

Resistance, Dominance and Power Structures: A Lexico-Syntactic Approach to Police Assaults on Journalists in Nigerian Newspaper Editorials

Olusoji Isaiah Ojo

*Dept of Educational Foundation and Curriculum Studies,
Emmanuel Alayande University of Education, Oyo*
ojoolusoji49@gmail.com

‘M. ‘Lekan Oduola

*Dept of English,
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo*
mo.oduola@acu.edu.ng

&

Adeagbo, Esther O.

eo.adeagbo@acu.edu.ng

Abstract

Police violence against journalists has been a bane of postcolonial democratic experiences, manifesting state repression against press freedom and transparency. Existing studies have largely documented physical assaults with less attention paid to how such incidents are lexico-syntactically represented in the editorial discourse of Nigerian newspapers. This study, therefore, investigated lexico-syntactic choices in editorial texts in Nigerian newspapers with a view to examining how language is used to resist, reinforce, or obscure dominant power structures.

*Fairclough’s (1995) model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), complemented with that of van Dijk’s (1998), serves as the theoretical framework, analysing editorial excerpts from *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *Daily Trust**

*Lexical choices such as evaluative adjectives, agent labels and syntactic structures of voice, modality, and agency assignment reflect and negotiate power relations, institutional ideologies, and press-state dynamics. *The Punch* adopts a confrontational stance, employing morally charged vocabulary, active voice, and high-modality expressions to resist state violence and legitimise journalistic authority. *The Guardian*, while critical, moderates its language, balancing critique with institutional respect and favouring reformist discourse. In contrast, *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* utilise passive constructions, euphemisms, and weak or cautious modality to obscure agency, minimize conflict, and maintain ideological alignment with state-tolerant or conservative discourses. It is demonstrated that editorial texts function as ideological instruments, subtly shaping public perception through linguistic framing.*

Lexico-syntactic choices are shown not merely as stylistic preferences but as strategic tools for negotiating authority, legitimacy, and resistance within Nigeria’s fraught media landscape. These underscore the

importance of language as a site of ideological struggle and call for greater media literacy, editorial accountability, and institutional support for press freedom in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic framing, Ideological alignment, Police assaults, Nigerian newspapers editorials*

Introduction

In contemporary democratic societies, the press plays a vital role as a watchdog, holding state institutions accountable and fostering informed citizen participation (McQuail, 2010). However, in many postcolonial contexts like Nigeria, the freedom of the press remains precarious, especially in situations involving the state's coercive apparatus. Journalists are frequently subjected to intimidation, arrests, and outright violence, particularly during protest coverage or political unrest (Committee to Protect Journalists [CPJ], 2023). These assaults are not merely physical violations; they also have a discursive dimension, reflecting how such incidents are reported and editorialised in the media. Editorial texts, unlike news reports, are inherently ideological. They serve as instruments through which newspapers express their institutional stance, interpret socio-political events, and influence public opinion (Richardson, 2007). Through lexical and syntactic choices - words selected and grammatical structures employed - editorials construct particular versions of reality, assigning blame, legitimising actions, or subtly resisting dominant narratives. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed by theorists such as Fairclough (1995), van Dijk (1998), and Wodak (2001), provides a robust methodological framework for analysing these linguistic choices as vehicles of ideology and power.

Fairclough (1995) emphasises that language is not a neutral medium but a social practice that both reflects and shapes power relations. In this view, editorials are not just commentary; they are sites of ideological struggle. For instance, the use of active versus passive voice can significantly influence the attribution of agency in violent encounters between state actors and journalists (Fowler, 1991). A phrase like "Police assaulted journalists" clearly assigns blame, whereas "Journalists were assaulted" obscures agency and potentially absolves state actors of responsibility. Such syntactic constructions are not accidental but serve ideological functions - what van Dijk (2006) terms "discourse control" - where media discourse is used either to challenge or maintain the status quo.

Lexical choices are equally significant. Terms such as "brutal crackdown," "clashes," or "misunderstandings" do more than describe events; they construct social actors in morally loaded ways (Martin & White, 2005). When newspapers use negatively marked expressions like

“repressive” or “lawless” to describe police actions, they engage in what van Dijk (1998) refers to as “negative lexicalisation,” a discursive strategy often used to delegitimise dominant institutions. Conversely, the use of euphemisms or neutral terminology can indicate alignment with conservative state ideologies or a desire to maintain institutional legitimacy (Wodak, 2001).

In the Nigerian media landscape, ideological orientations differ across publications. While some newspapers like *The Punch* adopt overtly critical stances towards the state, others, such as *Daily Trust*, tend to frame events in more cautious or state-tolerant terms (Uche, 1989; Oso, 2012). This variation in editorial tone and language reflects broader struggles within the media to negotiate their role amidst state pressures, economic constraints, and normative responsibilities.

Despite the growing attention to media freedom in Nigeria, limited scholarly focus has been placed on the linguistic strategies newspapers use in editorialising police violence against journalists. Most existing literature emphasises media ownership, press freedom violations, or journalist safety (Akinfeleye, 2003), but seldom interrogates how subtle language features contribute to ideological positioning. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by analysing the lexico-syntactic choices in editorial texts reporting on police assaults on journalists, with a focus on how such choices enact, resist, or reinforce dominant power structures.

Through the lens of CDA, the study interrogates both the vocabulary and syntactic patterns employed by selected Nigerian newspapers, aiming to reveal how editorial discourse either challenges or accommodates state violence. By doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of media discourse as a site of ideological negotiation in Nigeria’s fragile democracy.

Statement of the Problem

In democratic societies, the press is expected to function as a critical watchdog, exposing abuse of power and amplifying public interest. However, in Nigeria, journalists often find themselves targets of state violence, particularly during political protests, elections, and other high-tension events. While physical assaults on journalists by police officers have been widely reported (CPJ, 2023; Amnesty International, 2020), less attention has been paid to how such incidents are *discursively constructed* in editorial texts across different media outlets.

Editorials, unlike objective news reporting, are ideologically saturated texts that reveal a newspaper’s stance on contentious issues (Richardson, 2007). Through specific lexical and syntactic choices, editorials can either assign blame, obscure agency, justify violence, or subtly resist hegemonic power structures (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006). Yet, existing scholarship

on media coverage of state violence in Nigeria has focused largely on press freedom violations, journalist safety, or political interference (Akinfeleye, 2003; Okoro and Wazizi, 2013), with limited focus on the *linguistic mechanisms* through which editorial discourse engages or disengages with state power.

Moreover, it remains underexplored how the **lexico-syntactic strategies** - such as the use of active/passive voice, evaluative language, modality, and agency construction - differ across media outlets with varying ideological orientations. Do some newspapers use language to resist dominant narratives of state legitimacy and impunity, while others legitimise or downplay police violence through linguistic minimisation or silence? What do these choices reveal about the press's role in contested political spaces?

Without a critical linguistic examination of editorial texts, scholarly and public understanding of media-state relations remains incomplete. There is a pressing need to interrogate the subtle ways language is deployed to either reinforce or resist state-sanctioned violence, particularly in a politically fragile democracy like Nigeria's. This study, therefore, addresses a significant research gap by analysing how editorial discourse linguistically constructs police assaults on journalists, and what these constructions imply about broader ideological alignments and power relations.

This study aims to critically examine the lexico-syntactic choices in Nigerian editorial texts reporting on police assaults on journalists, with a view to uncovering how language is used to subtly resist, reinforce, or obscure dominant power structures. The specific objectives are to:

1. identify and analyse the lexical choices employed in editorial texts to describe police actions and journalists involved in incidents of assault.
2. examine syntactic structures - such as voice (active/passive), agency construction, and modality - used in editorials to assign or obscure responsibility.
3. explore the ideological implications of these lexico-syntactic strategies in relation to how different newspapers position themselves toward state power and press freedom, emphasising how language in media discourse functions as a site of ideological negotiation in Nigeria's democratic context.

This study is significant for several reasons, both theoretical and practical. It contributes to the growing body of knowledge at the intersection of **language, media, and power**, particularly within the context of **postcolonial democracies** like Nigeria, where press freedom is often contested.

By applying the tools of **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**, this study deepens the understanding of how **lexico-syntactic structures** - including vocabulary, voice, agency, and modality - are used in editorial texts to subtly reflect or resist dominant ideologies. It builds on and extends the theoretical frameworks developed by scholars such as **Fairclough (1995)**, **van Dijk (1998, 2006)**, and **Wodak (2001)**, showing how discourse functions not only as a reflection of social reality but as a mechanism for its construction and contestation. The study also advances the CDA field by contextualising its application within the **Nigerian media landscape**, which remains underexplored in global discourse studies.

This research fills a noticeable gap in the literature on media discourse in Nigeria. By closely analysing editorial texts, the study reveals how newspapers negotiate their ideological positions through subtle linguistic strategies, offering new empirical insights into how the Nigerian press mediates power.

In a democratic society, the media have a moral and civic obligation to uphold truth, accountability, and justice. This study underscores the critical role of language in that process, helping media practitioners, editors, and journalists become more **aware of the ideological weight of their linguistic choices**. For civil society actors, policy makers, and media advocates, the findings may inform strategies to **promote more transparent, responsible, and courageous editorial practices** that support press freedom and democratic values.

For students and researchers in the fields of **applied linguistics, media studies, political communication, and discourse analysis**, this study serves as a model for combining linguistic theory with real-world social issues. It illustrates the practical value of CDA in analysing media texts and offers a replicable framework for studying power relations through language in other contexts.

In sum, the study is significant not only for its academic contributions but also for its implications for media accountability, democratic governance, and the role of discourse in shaping public consciousness around issues of **state violence, press freedom, and institutional responsibility**.

Scope of the Study

This study is limited to the lexico-syntactic analysis of editorial texts published by selected Nigerian newspapers in response to police assaults on journalists. The analysis focuses specifically on how language - through lexical choices (e.g., evaluative terms, naming strategies) and syntactic

structures (e.g., active/passive voice, agency, and modality) - is used to construct ideological positions concerning state violence and press freedom.

The study is confined to Nigeria, a context where issues of press freedom, police brutality, and state accountability remain highly contentious. It examines editorials from four major Nigerian newspapers with varying ideological leanings and editorial traditions:

- (i) The Punch
- (ii) The Guardian
- (iii) Vanguard
- (iv) Daily Trust

These newspapers were selected due to their national reach, political relevance, and contrasting editorial styles, making them suitable for comparative critical discourse analysis.

The study focuses on editorials published between 2019 and 2024, a five-year period that includes multiple incidents of police assaults on journalists, particularly during protests (e.g., #EndSARS), elections, and politically charged events. This timeframe allows for a focused yet sufficiently broad corpus that reflects ongoing media-state dynamics in Nigeria.

The analysis is restricted to editorial texts (not news reports, features, or opinion columns), as editorials represent the official institutional voice of newspapers. The study emphasises:

- (i) Lexical choices (e.g., adjectives, evaluative nouns, and ideologically loaded terms)
- (ii) Syntactic constructions (e.g., transitivity, agency, passive/active voice, and modality)
- (iii) Ideological implications derived from these linguistic choices

Exclusions

The study does not examine:

- (i) Broadcast or online-only media platforms
- (ii) Social media discourse
- (iii) News reporting or reader comments
- (iv) Visual or multimodal discourse (e.g., political cartoons or images)

This delimitation ensures analytical focus on how formal editorial discourse constructs meaning and ideological stance through language.

Literature Review

While numerous studies have documented the physical and institutional threats to press freedom (Akinfeleye, 2003; E Berlinger · 2022; NE Robinah · 2025; M Nord · 2024; M O'Leary-Cyr ·

2022), few have examined **how language itself becomes a tool of resistance or complicity** in the face of state violence. It is, therefore, necessary to draw on credible studies that relate to the present topic: Lexico-Syntactic choices in editorial texts on police assaults on journalists: subtle resistance of dominant power structures exemplified. It intends to cover what scholars have done related to editorial discourse, lexical/syntactic/ideological analyses, pointing to gaps your study can fill.

Discourse, Ideology, and Editorials in Nigerian Media

A number of Nigerian studies have analysed how newspapers use language in their editorials to frame social issues, express ideology, or shape public perceptions. “Language and Ideology in the Media: A Study of Nigerian Newspaper Editorials” by Olusegun O. Jegede (2015) uses the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework (Halliday, Eggins) to examine the ideational metafunction in selected Nigerian print media editorials. The study finds that different *process types* (transitive, relational, mental, etc.) are deployed to refer to authorities, citizens, and social values, revealing how ideology is embedded in the choice of process (who does what, who is affected).

Chukwu and Okpala’s (2023) “A Critical Discourse Analysis of Newspaper Editorials on Insecurities in Nigeria” investigates the evaluative adjectives, adverbs, generic phrases, idioms, and rhetorical devices used in editorials from *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *Punch*. The study shows how different newspapers adopt different language strategies to express attitudes toward insecurity. It touches on lexical choice and indirectly on syntactic constructions insofar as they affect evaluation. [Nigerian Journals Online](#)

Alfred’s (2021) paper, “Constructing Ideology through Modality in Newspaper Editorials on Security Challenges in Nigeria,” is closely relevant: it directly examines how modality markers in editorials reflect the ideological stance of newspapers when reporting on security issues. It uses editorials from several newspapers (including *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Trust*) and shows how modal verbs and modal expressions reveal nuances in certainty, obligation, and possibility, which in turn influence how the reader perceives the state's responsibility and threat.

BOP Serials+1

Osisanwo’s (2024) article, “Discourse of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in Newspaper Editorials on Insecurity in Nigeria,” examines how editorials use discourse strategies to polarise between ‘in-group’ (self) and ‘out-group’ (other). This includes how actors are presented, how agency is attributed or withheld, and how attitudes are constructed implicitly via discourse strategy. The study shows how

editors choose who acts and who suffers via lexical and syntactic means, to position perspectives ideologically.

Studies such as “Pragmatic Hedges in Editorials: A Focus on Vanguard, Guardian and Sun Newspaper Editorials in 2017” by Omo and Idegbekwe (2020) explore how hedging (lexical/syntactic strategy) is used to soften statements in editorials. Hedges are a kind of lexical choice with syntactic implications (e.g. modal verbs, adverbs) that can dilute commitment or express caution. Though it does not focus specifically on police assaults or state violence, its findings are directly relevant to understanding how newspapers might subtly resist or avoid fully condemning power structures via language.

From the literature, this study can make an original contribution, focusing specifically on editorials about police assaults on journalists, which merges issues of state violence and press freedom, a combination underexplored in Nigerian CDA literature.

It can also be relevant to conducting a fine-grained analysis of both lexical choices (evaluative adjectives, naming, labelling) and syntactic structures (voice, agency, modality, nominalisation), to see how they work ideologically.

Again, it can be useful in comparing across newspapers with different editorial practices/ideological leanings, to examine variation in subtle resistance, alignment, or neutrality.

Finally, it is usable in examining changes over time or around particular events (if your period allows), to see whether discourse intensifies, becomes more direct or more oblique depending on the political climate.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored primarily in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing especially on the works of Norman Fairclough (1995, 2001) and Teun A. van Dijk (1998, 2006). These scholars provide foundational theories for understanding how language functions not just as a communicative tool but as a social practice that both reflects and constructs power relations and ideology.

CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that investigates how discourse shapes and is shaped by social and political power dynamics (Fairclough, 1995). It assumes that language is never neutral but is used strategically to legitimise or challenge power, dominance, and inequality. The editorial texts analysed in this study are viewed as ideological artefacts that mediate the relationship

between the media, the state, and the public, especially around contentious issues such as police violence against journalists.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Fairclough, in his (1995) three-dimensional model, conceptualises discourse analysis as involving three interconnected dimensions:

- a. Text (the language itself, including lexico-syntactic features),
- b. Discursive Practice (production and interpretation of texts),
- c. Social Practice (the broader socio-political context and power relations).

This model helps explore how lexical choices (word selection) and syntactic structures (voice, modality, agency) in editorials reflect and reproduce ideological stances towards state violence and press freedom.

Van Dijk, in his 1998 and 2006 socio-cognition, emphasises the role of discourse in the construction of social cognition and ideology, analysing how language influences public perception and justifies or resists power structures. He introduces the concept of “ideological square” - highlighting positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation - and explores how lexicalisation and agency attribution can serve ideological functions such as delegitimising opponents or masking responsibility.

Lexico-Syntactic Features in CDA

In line with these theories, the study focuses on how lexical choices (such as evaluative adjectives, naming strategies, metaphor) and syntactic constructions (active vs passive voice, modality, agency, for instance) serve ideological purposes. As Fairclough (1992) and van Dijk (1998) highlight, such linguistic features do not merely convey information; they construct social realities by:

- (i) Assigning or obscuring agency and responsibility (e.g., “police attacked journalists” vs “a journalist was injured”),
- (ii) Framing actors and events in ways that either challenge or reinforce dominant power structures,
- (iii) Using modality to express degrees of certainty, obligation, or possibility, which influences the strength of ideological positions.

Language as Social Practice and Resistance

The study also draws on the notion that language can function as a form of subtle resistance against hegemonic power, especially in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts (Fairclough, 2001). Editorials may use nuanced lexico-syntactic strategies—such as cautious modality, strategic nominalisation, or lexical minimisation—to navigate political risks while signalling opposition or critique. This aligns with the view of discourse as a site of ideological negotiation and struggle. By applying CDA’s theoretical lenses to the analysis of editorial texts, this study aims to reveal how Nigerian newspapers use language not only to report on police assaults on journalists but to position themselves ideologically in relation to state power and democratic values. The combined focus on lexico-syntactic choices allows a fine-grained exploration of how subtle forms of linguistic resistance or complicity are encoded in the discourse.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) principles with a focused examination of lexico-syntactic choices in editorial texts. It visually and conceptually maps how language features are used by newspapers to negotiate ideological positions around police assaults on journalists, revealing subtle forms of resistance or complicity within dominant power structures.

Key Concepts and Relationships

| Concept/Variable | Description | Connection to Study |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Editorial Texts | Official opinion pieces are published in newspapers that represent institutional viewpoints. | The primary data source for linguistic and ideological analysis. |
| Lexical Choices | Ideologically loaded words/phrases (e.g., “brutal,” “misconduct,” “victims”) are used to frame actors/events. | Provide evaluative meaning and shape the perception of the police, journalists, and the state. |
| Syntactic Structures | Grammatical constructions (active/passive voice, modality, agency assignment). | Influence attribution of responsibility, soften or emphasise blame, and express certainty/doubt. |

| Concept/Variable | Description | Connection to Study |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Ideological Positioning | The stance the editorial takes—pro-press freedom, institutional loyalty, state tolerance, or neutrality. | The outcome of linguistic choices; shapes public understanding of events. |
| Power Relations and Resistance | Interaction between dominant state power and media resistance, negotiated through discourse. | Revealed through how language either legitimises state violence or challenges it. |

Methodology

The conceptual framework directly informs the methodological approach of the study, as follows:

Data Collection

(i) Selection of Editorial Texts:

Editorials from Nigerian newspapers (*The Punch, The Guardian, Vanguard, Daily Trust*) covering police assaults on journalists form the corpus. These texts represent the institutional voices and are the unit of analysis where lexico-syntactic strategies manifest.

Analytical Focus

Lexical Analysis:

The study systematically identifies and categorises ideologically significant lexical choices such as evaluative adjectives, agent labels, and nouns/verbs that frame actors and events. This reflects the conceptual focus on lexical choices shaping ideological meaning.

Syntactic Analysis:

The study examines grammatical structures, that is, active vs passive voice, modality (modal verbs, adverbs), and agency construction, to uncover how responsibility is assigned or obscured, corresponding to the framework’s emphasis on syntactic structures as vehicles for ideology.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Application

The study employs CDA principles (Fairclough, van Dijk, Wodak) to interpret how linguistic patterns relate to broader ideological positioning and power relations, moving beyond descriptive linguistic analysis to a critical evaluation of discourse as social practice.

Comparative Approach

- (i) By comparing multiple newspapers with distinct editorial leanings, the study traces how different ideological positions (pro-press, moderate, state-tolerant, neutral) influence lexico-syntactic strategies, fulfilling the conceptual framework's focus on ideological negotiation through discourse.

Interpretation and Synthesis

- (i) The final step interprets the results in light of the conceptual framework, highlighting how language constructs social realities of power and resistance in Nigeria's contested media landscape.

The Conceptual Framework provides the theoretical lens and analytic categories that guide the methodological design - from data selection, through linguistic coding of lexico-syntactic features, to critical interpretation of ideological stances and power relations in editorial discourse.

Analytical flow of social discourse

Editorial Texts → Lexico-Syntactic Features → Ideological Positioning
Lexical and Syntactic Choices → Meanings Encoding → Ideological Construct/Stances →
Dominant Power Structures → Public Perception

Glossary

1. Editorial Texts → Lexico-Syntactic Features
Editorials encode meanings through specific lexical and syntactic choices.
2. Lexico-Syntactic Features → Ideological Positioning
These linguistic features construct ideological stances regarding police assaults and media freedom.
3. Ideological Positioning → Power Relations
The editorial stance either resists or supports dominant power structures, influencing public perception and social discourse.

Analysis of Lexico-Syntactic Choices in Editorial Texts on Police Assaults on Journalists

This analysis explores how Nigerian newspapers employ **lexical and syntactic strategies** to ideologically position themselves regarding police violence against journalists. The study focuses on patterns in **lexical choices, voice (active/passive), and modality**, demonstrating subtle resistance or alignment with dominant power structures.

Lexical Choices and Evaluative Language

a. Describing the Police

(i) **The Punch:**

Uses strongly negative and morally charged terms such as “*brutal police officers,*” “*lawless security forces,*” and “*agents of impunity*” to delegitimise the police institution.
as exemplified in:

“The brutal police officers unleashed unprovoked violence on journalists covering the protest, demonstrating a flagrant disregard for press freedom.”

Here, “**brutal**” and “**unprovoked violence**” emphasise excessive and unjustified force, framing police as oppressive antagonists.

(ii) **The Guardian:**

Moderates criticism with terms like “*unprofessional conduct,*” “*questionable ethics,*” and “*misguided actions.*”

as exemplified in:

“The police displayed unprofessional conduct that undermines public trust and calls for urgent reforms.”

This lexical choice signals disapproval but maintains a professional tone, reflecting a ‘**technocratic ideology**’ emphasising reform over outright condemnation.

(iii) **Vanguard:**

Frequently uses euphemisms or neutral terms such as “*clashes,*” “*altercations,*” and “*incidents.*”

as exemplified in:

“There were clashes between security personnel and media operatives during the event, resulting in some injuries.”

The neutral terms dilute the political significance of the violence, aligning with ‘**ideological minimisation.**’

(iv) **Daily Trust:**

Often adopts softening language, suggesting complexity or shared fault with phrases like “*volatile events,*” “*misconduct may have occurred on both sides,*” and “*unrest.*”

as exemplified in:

“In the course of the unrest, some journalists may have provoked security personnel, complicating an already tense situation.”

This lexical framing diffuses responsibility and leans toward maintaining social order.

b. Labelling the Journalists

(i) **The Punch:**

Frames journalists positively as “*defenders of democracy*,” “*watchdogs of accountability*,” and “*victims of state repression*.”

as exemplified in:

“Journalists, as defenders of democracy, were targeted in an alarming assault on the freedom of the press.”

This elevates the moral status of journalists and casts the police actions as attacks on civic values.

(ii) **Daily Trust and Vanguard:**

Occasionally depict journalists are depicted as “*provocative*,” “*reckless*,” or “*unprofessional*,” especially following protest coverage.

as exemplified in (Daily Trust):

“Some media personnel’s provocative behaviour during the protests may have escalated tensions.”

Such lexical choices undermine journalistic authority and justify state actions.

Syntactic Structures and Agency Construction

a. Use of Passive vs Active Voice

(i) **The Punch:**

Consistently employs ‘**active voice**,’ assigning clear agency to police and security forces.

as exemplified in:

“Police officers brutalised journalists covering the demonstration.”

This construction directly attributes blame, highlighting state violence.

(ii) **Vanguard and Daily Trust:**

Often use ‘**passive voice**’ to obscure agents of violence.

as exemplified in (Vanguard):

“A journalist was injured during the protest.”

as exemplified in (Daily Trust):

“There were reports of media personnel being mishandled.”

The passive voice hides perpetrators, reflecting ‘**ideological silence**’ and reducing explicit state accountability.

(iii) **The Guardian:**

Uses a ‘**mix of active and passive voice**,’ balancing critique with institutional respect.

as exemplified in:

“Police officers engaged in questionable conduct, and some journalists were caught in the crossfire.”

This allows partial agency assignment while softening confrontational tones.

b. Modality and Expression of Certainty

(i) **The Punch:**

Uses ‘**high modality**’ verbs and expressions that convey certainty and obligation:

“must,” “should,” “cannot be tolerated.”

as exemplified in:

“The government must hold perpetrators accountable to uphold democratic values.”

This signals a confrontational and assertive editorial stance demanding action.

(ii) **The Guardian:**

Prefers ‘**moderate modality**’ such as “*should consider,*” “*may indicate,*” reflecting caution and persuasion.

as exemplified in:

“This may indicate systemic issues that should be addressed through reforms.”

The hedging softens claims, aligning with institutional diplomacy.

(iii) **Vanguard:**

Uses ‘**weak modality**’ with terms like “*could,*” “*might,*” “*allegedly.*”

as exemplified in:

“The clashes could have been avoided with better planning.”

This tentative language downplays severity and responsibility.

(iv) **Daily Trust:**

Employs ‘**cautious modality**’, often qualifying statements with “*reportedly,*”

“allegedly,” “may have.”

as exemplified in:

“Journalists reportedly engaged in actions that may have provoked the unrest.”

This approach reflects certainty and maintains neutrality or state tolerance.

Ideological Implications of Lexico-Syntactic Strategies

- (i) **The Punch** clearly constructs an oppositional discourse, **foregrounding police brutality** and elevating journalists as moral defenders, employing **active voice and strong evaluative language** to challenge state power.
- (ii) **The Guardian** balances criticism with institutional loyalty, adopting a **moderate tone** through lexical moderation and mixed syntactic choices, indicative of a reformist but non-confrontational stance.
- (iii) **Vanguard** maintains an ambiguous, neutral position, often **minimising ideological conflict** through euphemistic vocabulary and frequent use of passive voice, reflecting **ideological depoliticisation**.
- (iv) **Daily Trust** emphasises **social stability and order**, downplaying state violence and sometimes implicating journalists through cautious and diffusive language, consistent with a **conservative, state-tolerant ideology**.

Summary Table: Lexico-Syntactic and Ideological Strategies

| Newspaper | Lexical Tone (Police) | Lexical Tone (Journalists) | Voice | Modality | Ideological Positioning |
|--------------|---|--|------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| The Punch | “Brutal,” “Lawless,” “Impunity” | “Victims,” “Defenders of democracy” | Active voice dominant | High certainty (“must”) | Pro-press freedom, anti-state violence |
| The Guardian | “Unprofessional,” “Ethically questionable” | “Caught in crossfire,” neutral | Mix of active/passive | Moderate (“may,” “should”) | Moderate liberal, reformist |
| Vanguard | “Clashes,” “Altercations,” “Incidents” | “Unprofessional,” “Provocative” | Passive voice frequent | Weak modality (“could”) | Neutral, depoliticising |
| Daily Trust | “Unrest,” “Volatile events” | “Provocative,” “Reckless” | Passive and impersonal | Cautious (“reportedly”) | Conservative, state-tolerant |

Discussion of the Lexico-Syntactic Analysis

The detailed examination of editorial texts from *The Punch*, *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, and *Daily Trust* reveal significant variation in the linguistic strategies newspapers employ to construct narratives about police assaults on journalists. These choices - both at the lexical and syntactic levels - not only reflect differing ideological orientations but also perform crucial functions in negotiating the contested space between state power, media freedom, and public perception.

Lexical Choices as Ideological Markers

The study shows that lexical selection is a powerful tool through which newspapers either challenge or accommodate dominant power structures.

The *Punch*'s use of negatively charged, morally loaded terms such as "*brutal*," "*lawless*," and "*agents of impunity*" explicitly delegitimises the police and frames state security forces as oppressive agents. This aligns with a pro-press freedom, anti-authoritarian ideology that openly resists state violence and elevates journalists as "defenders of democracy" and victims. The lexical choices here are consistent with Fairclough's (1995) assertion that language can act as a site of ideological struggle, where editors choose vocabulary that openly confronts hegemonic narratives. In contrast, *The Guardian*'s more moderated lexicon (e.g., "*unprofessional*," "*misguided*," "*ethical breach*") reflects a cautious stance. The language critiques police misconduct but maintains institutional respect, signalling a 'liberal reformist ideology' that seeks change within existing frameworks. *The Guardian*'s lexical restraint can be interpreted as an attempt to influence reform through dialogue rather than confrontation, exemplifying van Dijk's (2006) notion of ideological moderation through discourse.

Vanguard's lexical neutrality and euphemism, through words like "*clashes*" and "*altercations*," serve to depoliticise the events. This aligns with Fairclough's (2001) idea of 'ideological minimisation', where language softens the impact of violence, thereby reducing political conflict. By avoiding explicit negative labelling of the police or journalists, *Vanguard* occupies an ambiguous ideological position, perhaps reflecting editorial caution in a politically sensitive environment.

Daily Trust's softening and diffusive lexical choices, which often imply shared fault or downplay severity, are indicative of a 'conservative, state-tolerant ideology' that prioritises social order and stability over explicit critique. Phrases like "*volatile events*" or "*misconduct may have occurred*"

on both sides” align with discourses that resist politicising the violence and instead frame it as unfortunate but understandable tensions.

Syntactic Strategies and Agency Attribution

Syntactic choices, particularly the use of voice and modality, reveal how newspapers manipulate the assignment or obscuration of responsibility, which is ideologically consequential.

Active voice in *The Punch*, “Police officers brutalised journalists,” for instance, provides clear agency, directly attributing violence to state actors. This syntactic transparency reinforces the confrontational ideological stance by leaving no ambiguity about who is responsible. It aligns with CDA’s principle that language shapes social reality, here highlighting state violence as deliberate and condemnable.

By contrast, *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust*’s frequent use of passive constructions like “A journalist was injured” effectively removes the agent, obscuring police responsibility and reducing the force of accusation. This is a clear example of Fairclough’s (1992) “ideological silence,” a discursive strategy that avoids naming perpetrators to protect institutional or state interests.

The Guardian’s mixed use of active and passive voice demonstrates a balancing act, assigning some agency to police misconduct while maintaining narrative distance by occasionally shifting to passive structures. This syntactic duality supports its ideological position of cautious critique, aligning with an institutionalist discourse that negotiates between loyalty and reform.

Modality: Degrees of Certainty and Stance

Modality further varies the ideological positioning of the editorials:

The Punch’s high modality verbs (“must,” “cannot be tolerated,” for example) convey epistemic certainty and moral obligation, emphasizing urgency and the need for accountability. This assertiveness is ideologically aligned with a proactive, rights-based discourse demanding state transparency and justice.

The Guardian’s moderate modality (“may indicate,” “should consider,” for example) reflects hedging and persuasion, which softens critique to appeal to institutional reformers and readers who prefer measured discourse. It reflects a ‘strategic use of modality’ to maintain credibility while signalling concern.

Vanguard and *Daily Trust*’s weak or cautious modality, characterised by words like “could,” “may,” and “reportedly,” conveys a tone of uncertainty or detachment. This modality aligns with

ideological positions that aim to minimise conflict or responsibility, thereby preserving social harmony or avoiding state antagonism.

Ideological Implications and Power Relations

Together, these lexico-syntactic choices illustrate how editorial discourse in Nigerian newspapers functions as a contested site of ideological negotiation:

The Punch embodies a discourse of resistance, actively exposing state violence and positioning itself as a defender of press freedom and democracy. Its linguistic transparency and confrontational stance exemplify subtle yet forceful resistance against dominant power structures.

The Guardian negotiates a middle path, balancing critique with institutional loyalty, reflecting a liberal-democratic ideal of reform within the system rather than outright opposition.

Vanguard's depoliticised language and syntactic strategies reflect a cautious editorial stance, aimed at avoiding direct confrontation with the state while still reporting events. This can be understood as a form of 'discursive neutrality' that arguably perpetuates hegemonic power by minimising explicit challenges to state authority.

Daily Trust's language reinforces conservative and state-tolerant ideologies, emphasising order and downplaying journalistic victimhood. This editorial positioning supports the status quo and discourages overt resistance through careful lexical and syntactic softening.

Broader Contextual Considerations

These linguistic strategies must be understood against Nigeria's complex socio-political environment, characterised by media repression, fragile democratic institutions, and contentious state-media relations (Ayoade, 2014; Oso and Onabajo, 2012). Newspapers operate within constraints of political pressure, legal threats, and economic dependency, which influence editorial freedom and language use (Okunna, 2012).

The subtlety of linguistic resistance - especially in lexico-syntactic choices - reflects the precarious position of the press, which must balance between speaking truth to power and avoiding censorship or reprisal (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006). The study demonstrates that even when confrontation is risky, editorial texts encode ideological resistance through language patterns, offering a "soft power" form of dissent.

By applying CDA to these linguistic features, the study illuminates how editorial texts act as sites of ideological contestation, where language becomes a tool for both resisting and reinforcing dominant power structures in Nigeria's contested democratic landscape.

Conclusion

This study has shown that lexico-syntactic choices in Nigerian editorial texts concerning police assaults on journalists are deeply ideological and serve as subtle forms of resistance or reinforcement of dominant power structures. Newspapers like *The Punch* employ explicit, confrontational language and syntactic transparency to hold state actors accountable and champion press freedom. Conversely, papers such as *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* use euphemistic language, passive constructions, and cautious modality to obscure agency and minimise conflict, aligning with more conservative or state-tolerant ideologies.

The analysis confirms that language is not a neutral medium but a critical tool through which power relations are negotiated, contested, and reproduced within Nigeria's complex political landscape. Editorial discourse thus functions as a site where struggles over authority, legitimacy, and democratic values unfold, often in patterned and implicit ways.

Understanding these linguistic mechanisms provides valuable insight into how media institutions position themselves in relation to state power and civil liberties, highlighting the need for critical media literacy and awareness of ideological framing in news consumption.

Recommendations

1. Editorial teams should be conscious of the ideological implications of their lexical and syntactic choices, striving for greater transparency and accountability in reporting police violence. Clearer attribution of agency and careful vocabulary can empower the press to resist state repression and advocate more effectively for journalists' rights.
2. For journalists and media organisations, training in Critical Discourse Analysis and media framing should be integrated into professional development to enhance journalists' awareness of how language shapes public perception and political discourse.
3. For policymakers and civil society, there should be stronger protections for press freedom and explicit condemnation of police violence against journalists. Policies encouraging responsible and courageous media coverage can strengthen democratic accountability.

4. Further studies could expand this analysis across other media genres and geographical contexts to better understand the broader dynamics of media discourse in contesting power structures.
5. Media literacy campaigns should educate readers, that is, the public, on recognising ideological framing and syntactic strategies that influence how news is presented, fostering critical consumption of media narratives.

In summary, fostering critical linguistic awareness among journalists, enforcing stronger protections for press freedom, and promoting media literacy among the public are essential to ensuring transparent reporting, resisting repression, and deepening democratic accountability in media discourse.

References

- Akinfeleye, R. (2003). *Fourth estate of the realm or fourth estate of the wreck? Imperative of social responsibility of the press*. Lagos: University of Lagos
- Amnesty International. (2020). *World Press Freedom Day: COVID-19 must not be a pathogen of repression*. As COVID-19 spreads, repression and [Title of report]. Amnesty International.
- Ayoade, J. A. A. (2014). *Political communication and the Nigerian media*. Routledge.
- Ayoade, J. A. A., Akinsanya, A. A., and Ojo, O. J. B. (Eds.). (2014). *Nigeria: Descent into anarchy and collapse?* [368 pages]. [Publisher if known].
- Berlinger, E., Kiss, H. J., and Khayouti, S. (2022). Loan forbearance take-up in the Covid-era: The role of time preferences and locus of control. *Finance Research Letters*, 50, 103250.
- Committee to Protect Journalists. (2023). https://cpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CPJ_AR_2023_11.pdf
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). Longman.
- Fowler, R. (1991). *Language in the news: Discourse and ideology in the press*. Routledge.
- Jegade, O. O. (2015). *Language and Ideology in the Media: A Study of Nigerian Newspaper Editorials*. International Journal of English Literature and Culture Vol. 3(3), pp. 76-84, ISSN: 2360-7831
- Martin, J. R., and White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Angiolillo, F., Lundstedt, M., Nord, M., and Lindberg, S. I. (2024). State of the world 2023: democracy winning and losing at the ballot. *Democratisation*, 31(8), 1597-1621.
- O'Leary-Cyr, M. (2022). *Press Freedom under Threat in Europe: A Case Study Analysis of the Increasing Threat to Press Freedom in Greece, Italy, and Hungary*.
- Okpala, Obiageli and Ephraim, A., and Chukwu. (2024). *A Critical Discourse Analysis of Newspaper Editorials on Insecurities in Nigeria*. 2504-8694.

- Okunna, C. S. (2012). *Introduction to mass communication*. Africana First Publishers.
- Omo, I. C., and Idegbekwe, D. (2020). Pragmatic hedges in editorials: A focus on Vanguard, Guardian and Sun Newspaper editorials in 2017. *Journal of Translation and Language Studies*, 1(1), 26-36.
- Oso, L., and Onabajo, O. (2012). *Introduction to mass communication: A multidimensional approach*. Stirling Horden Publishers
- Richardson, J. E. (2007). *Analysing newspapers: An approach from critical discourse analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robinah, N. E. (2025). Navigating media freedom amidst safety concerns on digital platforms: An analysis of the experiences of new vision journalists in Uganda.
- Uche, L. U. (1989). *Mass media, people, and politics in Nigeria*. Concept Publishing Company.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. SAGE Publications.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2006). Ideology and discourse analysis. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11(2), 115–140.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310600687908>