



Face Negotiation Strategies in Selected Nyesom Wike's Media Interviews: A Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract: This study focuses on the strategic use of face acts by Nyesom Wike in media interactions within the time frame of his governorship of Rivers State (2015–2023) and ministerial position in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory (2023 to present). Although studies on politeness breaches and the face work among journalists have been conducted in the context of Nigerian political discourse, there is still much to be explored on the strategic use of face acts by politicians for political branding and identity construction. In particular, not much attention has been paid to the systematic use of face acts by Nigerian politicians in navigating governance problems, evading accountability, and exhibiting power in impromptu media interactions. Using qualitative thematic analysis, this study examined ten purposively sampled media chats of Wike, a prominent Nigerian political figure, with journalists on Channels Television and TVC News (2022–2025). The data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the framework of Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987). Findings reveal that the political figure, Nyesom Wike, applies several forms of face strategies, including bald on-record face threats, positive and negative politeness, off-record avoidance, and ironic reversal, contextually to negotiate power, construct identity, and brand his political style. The study adds to face management literature by providing an example of how facework is an integral part of power struggle and political branding in African political communication.

Keywords: Face acts; Nigerian political discourse; media interviews; Nyesom Wike; politeness strategies; political branding

1. Introduction

Politics, which involves negotiation of power, governance, and the creation of identity, is highly contingent on language. As pointed out by Heywood (2013), “politics” comes from the Greek word “polis” meaning a social process through which people make, sustain, and alter their rules of life. In today's world, the process has become even more mediated since politicians have started using language as an instrument to shape opinions and exert power over their citizens (Ajayi, 2018; Crystal, 2008). The process is very common in Nigeria, a nation that is quite politically dramatic and dynamic (Aworo-Okoroh & Salihu, 2018).

The concept of face, which is viewed as the projection, protection, and enhancement of “a positive public image in interactions with others,” forms an important part of Nigerian politicians' media practices (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Despite the extensive exploration of facework in different

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social institutions, relatively little research exists on how face work strategically functions in Nigerian politics through media interviews. Current research mainly focuses on impolite language used in online election campaigns (Ajayi, 2018; Taiwo et al., 2021); face-threatening acts in quasi-judicial hearings (Unuabonah, 2019); and aggressions through language in political conversations (Onyeama et al., 2023). In a recent study, however, Esuola and Okunade (2026) shifted focus to the proactive role of media in regulating politicians' face in their political interviews, showing that face-threatening acts can be legitimate in terms of adversarial accountability.

However, there are some key limitations: up to date, the issue of face act utilization by Nigerian politicians in the process of media chats for the purposes of political branding, leadership negotiation, and identity construction has not been systemically and comprehensively researched. Although some studies deal with language manipulation (Ayeomoni, 2005; Akinwotu, 2013), ideological projection (Akinmameji, 2020), and hate speech (Chiluwa et al., 2020) by politicians, none of them has paid attention to the interesting and research-worthy use of face management as a tool for political positioning in unscripted media settings. The problem is especially important because media interviews can be viewed as the settings of 'cross-firing' where politicians need to combine accountability and positive presentation of self (Esuola & Okunade, 2026; Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

This study bridges this gap through the analysis of the face work used by Nyesom Wike, a Nigerian politician well known for his provocative, aggressive, and controversial public speaking manner. Nyesom Wike is a perfect subject for the study due to his unique speech style and presence in the media during two major political periods: when he served as Governor of Rivers State (2015–2023) and now that he is Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (2023 to date). Four research questions inform this study: i. What types of face acts does Nyesom Wike use in his media interviews? ii. In what way are these face acts used as political branding and identity-construction tools? iii. How does the context affect the choice of face work by Wike? iv. What politeness strategies lie at the core of Wike's face work, and in what way do they coincide or differ from the model developed by Brown and Levinson (1987)? These queries are operationalized using the framework provided by the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), a model that can be used for classifying face-threatening acts (FTAs), face-saving acts, and five politeness strategies (on-record bald strategy, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record, and avoiding FTAs). This theoretical model is supplemented by van Dijk's (1997) Political Discourse Analysis model that focuses on the ideological and power aspects of political discourse.

There are at least three major ways in which this study enriches the increasing literature on face management in political communication in Africa. First, it applies Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to a non-Western political context, thus answering Spencer-Oatey's (2008) call for culture-sensitive studies as well as Gu's (1990) call to conduct more cross-cultural studies of politeness in general. Second, this study focuses on a politician's face management strategies rather than on the face management strategies used by journalists, as was the case in Esuola and Okunade's (2026) research. Third, it highlights the issue of language, power, and identity in relation to Nigeria's evolving democracy.

2. Literature Review

Language is almost inextricably connected to politics, as the latter can scarcely operate without the former (Ajayi, 2020). Michira (2014) observes that since politics is fundamentally concerned with control and manipulation, the role of language becomes indispensable. Building on this premise, the

present study reviews scholarship on how language has been deployed for manipulative and control purposes within the Nigerian political context and beyond.

Numerous studies have explored the manipulative nature of political language, including works by Ayeomoni (2005), Adeyanju (2006), Akinwotu (2013), Akinkulere (2015), Akinrinlola (2015), Sharndama (2015), Aremu (2017), Fowobayi et al. (2018), Balogun and Amodu (2018), Akinmameji (2020), and Ajayi (2020). These have largely engaged with ideological issues and power dynamics in inaugural and Independence Day speeches of Nigerian presidents. From the perspective of hate speech, prominent contributions include Chilwa et al. (2020), Eyo et al. (2021), Obiora et al. (2021), and Sunday (2021). With respect to political campaign speeches, the works of Agbo et al. (2018), Oparinde et al. (2021), Omidiora et al. (2020), and Mensah et al. (2022) are remarkable. Furthermore, scholarly works by Aikoriogic and Ugwu (2013), Aremu (2019), Akinmameji (2020), Unuabonah and Boluwaduro (2020), Fawunmi and Taiwo (2021), and Ojo et al. (2022) have engaged with ideological stances and discursive practices.

Within Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) tradition, Ayeomoni (2005) and Akinkulere (2015) agree that inaugural speeches of Nigerian political actors are replete with rhetorical devices that add manipulative force. Similarly, Akinrinlola (2015) observes that President Buhari employs verbal and nominal devices to project obligation and collectivism. It should be highlighted that inaugurals represent expressions of hope and optimism, according to Fowobayi et al. (2022). Adeyanju (2006) observes, through a discussion of important speeches made by influential Nigerian political personalities such as Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, General Yakubu Gowon, President Olusegun Obasanjo, and General Ibrahim Babangida, that pragmatic decisions serve solidarity with the citizens. Akinwotu (2013) suggests that the nomination inaugurals of Obafemi Awolowo and MKO Abiola illustrate solidarity speech acts; this submission is re-echoed by Aremu (2017). Balogun and Amodu (2018) reveal that former President Goodluck Jonathan's speeches are replete with repetition as a rhetorical device, like former US President Barack Obama. Ajayi (2020) notes that strategic positive self-representation and negative other-representation characterise President Buhari's 2019 Independence Day speech. Akinmameji (2020) engages with assertion and pronominals to project power and leadership ideology in Obasanjo's speeches. Sunday (2021) explores the sociocognitive dimension of campaign speeches, observing that they are characterised by hate elements, as political actors reference opponents' negative pasts to foreground incompetence. Obiora et al. (2021) affirm that hate elements: accusations, judgment, and mockery constitute linguistic devices in Nigerian political actors' language.

While Eyo et al. (2022) examine labelling within Nigeria's political arena, Chilwa et al. (2020) investigate the use of hate language in speeches given by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). In Eyo et al., the authors adopt the impoliteness theory proposed by Culpeper (1996, 2008, 2011). The labelling concept is used as an instrument for self-promotion. In contrast, Chilwa et al. (2020) discuss some linguistic characteristics that people may apply while delivering hate speech. Moreover, Omidiora et al. (2020) study political jingles in Nigeria, showing their pragmatic functions in terms of face saving, assertiveness, and education. Agbo et al. (2018) investigate metaphorical language use in political discourse, pointing out that Nigerian politicians embed their ideologies into language. Also, Oparinde et al. (2019) study political jingles from the perspective of manipulative language use.

However, manipulation is not confined to Nigerian political discourse. For example, McClay (2017) and Korhonen (2017) prove the global application of manipulative language use. McClay (2017)

applies van Dijk's ideology concept and examines how Donald Trump applied the *us-them* dichotomy in his pre-2016 campaign speeches. Essentially, all reviewed works have engaged with different aspects of language use in Nigerian and global political spaces. However, Esuola and Okunade (2026) note that media interviews are contexts where accountability and power are negotiated, but the role of face acting remains underexplored. The present study shares the same context with the aforementioned studies, especially in their demonstration of the nexus between language and politics, but is significantly different in that it primarily focuses on face acts in Nyesom Wike's media chats. While other aspects of language use in the Nigerian political context have been heavily explored, almost nothing, to our knowledge, has been done on the deployment of face acts in Wike's media chats.

We argue that, since there is always tension in unscripted media chats, politicians must balance public accountability with positive self-projection. An ideal example is Nyesom Wike, known for his provocative, blunt, and controversial statements in media engagements. Building on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and van Dijk's (1997) Political Discourse Analysis theory, this study focuses on face in political discourse within media chats with reference to Wike, providing insight into politeness, power, and political identity in a non-Western democracy.

3. Theoretical Orientation

This research is based on the Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987), which serves as the fundamental framework for recognizing and classifying face acts in Nyesom Wike's media interviews. Although the research recognizes other theoretical approaches to the issue of face and politeness, Politeness Theory is used as the key framework for three main reasons: first, its classification of face-threatening acts and politeness strategies allows for the systematization of linguistic means of achieving politeness; second, it has already been used in Nigerian political discourse (Ajayi, 2018; Unuabonah, 2019; Esuola & Okunade, 2026); third, its dyadic concept of face fits well into the nature of media interviews.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face is the public image that everyone would like to claim for himself. The face notion in politeness theory suggests that there are two basic face wants – positive face (wanting to be liked and valued) and negative face (wanting to avoid any impositions). Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are actions that are face-threatening in nature by their very definition. In political media interviews, typical examples of FTAs may be direct questions about accountability that pose a threat to negative face and accusations of misconduct posing a threat to positive face. There are five super-strategies used for FTA management, such as bald on record (direct face threats without any modification), positive politeness (showing solidarity and approval), negative politeness (showing deference and non-imposition), off record (indirect FTAs), and avoidance.

In addition to Brown and Levinson's theory, Interaction Ritual by Goffman (1967) and Political Discourse Analysis by van Dijk (1997) are utilized as supporting theoretical perspectives. Goffman highlights the role played by face in interaction, while van Dijk explores the importance of face strategies in constructing political identities and legitimate power relations. The three theories are synthesized in such a way that Brown and Levinson offer the tools for coding and recognizing which face strategies are deployed; Goffman shows how those strategies are interactionally negotiated; and van Dijk highlights the political relevance of those strategies.

The analysis process employs systematic coding of data. The coding is done by noting the presence of FTAs, the politeness strategies used, the faces involved, and the context. This coding process

ensures that the analysis is replicable and sensitive to context, hence making it possible to analyze the forms, context, and political uses of face acts made by Wike.

4. Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative research methodology suitable for conducting a thematic analysis of face acts in Ezenwo Nyesom Wike's media chats across two different phases of his political career: his gubernatorial period as Governor of Rivers State (2015–2023) and the current phase as Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (2023–present). Wike was chosen as the case study due to the controversial public image that he creates because of a unique communication style characterized by bluntness, straightforwardness, and face aggression. In this context, the present corpus consists of ten video recordings of Wike's media chats and interviews that were carried out between 2022 and 2025. This timeframe includes the last year of his work as Governor and the first years of his work as FCT Minister. The video recordings were downloaded from the YouTube channels of major Nigerian television stations: Channels Television (5 video recordings), TVC News (3 videos), SYMFONI Channel (1 video recording), and News Central (1 video recording). YouTube was used because of open access to authentic audiovisual materials needed for pragmatic analysis.

A purposive sampling method was utilized whereby the samples were purposefully selected based on their relevance to the research questions. The process of sample selection was first done via screening videos out of 30 videos initially sampled through keyword search (“Nyesom Wike interview”, “Wike media chat”) and screening according to criteria of inclusivity, which include interviews where Wike is the main interlocutor speaking on politically sensitive issues with visible and audible interaction between participants. During the final selection of the samples, more consideration was placed on diverse thematic content (issues of governance, political conflict, and accountability), contextual variety (two different institutions), and more interaction. Three videos from Wike's governorship (March 2022–March 2023) and seven videos from his ministry period (March 2024–November 2025) were used. The videos were fully transcribed verbatim with numbering of speaker turns, marking overlaps using square brackets and notations of nonverbal actions in parentheses. Six excerpts were singled out from the transcribed text based on rich face acts.

The coding framework used for data analysis is based on the Politeness Theory taxonomy of Brown and Levinson (1987), which includes: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record, and avoiding face-threatening acts (FTAs). Every speech act was coded according to the type of politeness strategy applied, the face being threatened, and contextual information. To achieve a high level of rigour in the analysis, triangulation of excerpts, justification of coding, and exemplification by quotation were used.

5. Data Analysis

5.1. Political Evasion in Media Chat

The use of evasion by political actors during political discourse is a strategy for avoiding misunderstanding and damage to the political career. Evasion is a way in which complicated discussions are avoided so as to avoid unwanted reactions from the public and the media (Al-Nouri & Jebur, 2024).

Excerpt 1

LINE 1 – JOURNALIST 1: I am going to ask you a point-blank question.

LINE 2 – WIKE: Yes.

LINE 3 – JOURNALIST 1: This crisis, if I may call it that, between you and Sim Fubara, is there going to be an end to it?

LINE 4 – WIKE: I do not know what you mean by a crisis between me and Sim Fubara.

LINE 5 – JOURNALIST 1: That is why I said, let me put it that way.

LINE 6 – WIKE: I do not have any crisis with him.

LINE 7 – JOURNALIST 1: So, whatever is going on now in Rivers State, is there going to be a solution soon?

LINE 8 – WIKE: I do not understand.

LINE 9 – JOURNALIST 1: You do understand, honorable Minister.

LINE 10 – JOURNALIST 2: Okay, let me put it in a different way. Is the atmosphere right now to lift the state of emergency?

LINE 11 – WIKE: I am not the president who declares a state of emergency.

LINE 12 – JOURNALIST 2: Yeah, but it is your state. Do you think there is enough peace now to restore democracy?

LINE 13 – WIKE: If Mr. President had called me that time, I would not have agreed for a state of emergency. So, he knows. He knows when to lift. He has everything on his table. I do not know.

LINE 14 – JOURNALIST 2: But politically, is it right?

LINE 15 – WIKE: I have never supported it.

(Channels Television, June 2, 2025)

The excerpt presents a media chat between Nyesom Wike and a panel of journalists concerning two politically sensitive issues: the perceived conflict between Wike and his successor, Siminalayi Fubara, and the subsequent declaration of a state of emergency in Rivers State. The interaction illustrates how Wike deploys politeness strategies to negotiate face in a potentially face-threatening environment. The exchange opens with Journalist 1 announcing a forthcoming direct question (line 1), thereby priming Wike for a face-threatening query. Wike's affirmative response (line 2) signals his readiness. In line 3, the journalist employs hedging (“This crisis, if I may call it that”) an instance of on-record negative politeness—to mitigate the threat to Wike's negative face (his desire to be free from imposition). The use of “crisis” implicitly characterises the Wike-Fubara relationship as conflictual.

Wike immediately rejects this characterisation (line 4: “I do not know what you mean by a crisis...”), defending his negative face by refusing the presupposition embedded in the journalist's question. This forces a reformulation. Following the journalist's clarification (line 5), Wike explicitly denies any crisis (line 6), thereby protecting his positive face the desire to be seen as a peaceful, non-confrontational political actor.

When the journalist rephrases the question more broadly (line 7: “whatever is going on now in Rivers State”), she shifts to a bald on-record strategy, intensifying the threat to Wike's negative face by imposing accountability. Wike resists through feigned ignorance (line 8: “I do not understand”).

Journalist 2 then deploys an on-record negative politeness strategy (line 9: “You do understand, honorable Minister”), simultaneously acknowledging Wike's superior status while exposing his evasion.

Journalist 3 attempts a different approach (line 10), using negative politeness to reduce imposition (“let me put it in a different way”). This tactic—reframing a question when a politician evades—is a recognised journalistic strategy (Clayman, 2001). Wike again deflects (line 11), asserting that only the President can answer regarding the state of emergency, thereby preserving his negative face by disclaiming authority.

Journalist 2 persists with a bald on-record challenge (line 12: “Do you think there is enough peace now to restore democracy?”). In response, Wike engages in a face-enhancing act (line 13), projecting himself as a responsible leader who would have opposed the emergency if consulted, while simultaneously deferring to presidential authority. When pressed on the political propriety of the declaration (line 14), Wike avoids direct judgement (line 15), reiterating his personal non-support without condemning the President's decision. This strategic ambiguity distances him from future criticism while maintaining his positive face as a principled yet loyal subordinate.

Through evasion, selective rejection of presuppositions, and strategic self-presentation, Wike demonstrates a sophisticated repertoire of face acts, balancing accountability with image preservation in a high-stakes media encounter.

5.2. Identity Construction in Political Discourse

Political identity reflects the individual self of political actors through their language, beliefs, and even shared ideologies (Ojewole et al., 2025). Political identity is constructed through various processes by political actors or political parties as a group to negotiate and transform their political identities during interaction; this identity is not permanent, since it can change during discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Wodak et al., 2009).

Excerpt 2

LINE 1 – JOURNALIST: Your Excellency, let me take you back to the Peter Obi controversy. There are insinuations that your humble self and Governor Seyi Makinde betrayed your other three colleagues in the Integrity Governor's Group. There is actually a video that is made out by Bwala, Barrister Daniel Bwala.

LINE 2 – WIKE: Bwala, who is Bwala? The one from Borno?

LINE 3 – JOURNALIST: Bauchi.

LINE 4 – WIKE: Is he from Bauchi?

LINE 5 – JOURNALIST: Thank you, Bauchi.

LINE 6 – WIKE: I do not know where.

LINE 7 – JOURNALIST: The one who left APC.

LINE 8 – WIKE: Yes. I do not know where most of these boys come from.

LINE 9 – JOURNALIST: He left APC when the issue of Muslim-Muslim tickets started.

LINE 10 – WIKE: Yes. Yes. Well, as far as we are concerned, our interest is that a southern president should emerge. That is our interest. Our interest is that a southern president should emerge.

(Channels Television, March 22, 2023)

The exchange begins with a journalist seeking clarification regarding an accusatory video in which Barrister Daniel Bwala alleged that Nyesom Wike and Governor Seyi Makinde betrayed their colleagues in the G5 group. In line 1, the journalist mitigates the force of his question through politeness: he attributes the allegation to Bwala's video and characterises it as an “insinuation.” Despite this mitigation, the journalist nevertheless threatens Wike and Makinde's negative face by imposing a demand for accountability regarding their loyalty and political integrity. This constitutes an on-record negative politeness strategy.

In line 2, Wike counters by downplaying the accusation itself, shifting focus to the identity of the accuser. He feigns ignorance of Bwala's origin, thereby threatening Bwala's positive face rendering him insignificant and unworthy of remembrance. By deliberately misidentifying Bwala's origin, Wike employs a bald on-record strategy aimed at dismissing the accusation and defending his own face. The journalist provides corrective information in line 3, identifying Bwala as from Bauchi. Wike, however, persists in his feigned ignorance (line 4: “Is he from Bauchi?”). The journalist appreciatively acknowledges Wike's partial identification (line 5). Yet in line 6, Wike continues to insist that he does not know Bwala's origin, his repeated emphasis signalling that Bwala is too unimportant to be known. From lines 3 to 6, the interaction focuses not on the substance of the accusation but on Bwala's identity, a strategic deflection engineered by Wike.

In line 7, the journalist attempts a more detailed identification that Wike cannot plausibly deny. Wike then concedes knowledge of the accuser but dismisses him as “these boys” (line 8). This bald on-record act severely threatens Bwala's positive face, as referring to a professional of his status as a “boy” is profoundly degrading. Simultaneously, Wike enhances his own positive face by positioning himself as a superior whose actions are beyond question from an inferior. This manoeuvre allows Wike to avoid any substantive response to the betrayal allegation. In line 9, the journalist employs an off-record strategy, indirectly challenging Wike by referencing Bwala's departure from the APC in protest of the Muslim-Muslim ticket, thereby attempting to restore Bwala's significance. Wike, however, completely evades the question (line 10), redirecting the discussion to an unrelated matter: the G5's collective interest in a southern president. This evasion aligns with Clayman's (2001) observation that political actors routinely deflect questions that threaten their public image.

Throughout this excerpt, Wike constructs a political identity defined by hierarchy and authority. He distances himself from Bwala, whom he portrays as insignificant and of lower status, someone whose words merit no response. By delegitimising the accuser rather than engaging with the accusation, Wike effectively manages face while sidestepping accountability.

5.3. Claiming Relevance through Political Achievements

Political achievement encompasses the various accomplishments made by a political actor, which could be for his or her party or the people. Political actors delight in mentioning their achievements, which can be seen as an act of self-mention. During political presentations, politicians mention their political achievements and experience to promote their relevance and hard work as a public servant and a member of a political party.

Excerpt 3

LINE 1 – JOURNALIST 1: The outcome of the presidential election is exactly what you want, the five of you. Going forward now, what kind of role would you be playing in the politics going forward?

LINE 2 – WIKE: What kind of what?

LINE 3 – JOURNALIST 1: Role. What role would you be playing in politics, strategic roles?

LINE 4 – WIKE: Well, we are still politicians. What, you mean in the administration that is coming up or what?

LINE 5 – JOURNALIST 1: In your party, in the political party.

LINE 6 – WIKE: Well, say in our party.

LINE 7 – JOURNALIST 1: Because the five of you have said you are not leaving the party. Yes, but of course, this is not the end of your political party yet.

LINE 8 – WIKE: Yes.

LINE 9 – JOURNALIST 1: And it is still going forward. So, what role would you be playing? Because the presidential candidate of the PDP, who did not win the election, is still also a member of the party with all of his supporters. So, how are you all going to co-exist going forward?

LINE 10 – JOURNALIST 2: Recently you said the victory for the PDP in Rivers State is not, you know, linked to the national.

LINE 11 – WIKE: Yes, they did not give us support. Let me say this, Rivers State is PDP, the governorship is PDP, the senatorial seat is PDP, the House of Rep, 90% PDP, House of Assembly, 100% PDP. So, what do you mean by what role are we going to still play? It is not about me, it is about Rivers State now.

LINE 12 – JOURNALIST 1: But you as an individual, you as an individual, your other colleagues except Governor Seyi Makinde, the four of you that will soon be out of office yet, are you not afraid of being seen by your other colleagues within the PDP hierarchy as betrayers who wrecked the PDP?

LINE 13 – WIKE: How can people who did not even deliver call us, that delivered, betrayers? Take for example, how he lost his polling unit? For his own presidential candidate, he lost his polling unit. I won three senatorial seats for PDP. I won eleven House of Rep seats for PDP. I won the governorship for PDP. I won over thirty-two houses of assembly for PDP. He did not get governor. So, who should, will call somebody a betrayer? Me that won or you that lost? No, tell me. Jigawa did not win the presidential election, they did not win the governorship election for PDP. Right? Niger State did not win the presidential election. He did not win the governorship election. Saliu Babangida did not win. Right? In Yobe, we did not win the governorship election. I am nothing. Adamu was in it. Amanda was in it. In Cross River State, they did not win. In Imo State, Emeka, they did not even win one seat. I hear the assembly seat, out of 27, APC took 26. In Sokoto State, I hear we did not win a governorship. So, what are we talking about? Who really, who are those who are really saying that there is PDP today? Somebody like Seyi Makinde, somebody like Rivers State. So, is it those who lost in their states that will say we did bad to PDP, or we that won, to still make sure that PDP exists, that you will now say that we are betrayers?

(Channels Television, March 22, 2023)

This excerpt, drawn from a media chat during Wike's governorship, illustrates how politeness strategies are deployed to assert relevance and loyalty by invoking political achievements. The interaction opens with Journalist 1 noting that the presidential election outcome favoured the G5

group. He then asks, “what kind of role would you be playing in the politics going forward?” (line 1). This question constitutes a face-threatening act against Wike's negative face, as it imposes on him the obligation to publicly define his future political role. It also implicitly positions Wike and the G5 as influencers of the election results. In line 2, Wike seeks clarification of the term “role,” likely feigning misunderstanding to resist the threat. This tactic buys time for evasion.

Journalist 1 clarifies that he refers to political roles (line 3). Wike responds with what Clayman (2001) terms a “roundabout trajectory”: “Well, we are still politicians” (line 4) an answer that neither directly responds nor is entirely irrelevant. He then shifts imposition back to the journalist by requesting further clarification, an on-record strategy against the journalist's negative face.

Persisting, the journalist specifies “in your party” (line 5), intensifying the threat by personifying the PDP. Wike employs negative politeness (line 6) to defend his negative face, rejecting the personification: “Well, say in *our* party.” The softening “well” allows him to resist imposition without confrontation. The journalist then reminds Wike of the G5's public commitment to remaining in the PDP (line 7), threatening their negative face by implying future conflict. Wike responds minimally with “yes” (line 8), a strategically cautious evasion.

Noticing Wike's consistent deflection, the journalist reframes the question bald on-record (line 9), threatening Wike's positive face by projecting him as a traitor who betrayed the PDP candidate for the APC. Journalist 2 intervenes (line 10), asking why Wike claimed the PDP's victory in Rivers State was not nationally linked, a face-threatening act imposing explanation. Wike responds by listing political achievements (line 11), projecting the G5 as indispensable to the PDP and denying any need for future roles, asserting that citizens hold the power.

Journalist 1 reasserts the challenge (line 12), now addressing Wike as an individual and baldly accusing him of betrayal. In response, Wike enhances his positive face (line 13) by cataloguing his electoral victories; for instance, winning three senatorial seats, eleven House of Representatives seats, and over thirty-two assembly seats, while contrasting these with the failures of his accusers. He threatens their positive face through bald on-record references to their losses across various states, concluding: “Who really, who are those who are really saying that there is PDP today? Somebody like Seyi Makinde, somebody like Rivers State.” By positioning himself and the G5 as the party's true pillars, Wike dismisses the betrayal accusation through sustained self-presentation as a competent and indispensable political actor.

Excerpt 4

Background Information: Media corps enquire about Wike's loyalty to his political party, which led to a self-presentation of his political achievements.

LINE 1 – JOURNALIST 2: Your Excellency, life provides us with options at any given time. Yes. In this situation, you have the option of leaving the party. Are you considering that?

LINE 2 – WIKE: I cannot. I have told you this is the party we have fought for. Look, I have left this party before, I left this party and came back, and now became national chairman. I am not going to leave this party.

LINE 3 – JOURNALIST 3: But are you worried that by May, because there are people within the PDP who have voiced that opinion, that by May 29 you will become an ordinary former governor?

LINE 4 – WIKE: What did you say?

LINE 5 – JOURNALIST 3: Are you not worried some forces will kick against you?

LINE 6 – WIKE: Who is that force? Am I not aware that my tenure is eight years? Am I just knowing today that my tenure is eight years? I fought a fight, not because I do not know I am leaving. How many of them will fight that kind of fight? Their relevance is not because of whether you are a former governor or not. That is the mistake most of them make. As a governor, since 2019, I have never slept in Abuja; most of them live in Abuja. I live in the village, I communicate with my people. I relate to my people. That is their irrelevance.

LINE 7 – JOURNALIST 3: Do you think you will still be able to win the level of influence that you have now after leaving?

LINE 8 – WIKE: You know, that is what people...

LINE 9 – JOURNALIST 3: (interrupts) Have you invested enough in the PDP for you to be able to count on that, that after May, you will see commands of the level, appreciable level of...

LINE 10 – WIKE: (interrupts) Mind you, I was not a governor when I was seated, when a sitting governor was here. So, what is the relevance? I was not a governor when, in 2015, I defeated the candidate of the sitting governor. It was 1,000,000 to 170,000 votes. Was I a governor then? How many governors have been able to survive the onslaught of the federal government against them? See, it is not about you being a governor or not being a governor, it is about yourself. How you conduct yourself, how your people see you. That is what makes you irrelevant. It is not whether you are a former governor or you are not a former governor.

LINE 11 – JOURNALIST 1: So, beyond May, you will continue to be a force in the PDP?

LINE 12 – WIKE: The way I have carried myself and the way I have related with my people, I do not think I have any problem. In any case, what is relevant? I can win my unit, I can win my ward, I can win my local government. Is it to go to Abuja and attend the former governors' forum meeting and then go to my state and lose the election? So, my relevance is—if I am invited to a meeting in Abuja, is that what the relevance is? I do not give a damn about that. My relevance is here. Deliver your state, that is your relevance. Not using other people's state votes to be relevant in Abuja. If they are the ones now, you will see all of them flying everywhere. We told them, we will win, Wike or no Wike, with Makinde or no Makinde, with Ortom or no Ortom, with Ugwu or no Ugwu. We would have seen that happening. Now, let them fly now, let them go now to Abuja and stay. We would have seen their attack dogs with them on Arise. You know we told Wike that we will bury him politically, has he not been buried? He lost woefully, he lost the governorship woefully. Now they cannot talk. I am the only governor who delivered 32 over 32. I am the only governor who delivered 3 over 3.

(Channels Television, March 22, 2023)

This excerpt demonstrates how Wike projects political relevance through self-presentation of his achievements, using face acts to enhance, defend, and maintain his public image when confronted with questions about loyalty and political capital. In line 1, Journalist 2 indirectly questions Wike's commitment to the PDP, asking: "In this situation, you have the option of leaving the party. Are you considering that?" The implication that other parties might welcome him constitutes a face-threatening act against Wike's negative face, imposing on him to clarify his loyalty. Wike responds (line 2) by asserting his deep ties to the party: "I have left this party before ... came back and now became national chairman. I am not going to leave this party." This refusal of imposition projects authority and accomplishment, thereby defending his negative face.

Journalist 3 intensifies the threat (line 3), going bald on-record to preempt evasion. He seeks clarity regarding internal party opposition. Wike, in line 4, protects his negative face by requesting

clarification himself, effectively diminishing the question's force. The journalist then challenges Wike's positive face (line 5): "Are you not worried some forces will kick against you?"—a direct assault on Wike's authority as party chairman. Wike counters (line 6) with a bald on-record strategy, threatening the negative face of his opponents: "Who is that force?" He reframes relevance not as political position but as connection to the people of Rivers State, dismissing his adversaries as "irrelevant." Journalist 3 persists (line 7), questioning whether Wike will retain influence after leaving office, implying that his power derives solely from the governorship.

After being interrupted (line 8), Wike seizes the floor in line 10. He catalogues achievements that predate his governorship, notably defeating a sitting governor's candidate in 2015 by a landslide (1,000,000 to 170,000 votes). He asks rhetorically how many governors have survived federal government onslaught, thereby projecting himself as a resilient, competent leader whose authority is not position-dependent. He further ridicules opponents, calling them "attack dogs on Arise," a bald on-record threat to their positive face.

In line 11, Journalist 1 baldly asks whether Wike will remain a force in the PDP. Wike counters immediately (line 12), anchoring his relevance in his relationship with his people and his electoral track record: "I am the only governor who delivered 32 over 32. I am the only governor who delivered 3 over 3." Through sustained self-presentation, he contrasts his tangible achievements with the failures of his accusers, projecting himself as an indispensable and impactful political actor. This strategic deployment of face acts transforms a line of questioning about potential post-tenure irrelevance into an affirmation of enduring political capital rooted in grassroots connection and proven performance.

5.4. Reputation Defence as a Response Strategy to Criticism in Nigerian Political Discourse

The Oxford Dictionary (2006) defines reputation as the idea that people already have about someone or something based on their past, while defence is a way of protecting someone or something by providing protection against criticism, in argument, attack, weather, illness, or external danger. Reputation defence is the protection of one's honor, which can be likened to protecting the public image from threat. Political actors use defence as a strategy to protect or restore their reputation, which is their public image from danger, such as criticisms from oppositions, journalists, and even citizens.

Excerpt 5

Background Information: Response to Babachir Lawal's criticisms of the Tinubu administration's performance and governance.

LINE 1 – SEUN: There is mounting economic pressure, and there are a lot of people, especially in the opposition, who think that this government is not doing enough. I heard a few days ago Babachir Lawal, former Secretary to the Government of the Federation, who says that the country is on a very dangerous path and we need to be careful, and he said a few things about the President and his approach. Part of what he says is that the President is unapproachable. In fact, he called him arrogant, one of those things which I thought might be very strong words, and a lot of Nigerians would think maybe this government is unapproachable, maybe this government does not even know what the average Nigerian is facing.

LINE 2 – WIKE: (laughs) Seun, sometimes there are people I have had respect for until events occur. You find out that you are just holding them in high esteem for nothing. When I was a

governor, I used to think that people like Babachir Lawal, people you should have respect for, until I started observing things that I never knew, that he is not a man you can really take for his words. I saw the interview, I watched the interview, and the unpalatable words he used against Mr. President, how he said that Mr. President is full of himself. This is unfortunate. This is a country. A man will come out on national television not to criticize genuinely what Mr. President has done wrong but to abuse Mr. President simply because he has had a relationship with Mr. President, simply because he had the opportunity to eat with Mr. President before. That has given him the latitude to come out on national television to say a President of a country is full of himself. He did not call him President, he says Bola. You know, if you have a problem with Mr. President before he became president, there is nothing wrong with you finding a way to sort out that problem.

LINE 3 – SEUN: So, his anger is about that...

LINE 4 – WIKE: It is certainly that.

(Channels Television, August 19, 2025)

This media chat between Nyesom Wike and political journalist Seun Okinbaloye illustrates how politicians strategically deploy reputation defence to protect their own public image and that of others from political criticism. The excerpt centres on Babachir Lawal's criticism of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, which the journalist extends to the entire government, challenging whether the cabinet understands the suffering of ordinary Nigerians.

In line 1, Seun introduces the economic pressures facing Nigerians, attributing the critique to a third party Babachir Lawal. This attribution functions as hedging, distancing Seun from the face threat directed at the President and the cabinet, including Wike as Minister of the FCT. Presenting the statement as reported speech is a common journalistic strategy to avoid responsibility for the question (Bull & Fetzer, 2010). Seun reports that Babachir used evaluative terms such as “unapproachable” and “arrogant,” escalating the threat to the President's positive face. He then intensifies the face-threatening act by asking Wike directly: “do you people know what is going on in the country at all?” a bald on-record challenge to the entire cabinet's awareness and responsiveness.

In line 2, Wike responds with laughter, a device that reduces the impact of the threat on his positive face. He then addresses the journalist by his first name, “Seun,” which, within Brown and Levinson's (1978) framework, constitutes a positive politeness strategy of “seeking common ground,” allowing Wike to maintain control and authority over the conversation. He then launches a reputation defence, shifting the negative commentary away from the government and onto the critic. Wike discredits Babachir by stating: “There are people I have had respect for until events occur — you are holding them in high esteem for nothing — he is not a man you can really take for his words.” These statements transform past respect into disappointment. Wike characterises Babachir's remarks as “unpalatable words” and “unfortunate,” lexical choices that downplay the criticism and frame it as inappropriate. He further diminishes Babachir's positive face by attributing the critique to personal grievance: Babachir's anger stems from not being chosen as the vice-presidential candidate. Thus, Wike defends the President's positive face by reframing the attack as motivated by disappointed ambition rather than genuine policy concern.

In line 3, Seun seeks confirmation that Babachir's anger is indeed about the lost position. Wike affirms in line 4: “It is certainly that.” Throughout the exchange, Wike avoids directly responding to Seun's core question, “do you people know what is going on?”, instead redirecting attention to the impropriety of the critic. This evasiveness, as Clayman and Heritage (2002) note, is a common

political tactic that diminishes the validity of the face-threatening act. This excerpt demonstrates that reputation defence serves as a strategic tool, enabling politicians to protect their face from criticism while simultaneously maintaining authority.

5.5. Irony and Political Self-positioning as Strategies for Denial

Electoral malpractice is the duplicity and manipulation of the outcome of an election (Aluaigba, 2016). Electoral malpractice allegations in Nigerian politics are rampant, as there are instances of oppositions and citizens accusing the winning party of electoral malpractice almost after every election. Electoral malpractice usually involves bribing of the electorate and election officials, violence through thugs to disrupt the election process, and falsification of electoral figures to win the election.

Excerpt 6

Background Information: Denial of an electoral malpractice allegation from the opposition as the source of power.

LINE 1 – SEUN: There was the election where they accused you of rigging and using every president.

LINE 2 – WIKE: Yes, yes, yes. I rigged when Jonathan was minister and was the president. I rigged, when Buhari was president. That is not correct. I also rigged in 2023 when Buhari was still president.

LINE 3 – SEUN: Why were you rigging?

LINE 4 – WIKE: (almost shouting) No, no. You said, they said I did.

LINE 5 – SEUN: They accused you of rigging.

LINE 6 – WIKE: I am only trying to prove to you. You are governor, I rigged you because Jonathan was president. That's what I am saying. I became governor, I rigged you. When Jonathan was no longer president, Buhari became president, I still rigged you. In 2023, you came and brought a governor, he did not win. He supported a presidential candidate, he did not win. I still rigged you. Why would I not be rigging you?

LINE 7 – SEUN: You are more superior than Amaechi locally in Rivers State as of today.

LINE 8 – WIKE: What do you mean by superior?

LINE 9 – SEUN: Politically superior.

LINE 10 – WIKE: Oh, I am very... No, it is not about being superior. I tell my people, my people know what I will do, what I will not do.

(Channels Television, August 19, 2025)

This excerpt illustrates how Nigerian political actors strategically avoid direct responses through ironic reversal and self-positioning, using face acts to mitigate the impact of electoral malpractice allegations. In line 1, Seun introduces the allegation by attributing it to an unspecified group “they accused you of rigging.” This off-record strategy allows Seun to maintain journalistic neutrality while threatening Wike's positive face, as the accusation undermines his integrity and portrays him as a criminal (Bull & Fetzer, 2010).

Wike responds in line 2 with ironic exaggeration, claiming to have rigged elections under multiple presidents (Jonathan, Buhari). By amplifying the accusation to absurdity, he defends his positive

face off-record, challenging the plausibility of the claim. Seun, however, drops hedging in line 3 and employs a bald on-record strategy: “Why were you rigging?”, treating Wike's irony as a confession and deliberately escalating the face threat.

In line 4, Wike clarifies: “No, no. You said, they said I did,” reasserting that his earlier statement was sarcastic. Seun persists (line 5), restating the accusation to prevent evasion. Wike then explains (line 6): “I am only trying to prove to you”—his exaggerated repetition (“I rigged you” across administrations) disarms Seun's framing. He reframes the issue as political competence rather than malpractice, noting that even when opponents fielded candidates, they lost. His rhetorical question, “Why would I not be rigging you?”, mocks the opponent, suggesting that “Wike rigged” is merely an excuse for defeat. Irony thus enhances his positive face as a politician who wins without rigging.

Seun shifts focus in line 7, asserting Wike's political superiority over Rotimi Amaechi. This compliment, however, threatens Wike's negative face by imposing an identity of dominance. Wike becomes cautious (line 8), requesting clarification rather than accepting the label (Bull & Mayer, 1993). Answering a question with another question “What do you mean by superior?” shifts imposition back to the journalist. Seun minimally clarifies (line 9): “Politically superior.”

In line 10, Wike begins a partial acceptance (“Oh, I'm very...”) but quickly redirects through tactical withdrawal: “No, it's not about being superior.” Accepting superiority could project arrogance, damaging his public image. Instead, he grounds his political standing in community relations: “I tell my people, my people know what I will do, what I will not do.” This reframing enhances his face as a transparent, dependable leader trusted by his constituents not by virtue of dominance, but through consistency and care.

6. Findings

From the analysis of the political discourse by Nyesom Wike in the six media chat excerpts, three key insights emerge. First, the use of face acts by Nyesom Wike goes beyond just face-threatening acts. In addition to bald face-threatening acts, such as labeling the accusers as “boys” (Excerpt 2) and making fun of his opponents' election defeats (Excerpt 3), he utilizes positive politeness tactics, such as referring to journalists by their names to establish common ground (Excerpt 1); negative politeness tactics, such as hedging and feigned ignorance to avoid imposition (Excerpt 4); and off-record evasion, such as irony (Excerpt 6).

Second, face acts serve as tools for proactive political branding. Nyesom Wike uses face acts to project himself as a decisive, competent, and people-oriented politician. He elevates his positive face by presenting himself as a capable politician who has won elections, earning “32 over 32” seats in the assembly and “3 over 3” seats in the senate (Excerpt 4), while at the same time diminishing the face value of his opponents as irrelevant and incapable.

Third, contextual factors influence the use of face acts. For politically contentious interactions accusations of betrayal, election misconduct, or bad governance Wike prefers evasion (feigned ignorance and topic switching) and ironic denial. However, when asked about his political significance, Wike uses bald on-record claims of success. The context sensitivity of facework is consistent with Esuola and Okunade's (2026) finding that face management in Nigeria's press media is culturally normed for adversarial accountability.

7. Conclusion

The use, politeness functions, and forms of face acts in the political discourse of Nyesom Wike were explored in relation to Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987). Through the analysis of six excerpts from media interviews during his governorship and ministership, the following three major findings were established. First, Nyesom Wike utilises face acts that go beyond the simple use of face-threatening acts, including bald on-record statements, positive and negative politeness, off-record avoidance, and ironic denial. Second, face acts are used proactively as a means of creating a political image in which Wike establishes himself as a decisive, competent, and people-friendly politician by delegitimising political opponents through strategic presentation of electoral successes. Third, the use of face acts is greatly influenced by context: evasion and ironic denial are mostly utilised in accountability situations, while bald on-record statements of success are utilised when talking about political relevance. Specifically, this paper found evasion through feigned ignorance (Excerpts 1 & 5), identity creation through discrediting accusers (Excerpt 2), self-promotion through political successes (Excerpts 3 & 4), reputation defence through delegitimising critics (Excerpt 5), and ironic denial of electoral malpractice accusations (Excerpt 6).

This is relevant to the expanding field of face management in African political communication, whereby the theoretical framework developed by Brown and Levinson has been extended to examine politically oriented discourse created through the media in Nigeria. This is because the study demonstrates that face management is an integral part of the process of power negotiation and political branding, and sheds light on politician-media relations in non-Western democracies. Furthermore, it addresses the need for politeness studies to be culture-bound by showing how face management works in an adversarial Nigerian media landscape.

Nevertheless, there are a number of limitations to this study. To begin with, the corpus consists of only ten interviews from four media sources, with Channels Television and TVC News being the most predominant. This limits the representation of the various media encounters that Wike is involved in. Secondly, the study is centred on Wike alone and, thus, lacks generalisability when it comes to other Nigerian politicians with varying communication methods. Thirdly, the fact that data collection was done using publicly available videos on YouTube might mean that some interactional elements are missed out in the process.

Future studies need to be conducted to address these weaknesses along several lines. Comparative studies that involve analyzing various face strategies among different Nigerian politicians would allow researchers to determine whether the face strategies used by Wike are idiosyncratic or common practices. Longitudinal studies that trace the development of face strategies throughout a political career would help illuminate how politicians learn and adjust their facework over time. Audience reception studies on how various audiences perceive politicians' face strategies would add another dimension to the current production-based approach. Cross-cultural comparative studies focusing on facework in media interviews of politicians in African democracies would allow researchers to identify culturally unique and universally applicable aspects of political face management. Finally, incorporating corpus linguistic methods into future studies would allow researchers to validate the patterns found in the current study quantitatively and possibly to identify frequency distributions of these strategies.

To conclude, the Wike case shows that, in Nigerian media politics, face management is a tool that helps navigate governance issues, evade accountability, and build political identity.

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