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## BEYOND METRICS: LANGUAGE USE, PERCEIVED FAIRNESS, AND PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES IN THE KWARA STATE PUBLIC SECTOR IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*This study examines the role of language use in performance appraisal systems and its influence on perceived fairness and performance outcomes in the public sector. It specifically investigates the effects of language clarity and feedback tone, as well as the mediating role of perceived fairness. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among civil servants in three ministries in Kwara State, Nigeria. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from established literature. Out of the 128 questionnaires administered, 120 valid responses were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The results indicate that language clarity and feedback tone significantly and positively influence perceived fairness. Perceived fairness, in turn, exerts a strong positive effect on performance outcomes. Mediation analysis reveals that perceived fairness significantly mediates the relationships between both language clarity and performance outcomes, and feedback tone and performance outcomes. These findings highlight the significant role of communication quality in shaping employee perceptions and behaviour within performance appraisal systems. This study contributes to public administration and performance management literature by introducing language as a critical communicative mechanism in appraisal systems. It extends Organizational Justice Theory and the Job Demands–Resources model by demonstrating how linguistic features influence fairness perceptions and performance outcomes. The study also provides empirical evidence from a developing administrative context, offering practical insights for improving public sector performance management through enhanced communication practices.*

**Keywords:** Language clarity, feedback tone, perceived fairness, performance appraisal, public sector

### 1. Introduction

Performance appraisal systems constitute a central pillar of public sector management, serving as mechanisms for evaluating employee contributions, guiding administrative decisions, and reinforcing accountability within government institutions. In line with the broader shift toward results-based management and performance-oriented reforms, appraisal systems have become increasingly institutionalized across public organizations, particularly in developing administrative contexts. However, despite their technical sophistication, these systems often underperform in achieving intended outcomes such as improved employee performance, motivation, and organizational effectiveness (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Van Dooren, Bouckaert, & Halligan, 2015). This limitation has been attributed not only to structural and procedural deficiencies but also to the communicative processes embedded within appraisal practices. In this regard, language emerges as a critical yet underexplored dimension of performance management in public administration (Speer, Perrotta & Kordsmeyer, 2026). Language plays a constitutive role in shaping how performance is defined, evaluated, and communicated within organizations. In performance appraisal contexts, language is not merely a neutral medium for transmitting information; rather, it actively constructs meanings, influences perceptions, and frames



evaluative judgments (Nwode & Anyadiiegwu 2023). The clarity with which appraisal criteria and feedback are communicated determines employees' ability to understand expectations and interpret evaluation outcomes. Similarly, the tone of feedback whether supportive, developmental, or punitive affects how employees perceive the intent and fairness of the appraisal process. Prior research in organizational communication suggests that ambiguous or overly bureaucratic language can generate confusion and mistrust, whereas clear and constructive communication enhances comprehension and acceptance of managerial decisions (Tourish & Robson, 2006; Hargie, 2016). Within public sector settings characterized by formal hierarchies and standardized procedures, these linguistic dynamics are particularly salient.

The concept of perceived fairness occupies a central position in understanding employee responses to performance appraisal systems. Drawing on Organizational Justice Theory, fairness perceptions encompassing procedural and interactional justice are shaped significantly by how decisions are communicated and justified (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter & Ng, 2001). In appraisal contexts, employees are more likely to accept evaluation outcomes when feedback is conveyed in a transparent, respectful, and comprehensible manner (Malsche, Tobback, & Vandenbroucke, 2025). Conversely, unclear or negatively framed language may undermine perceptions of fairness, leading to dissatisfaction, reduced motivation, and resistance to performance management initiatives. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that perceived fairness serves as a key predictor of employee attitudes and behaviours, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance outcomes (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Kim & Holzer, 2016). Thus, language functions as a critical antecedent to fairness perceptions within appraisal systems. Beyond fairness, the implications of appraisal language extend to broader employee and organizational outcomes. Within the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework, feedback characterized by clarity and supportive tone can be conceptualized as a job resource that fosters engagement, enhances role clarity, and promotes performance (Karim, Hossain, Chowdhury, Al Karim, Rahman, & Rahman, 2024). In contrast, vague or harshly framed feedback may act as a job demand, increasing cognitive strain and emotional exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In public sector environments where employees often operate under resource constraints and institutional pressures, the quality of communication embedded in appraisal systems can significantly influence their capacity to perform effectively (Shawn, 2023). Furthermore, the increasing digitalization of human resource management processes introduces additional complexities, as standardized templates and automated feedback mechanisms may constrain the flexibility and contextual sensitivity of language use in appraisals.

Notwithstanding the recognized importance of communication in organizational settings, the specific role of language in performance appraisal systems remains insufficiently theorized and empirically examined within public administration literature. Existing studies have predominantly focused on structural aspects of appraisal systems, such as rating accuracy, performance metrics, and institutional design, while paying limited attention to the discursive processes through which evaluations are conveyed and interpreted (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Kim & Holzer, 2016). Moreover, prior research has often treated fairness perceptions as outcomes of procedural arrangements, rather than as constructs shaped by linguistic features such as clarity and tone (Tarigan et al., 2023; Karim et al., 2024)). This oversight is particularly evident in developing administrative contexts, where bureaucratic communication practices may exacerbate ambiguity and hinder effective performance management. Consequently, there is a need for a more balanced understanding of how language operates as a mediating mechanism linking appraisal practices to employee performance outcomes.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the role of language use in performance appraisal systems within the public sector, with particular emphasis on its influence on perceived fairness and performance outcomes. Specifically, the study investigates (i) the effect of language clarity on perceived fairness, (ii) the effect of feedback tone on perceived fairness, and (iii) the relationship between perceived fairness and employee performance outcomes. Furthermore, the study explores the mediating role of perceived fairness in the relationships between language clarity and performance outcomes, as



well as between feedback tone and performance outcomes. By integrating insights from Organizational Justice Theory and the JD-R model, this study contributes to public administration scholarship by foregrounding the linguistic dimension of performance management. Practically, the findings are expected to inform the design of more effective and equitable appraisal systems, enhance managerial communication practices, and support ongoing public sector reforms aimed at improving performance and accountability.

## 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Performance appraisal systems have long been recognized as critical instruments for enhancing employee effectiveness and aligning individual contributions with organizational goals in the public sector. Within the broader framework of public human resource management, appraisal systems are designed not only to evaluate performance but also to provide feedback that supports employee development, accountability, and organizational learning (DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Speer et al, 2026). However, the effectiveness of these systems is contingent upon how performance-related information is communicated. Increasingly, scholars have emphasized that the communicative dimension of appraisal systems particularly the use of language plays a decisive role in shaping employee perceptions and behavioural outcomes. Language clarity refers to the extent to which communication is precise, unambiguous, and easily understood by recipients. In performance appraisal contexts, clarity is reflected in the articulation of evaluation criteria, the explanation of performance ratings, and the specificity of feedback provided to employees (Igor, 2023). Clear language reduces cognitive ambiguity, enhances role understanding, and facilitates meaningful engagement with appraisal outcomes. Conversely, ambiguous or overly technical language can obscure expectations and create uncertainty, thereby undermining the developmental intent of appraisal systems (Hargie, 2016; Plain Language Action and Information Network, 2011). Within public sector organizations, where bureaucratic communication is often characterized by formalism and complexity, issues of clarity are particularly pronounced.

Theoretical insights from Organizational Justice Theory suggest that clarity in communication is a key determinant of perceived procedural and interactional fairness. When appraisal criteria and decisions are communicated in a transparent and comprehensible manner, employees are more likely to perceive the process as fair and legitimate (Colquitt et al., 2001). Clarity enables employees to understand the basis of evaluation, reducing perceptions of arbitrariness and bias. Empirical evidence supports this assertion, indicating that clear communication enhances trust in management and acceptance of performance evaluations (Kim & Holzer, 2016; Tourish & Robson, 2006). In contrast, vague or inconsistent language may lead employees to question the integrity of the appraisal process, thereby diminishing fairness perceptions. Given the centrality of fairness in shaping employee attitudes, language clarity emerges as a critical antecedent within appraisal systems.

Furthermore, from the perspective of the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, clarity functions as a job resource that supports employee engagement and well-being. Clear feedback provides employees with actionable insights into their performance, enabling them to align their efforts with organizational expectations and improve outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In this sense, clarity not only enhances fairness perceptions but also contributes indirectly to performance by fostering a supportive communicative environment. Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Language clarity has a positive and significant effect on perceived fairness in performance appraisal systems.*

Closely related to clarity is the tone of feedback, which refers to the emotional and evaluative quality of language used in performance appraisals. Feedback tone can range from supportive and developmental to critical and punitive, and it significantly influences how employees interpret and respond to appraisal outcomes (Nwode & Anyadiegwu, 2023). In public sector settings, where hierarchical relationships and formal authority structures are prevalent, the tone adopted by supervisors in delivering feedback can shape employees' perceptions of respect, dignity, and inclusion. Constructive and respectful feedback is



associated with higher levels of acceptance, motivation, and trust, whereas harsh or dismissive language may generate defensiveness, dissatisfaction, and disengagement (Hargie, 2016; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Within the framework of Organizational Justice Theory, feedback tone is particularly relevant to interactional justice, which concerns the quality of interpersonal treatment during decision-making processes Ali, Sami, & Hassan, (2022). Employees evaluate fairness not only based on outcomes and procedures but also on how they are treated by supervisors during appraisal interactions (Dechawatanapaisal, 2026; Colquitt et al., 2001). A supportive tone signals respect and consideration, reinforcing perceptions of fairness and organizational integrity. Conversely, negative or overly critical language may be perceived as disrespectful or biased, thereby undermining fairness perceptions. Empirical studies have shown that interactional justice is strongly influenced by communication style, including tone, empathy, and clarity of explanation (Ali, et al., 2022; Kim & Holzer, 2016).

From a JD-R perspective, feedback tone can also be conceptualized as either a resource or a demand. Supportive feedback provides emotional and informational resources that enhance motivation and resilience, while negative tone may function as a stressor that contributes to emotional exhaustion and reduced performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In this regard, tone is not merely a stylistic feature but a substantive determinant of employee outcomes. In public organizations undergoing reform and performance pressures, the way feedback is delivered becomes particularly consequential for sustaining employee morale and effectiveness. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is advanced:

*H<sub>2</sub>: Feedback tone has a positive and significant effect on perceived fairness in performance appraisal systems.*

Perceived fairness represents a central mechanism through which appraisal systems influence employee attitudes and behaviours. It encompasses employees' judgments regarding the equity of procedures, the appropriateness of outcomes, and the quality of interpersonal treatment during appraisal processes (Ikramullah, van Prooijen, Iqbal, Shah, & Ul-Hassan, 2022). Extensive research in organizational behaviour and public administration has established that fairness perceptions are critical predictors of a wide range of outcomes, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust in management, and performance (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). In the context of performance appraisal, fairness enhances the legitimacy of evaluations and encourages employees to accept feedback and engage in performance improvement efforts. In public sector organizations, fairness is particularly salient due to the emphasis on equity, transparency, and accountability as core administrative values. Perceived unfairness in appraisal systems can lead to resistance, reduced motivation, and diminished trust in public institutions. Conversely, fair appraisal processes foster a sense of organizational justice, which in turn promotes positive work attitudes and behaviours (Raghavendra & Kumar, 2026). Empirical evidence indicates that employees who perceive appraisal systems as fair are more likely to exhibit higher levels of performance, both in terms of task accomplishment and contextual behaviours such as cooperation and organizational citizenship (Kim & Holzer, 2016; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017).

The relationship between perceived fairness and performance outcomes can also be understood through the JD-R model, where fairness operates as a motivational resource that enhances engagement and effort. Fair treatment signals organizational support and recognition, thereby strengthening employees' commitment to their roles and increasing their willingness to exert discretionary effort. In contrast, perceived unfairness may trigger withdrawal behaviours and reduce performance. Given these theoretical and empirical insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H<sub>3</sub>: Perceived fairness has a positive and significant effect on performance outcomes in the public sector.*

Building on the preceding arguments, perceived fairness is expected to mediate the relationship between language use in appraisal systems and performance outcomes. Mediation implies that language clarity and feedback tone influence performance indirectly through their impact on fairness perceptions. This proposition is consistent with Organizational Justice Theory, which posits that communication processes shape fairness perceptions, which in turn influence behavioural outcomes. In appraisal contexts, clear



and supportive language enhances fairness perceptions, thereby increasing the likelihood that employees will accept feedback and improve their performance (Muhammad, Suleiman, Mamun, Jewel & Mozumder, 2025).

The mediating role of fairness is further supported by empirical studies demonstrating that the effects of managerial practices on employee outcomes are often transmitted through fairness perceptions (Kim & Holzer, 2016). In the case of language clarity, clear communication reduces ambiguity and enhances transparency, leading to higher fairness perceptions and improved performance. Similarly, supportive feedback tone fosters interactional justice, which strengthens employees' motivation and engagement, ultimately contributing to better performance outcomes (Igor, 2023). These relationships underscore the importance of fairness as a central mechanism linking communication practices to organizational effectiveness. From the JD-R perspective, the mediating role of fairness can be interpreted as the transformation of communicative resources into motivational outcomes. Language clarity and tone provide informational and emotional resources that shape fairness perceptions, which in turn influence employee engagement and performance. This integrative perspective highlights the interconnectedness of communication, perception, and behaviour within public sector appraisal systems. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are advanced:

*H<sub>4</sub>: Perceived fairness mediates the relationship between language clarity and performance outcomes in the public sector.*

*H<sub>5</sub>: Perceived fairness mediates the relationship between feedback tone and performance outcomes in the public sector.*

## 2.1 Theoretical Review

Understanding the role of language use in performance appraisal systems requires a strong theoretical foundation that captures both perceptual and behavioural mechanisms through which communication influences employee outcomes. This study is anchored in Organizational Justice Theory and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, which together explain how linguistic elements such as clarity and feedback tone shape perceived fairness and performance in public sector organizations. Organizational Justice Theory provides a key lens for examining how employees evaluate fairness in organizational processes. It conceptualizes justice as comprising distributive, procedural, and interactional dimensions (Colquitt et al., 2001; Greenberg, 1990). In performance appraisal contexts, distributive justice relates to evaluation outcomes, while procedural and interactional justice focus on how those outcomes are determined and communicated. Language therefore becomes central to how fairness perceptions are formed.

Language clarity directly affects procedural justice by enhancing transparency and reducing ambiguity in appraisal criteria and decision-making processes (Malsche et al., 2023). When performance standards and evaluation outcomes are communicated clearly, employees better understand the rationale behind decisions, which strengthens fairness perceptions (Speer et al., 2026). In contrast, vague or overly technical language may obscure decision rules and create perceptions of bias or arbitrariness (Colquitt et al., 2001). This is especially relevant in public sector settings, where bureaucratic communication is often complex and formalized, increasing the risk of reduced clarity. Feedback tone is closely linked to interactional justice, which emphasizes respectful and dignified interpersonal treatment. The tone used by supervisors during appraisal discussions signals whether employees are valued within the organization (Singh et al., 2024). Constructive and supportive feedback enhances fairness perceptions, while harsh or dismissive communication can undermine them (Bies & Moag, 1986; Colquitt et al., 2001). This is particularly important in hierarchical public sector environments, where communication style can either reinforce or reduce power imbalances between supervisors and subordinates.

Organizational Justice Theory further suggests that fairness perceptions strongly influence employee attitudes and behaviours. Employees who perceive appraisal processes as fair are more likely to demonstrate trust, commitment, and improved performance, as fairness enhances organizational legitimacy and psychological contract fulfilment (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Cropanzano et al.,



2007). Conversely, perceived injustice may lead to reduced motivation and resistance. Within this framework, language acts as an antecedent to fairness perceptions, which then mediate performance outcomes. The JD-R model complements this perspective by offering a broader motivational explanation of how workplace characteristics influence performance. It distinguishes between job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Language use can function as either, depending on its nature. Language clarity operates as a cognitive resource by reducing uncertainty and enhancing role clarity, enabling employees to align behaviour with expectations (Speer et al., 2026). This supports effective performance and lowers cognitive strain. Conversely, unclear or inconsistent language increases cognitive load and confusion, acting as a job demand that can hinder performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Feedback tone similarly functions as an emotional resource or demand. Supportive communication enhances self-efficacy and engagement (Tarigan et al., 2023), whereas negative tone can reduce morale and motivation (Tarigan, Gustomo & Bangun, 2023). In resource-constrained public sector environments, the emotional quality of communication is especially important. The JD-R model also explains how resources translate into performance through engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In this study, perceived fairness reflects the internalization of communicative resources. Clear and respectful language fosters fairness perceptions, which enhance motivation and performance. Thus, fairness operates as both an outcome of language use and a driver of performance. Therefore, integrating Organizational Justice Theory and the JD-R model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of language in performance appraisal systems, highlighting its importance as both a perceptual and motivational mechanism in public sector management.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationships between language use in performance appraisal systems, perceived fairness, and performance outcomes among civil servants in Kwara State, Nigeria. The design was considered appropriate given the objective of testing hypothesized relationships using structured data and advanced statistical modelling techniques. The study followed a cross-sectional survey approach, which enabled the collection of data from respondents at a single point in time.

The measurement of variables was based on established scales adapted from prior literature to ensure construct validity and comparability with existing studies. Language clarity was operationalized using items adapted from studies on organizational communication and clarity in managerial feedback (Hargie, 2016; Tourish & Robson, 2006). Feedback tone was measured using items reflecting supportive versus critical communication styles, adapted from feedback intervention and communication literature (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Steelman et al., 2004). Perceived fairness was assessed using established organizational justice scales, particularly focusing on procedural and interactional justice dimensions (Colquitt et al., 2001). Performance outcomes were measured using self-reported indicators of employee effectiveness and task performance, adapted from public sector performance and human resource management studies (Kim & Holzer, 2016; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017). All constructs were modelled as reflective constructs and measured using multiple items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed in line with the study variables. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections: the first captured demographic information of respondents, while the second contained measurement items for the constructs under investigation. The instrument was administered in a paper-based format to ensure accessibility among respondents within the selected ministries. The population of the study comprised civil servants working in three key ministries in Kwara State, namely the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Water Resources which was unable to be determined. These ministries were selected due to their administrative relevance and their involvement in structured performance appraisal processes. The sample size for the study was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, which provides a simplified approach for calculating sample



size from an infinite population. Based on this approach, an appropriate sample size of 110 was derived to ensure representativeness and statistical adequacy.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who were directly involved in or had experience with performance appraisal systems within their respective ministries. This approach ensured that only relevant participants with adequate knowledge of appraisal processes were included in the study, thereby enhancing the quality of the data collected. To ensure the validity of the research instrument, both face and content validity were established. Face validity was achieved by presenting the questionnaire to subject matter experts in public administration and human resource management, who assessed the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items. Content validity was ensured by aligning the measurement items with constructs derived from established literature and theoretical frameworks, thereby confirming that the instrument adequately captured the dimensions of interest.

Reliability of the instrument was assessed through a pilot test conducted with 10 respondents drawn from a similar population. The pilot study enabled the identification and correction of ambiguous or unclear items prior to the main data collection. The results of the pilot test where all the items scored Cronbach Alpha of above 0.7 threshold (Table 1), indicated acceptable internal consistency of the measurement scales, thereby confirming the reliability of the instrument for the main study. A total of 128 questionnaires were administered to respondents across the selected ministries to cater for non-return and incomplete questionnaires. Out of these, 120 questionnaires were found to be complete and usable for analysis, representing a high response usability rate. The data obtained were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with the aid of SmartPLS 4 software. This technique was considered suitable due to its robustness in handling complex models, its suitability for predictive analysis, and its ability to accommodate relatively small to medium sample sizes. To address the issue of common method bias, which may arise from the use of a single data source, the full collinearity test was conducted as recommended in the literature. The results indicated that variance inflation factor (VIF) values were within acceptable thresholds, suggesting that common method bias was not a significant concern in the study.

Ethical considerations were duly observed throughout the research process. The questionnaire did not include any sensitive or intrusive questions, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality of responses was assured to all participants. These measures were implemented to ensure compliance with ethical standards in social science research.

#### **4. Results and Analysis**

##### **Demographic Profile of Respondents**

The demographic characteristics of the 120 usable respondents are presented in Table 1 below. The profile reflects a typical cross-section of civil servants in Kwara State ministries, with balanced representation across the selected institutions and a mix of experience levels consistent with public sector workforce patterns in Nigeria.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

| <b>Demographic Variable</b>       | <b>Category</b>   | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage (%)</b> |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Gender                            | Male              | 70               | 58.3                  |
|                                   | Female            | 50               | 41.7                  |
| Age Group                         | 18–30 years       | 12               | 10.0                  |
|                                   | 31–40 years       | 48               | 40.0                  |
|                                   | 41–50 years       | 36               | 30.0                  |
|                                   | 51–60 years       | 24               | 20.0                  |
|                                   | OND/HND/Diploma   | 15               | 12.5                  |
| Highest Educational Qualification | Bachelor's Degree | 65               | 54.2                  |
|                                   | Master's Degree   | 35               | 29.2                  |
|                                   | Doctorate (PhD)   | 5                | 4.2                   |



|                   |                    |    |      |
|-------------------|--------------------|----|------|
| Length of Service | Less than 5 years  | 20 | 16.7 |
|                   | 5–10 years         | 40 | 33.3 |
|                   | 11–15 years        | 30 | 25.0 |
|                   | 16–20 years        | 18 | 15.0 |
|                   | More than 20 years | 12 | 10.0 |

The sample shows a modest gender imbalance, with men forming the majority, though female representation remains substantial enough which reflects the Nigerian public service. The age distribution is concentrated in the mid-career range, suggesting that most respondents are likely to be in their most professionally active and productive years rather than at entry-level or nearing retirement. Educationally, the group is highly qualified overall, with most participants holding at least an undergraduate degree and a notable share having postgraduate degree indicating a workforce with strong formal training, which may influence both competence levels and expectations around career progression. In terms of experience, the respondents are largely professionals, with many having accumulated several years in service.

#### 4.1 Assessment of the Measurement Model

All constructs were modelled as reflective. Convergent validity was established with outer factor loadings greater than 0.70, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are all above 0.50), and Composite Reliability (CR) values are all above 0.70. Internal consistency was further confirmed with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.70 for every construct. Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio as all HTMT values are less than 0.85. The full collinearity test conducted earlier (as reported in the methodology) already confirmed that common method bias was not an issue, with all VIF values below 3.3.

Table 2: Measurement Model Assessment – Outer Loadings, Reliability, and Convergent Validity

| Construct               | Item Code | Item Statement                                                                            | Outer Loading | Cronbach's Alpha (CA) | Composite Reliability (CR) | Average Variance Extracted (AVE) |
|-------------------------|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Language Clarity</b> | LC1       | The language used in the performance appraisal feedback was clear and easy to understand. | 0.821         | 0.84                  | 0.88                       | 0.69                             |
|                         | LC2       | The performance appraisal goals were explained using simple and unambiguous language.     | 0.856         |                       |                            |                                  |
|                         | LC3       | I could easily understand the written comments in my appraisal report.                    | 0.792         |                       |                            |                                  |
|                         | LC4       | The feedback avoided confusing technical jargon.                                          | 0.813         |                       |                            |                                  |
|                         | LC5       | The instructions in the appraisal process were precise and well-structured.               | 0.874         |                       |                            |                                  |
| <b>Feedback Tone</b>    | FT1       | The tone of the feedback received during appraisal was supportive and encouraging.        | 0.783         | 0.81                  | 0.86                       | 0.65                             |
|                         | FT2       | My appraiser used a positive tone when providing performance feedback.                    | 0.847         |                       |                            |                                  |
|                         | FT3       | The feedback was delivered in a constructive rather than critical manner.                 | 0.812         |                       |                            |                                  |
|                         | FT4       | The communication tone motivated me to improve my performance.                            | 0.765         |                       |                            |                                  |
|                         | FT5       | Feedback emphasized achievements before suggesting improvements.                          | 0.829         |                       |                            |                                  |



|                             |     |                                                                                             |       |      |      |      |
|-----------------------------|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------|------|------|
| <b>Perceived Fairness</b>   | PF1 | The performance appraisal procedures were applied fairly and consistently to all employees. | 0.834 | 0.80 | 0.85 | 0.67 |
|                             | PF2 | I had the opportunity to provide input during the appraisal discussion.                     | 0.791 |      |      |      |
|                             | PF3 | The appraisal was based on accurate information about my work.                              | 0.862 |      |      |      |
|                             | PF4 | The way the appraisal was conducted showed respect for me as an employee.                   | 0.778 |      |      |      |
| <b>Performance Outcomes</b> | PO1 | I consistently achieve the targets set for my position.                                     | 0.745 | 0.85 | 0.89 | 0.63 |
|                             | PO2 | My task completion rate has improved following the appraisal.                               | 0.812 |      |      |      |
|                             | PO3 | I perform my duties efficiently and effectively.                                            | 0.789 |      |      |      |
|                             | PO4 | The quality of my work meets or exceeds expectations.                                       | 0.821 |      |      |      |
|                             | PO5 | I contribute meaningfully to the goals of my ministry.                                      | 0.767 |      |      |      |
|                             | PO6 | My overall productivity has increased in the past year.                                     | 0.798 |      |      |      |
|                             | PO7 | I effectively handle challenges and solve work-related problems.                            | 0.732 |      |      |      |
|                             | PO8 | I meet all key performance indicators (KPIs) assigned to me.                                | 0.854 |      |      |      |

#### 4.2 Assessment of the Structural Model

The structural model demonstrated acceptable predictive relevance and explanatory power. The  $R^2$  value for Perceived Fairness was 0.425 (moderate explanatory power), while the  $R^2$  for Performance Outcomes was 0.316 (also moderate).  $Q^2$  values via blindfolding were positive (0.292 for Perceived Fairness and 0.221 for Performance Outcomes), indicating the model has predictive relevance. Effect sizes ( $f^2$ ) were small to medium for the direct paths, consistent with social science research in organizational behaviour. The results of the hypothesis tests for direct effects are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Structural Model Results – Direct Effects

| Hypothesis | Path                                                         | Path Coefficient ( $\beta$ ) | t-value | p-value | Decision  |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------|---------|-----------|
| H1         | Language Clarity → Perceived Fairness                        | 0.418                        | 5.124   | 0.000   | Supported |
| H2         | Feedback Tone → Perceived Fairness                           | 0.365                        | 4.380   | 0.000   | Supported |
| H3         | Perceived Fairness → Performance Outcomes                    | 0.523                        | 6.819   | 0.000   | Supported |
| H4         | Language Clarity → Perceived Fairness → Performance Outcomes | 0.219                        | 3.933   | 0.000   | Supported |
| H5         | Feedback Tone → Perceived Fairness → Performance Outcomes    | 0.191                        | 3.450   | 0.001   | Supported |

All direct hypotheses (H1–H3) were strongly supported, indicating that clearer language and a more positive feedback tone significantly enhance employees' perceptions of fairness in performance appraisals, which in turn positively influence self-reported performance outcomes. The indirect (mediation) effects were tested using bootstrapping. Both mediation hypotheses (H4 and H5) were supported, confirming that Perceived Fairness fully mediates the relationships between Language Clarity and Performance Outcomes, and between Feedback Tone and Performance Outcomes.

#### 4.3 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the central role of language use in shaping performance appraisal outcomes in the public sector. Both language clarity and feedback tone significantly



influence perceived fairness, which in turn drives performance outcomes. The strength of the path coefficients highlights communication processes as critical determinants of effective performance management in public administration.

The result for H1 shows that language clarity has a positive and significant effect on perceived fairness. When appraisal information is communicated in a clear and understandable manner, employees are more likely to view the process as fair. This aligns with Organizational Justice Theory, which emphasizes transparency as a key element of procedural justice. The finding is consistent with prior studies showing that clear communication enhances trust and reduces perceptions of bias (Kim & Holzer, 2016; Karim et al., 2024). In public sector organizations, where bureaucratic language is often complex, this result underscores the importance of simplifying communication to strengthen fairness perceptions.

Similarly, the result for H2 indicates that feedback tone significantly influences perceived fairness. The way feedback is delivered—whether respectful, supportive, or constructive—shapes employees' fairness judgments. This supports interactional justice literature, which links respectful communication to stronger perceptions of fairness and legitimacy (Shawn, 2023; Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). It also aligns with evidence that positive communication styles improve acceptance of appraisal systems (Hargie, 2016; Ali et al., 2023). In hierarchical public organizations, feedback tone is particularly important for managing power dynamics and fostering constructive relationships.

The finding for H3 reveals that perceived fairness has a strong and significant effect on performance outcomes, representing the strongest direct relationship in the model. This reinforces fairness as a key driver of motivation, commitment, and performance (Colquitt et al., 2001; Kim & Holzer, 2016). From a JD-R perspective, fairness functions as a motivational resource that enhances engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), indicating its role as a mechanism linking appraisal systems to performance.

The mediation results provide further insight. Support for H4 shows that perceived fairness mediates the relationship between language clarity and performance (Speer et al., 2026; Cropanzano et al., 2007), while H5 confirms a similar mediating role between feedback tone and performance (Sign et al., 2024). These findings suggest that communication influences performance indirectly through fairness perceptions.

#### 4.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study make important theoretical contributions to public administration and public human resource management by reframing performance appraisal systems as communicative and perceptual processes rather than purely technical mechanisms. First, the study extends Organizational Justice Theory by showing that linguistic features—specifically language clarity and feedback tone—are key drivers of perceived fairness. While prior research has focused on procedural design and outcomes, this study highlights the discursive dimension of justice, demonstrating how communication shapes fairness perceptions. This enriches justice theory by positioning language as a core mechanism through which procedural and interactional justice are enacted.

Second, the study contributes to the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model by identifying language clarity and feedback tone as job resources with both cognitive and emotional effects. Existing research has emphasized structural resources such as autonomy and supervisory support. By contrast, this study shows that the quality of feedback significantly influences fairness perceptions and performance, thereby expanding the concept of job resources to include communicative attributes. This underscores the role of micro-level communication in shaping employee motivation and engagement in public sector contexts.

Third, the study advances performance management research by integrating communication theory with PHRM frameworks. Traditional studies have focused on rating accuracy and system design, often overlooking how evaluations are communicated and interpreted. By demonstrating that perceived fairness mediates the relationship between language use and performance outcomes, the study offers a process-based explanation of appraisal effectiveness.



Practically, the findings suggest several implications. Public organizations should prioritize clear and simple language in appraisal documents to enhance understanding and transparency. Managerial training should emphasize constructive and respectful feedback styles, ensuring communication supports employee development. Improving performance outcomes requires not only technical system changes but also stronger fairness perceptions through effective communication. In digital HRM systems, user-friendly language and customizable feedback are essential to avoid impersonal or unclear evaluations. Finally, policymakers should treat language as a strategic resource, incorporating communication standards into appraisal guidelines to strengthen accountability and performance in public institutions.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that language use constitutes a critical yet often overlooked dimension of performance appraisal systems in the public sector. The findings provide empirical evidence that language clarity and feedback tone significantly shape employees' perceptions of fairness, which in turn drives performance outcomes. By establishing the mediating role of perceived fairness, the study highlights that the effectiveness of appraisal systems depends not only on structural design but also on how evaluation processes are communicated. The study contributes to public administration scholarship by integrating communication dynamics into performance management and extending theoretical frameworks such as Organizational Justice Theory and the JD-R model. Practically, it underscores the need for public sector organizations to prioritize clear, respectful, and constructive communication in appraisal practices. Strengthening linguistic quality in performance feedback can enhance fairness perceptions, improve employee engagement, and ultimately support more effective and accountable public service delivery.

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