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CONFLICT, PEACE AND INTER-GROUP RELATIONS IN KOGI STATE: A PEACE-PRAGMATICS INVESTIGATION

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Abstract

Studies on conflict, peace and inter-group relations have often been investigated from a historical, political, economic or psychological dimension, with little or no focus on linguistic considerations; yet language is most often the source and genesis of human conflict in general. This study therefore, seeks to utilise a leading tool of peace-pragmatics to investigate conflict between and among the different ethnic nationalities in Kogi State with a view to proposing peace-building strategies within the context of inter-group relations amongst the different groups. Adopting a qualitative method of data analysis, the peace-pragmatics investigation employs a multidisciplinary approach to analyse the language use in conflict and identify. The findings reveal that, though historical, economic and political factors contribute to inter-group tensions in Kogi State, the primary source of conflict is language, highlighting the resilience of local communities in practising peace pragmatics and emphasising community-led initiatives, dialogue forums and cultural exchange programmes as integral components of successful peace-building. The study recommends the need to foster inclusive governance, implement educational programmes in peace linguistics that promote tolerance, strengthen community-based conflict resolution mechanisms, incorporating the establishment of a comprehensive inter-group relations framework with insights from both traditional and modern perspectives. On the whole, the peace-pragmatics investigation has underscored the need for a holistic and context-specific approach to address conflicts and promote sustainable peace in the state, integrating local practices with contemporary strategies, as stakeholders contribute to building a resilient and harmonious society in multilingual, multicultural and multi-religious Kogi State.

Keywords: Inter-group relations, Peace pragmatics, Conflict, Politeness, Face-threatening acts, Identity

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Introduction

Conflicts of different kinds abound in pluralistic societies, but are pervasive in lexical choices or language use. Thus, this research delves into the intricate dynamics of conflict, peace, and inter-group relations within Kogi State, employing a multi-disciplinary approach, with peace-pragmatics as a tool for investigation. Through a systematic investigation, this study seeks to unravel the underlying factors influencing these phenomena, contributing valuable insights to the understanding and promotion of sustainable peace in Kogi State. Specifically, using ethno-derogatory perceptions, the primary aim of the study is to conduct a comprehensive peace-pragmatics investigation in conflict, peace and inter-group relations in Kogi State by identifying and discussing the linguistic choices often utilised in generating inter-group conflicts in Kogi State, analysing the contextual linguistic choices used by different groups and their goals for such choices and evaluating the existing peace-building initiatives, recommending workable strategies for effective inter-group relations in the state.

Kogi State, a place rich in cultural heritage, is marred by the complexities of inter-group relations and persistent conflicts. Strategically situated at the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers, the state is a microcosm of Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity. With over 20 ethnic groups, including the Igala, Ebira, Okun and Bassa, coexisting within its borders, the state epitomises the challenges and opportunities presented by diversity. Kogi's diversity has, however, been fraught with problems, contributing to the intricate web of conflicts that have plagued the state. The historical context of Kogi State's conflicts is multidimensional. Rooted in pre-colonial rivalries and exacerbated by post-colonial political dynamics, these conflicts often manifest along ethnic and religious lines. As the state is faced with historical injustices, economic disparities, and competition for scarce resources, the need for a thorough examination of the interplay between conflict, inter-group relations, and peace becomes increasingly urgent, especially within the context and focus of this study, as different groups' stereotype and frame one another.

This peace-pragmatics investigation adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing insights from history, sociology, anthropology and political science to unravel the underlying causes of conflicts and to identify pragmatic pathways to sustainable peace. In situating the study within the framework of peace pragmatics, which emphasises practical and context-specific solutions, the research aims to move beyond theoretical paradigms and engage with the lived experiences of the people of Kogi State.

Thus, the significance of this investigation lies not only in its academic merit but in its potential to inform policy and community-driven initiatives. Kogi State stands at a crossroads, where the choices made today will shape its future trajectory. As conflicts persist, hindering socio-economic development and fostering mistrust, there is a critical need for evidence-based interventions grounded in the realities of the local context. While existing literature touches upon the challenges faced by Kogi State, this investigation seeks to contribute by providing a deeper understanding of the peace-building mechanisms that have evolved organically within the communities. In acknowledging the resilience of the people and the cultural resources at their disposal, it is hoped to illuminate pathways towards sustainable peace that leverage local knowledge and practices.

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Literature Review

Peace and conflict studies in Nigeria abound in the literature, dealing with different causes such as poor governance, politics of identity and competition for resources. Olerede (2015) examines communal conflicts in Nigeria with emphasis on political marginalisation and elite manipulation. While the study offers valuable insights into the macro-level causes of conflict, it treats language merely as a background variable rather than as an active instrument in the escalation or mitigation of conflict. Consequently, the pragmatic mechanisms through which hostility and reconciliation are enacted in everyday interaction remain unexplored. Similarly, Akinyoade (2013) analyses conflict dynamics in Nigeria within the context of state fragility and economic inequality. The study foregrounds institutional weaknesses and economic grievances as triggers of violence. Its limitation lies in its structural determinism, as it does not interrogate how discourse, verbal practices and symbolic communication shape inter-group perceptions and actions. Jonah (2019) focuses on ethno-religious conflicts and peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria, highlighting the roles of political actors, civil society and religious institutions. Although the study acknowledges communication as part of peacebuilding, it does not subject language use to systematic pragmatic analysis. Thus, the subtle linguistic strategies through which peace or hostility is negotiated are overlooked.

Albert (2007) provides one of the most influential contributions to peace and conflict studies in Nigeria, particularly through community-based peacebuilding and conflict transformation frameworks. His work is rich in empirical detail and policy relevance. However, it privileges institutional mediation and dialogue platforms without closely analysing the linguistic content of such dialogues, thereby leaving unexplored the pragmatic features that make peace talks effective or ineffective. Adegbami (2020) examines insecurity and violent conflict in Nigeria with particular attention to governance failures and youth unemployment. While the study is valuable for understanding the socio-political context of conflict, it treats communication as an outcome rather than a constitutive element of conflict relations. The absence of discourse-oriented analysis limits its applicability to linguistic peacebuilding. Paden (2015) explores peace processes in Northern Nigeria, especially the role of religious leaders and traditional institutions in conflict resolution. Although language is implicit in religious preaching and mediation, the study does not analyse the pragmatic choices, speech acts, or rhetorical strategies that underpin successful peace interventions.

On inter-group relations, Ofili (2016) investigates ethnic relations and social cohesion in Nigeria, emphasising historical interactions and patterns of cooperation and rivalry. The study offers a useful sociological framework but does not address how inter-group attitudes are linguistically constructed, sustained, or challenged in everyday discourse. Achoba (2017) examines identity construction and inter-group competition in multi-ethnic Nigerian communities. While the study recognises stereotypes and prejudices, it stops short of analysing the linguistic forms such as labels, metaphors, insults and implicatures through which such stereotypes are pragmatically enacted. Batalha (2008), working largely from an anthropological perspective, analyses inter-group relations and power dynamics in African societies. Though insightful in its cultural analysis, the study is not situated within the Nigerian context and does not engage with pragmatic theories of meaning-making in conflict situations.

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Beyond Nigerian-focused studies, some scholars have examined peace from a pragmatic standpoint. Mey (2006) introduces the notion of peace pragmatics, arguing that peace is not merely a political condition but a communicative achievement realised through language use in context. This theoretical contribution is foundational but remains largely abstract and is not empirically applied to specific Nigerian multilingual settings such as Kogi State. In addition, STEPPUTAT (2018) examines peace, violence and governance from a discourse-oriented perspective, highlighting how state narratives legitimise or delegitimise violence. While valuable, the study focuses on institutional discourse and does not sufficiently address everyday inter-group interactions at the grassroots level. On his part, Cassin (2023) explores language, ethics and coexistence, stressing the moral responsibility embedded in speech. Although philosophically rich, the work does not provide empirical tools for analysing real-life conflict discourse in multilingual, multi-ethnic societies.

Furthermore, historical accounts of events, cultural factors, and economic shifts from different scholars (Achoba, 2017) reveal the dynamics of conflict and peace in Kogi State, shaping inter-group relations and the significance of imports. The drivers of conflict include, but are not limited to, ethnic tensions, resource competition, political disputes and socio-economic disparities. Understanding these drivers, therefore, becomes essential for developing effective peace strategies. Despite these conflicts, peace-building initiatives in Kogi State, both governmental and non-governmental, have not yet yielded the required results. Local perspectives on the conflicts have also been researched as perceptions and experiences are integral to comprehending the intricacies of inter-group relations. In addition, studies have investigated the role of state institutions, including government structures, law enforcement and judiciary, in managing conflicts and promoting peace. External influences on the conflict have been associated with factors such as regional dynamics, national policies and global influences that impact inter-group relations in Kogi State. Investigating these external influences has provided a wider context for the conflicts.

No doubt, existing studies on conflict, peace, and inter-group relations in Nigeria have largely privileged historical, political and economic explanations, with limited attention to language as a central variable. Even where communication is acknowledged, it is rarely subjected to systematic pragmatic analysis. Moreover, peace-pragmatic theories, though well-developed conceptually, have not been sufficiently applied to specific Nigerian contexts, particularly at the level of everyday inter-group discourse. The present study, therefore, fills a critical gap by adopting a peace-pragmatic approach to examine how conflict, peace and inter-group relations are discursively constructed, negotiated and contested in Kogi State. In focusing on language use in inter-group interactions, the study contributes both empirically and theoretically to the growing field of peace pragmatics within African sociolinguistic scholarship.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored primarily on Peace Pragmatics Theory (Mey, 2006) and supported by Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, Impoliteness Theory and Face-Threatening Acts Theory. Collectively, these frameworks provide an interdisciplinary perspective on how language use both reflects and shapes conflict, peace, and inter-group relations among ethnic groups in Kogi State.

Peace Pragmatics Theory

Mey (2006) conceptualises peace not merely as the absence of violence, but as a communicative achievement realised through language use in social interaction. According

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to Mey (2006), peace emerges when linguistic practices promote understanding, cooperation, mutual recognition and social harmony, while conflict is sustained through discourse that marginalises, insults, excludes, or delegitimises others. Central to peace pragmatics is the idea that language is action-oriented. Utterances function as social acts that can either escalate hostility or foster reconciliation depending on context, intention and interpretation. Peace, therefore, is pragmatically constructed through speech acts such as negotiation, apology, mitigation and accommodation, whereas conflict is pragmatically enacted through insults, stereotypes, threats and exclusionary labels (Mey, 2006).

This theory is particularly suitable for the present study because inter-group relations in Kogi State, especially among the Ebira, Igala, and Okun groups, are largely mediated by everyday language practices. Ethnic labels, stereotypes, proverbs and derogatory utterances operate as pragmatic tools for expressing dominance, resentment, or resistance. Thus, applying Peace Pragmatics Theory, the study examines how such linguistic practices function either as conflict-generating acts or as potential peace-building resources within inter-group interactions.

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory: Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) posit that language is a central marker of ethnic identity and group membership, in which speakers use language strategically to assert group boundaries, reinforce in-group solidarity, and differentiate themselves from out-groups. The theory explains how linguistic choices such as accent, lexical items, labels and code selection index ethnic belonging and social positioning. In inter-group contexts, language becomes a symbolic resource for negotiating power, prestige and legitimacy. Positive representations of one's own group and negative portrayals of others are common discursive strategies used to maintain ethnolinguistic boundaries.

Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory is relevant to this study because conflict and peace in Kogi State are deeply intertwined with ethnic identity. Derogatory utterances, stereotypes and ethnically marked expressions function as identity-affirming acts for the speaker's group while simultaneously threatening the identity of the other. Therefore, by integrating this theory, the study accounts for how linguistic expressions of identity contribute to both inter-group tension and group cohesion, complementing the peace-oriented insights of Mey's Peace Pragmatics.

Impoliteness Theory: Culpeper (1996, 2011) provides a framework for analysing language that is intentionally or perceived as offensive, aggressive, or face-damaging, arguing that impoliteness is not simply the absence of politeness but a strategic communicative behaviour used to attack, undermine, or dominate others. Impoliteness strategies include insults, ridicule, exclusion, negative labelling and the use of taboo expressions. These strategies are particularly salient in conflict situations, where speakers deliberately deploy language to assert power, provoke reactions, or reinforce social hierarchies (Culpeper, 2011). This theory is highly applicable to the present study, as many inter-group interactions in Kogi State involve impolite and derogatory expressions directed at ethnic out-groups. Employing this theory, the study systematically analyses how such utterances function pragmatically to escalate conflict, deepen resentment and normalise hostility in inter-ethnic discourse.

Face-Threatening Acts Theory: Face-Threatening Acts (FTA) Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) as part of Politeness Theory is anchored on the concept of "face", which refers to an individual's public self-image, comprising positive face (the desire to be approved of) and negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition). Face-threatening

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acts are communicative actions that damage or challenge these desires, such as insults, accusations, ridicule and exclusion. In inter-group settings, FTAs often target collective face, thereby threatening not just individuals but entire ethnic or social groups. In the context of this study, many ethnically charged utterances in Kogi State function as collective face-threatening acts, attacking the dignity, morality, or humanity of other groups. Integrating FTA theory allows the study to explain why such utterances provoke strong emotional responses and retaliatory discourse, thereby perpetuating cycles of conflict. It also helps identify communicative strategies that could mitigate face threat and promote peaceful coexistence.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive analytical framework for the study. While Peace Pragmatics theory offers the overarching framework for understanding peace and conflict as discursively constructed phenomena and Ethnolinguistic Identity theory explains the identity-based motivations behind inter-group discourse, Impoliteness theory and Face-Threatening Acts theory supply the analytical tools for examining how conflict is linguistically enacted at the micro-interactional level. Integrating these frameworks for the study captures both the ideological and interactional dimensions of conflict and peace in Kogi State, thereby contributing to the emerging scholarship on peace pragmatics in multilingual African contexts.

Research Methodology

The research methodology is qualitative, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics of conflict, peace and inter-group relations in Kogi State, stemming from perceptions expressed in ethno-linguistic choices. Considering its diverse communities and historical significance in inter-group relations, the state is subdivided into regions based on demographic, ethnic and socio-economic factors to ensure a comprehensive understanding of variations in conflict and peace dynamics.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection adopted purposive sampling to select representative sites within the state, while maintaining ethical considerations. Thus, the three state-owned universities and the federal university in Lokoja serve as key subjects. This criterion is adopted because it represents the spread across geo-sociopolitical groupings, the prevalence of inter-group conflicts, historical significance, and the diversity of communities. A mix of urban and rural settings captures a wider spectrum of experiences. Qualitative data on the prevalence and perceptions of conflicts, including questions on grievances and attitudes towards inter-group relations, with in-depth interviews conducted with major stakeholders. For the analysis, qualitative methods were employed. Tables were utilised to analyse data from the interviews, focusing on the lexico-semantic choices of the perceptions of different groups to enrich the qualitative understanding of conflict dynamics.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

The data for analysis is presented below in six (6) tables.

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Table 1a: Igala people's perception of Okun people

SN	Utterance in Igala on Okun	English equivalence (gloss / literal meaning)	Intended meaning/perception
1	*Abo ku ma je akpoko.*	People that eat pepper	Okun people are stereotyped as hot-tempered, aggressive and quick to anger, symbolically associated with "pepper" as irritability.
2	*Ama a cho ne je.*	People who are deceptive	Okun people are portrayed as dishonest and untrustworthy, especially in interpersonal and transactional relations.
3	*Ama agbo ne ibe.*	People who are traitors/betrayers	Okun people are framed as disloyal and unreliable, capable of betrayal for personal gain.
4	*Abo ke do ma magbon.*	People who are fearful	Okun people are perceived as cowardly or lacking courage, particularly in confrontational or political situations.
5	*Abo ku ma chechu nyu gba.*	People who defecate anywhere	Okun people are dehumanised as unclean, uncultured and lacking social discipline, invoking moral and hygienic inferiority.
6	*Ama kpo ne bie.*	People who gossip	Okun people are seen as loquacious and meddlesome, spreading rumours that threaten social harmony.

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7	*Ama juja omimi.*	People who pretend	Okun people are stereotyped as hypocritical and insincere, masking true intentions behind false appearances.

Discussion

Table 1a shows that Igala speakers label Okun people with vividly negative epithets. For example, SN1 translates literally "people that eat pepper", casting Okun as hot-tempered and aggressive. Correctly or otherwise, this food metaphor (pepper) equates Okun's temperament with the burning heat of pepper, exoticising them and framing them as irritants. Similarly, Okun are called "people who are deceptive" and "people who are traitors/betrayers", explicitly assigning dishonesty and betrayal to the entire group. These moral slurs attack Okun's collective character, painting them as untrustworthy. Other utterances stereotype Okun as lacking positive traits: for example, "people who are fearful" are branded as cowardly, while "people who gossip" and "people who pretend" depict Okun as loquacious, meddlesome, hypocritical, and insincere. A particularly demeaning line, "people who defecate anywhere", equates Okun with filth and primitive hygiene. Each of these utterances is an *insulting label;* by Culpeper's taxonomy, they are classic impoliteness strategies (negative labelling and ridicule) aimed at undermining the target's image. In Brown and Levinson's account, they are collective face-threatening acts (FTAs), each phrase directly damages Okun's positive face (their dignity/prestige) and implicitly challenges their negative face (autonomy, and respect).

Table 1b: Igala people's perception of Ebira people

SN	Utterance in Igala on Ebira	English equivalence (Gloss / literal meaning)	Intended meaning / perception
1	*Ama alih gogo.*	People who eat benniseed	Ebira people are ethnically marked through food imagery, often used mockingly to signal cultural otherness and primitiveness.
2	*Ama ju ja.*	People who are troublemakers	Ebira people are stereotyped as violent, confrontational and socially disruptive, prone to conflict.
3	*Abo ko ala ma che ma uja.*	People who are stubborn	Ebira people are perceived as headstrong, inflexible and resistant to authority or compromise.

4	*Ama je ela abia.*	People who eat dogs	Ebira people are morally and culturally othered, portrayed as uncivilised through taboo food practices.

Table 1b shows similar patterns in Igala discourse about the Ebira. Food metaphors again figure prominently. Ebira are called "people who eat benniseed" and "people who eat dogs". These insults mark Ebira by their diet, a stereotypical trait outside Igala norms. Anthropologically, characterising others by their "strange" foods (such as sesame seeds or dog meat) serves to label them as primitive or uncivilised. Linguistic research notes that food-based nicknames (for example, calling French "frogs" or Chinese "rice-eaters") are a common way of constructing ethnic otherness. Here, "benniseed-eater" and especially "dog-eater" depict Ebira as culturally alien and morally backward. Other descriptors in Table 1b assign negative dispositions: "people who are troublemakers" portray Ebira as violent, confrontational, and disruptive, while "people who are stubborn" brand them as headstrong and inflexible. These behavioural stereotypes of troublemaking and obstinacy are framed as innate group traits. Like in Table 1a, such terms are insulting negative characterisations (Culpeper's impoliteness) and FTAs on the Ebira collective face.

Collectively, the utterances in Tables 1a and 1b function to 'other' and demean Okun and Ebira. The food metaphors in particular externalise cultural difference, suggesting "us vs. them" by asserting that *they* eat things *we* do not. In Brown and Levinson's theory, calling someone a "pepper-eater" or "dog-eater" is clearly an FTA against their positive face; it strips them of respect and positions them as inferior or uncivilised. Culpeper (1996, 2011) classify these as negative impoliteness strategies (insults and taboo references) deliberately used to humiliate the target. In pragmatic terms, each utterance is a speech act of hostility. As Mey's Peace Pragmatics notes, conflict is often "pragmatically enacted through insults, stereotypes, threats and exclusionary labels", exactly as seen in these tables. These gibes are not peace-making language; they are conflict-inducing by design, solidifying antagonism rather than understanding.

Pragmatic Functions: In-group Solidarity, Exclusion and Rivalry

These ethnic slurs pragmatically reinforce Igala in-group identity. In projecting undesirable traits onto Okun and Ebira, Igala speakers implicitly cast themselves as not possessing those flaws. For example, if Okun are "hot-tempered" and "traitorous," then Igala are implicitly portrayed as cool-headed and trustworthy by contrast. Giles's Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory explains this clearly: speakers use language to assert group boundaries, boosting in-group solidarity with positive self-images while denigrating out-groups. The Igala utterances exhibit exactly this pattern; they feature positive *self* versus negative *other* polarisation. Calling others "gossipers" or "cowards" both bonds the Igala speaker with fellow Igala, who presumably share disdain for these traits, and highlights a separate, inferior out-group. In short, these face-threatening jokes and slurs serve as collective rituals of self-definition. As Giles et al. note, positive representations of one's own group and negative portrayals of others are common discursive strategies used to maintain ethnolinguistic boundaries.

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The speech also legitimises social distance and exclusion. Once Okun or Ebira are painted as immoral or uncultured, the idea of keeping them at arm's length is presented as reasonable. For instance, suggesting that Okun "defecate anywhere" dehumanises them and implies hygiene and respectability gaps. In face-theoretic terms, such labels attack the target's collective social face; they state that the group does not deserve polite treatment or equality. Under Mey's Peace Pragmatics, language that "delegitimises" others fosters division. Indeed, an utterance such as "Ebira eat dogs" justifies social exclusion by implying a gross cultural chasm. In practical terms, if a group is labelled traitorous or filthy, intermarriage or friendship with them is socially discouraged. Igala community members hearing these stereotypes may feel justified in refusing Okun or Ebira requests, sidelining them from communal events, or generally keeping inter-group distance. Implicitly, each insult provides a rationale for segregation.

Finally, the rhetoric justifies suspicion and rivalry in Kogi State's inter-ethnic politics. Negative moral labels (deceit or betrayal) frame Okun and Ebira as potential enemies. When a speaker calls Okun "traitors" or Ebira "troublemakers", the insinuation is that these groups cannot be trusted and may undermine Igala interests. This stokes a defensive stance: Igala listeners are warned to watch out for Okun duplicity or Ebira hostility. The theoretical frameworks corroborate this effect. Under Giles's theory, derogatory discourse implicitly asserts Igala dominance and minority submission, which breeds political competition and tension. Brown and Levinson's framework explains that FTAs elicit resentment; an insulted group will retaliate or remain guarded to protect their face. Moreover, since Mey's Peace Pragmatics emphasises language as creating either hostility or harmony, these utterances clearly construct rivalry, not reconciliation. Each stereotype or slur is a strategic move in an "ethnolinguistic war of words," reinforcing the notion that Okun and Ebira are suspect out-groups.

Theoretical Mapping

These observations align directly with the study's theoretical framework. From Mey's Peace Pragmatics perspective, the Igala utterances are conflict-generating speech acts. They contradict peace-building discourse by alienating and insulting others. In contrast to negotiated or conciliatory language, Table 1a–b exemplifies how "language is action-oriented" in sustaining conflict. According to Giles et al.'s Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, the negative labelling in Table 1a–b is a classic case of in-group boundary maintenance. Igala speakers reinforce Igala solidarity by vilifying Okun and Ebira, using language as a marker of group membership. The utterances treat Okun/Ebira as the embodied "out-group other," while implicitly affirming Igala virtues by contrast (hot vs. cool temperament; honest vs. deceitful, and so on). This fits Giles's claim that speakers strategically use language to present their own group positively while presenting others negatively. In Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory, each phrase in the tables exemplifies an impoliteness strategy. They are not polite frames; they are direct slurs, employing negative labelling and taboo content (for example, defecation or dog-eating) to attack the target's image. Culpeper notes that insults and negative labels are used to "attack, undermine or dominate". Here the Igala insults exactly dominate the discourse, undermining Okun/Ebira. The repetitive use of such strategies (pepper, deception, gossip, dog-eater, etc.) normalises hostility and encourages resentful reactions, as Culpeper describes. Finally, Brown and Levinson's Face Theory helps explain the force of these utterances. Each epithet is a face-threatening act that damages the out-group's public image. By branding Okun as cowards or Ebira as dog-eaters, Igala speakers are effectively stripping away those groups' positive face

(their desire for social approval). This collective face-attack also pressures Igala in-group members to view the targets as inferior or objectionable. As noted in the theoretical section, ethnically charged insults threaten "not just individuals but entire ethnic or social groups". The strong emotional reactions that such language provokes (anger, suspicion, or defensiveness) are exactly the patterns Brown and Levinson predict when face is threatened.

In a nutshell, the epithets in Tables 1a and 1b function as strategic face-threatening acts that solidify Igala identity while marginalising Okun and Ebira. They rely on food metaphors, moral judgments and behavioural stereotypes to portray the others as culturally alien, morally deficient and socially disruptive. This discourse conforms to the theoretical models: it uses language to enact conflict (Mey), draw clear ethnolinguistic boundaries (Giles et al.), employ impoliteness strategies (Culpeper) and attack group face (Brown & Levinson). Pragmatically, the result is intensified in-group bonding, justified exclusion and heightened inter-ethnic mistrust in Kogi State.

Table 2a: Okun people's perception of Igala people

S/N	Utterance in Okun on Igala	English equivalence (Gloss / literal meaning)	Intended meaning/perception
1	*Igala fẹ fi ju gbogbo eniyan lọ.*	Igalas think they are better than others.	Igala people are stereotyped as arrogant and condescending, with a superiority complex.
2	*Wọn fẹ jọba gbogbo Kogi…*	They want to rule all of Kogi.	Igala people are framed as politically hegemonic and suppressive of minority voices.
3	*Wọn maa n kẹ́kọ̀ọ́ ju…*	They over-educate to dominate.	Education is perceived as a strategic tool for political domination, not communal uplift.
4	*Igala mọ fi owo ra gbogbo nkan.*	Money buys everything for them.	Igala people are portrayed as materialistic and morally flexible, using wealth manipulatively.
5	*ọgbọn iro.*	Deceptive cleverness.	Igala people are stereotyped as calculative and deceitful, masking intentions with intelligence.

6	*Ko si ohun ti wọn o ṣe…*	They'll do anything for power.	Igala people are perceived as desperate, ruthless power seekers, lacking ethical restraint.
7	*Igala ko mọ gbo.*	They don't listen.	Igala people are seen as dismissive, authoritarian and unaccommodating.
8	*yi agbára si ara wọn.*	They divert power to themselves.	Igala people are framed as politically manipulative and self-serving.
9	*A o fi ọmọ wa fun Igala…*	We won't marry them.	Igala people are viewed as culturally incompatible and socially untrustworthy in marriage.
10	*Ọrọ wọn pọ ju…*	They talk too much.	Igala people are perceived as provocative, loquacious and trouble-inducing.

Discussion

The data presented in Table 2a above and Table 2b below capture Okun people's perceptions of the Igala and Ebira ethnic groups, respectively, revealing a patterned use of language that functions less as a neutral description and more as an ideological construction. The utterances in both tables operate pragmatically as collective ethnic stereotypes and face-threatening acts (FTAs), serving to demarcate social boundaries, reinforce Okun in-group solidarity and rationalise various forms of exclusion within the socio-political landscape of Kogi State.

In Table 2a, the dominant thematic framing is that of political dominance, arrogance, manipulation and moral flexibility. Expressions such as "Igalas think they are better than others" and "They want to rule all of Kogi" construct Igala identity around hegemonic ambition and superiority. Pragmatically, these utterances do not merely describe political realities; rather, they ideologically frame the Igala people as overreaching and oppressive, thereby legitimising Okun resistance and suspicion. Within Brown and Levinson's (1987) Face Theory, such utterances constitute direct threats to the Igala collective positive face, undermining their desire to be seen as legitimate, cooperative members of the larger Kogi polity. Other utterances in Table 2a intensify this face threat through moral delegitimisation. Statements such as "deceptive cleverness" and "They'll do anything for power" depict intelligence as morally corrupted and power as pursued without ethical restraint. These are classic examples of what Culpeper (1996, 2011) identifies as impoliteness strategies, specifically negative labelling and moral attack, used to damage the target group's social standing. The repeated association of the Igala people with deceit,

materialism (*"Money buys everything for them"*) and authoritarianism (*"They don't listen"*) reflects an ideological narrative that positions them as untrustworthy and politically dangerous. From the perspective of Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory (Giles et al., 1977), these discursive constructions serve a crucial identity function, portraying the Igala as domineering and morally compromised, while Okun speakers implicitly position themselves as politically marginalised yet morally upright, thereby strengthening Okun in-group cohesion. Language here becomes a symbolic resource for asserting group boundaries: "we" (Okun) are reasonable and ethical; "they" (Igala) are arrogant, manipulative and exclusionary. This oppositional identity work reinforces solidarity within the Okun group while sustaining long-standing inter-group rivalry.

The pragmatic consequences of these stereotypes are made explicit in utterances such as "We won't marry them". This statement moves beyond symbolic insult to articulate concrete social exclusion, particularly in the sensitive domain of marriage. Marriage refusal functions as a powerful discursive act that institutionalises ethnic distance and signals deep mistrust. Within Peace Pragmatics (Mey, 2006), such utterances exemplify conflict-sustaining language practices, as they foreclose avenues for interpersonal and inter-group reconciliation. Rather than facilitating dialogue, they solidify exclusion as a rational and necessary response to perceived Igala dominance.

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

Table 2b: Okun people's perception of Ebira people

S/N	Utterance in Okun on Ebira	English equivalence (Gloss / literal meaning)	Intended meaning / perception
1	*Awon Ebira o ni suuru.*	Ebira people are not patient.	Ebira people are perceived as hot-tempered, impulsive and intolerant, prone to violence or rash reactions.
2	*Ebira ma ba nkan je…*	They destroy things; they don't respect boundaries.	Ebira people are framed as lawless, intrusive and socially disruptive, especially in communal settings.
3	*Wọn buru ju…*	They are wicked; they can't be trusted.	Ebira people are stereotyped as dangerous, vengeful and unreliable, particularly in interpersonal relations.

4	*Wọn fẹ jọba nibi gbogbo.*	They want to rule everywhere.	Ebira people are portrayed as politically aggressive and domineering, seeking control beyond their domain.
5	*Wọn jùbọ s'ọrun mẹta.*	They bow to three gods.	Ebira people are mocked as spiritually confused or fetish**,** reinforcing religious othering.
6	*Wọn fẹ ṣẹgun gbogbo wa…*	They want to conquer everyone but lack humility.	Ebira people are viewed as arrogant expansionists, driven by pride rather than cooperation.
7	*…fi ẹkọ rẹ run.*	They spoil intelligence with bad behaviour.	Ebira people are acknowledged as intelligent but morally deficient, wasting potential through misconduct.
8	*Wọn fẹ jẹ kọlọgbọn…*	They act clever but behave badly.	Ebira people are seen as cunning and manipulative, using intelligence deceptively.
9	*A o fi ọmọ wa fun Ebira…*	We won't marry them.	Ebira people are considered culturally incompatible and socially risky for marital alliances.
10	*Wọn lẹnu buruku…*	Their mouths are dangerous.	Ebira people are perceived as verbally aggressive, abusive and socially provocative**.**

In Table 2b, a somewhat different but equally stigmatising pattern emerges, the dominant stereotypes here revolve around violence, lawlessness, arrogance and moral unpredictability. Utterances such as "Ebira people are not patient" and "Ebira destroy things; they don't respect boundaries" frame Ebira identity as inherently volatile and disruptive. These expressions function pragmatically as pre-emptive justifications for fear, avoidance and defensive posturing. As with Table 2a, these are not neutral observations but ideological generalisations that threaten the Ebira collective's face by portraying them as socially dangerous.

Culpeper's Impoliteness Theory is particularly salient here, as the utterances deploy aggravated impoliteness through repeated character assassination. Descriptions such as *"They are wicked; they can't be trusted"* and *"Their mouths are dangerous"* attack both moral character and communicative behaviour, suggesting that Ebira people are verbally aggressive and emotionally unregulated. These face-threatening acts intensify social stigma and legitimise avoidance. Under Brown and Levinson's framework, such utterances simultaneously threaten Ebira positive face (desire for approval) and negative face (freedom from imposition), as they invite surveillance, caution and exclusion. Religious and cultural othering further deepen this boundary-making. The utterance "They bow to three gods" frames Ebira spirituality as confused or fetish, invoking a long-standing discourse in Nigerian inter-ethnic relations where religious difference is used as a moral fault line. This ideological framing constructs Ebira people as culturally incompatible with Okun norms, reinforcing exclusion in social and marital contexts. Once again, the refusal of marriage ("We won't marry them") emerges as a pragmatic outcome of these discursive constructions, transforming stereotypes into socially actionable boundaries. From a Peace Pragmatics perspective, the utterances in Table 2b exemplify how everyday language choices actively sustain conflictual relations. Mey (2006) argues that peace is a communicative achievement, while conflict is linguistically reproduced through exclusionary and delegitimising discourse. The repeated portrayal of Ebira people as violent, arrogant and spiritually suspect normalises inter-group suspicion and forecloses the possibility of mutual recognition. Language here functions not as a bridge but as a barrier.

Across both tables, the Okun discourse constructs Igala and Ebira peoples as fundamentally incompatible "others," thereby legitimising political rivalry, social distancing and marital exclusion. These utterances simultaneously reinforce Okun in-group solidarity by creating a shared narrative of threat and difference. As ideological constructions rather than empirical truths, they demonstrate how ethnic stereotypes operate pragmatically as face-threatening acts and boundary markers, shaping inter-group relations in Kogi State. In all, Tables 2a and 2b reveal that Okun's perceptions of Igala and Ebira peoples are linguistically encoded through impoliteness strategies, face-threatening acts and identity-driven boundary work. Anchored in Peace Pragmatics, Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, Impoliteness Theory and Face Theory, the analysis shows that these utterances are powerful tools for sustaining inter-ethnic tension rather than promoting peaceful coexistence.

Table 3a: Ebira people's perceptions of Igala people

SN	Utterance in Ebira on Igala	English equivalence (Gloss / literal meaning)	Intended meaning/perception
1	*ojahuwenyi*	People who are surrounded by water	Igala people are geographically marked and subtly othered, perceived as riverine people whose environment shapes a distinct, non-Ebira identity.
2	*Ani Gara*	Cliché for an Igala / Igala people	A generalized label that reduces Igala

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			identity to a stereotype, reinforcing ethnic categorisation and social distance.
3	*Omi 'sa ozi' jete*	Fetish people	Igala people are portrayed as spiritually fetish or excessively traditional, reinforcing religious othering and moral suspicion.
4	*Osi uvo eyiva risa*	People who eat with both hands	Igala people are stereotyped as gluttonous and lacking moderation or refined social etiquette.

Discussion

Tables 3a and 3 b above and 3b below present the Ebira people's perceptions of the Igala and Okun ethnic groups, respectively. The utterances documented in these tables operate pragmatically as collective ethnic stereotypes rather than neutral descriptions of social reality. They function as ethnic face-threatening acts (FTAs) and discursive boundary markers, drawing heavily on hygienic metaphors, food symbolism, spiritual labelling and insider–outsider distinctions. Through these linguistic strategies, Ebira speakers reinforce in-group identity, legitimise social distance, and sustain inter-ethnic rivalry among the Ebira, Igala, and Okun communities within Kogi State.

In Table 3a, the dominant discursive strategies revolve around spiritual suspicion, bodily excess and symbolic othering. The utterance "people that are surrounded by water" appears, on the surface, to be a geographical descriptor. Pragmatically, however, it functions as an insider–outsider marker, subtly constructing Igala identity as environmentally and culturally distinct from Ebira identity. Foregrounding geography as essence, the utterance naturalises difference and reinforces ethnic boundaries. According to Giles et al.'s (1977) Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, such linguistic marking of difference strengthens in-group cohesion by defining who belongs and who does not. The Igala are framed as "riverine others," implicitly positioned outside the Ebira socio-cultural core. This boundary-marking intensifies in the utterance *"Ani Gara"*, a generalised label for Igala people. The reduction of a complex ethnic identity to a cliché exemplifies ideological categorisation. Rather than naming individuals, the term collapses diversity into a single stereotypical signifier, thereby facilitating collective judgment. From Brown and Levinson's (1987) Face Theory, this constitutes a collective FTA against Igala positive face, as it undermines their desire for recognition as complex, respectable social actors. The utterance strips the Igala people of individuality and replaces it with a caricature. Also, spiritual labelling emerges more explicitly in "fetish people". This expression frames the Igala people as spiritually suspect and excessively traditional. In the Nigerian inter-ethnic context, accusations of fetishism carry heavy moral and social stigma, often implying backwardness, danger and moral

inferiority. Culpeper's (2011) Impoliteness Theory identifies such moral accusations as aggravated impoliteness strategies designed to damage the target's social standing. Pragmatically, the label functions to delegitimise Igala cultural practices and rationalise avoidance, mistrust and exclusion. Within Mey's (2006) Peace Pragmatics, such utterances exemplify conflict-sustaining discourse, as they deny mutual recognition and instead foreground moral hierarchy. Lastly, food symbolism further reinforces this negative construction. The utterance "people who eat with double hands" depicts Igala people as gluttonous and lacking social etiquette. Excessive eating here is not merely about food; it symbolises lack of restraint, greed and moral excess. Food metaphors, as used here, function as hygienic and moral judgments, positioning Igala bodies as undisciplined and socially inferior. This again constitutes an FTA against collective positive face and legitimises social distance by framing Igala people as culturally incompatible with Ebira norms.

Table 3b: Ebira people's perception of Okun people

SN	Utterance in Ebira on Okun	English equivalence (Gloss / literal meaning)	Intended meaning/perception
1	*Oriákókó*	People who eat a lot of pepper	Okun people are stereotyped as hot-tempered, aggressive and quick to anger, using "pepper" metaphorically to signify irritability.
2	*Ani kinami*	Strangers	Okun people are viewed as outsiders or non-indigenes, reinforcing social exclusion and weak ethnic affiliation.
3	*Okuyere peresu*	Dirty people without good toilet habits	Okun people are dehumanised as unclean and uncivilised, invoking moral and hygienic inferiority.
4	*Ani manasiki*	Dubious people / who defecate	Okun people are portrayed as morally questionable, indecent and socially irresponsible, reinforcing stigma and ridicule.

In Table 3b, the stereotypes intensify around hygiene, aggression and outsider status. The utterance "people who eat a lot of pepper" draws on food symbolism to portray the Okun people as hot-tempered and aggressive. Pepper functions metaphorically as irritability and

volatility, framing Okun's identity as emotionally unstable. As with similar metaphors elsewhere in the data, this utterance is an ideological construction rather than an empirical claim. Pragmatically, it prepares the ground for suspicion and avoidance by presenting the Okun people as predisposed to conflict. Also, insider-outsider distinctions become explicit in "strangers". Unlike subtler forms of othering, this label directly excludes Okun people from the moral and social community of the Ebira. According to Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, naming a group as "strangers" is a powerful boundary-marking act that strengthens in-group solidarity while delegitimising the out-group's claims to belonging (Giles et al., 1977). This outsider framing has tangible consequences; strangers are not owed trust, intimacy, or inclusion, particularly in political or marital relations. Lastly, hygienic metaphors are especially prominent in Table 3b. Utterances such as "dirty people without good toilet habits" and "dubious people/people who defecate" dehumanise Okun people by associating them with dirt and uncontrolled bodily functions. In pragmatic terms, hygienic metaphors are among the strongest forms of face attack, as they symbolically deny the target group dignity and civility. Brown and Levinson's framework explains why such utterances provoke strong emotional responses. They threaten both positive face (approval, or respect) and negative face (freedom from imposition and surveillance). Culpeper (1996) further notes that references to taboo bodily functions constitute extreme impoliteness, designed to humiliate and stigmatise.

Across both tables, these Ebira utterances function as discursive justifications for political, marital and cultural exclusion. In framing Igala people as fetish, gluttonous and culturally alien and Okun people as dirty, aggressive strangers, Ebira speakers construct moral narratives that make exclusion appear rational and necessary. Marriage across these boundaries becomes undesirable, political cooperation risky and cultural integration implausible. From a Peace Pragmatics perspective, this language actively undermines peace by reproducing suspicion and rivalry through everyday discourse (Mey, 2006). Importantly, the utterances in Tables 3a and 3b should not be read as descriptive truths but as ideological constructions that serve specific social purposes. They reinforce Ebira in-group identity by establishing a shared repertoire of negative images about "others." They legitimise social distance by moralising difference and they sustain inter-ethnic rivalry by continually rehearsing narratives of danger, impurity and incompatibility. As Mey (2006) argues, peace is not merely the absence of violence but a communicative achievement; the language documented here works in the opposite direction, entrenching conflict at the level of everyday meaning-making.

Tables 3a and 3b demonstrate how Ebira perceptions of Igala and Okun peoples are linguistically encoded through hygienic metaphors, food symbolism, spiritual labelling and insider–outsider distinctions. Mapped onto Peace Pragmatics, Impoliteness Theory, Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory and Face Theory, these utterances emerge as powerful face-threatening acts and boundary markers that sustain inter-group tension rather than promote coexistence in Kogi State.

Summary Findings, Conclusion and Recommendation

With respect to major findings, the lexico-semantic analysis of the study demonstrates that everyday inter-group talk in Kogi State is a potent generator of distrust and exclusion. Across the six tables, Igala, Okun and Ebira speakers routinely deploy food metaphors (for example, "pepper", "benniseed", "dog-eating"), hygienic imagery (dirt and defecation), moral evaluations (deceit, betrayal and stubbornness) and spiritual labels (fetishism) to

depict out-groups as inferior, dangerous or contaminating. These utterances operate as collective face-threatening acts (FTAs) and normalised impoliteness strategies that consolidate in-group solidarity by contrastive negative othering; legitimise social distance and practical exclusion (notably in marriage and local politics); and reproduce interethnic suspicion and rivalry across administrative and social domains. These empirical patterns are documented in the study's data tables and discussion.

Inter-group hostility in Kogi State is not only a matter of material competition or history but is actively reproduced and therefore potentially remediable through everyday linguistic practice. From the vantage of Mey's Peace Pragmatics, language is both the medium of conflict and the resource for peace. Thus, while the dataset shows pervasive conflict-enacting discourse, it also points to pragmatic entry-points for communicative repair (Mey, 2006). Impoliteness theory (Culpeper) and Face framework (Brown & Levinson) explain the force and likely social consequences of the insults; Giles et al.'s ethnolinguistic identity perspective explains why such language is attractive as an identity-maintenance device. Crucially, the findings indicate that linguistic interventions, if contextually sensitive, can reduce face-threat, weaken exclusionary narratives and open pathways to reconciliation.

The study makes the following far-reaching recommendations for peace-building and harmonious co-existence. First, *Institutionalise 'peace-linguistics' education* by integrating modules on peace pragmatics, media literacy and inter-group communication into secondary, tertiary and local leadership training so speakers can recognise and resist dehumanising metaphors (Mey, 2006; Culpeper, 2011). Second is *Community dialogue and structured contact* where stakeholders sponsor recurring, facilitated inter-ethnic dialogues and mixed social projects (schools, markets, or cultural festivals) that allow repeated positive contact, reducing stereotype salience and creating new, non-stigmatising narratives (Giles et al., 1977). Third is *Media and speech governance* to establish local media codes and rapid-response counter-speech teams to identify and mitigate broadcast or social-media FTAs before they escalate into violence. Train journalists in non-stigmatising reporting. Another is *Leadership and restorative practices* designed to train political, traditional and religious leaders in face-sensitive communication and restorative justice methods to transform public FTAs into apology, acknowledgement and reparation when harms occur. Also, formulate *a policy for inclusive governance and social ties* to promote inclusive appointment and representation practices across local government and institutions; support scholarship/exchange programmes and incentives for inter-group family ties while protecting voluntariness. The last is *Research and monitoring* by funding a holistic, mixed-methods follow-up (e.g. longitudinal discourse-ethnography + surveys + intervention trials) so that descriptive linguistic analysis is complemented by evaluative research on which communicative interventions actually reduce hostility, ensuring recommendations are evidence-based rather than prescriptive. Finally, though a linguistic study must remain essentially descriptive, accurately documenting how people talk where discourse demonstrably fuels harm, scholars and stakeholders have a pragmatic responsibility to propose contextually appropriate, evidence-based interventions. Grounded in Mey's positive framing of peace pragmatics, a combined programme of education, mediated contact, leadership training and rigorous follow-up research offers the best route from contested talk to sustainable coexistence in Kogi State.

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