their religious obligations through alms giving. To this category of people, beggars are associated with spirituality. Other beggars who sit at purchase points sometimes compel impulse benefaction as most people, after purchasing certain expensive commodities, may not mind letting go or may be ashamed of not letting go of loose change collected during their purchases. The *Babiyala* beggars are entertainers: They wander streets, sing-begging. They are typically Hausa from the Northern part of the country-Nigeria,

where the attitude to begging, as will be pointed out later in this paper, is that of manifest**.

Because beggars in this group use entertainment, in the form of singing and dancing, they seem to receive more favours from than others.

Ceremonial beggars are seen at ceremonies; they have a very active nose for news about ceremonies. They are particularly different from other groups in that they render small services to their clients such as fanning them with locally made hand fans, mopping their faces with handkerchiefs or the tail of their wrapper, and decorating them with stickers. Some of them chant un-coordinated ululations. In this group are the aged and a few young persons who take up begging as a pastime.

All of these categories of beggars are ubiquitous in Nigeria, and their activities are wide-ranging. However, this study focuses attention on the peripatetic group who conducts its panhandling business with language. It seeks to reveal how beggars in this group use language in presenting their position to the world in achieving their intentional act(s).

Contextual background of the study

Begging is an age old (Fariside, 2008) and universal (Selby, 2008; Kamat, 2008) phenomenon, but several attitudes respond to the trend in Nigeria, which can be described in three ways, latent, manifest and indifferent. Culture and religion are obvious indices or determinants of these attitudes, along with other determinants such as an individual's personality, home background (begging is a household profession in some communities), and the economic situation in Nigeria.

Generally speaking, beggars of all sorts are resented in Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba, where one of the people's daily prayers is that God should 'not make begging their means of livelihood'. To them, begging is as mortifying as stealing. So in that society, when a person begs for whatever reason, it is believed he does not have a sense of shame. Because of

their communal style of living, anybody with any serious handicap which ordinarily should warrant begging is considered to be the responsibility of his immediate family. So, when a man is found on the street begging, such is considered to have lost everything, including his family. Reflecting this attitude are the following reactions by three Nigerians to an online debate “Is Begging now a profession?” (<http://www.nairaland.com/nigeria/topic-96856.0.html>)

a. Well, it is bad that our cities are full of beggars. Naija own too much.

I think the only way to discourage them is to stop giving them alms.

b. I will never give any beggars money in Nigeria since I learnt that some use your money to do Juju and other are basically greedy.

c. Well, I am sorry but I have little or no sympathy for beggars, I don't give them money either. If it's their job, so be it but their salary aint coming from me.

In this situation, it is clear that anyone who would survive on begging will have to develop special language ability, and adopt a convincing persuasive style, to arouse the sympathies of a generally unwilling audience. Even the Caucasian coloured people from Chad and Niger Republic, whose strategy of begging is to ‘cling’ to targeted donors until they are intimidated into giving alms, have learnt to verbalize their acts. This is because people who were once fascinated by the initial non-verbal action now regard it to be intimidating and walk away on the errand children used for the act.

This is the converse of what obtains in the northern part of the country, particularly amongst the Hausa, where the tradition of *Alimanjiri* flourishes. *Almajiric* “is a word which originated from the Arabic word –Al-MUHAJIR, which generally means one who migrated either for learning or to uphold the Islamic knowledge” (Ibrahim in THISDAY) This part of the country pays host to a greater number of beggars than are found in the other parts of the country, taken

together. Another reason for the large number of beggars in this region is that it is a savannah region where residents are subject to the desert wind, which is believed to carry dust capable of making people go blind. It is not only culturally permissible to beg in this part of the world, it is also a part of the injunctions of Islam, the dominant religion in the region, that alms should be given to the poor. In the light of the aforementioned facts, when beggars from this part of the country first go elsewhere to beg, they go about it with a light heart, believing that the people will 'cooperate'. They may need to change style later, though, depending on the situation on the ground.

Elsewhere in the country, especially among the Igbo people in the Eastern region, no one seems to care about what others do for sustenance as long as it is not stealing. Generally speaking however, the peoples of this region are generally known for hard work, particularly in farming, trading, weaving, metalwork and woodcarving. This explains why they are hardly found in the panhandling business. The common form of begging in this region is 'high sense' begging, involving telling important or unimportant lies to obtain people's help. This form of begging has now developed to a high level fraudulent practice called 419 in Nigeria, a term that has now become a global register in the world of crime.

In addition to all of the circumstances discussed above, one general question which is crucial to the success of begging in Nigeria is this: Is the beggar qualified to beg, i.e., is the beggar real or fraudulent)? The implication of this question is that begging, probably because of the general downturn in the country's economy, is no longer a "passive activity". Even people whose attitude to panhandling is manifest demand answers to this question. Beggars, no doubt, have some of these facts about their people and these facts consequently constrain their strategies. The varied attitudes described above account for the choice of our research area in this study.

Beggars from the chosen region, we assume, will inevitably need to design their appeal in a more heart-rending manner, furnish their prospective benefactors with facts about their circumstances and package their utterances in a way to give them relevant affective power.

Aim, method, and theoretical base of the study

The study aims at exploring the discourse practices in some beggars' entreaties and appeals in South-western Nigeria. The specific objectives are to: discuss the manipulative potentials of the sampled beggars' entreaties and to explain their possible effects on benefactors and describe how they can lead to the achievement of the beggars' ends. In other words, our tasks are to make reasonable interpretation of what some beggars intend to communicate in their seemingly "jumbled and incoherent" (Yule, 1985) utterances, and to explain these communicative intensions vis-à-vis certain mutual socio- contextual understandings among beggars and their targets. In pursuance of these objectives, some beggars in Ile-Ife, Ibadan, and Lagos were closely observed in their usual 'markets' — motor parks and other public places, like churches, mosques, and other social gatherings. Their utterances were documented for close linguistic scrutiny. Since these utterances needed be correlated with their physical condition and other elements of social context, they were adequately considered when documenting the data. For the purpose of achieving a comprehensive interpretation, I draw upon Critical Discourse Analysis, which has resources for describing a wide range of phenomena present in the discourse under study.

I have already indicated that panhandlers in the chosen area of study contend with certain social forces and interests in their discourse practices. The situation of begging is that of power struggle or negotiation: at one end of the struggle are the individuals with economic power; at the other end, are those who rely on the power of their words. It would be expected that the latter

play politics with their utterances so as to reflect the actual social interest of the former and which are beneficial to their ‘profession’. Critical Discourse Analysis, borrowing the words of Luke (1997, cited in McGregor, 2004), is necessary for describing, analyzing and critiquing such social interest. It can also be inferred from the contextual information I provided earlier on panhandling in Nigeria that beggars are aware of the negative perceptions of their trade and realize that they need to counter those forces with their words. In doing this, they will need to recreate this social system (reflecting its ideologies, beliefs and practices) and appropriate it by constructing a new form of social reality that is advantageous to their economic activity.

One of the objectives of Critical Discourse Analysis is “to uncover the ideological assumptions that are hidden in the words of our written texts or oral speech in order to resist and overcome various forms of power over or to gain an appreciation that we are exercising “power over” unbeknownst to us (Fairclough, 1989). Corroborating this, Van Dijk, (1988) declares that CDA is concerned with studying and analyzing written texts and spoken words to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific social, economic, political, and historical contexts. Finally, beggars’ discourse is essentially manipulative and, as indicated by Van Dijk “manipulation is one of the crucial notions of Critical Discourse Analysis” (2006).

In view of the assumptions above, I will conduct my analysis within Fairclough’s (2000) three tenets of CDA: social structure, culture and discourse. In these tenets, there is a systematic link between language or text, the discursive practices (the process involved in creating the language and the larger social system which constrain language production and reception. However beggars’ utterances are not only ideologically critical; they also contain such pragmatic resources as expression of beliefs, values, intention, etc. In view of this, (and in line with the

view of Larazabal and Kepa Korta (2006) that “the analysis of beliefs, desires and, particularly intentions is the centre of pragmatic studies”, I will also turn to “the pragmatic toolbox” (Wodak, 2008) in my descriptive account drawing analytical resources precisely from Back and Harnish’s (1979) Unified Theory of Speech Act, which specifies, among other things, that context-utterance correlation is necessary in the pragmatic enquiry of discourses.

The two approaches are, in no way, disparate; they are fruitfully interconnected (See Wodak, 2008). In uniting these approaches, I am guided by Huckin (1997, cited in McGregor, 2004), who recommends that one first approach a text in an uncritical manner, like an ordinary, undiscerning reader, and then come at it again in a critical manner. In line with this view, my analysis will focus on the identification of the actions in the beggars’ utterances. I will then relate these actions to the social and ideological forces that constrain the utterances. In describing the actions, I will draw upon Back and Harnish’s (1979) Theory of Speech Act because this model of speech act theory unites, simplifies, and improves upon classical speech act theories. The theory moves off from Austin- Searle’s view of speech acts as being performed according to some conventional or constitutive rules but leans much more toward Gricean inferential theory of utterance meaning. The theory specifies four conditions for determining what someone does by uttering a sentence. These include the operative meaning of the sentence uttered, the referents for the referring expressions, the properties and relations being ascribed, and the time specified. The remarkable point of this theory is that the proponents conceive of the determination of the locutionary act by the hearer, not as a matter of merely decoding the conventional meaning of the sentences uttered, but of inference that has to be based on linguistic meaning plus contextual information concerning the speaker’s intention , according to (*Pragmatics*, 2008).

Data

Having established a theoretical basis for the study, I can now go on to analyze the sampled data.

The Yoruba data is glossed in English.

TEXT LABEL	Locution	Gloss	Contextual Information
A	E bun mi; ebi n pa mi ni. Eyin naa o ni sofo omo yin o o.	Give me; for I am hungry. May you also not suffer child loss o o.	An aged woman with no physical handicap. Dress is fair; walks with a stick. Setting is public motor park.
B	Gbogbo eyin ero inu oko yii. E saanu mi; olorun yoo saanu eyin naa o. Emi naa ko o. Emi kii s'ole o; ise lo bo lowo mi o. Ko si si agbara lati se ise mo; mo ni awon omo ni ile iwe.	All of you in this vehicle. Show mercies unto me; may God also bestow His mercies unto you. It is never my fault; I am not a lazy man; I was once a teacher but I lost the job. Now there is no more energy to work and I have children in schools.	Fairly old (between age 50 and 55). Unkempt beard. Dresses in English style. No physical handicap. Setting is public motor park.
C	E wo mi se laanu o. Tori Olorun, e wo mi se laanu o o.	Look at me and show mercy. Because of God, look at me and show mercy.	Woman of about thirty. Walks on four limbs. Setting is a main road in Ibadan metropolis.
D	Aanu yin ni mo fe o. Eyin naa ati awon omo yin o ma ni r'ajo a lo o de o.	It is your mercies that I need. May you and your children not embark on ill-fated journeys.	Middle-age woman; purblind. Scalded hands. Setting is Lagere motor park in Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria.
E	Eni olorun bun ko bun mi o o.	He that is given by God, let him give me o.	Middle-age man. Stoutly built but delicately weak in the manner of appeal. No visible handicap. Setting is <i>Oja Oba</i> Mosque area in Ibadan.
F	E je k'a gbadura ninu moto yii o. (recites verses from the Quran)	Let us all pray in this vehicle o. (recites verses from the Quran).	Young beggar; no visible handicap. Setting is motor park.
G	Ina omo o ni jo e o. Nkan ti oba ni ki o bun mi o.	The "fire of child" will not burn you.	Woman, quite aged. No noticeable handicap. Setting is motor park in Ile-ife
H	Ka so layoo o.	May you have a safe journey.	Man, fairly young. Raises an amputated right hand. Setting is Ojo motor park, Lagos.
I	E ke meji o. Iya mi. Baba mi. E ba mi ke edunjobi o.	Kindly give to my twin babies. My father. My mother. Give <i>edunjobi</i> 'twin babies' for me.	A woman. No handicap. Setting is a market road in Ile-ife.
J	Ti toro ni mo tooro o ; bie ba ni e fun mi o.	It is ask (beg) I beg; if you have, give me.	Old woman. Dresses well. No physical handicap. Setting is a church premise.

Analysis

The data show that beggars' locutions are generally a combination of phonokinetic, phatic and rhetoric acts.

Phonokinetic Acts

This describes the combination of the 'sound' and the 'doing' actions of beggars. A sound device commonly used by beggars sampled is the /*ɔv*/ sound (i.e., the o, o – o particle) produced at the end of their solicitations. This particle produces an expression, or conveys a sense of, grief and imbues their utterances with emotion. This is a marker for sharing their emotion with their addressee. The structure of the utterances above is imperative; without the presence of the particle described above, this grammatical form would be otherwise inappropriate and even frightening in the context of the discourse. The use of the marker/particle mitigates the brusque effect of the imperatives. In most cases, beggars complement this act with a worrying gaze that reflects a distasteful emotion.

Beggars sometimes exhibit their handicap (as in H above who raises an amputated hand) to further flaunt their sympathetic condition. The raising of the hand is capable of exerting some influence over the mental judgment of benefactors. In the Yoruba semiotic world, the hand is the symbol of survival; a man's hand never deceives him. What this means clearly is that a man's survival is threatened when his hands are missing. The beggar who raises his hand in this encounter understands this semiosis and appropriates it for communicating subliminal messages to his benefactors. However, the meanings that people can read into this kinetic message can be negative toward his aims. If the beggar is a Hausa from the Northern part of the country, where Zaria law (which allows capital punishment) is practiced, the amputated hand can identify the beggar as a criminal, and this can fail him in his begging ruff.

Similarly, in these examples beggars inject sonority into their solicitation through the modulation of their voices to produce a higher pitch, rising, melodic intonation that injects their demand for charity with some elements of entertainment. The musical effect so generated could produce positive affective responses from the audience.

Phatic Acts

The phatic acts are dominantly conventional; they generally conform to the lexico-grammatical rules of the language of the immediate environment. With the exception of B, all the sampled beggars used few words; a practice which I think is constrained by the general notion among the Yoruba that “too many words portend nothing but lies.” What could be attributed to B’s flouting of the maxim of quantity in his discourse is his experience as a teacher, the fact which further reinforces the general notion, particularly in Nigeria, that teachers do talk a lot. However, it cannot be said confidently that the beggar in question is a teacher; he may hide under excessive locution in order to obscure facts. When facts are blurred, beggars may achieve their aims because their entreaties are endowed artificially with some elements of credibility and in this situation, begging becomes morally justified.

Rhetic Acts

Similarly, beggars deploy their locutions to make certain definite senses or references. This describes the rhetic component of their discourses. The producers of the utterances A, D, G and I above display their rhetic skills by referring, in passing, to some definite unpleasant incidents in the past. Allusion to these events, many of which may not be true in most instances, can generate for prospective benefactors a short story of a beggar’s life. For instance, the reference to “child loss” in A’s entreaty above could drum in a message, through inference, that the beggar was once ‘a father of children’ but now is childless, thus the reason for his panhandling business. This

inference is the same for beggars D and G, whose locutions gave account of ‘an ill-fated journey’ and the incidence of ‘a child loss’ respectively. The choice of *naa* ‘as well’, in their entreaties, makes clear this inference by suggesting that the implied events really occurred.

Socio-ideological content of the discourse

Beyond their literal content, many facts are implicated in beggars’ utterances analysed above. One of the common implicated elements of the informative content of these utterances is the idea that beggars’ circumstances oblige them to panhandle. In most cases, they use their utterance acts in expressing the *raison d’être* for their involvement in panhandling business. If beggars do not assume that the society in which they panhandle is not positive about their business, they will not tell stories when they beg.

All panhandlers sampled used their locutions to perform two explicit acts: they request help, and they offer prayers in exchange for this. The prayer component of their acts conveys implicit acts of argument, vindication or justification used in countering their benefactors’ resistance to their appeal. The arguments are obviously arguments of reason and the acts of vindication are of validation. These are capable of creating effects upon the feelings and actions of the prospective benefactors. Let’s return to data ‘B’ and ‘E’ above for illustration.

In B, the beggar asserts that he has lost his job, has no energy to work again, and has children in schools. These are not a mere declaration of facts; they convey the following implicated arguments: if he had not lost his job, he would not have taken to begging; If he had not lost the energy to work, he would have engaged in a better occupation than begging; and if he had not had children in school, he would have been able to survive without begging. All these reinforce his preceding vindication, “it is not my fault” and “I am not a lazy man”. The beggar implicitly acknowledges the socially conceived fact that some people beg because they are lazy and he uses

his utterances to distinguish himself from that group. The beggar also reflects in his utterance the society's values for hard work and social responsibility and associates himself with these values. By endorsing the social values, the beggar plays politics with social system. Similarly, 'E' implicates in his utterance that though he might not be qualified to beg, he should be given to, for we all take from God even when we are not qualified. This can influence prospective benefactors to reason that since they cannot claim that God does not give to them, they should help whoever asks them for help. This is certainly an intimidating act, subtly coercing benefactors into kind responses to his appeal.

Text 'J' offers another example of acknowledgment in beggars' discourse. A sort of verbal aggression is noticeable in this utterance, resulting from the emphasis placed on *toro* 'ask / beg' being reduplicated. This serves in shaking off whatever insult or shame that people might associate with begging and in cutting down to size proud, usually unwilling, benefactors. The beggar implicitly acknowledges that she is not qualified to beg and that she is a 'total beggar', one whose occupation is not the result of any piteous circumstance, given her good physical condition, and suggests that her solicitation is only to those that have, and are willing to give. The conditional clause, "if you have", supports this analysis.

In view of the analysis above, I develop the following framework for analyzing beggars' discourse in Nigeria (Fig. 1):

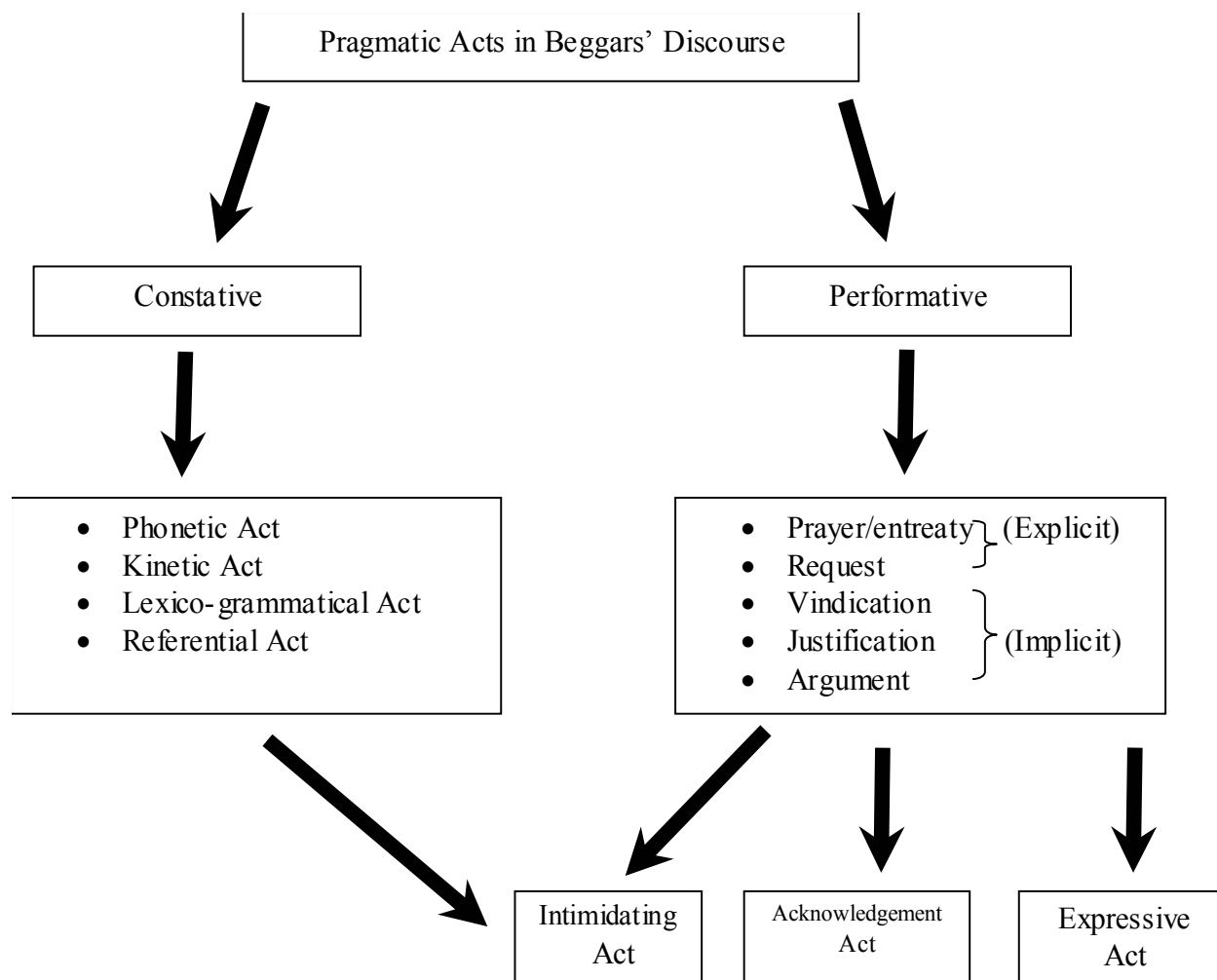


Figure 1: Classes of Pragmatic Acts in Beggars' Discourse in South Western Nigeria.

The figure above indicates that beggars' utterances contain several performative acts and other sub-acts, which constitute such discourse practices as intimidation, acknowledgement and expression. All these acts are socially constrained. The unequal economic power between beggars and their benefactors and the negative social impression concerning begging are dominant indices of the social constraints. The hidden intention behind the various acts is the achievement of manipulation; beggars' discourse can therefore be seen in the same perspective

as political discourse, advertising discourse and other rhetorical texts that are designed to win over those they solicit.

Conclusion

The general socio-cultural and economic contexts in which the Nigerian panhandlers carry out their business compel them to design their utterances to perform more than the basic act of begging. It has been indicated that beggars' locutions are not just semantic outputs; they serve in staging several acknowledgement, intimidating, and expressive actions, which could be effectual in achieving their aims. In addition, the study has shown that their utterances are calculated to manipulate both the cultural and emotional values of their potential benefactors. Since the present study does not account for the felicity potentials of all these acts, other researches could be set into motion to investigate these. The study may also be extended beyond the South-western Nigeria to include other parts of the country and the western nations where one form of begging or the other comes about. Also, a modern form of begging called e-begging or cyber begging has become known. It takes the form of personal advertisements for help on local bulletin board systems. This is another interesting area for future researches.

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