

BIAS AND IDEOLOGY IN NEWSPAPERS' REPORTAGE OF HERDSMEN RELATED CRIMES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Though media organisations hardly get involved in crimes directly, they tend to discreetly fuel criminalities through what, and how, they report crime-related activities and events. We examined how three Nigerian newspapers of different geo-political zones and socio-political ideologies reported herdsmen-related crimes between June 2020 and June 2021 in Nigeria. The aim was to determine reportorial variations and account for such variations from linguistic perspective. Thirty major violent crime related events covered by most national newspapers within the period were sampled. Headlines and sampled parts of the reports for each newspaper were analysed using the Hallidayan transitivity and textual analytical frameworks. The results showed that while two of the newspapers consistently concur in factual presentations (about participants involved in reported crimes), one newspaper consistently departs by reversing participant roles, de-emphasising participant information, mitigating casualty figures and outright exclusionary reportage. It is concluded that the manipulative strategies by the newspaper with substantial reportorial variation may all be intentional and connected with shared ethno-tribal and ethno-religious ideology between the newspaper's owners and the groups constantly alleged to be perpetrators of the reported crimes. This manner of filtering and distortion bias has tendency for increased animosities and crimes among the various groups involved in the reported crimes, with cumulative influence on national peace and security.

Keywords: Crime reports; herdsmen; media bias; critical discourse analysis; systemic functional grammar.

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1. Introduction

Nigeria as a developing country has continued to witness a rise in crime, violence and insecurity in the last decade. One type of crime that has become a recurrent subject of media reports has to do with the pervasive violence relating to herdsmen in the country, which media organisations report with corresponding frequencies. Determining what should be reported and how some should be reported are the primary roles of media organisations (Ghazi-Tehrani & Kearns, 2020), with the latter leading to issues of factual accuracy or otherwise about the events reported. The concept of media accuracy in crime narratives by media outlets has been a subject of multidisciplinary research for a couple of decades (e.g. Amzat, Abodunrin & Okunola, 2007; Greer & Reiner, 2015; Ghazi-Tehrani & Kearns, 2020). Substantially, a large number of existing studies on media communications concur that media organisations do not report plain or unadulterated facts, thus leading to what language, communication and social science scholars identify as biased reporting (van Dijk, 2001; Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2002; Groseclose & Milyo 2005; Dahunsi, 2018).

Scholars are also concurrent in their arguments that biased reporting is often characterised by ideological underpinnings which are usually rooted in one or more of racial, ethno-tribal, religious and political affiliations (Dahunsi, 2016; Ghazi-Tehrani & Kearns, 2020). Though patterns of biased reporting vary from media outlet to media outlet, language plays a very critical role in news reportage and biased reporting. First, all news items are relayed through language. Second, the manipulations that result in biased reporting or ideological representations are also through language. In spite of the centrality and criticality of the role of language in media communications and biased reporting, the number of linguistic studies in this area of knowledge is far less than other studies from the non-linguistic disciplinary backgrounds including sociology and communications studies.

The study reported here approached the notion of biased reporting of crimes from a purely linguistic perspective. It is aimed at using media data to determine whether (or not) newspapers are sometimes biased in their reportage of certain criminal events, to identify the linguistic strategies used to achieve biased reporting of criminal events where such is established, and from critical perspective, link the identified biased reporting of criminal events to possible underlining ideologies. Studies on media bias on crime and criminalities are of enormous importance to global peace because conflicts, crises and (sometimes) crimes are often based on perceptions about issues, and it is argued in this study that individual perceptions, which culminate in group perceptions, are formed largely on the information available to individuals through different possible sources that include media publications. As Spinde et al (2021) note, the way media organisations report events can potentially alter the beliefs, views and actions of the public. In the case of developing countries (such as Nigeria) which are persistently riddled with crime and insecurity, concerted efforts need be made to reduce biased reporting since, as Spinde et al (2021) further note, complete elimination of bias might be an unrealistic goal.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Crime Narratives and Media Bias*

Information drives humanity. The more informed a person is, the better their perspectives and judgments on issues. Humans need information on virtually everything happening not only around them but globally too. It is practically impossible for people to be present everywhere every time. They therefore rely on information presented to them through such channels as traditional electronic media (television and radio), print media (newspapers, tabloids, magazines, etc.), online newspapers, social media platforms, blogs, etc. Crime

narratives form one of the recurrent features of news items reported by media organisations. Media organisations' conscious choices of what crime is reported and how such is reported has implications and consequences on the populace, and these have not only led to contrasting concerns of members of the society (depending on ideological leaning) but have also led to a large volume of studies on the representation of crime in the press.

The questions of how true, objective, and reliable media reports and crime narratives are, have been a subject of trans-disciplinary debate and scholarship for over a century. What the overwhelming scholarly evidence indicates is that news reports are often presented in ways that show bias, and that the idea of a totally objective news reports might be a mirage (Shojaei, Youssefi & Hosseini, 2013; Wolton, 2019). Biased reporting has been defined in a great number of studies to refer to slanted news coverage reflected in news articles, a deliberate pattern of news reporting to serve some ideological purposes or to achieve specific implicit goals (Hamborg et al, 2019; Spinde et al, 2021). Gentzkow et al (2015) and Moreno-Medina (2020) have noted media organisations' power to determine what is reported and what is not reported (filtering bias), and "news outlets' outright lie about the state of the world" (distortion bias) (Moreno-Medina, 2020, p.6). In terms of distortion bias for example, Moreno-Medina *ibid* reported substantial (filtering) biases in the reportage of homicide in the United States along victim and suspect's race and wealth, and concluded that while inter-racial crimes were substantially over-covered by media organisations, white-on-white crime was under-covered, and richer neighborhoods got substantially more coverage (p.1). A high concurrence level has also been observed among different studies that what media outlets do in biased reporting is to sway public opinion through the way they select and craft information (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009; DellaVigna & Gentzkow, 2010; Fan et al, 2019).

The various studies that have been reported on media bias can be categorised on the basis of their thematic focus and methodological approaches. Some studies have examined how media bias can be detected in media texts using automated identification and related computational measures (e.g. Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Fan et al, 2019; Spinde et al, 2021; Farber & Bartscherer, 2021). Some studies have also examined the effect of media bias on the perceptive interpretation of the public (e.g. Bernhardt, Krasa & Polborn, 2008; DellaVigna et al, 2011; Van der Meer, Hamelers, & Kroon, 2020; Bergold, Matthias & Ricarda, 2021). Majority of the studies in both groups are from the social sciences (economics, political science and sociology) and computational science, while very few are from linguistics. For example, while Leeson and Coyne (2005) report that ownership plays a significant role in media manipulation in the case of Romania, Gehlbach and Sonin (2014) contend that "bias in reporting reduces the informational content of the news, thus decreasing viewership among those who value that information" (p.24). Fan et al (2019) distinguish between lexical bias and informational bias, and observe that informational bias outnumbers lexical bias; lexical bias appears early in an article, and that media sources strategically select opinionated quotes as a subtle proxy for their own opinions.

Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010) developed some computational measure of biased reporting and used same to investigate newspapers' use of partisan language in relation to the Republicans and the Democrats in the US Congress. The study found that the demand and ideology of newspapers' potential readers is a key determinant of reportage pattern, and as such enables the newspapers to achieve their economic objectives. The study also reported that newspaper ownership and pressure from incumbent politicians played much less role as a determinant of slant in newspaper reportage. Along this methodological dimension, Spinde et al (2021) developed a comprehensive media bias data-set that could be used to easily identify lexical and informational elements of bias in media reports. Some other studies have

identified language manipulative strategies for bias to include contrasting lexicalisations (Fairclough, 2010), labeling and unbalanced use of sources (Kuypers, 2002). Mullainathan and Shleifer (2002) further elaborate these to include making up facts to corroborate stories, deliberate omission of information inconsistent with the message of the story, build-up information sources that corroborate the story, ignore information sources that undermine the story, etc.

2.2 *Critical Discourse Analysis and the Concept of Biased Reporting*

One of the discourse analytical approaches often used to study patterns of language use particularly in institutional, power-oriented or ideology-inclined discourse is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a trans-disciplinary approach used in the humanities and social sciences, and its analytical focus is on the relations between discourse and society (van Dijk, 1995). Among other multi-functional and multi-dimensional approaches, CDA focuses on the strategies of manipulation, legitimation, the manufacture of consent and other discursive ways to influence the mind, and it attempts to “uncover, reveal or disclose what is implicit, hidden, and not immediately obvious” in language use (van Dijk, 1995, p.18). Fairclough (2010, p.7) posits that CDA “focuses on what is wrong with a society (an institution, an organisation etc.), and how ‘wrongs’ might be ‘righted’ or mitigated, from a particular normative standpoint”.

As Fairclough and Wodak (1997) note, studies in CDA are united in thematic and analytical foci. They all focus on social problems (that include power relations, injustice, inequality, ideology, racism, ethnic prejudice, etc.). They also closely examine how linguistic and semiotic practices contribute to social problems. Such works also have the *a priori* belief that discourse is socially influential, and that discourse does ideological work by advancing and naturalising the interests of specific groups against other groups in the society. If institutions or social groups use language to naturalise ideologies and “win acceptance for them as non-ideological ‘common sense’” (Fairclough, 2010:1), it is the duty of Critical Discourse analysts to deconstruct such linguistic and semiotic practices and denaturalise the underlining ideological interests with a view to having a better humanity. CDA is therefore discourse analysis “with attitude” characterised by evaluative stances (van Dijk, 2001, p.96).

The number of globally prevalent social ills has continued to rise more increasingly. Some of these include oppression and injustice (by the politically and economically powerful against the less politically and economically powerful), racism (between the white and the black), ethno-tribal prejudice (between major and other ethnic and tribal groups particularly in developing countries), inter-gender and inter-social class inequality, to mention but a few. As these social problems increase, scholarly activities geared towards understanding the central role of language and how language use contributes to them also increase from multi-disciplinary, multi-thematic and varied methodological perspectives. Notable among studies that have adopted a critical discourse analytical approach to investigate media bias include Baker (2012), El-Nashar (2014), Ramanathan and Bee (2015), Sriwimon and Pattamawan (2017), etc. Baker (2012) adopted a corpus analytical approach with critical discourse analysis to investigate the comparative representation of Muslims (a supposedly minority group in Britain) in the British press. The study observed that the word “Muslim” tended to be more associated with extremism in the newspapers but with variation in such representative manners in both *The People* and *The Guardian*. El-Nashar (2014) examined how the US media (with a corpus of media texts from *New York Times*) represented the Egyptian army in its coverage and reportage of the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Using a combined qualitative-quantitative methodological approach, the study reported that the newspaper was not entirely objective in its reportage, as subjective evaluation stances were evident in the corpus.

Shojaei, Youssefi and Hosseini (2013) investigated how different western media organisations reported issues and debates regarding the Iran nuclear programme, the various sanctions on Iran and the Syrian crisis. Using sampled headlines and lead paragraphs from newspapers between January and August, 2012, the study closely examined lexical and collocational patterns, ideological square and intertextual framing patterns in the data combined with a critical discourse analysis approach to the interpretation of the emanating results of analysis. It was concluded in the study that the media organisations investigated did not provide a perspective that is totally free from subjective interpretation of events, and that they were “highly ideological while representing the news of conflicting ideas between Iran and western countries” (Shojaei, Youssefi & Hosseini, 2013, p.867). Sriwimon and Pattamawan (2017) examined gender stereotypes in political media discourse with focus on political activities in Thailand. The study used the transitivity aspect (experiential metafunction analysis) of the Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). With close identification of participant roles and process types in the component clauses of the corpus created (which was classified into campaign phase, post-election phase and inauguration phase of Yingluck Shinawatra of Thailand), it was found that Yingluck Shinawatra, a female politician, was predominantly represented as “an ambitious politician”, “a passive and dependent politician” and “a successful businesswoman, yet inexperienced and incompetent politician” in the campaign phase (p.141).

Language manipulation for implicit purposes transcends both electronic and print media. With the advent of social media in the last two decades, a deluge of studies have concurrently documented varying extents of language manipulation on the social media to influence public opinions and shape public attitudes usually in support of, or in opposition to certain underlining ideologies. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) sum this global disinformation trend by averring that in most countries “there is at least one political party or government agency using social media to shape public attitudes domestically” and that the identified information manipulation and control is aimed at suppressing fundamental human rights, discrediting political opponents and drowning out dissenting opinions (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019, p.1).

What is evident from the submissions of most CDA-based studies of media discourse is the central concurrence that there is no absolute objectivity in patterns of media reportage of newsworthy events, and this seems to be a general trend globally. This implies that even though language serves same communicative purpose for all human beings, it can, and is often manipulated to achieve implicit personal and institutional goals. It is such manipulative use of language in crime narratives that this study investigated, but within the context of Nigeria. In this context, studies abound whose documented findings have shown evidence of media bias in coverage and reportage of events. The identified media bias has also been traced to such factors as ownership, political ideology and ethno-religious sentiments (Taiwo, 2007; Olagunju & Ajadi, 2014; Dahunsi, 2016, 2018). Ayoola (2015) investigated how such macro-structures as setting, topics and participants comparatively influenced discursive strategies on Niger-Delta issues in selected newspapers in Nigeria. The study reported that “discourse participants from different sides of the Niger-Delta conflict often slanted their public pronouncements in a manner that promoted their positive sides... and the unflattering sides of their opponents” (Ayoola, 2015, p.1).

3. Methodology

This is a descriptive and qualitative research from a linguistic perspective. The data used for the study comprised purposefully selected crime news reports from three Nigerian

newspapers: *The Punch*, *The Vanguard* and *Daily Trust*. The newspapers were all national dailies located in different geo-political regions of Nigeria, and they report major political, governmental, religious, social, economic and crime related events from all parts of the country, in addition to news items from other parts of the world. A search was run in the online versions of each newspaper for “Herdsman, herders, Fulani herdsman” and from the array presented, thirty of such news items, which were reported same days and on same criminal incidents of violence, were retrieved as data for the study. For the study therefore, a total of thirty (30) major events relating to crime, violence and national security between June 2020 and June 2021 were randomly selected for analysis. The data structure and relevant details for the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Data Structure for the Study

Newspapers	Ownership	Geo-political Region	No. of Events Reported & Investigated	No. of Headlines Analysed	No. of Sampled sentences per Newspaper
<i>The Punch</i>	Type: Private Founder: Southerner Editor: Southerner	South-South	30	30	300
<i>The Vanguard</i>	Type: Private Founder: Southerner Editor: Southerner	South-West	30	30	300
<i>Daily Trust</i>	Type: Private Founder: Northerner Editor: Northerner	North-Central	20	20	200

The analytical framework adopted is the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), with the specific choices of experiential and textual metafunction analysis. SFG is a broad theoretical and grammatical model spearheaded by the British-born Australian linguist, Michael Alexander Kirkland Halliday. Even though the grammatical model deals essentially with the structural organisation of the English clauses, the focus of analysis is substantially on the meanings of language in use in the “textual processes of social life”, or “the socio-semantics of texts” (Eggins, 2013, p. 2). According to Halliday (1994, p. xv):

... the aim has been to construct a grammar for purposes of text analysis: one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English.

Of the three metafunctions of the clause theorised by Halliday (experiential, interpersonal and textual), only experiential and textual approaches to clause analysis were adopted for the study. The experiential metafunction analysis was adopted as one analytical approach because language is viewed as comprising a set of resources for referring to entities in the world and the ways in which those entities act on or relate to each other (Eggins, 2013; Bloor & Bloor, 2013; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Language is also argued by systemicists as being a system of options, and humans make conscious choices of lexical and grammatical resources to express meanings. Since, in reality, we do not see the same thing the same way, then our lexical and grammatical selections tend to vary. Consequently, different newspapers tend to view issues differently; and this construal variation has tendency to manifest in varying lexico-syntactic choices that potentially become reportage patterns and indicators of ideological stances over time.

The textual metafunction approach was also adopted on the assumption that if clauses are used to convey messages, then such messages must have a pattern of organisation, wherein a distinct status is assigned to one part of the clause (Theme), and that part combines with all other parts of the clause (Rheme) to make the complete message that is conveyed by the clause (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The choices of what message is made to constitute the Theme and Rheme are consciously and deliberately made by speakers, and what speaker “A” makes the Theme may constitute the Rheme of Speaker “B” if they have to report the same event. This is a possibility in media reports, hence the complementary textual analysis of sampled data in the study. Tables 2a and 2b show different headline versions of two major incidents by each of the three newspapers as examples of analytical approaches.

Table 2a.

Transitivity and Textual Analysis of Newspaper Headline Versions: Same Incident (1)

<i>The Punch</i>						
	^{C1} <i>Herdsmen</i>	<i>attack</i>	<i>angry rice farmer,</i>	^{C2} <i>chop off</i>	<i>hand.</i>	
Transitivity	Actor	Proc:material	Goal	Proc:mat	Goal	
Textual	Theme	Rheme		Theme	Rheme	
<i>The Vanguard</i>						
	<i>Fulani herdsmen</i>	<i>reportedly</i>	<i>Kill</i>	<i>seven hunters</i>	<i>in Kwara</i>	
Transitivity	Actor	Circumstance	Proc:material	Goal	Circumstance	
Textual	Theme	Rheme				
<i>Daily Trust</i>						
	^{C1} <i>Tension</i>	<i>in Kwara</i>	^{C2} <i>as</i>	<i>angry youths</i>	<i>move to evict Fulani residents</i>	
Transitivity	Attribute	Carrier	-	Actor	Proc:material	Goal
Textual	Theme	Rheme	Text. Theme	Top. Theme	Rheme	

Table 2b.*Transitivity and Textual Analysis of Newspaper Headline Versions: Same Event (2)*

<i>The Punch</i>								
	^{C1} <i>Farmers</i>	<i>flee</i>	^{C2} <i>as</i>	<i>herdsmen</i>	<i>allegedly</i>	<i>Attack</i>	<i>Igangan</i>	<i>again.</i>
Transitivity	Actor	Proc:material	-	Actor	Circ.	Proc:mat	Goal	Circ.
Textual	Theme	Rheme	Tex. Theme	Top. Theme	Rheme			
<i>The Vanguard</i>								
	^{C1} <i>Fulani herders</i>	<i>attack</i>	<i>two</i>	^{C2} <i>as</i>	<i>tensions</i>	<i>Mount</i>	<i>in Ibarapa.</i>	
Transitivity	Actor	Proc:material	Goal	-	Actor	Proc:mat	Circumstance	
Textual	Theme	Rheme		Tex. Theme	Top. Theme	Rheme		
<i>Daily Trust</i>								
	<i>Youths</i>	<i>attack</i>		<i>Fulani communities</i>	<i>in Oyo.</i>			
Transitivity	Actor	Proc: material		Goal	Circumstance			
Textual	Theme	Rheme						

Both experiential (Transitivity) and textual (Theme-Rheme) analyses were comparatively carried out for all the headlines and the randomly selected parts of the main report of each newspaper for every major instance of violence investigated. This was aimed at determining patterns of similarities and dissimilarities in terms of the reported participants in the events (the doer and the done-to), process type (activity type) and circumstantial elements for transitivity analysis; and the Theme (information element emphasised) in the organisation pattern of the message for textual analysis. The outcome of these analyses was interpreted using Critical Discourse Analytical perspective with the aim of unraveling ideological underpinnings that the public might be unaware of, and to denaturalise some naturalised ideologies that may be characteristically used to win acceptance from the public as non-ideological ‘common sense’ (Fairclough, 2013, p.30). In other words, the determination of biased reporting of crime was done by determining factual concurrence levels among the newspapers, and any newspaper with overwhelming reportorial divergence is deemed to be biased.

4. Results

4.1 Determination of Biasedness of News Reports

4.1.1 Transitivity Analysis of Headlines

The result of analysis showed how each newspaper captioned their respective reports per incident, with conscious choices from the paradigmatic and syntagmatic resources provided by English. The result also showed the projection stances of each newspaper in terms of the participants involved (that is, the “doer” and the “done-to”), the reported activity type, exactitude versus mitigation of reported figures, emphasized element of the message, etc. Presented in Table 3 are the comparative frequencies of the node “Fulani herdsmen/herders” in the headlines analysed, where it is shown that both *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers mentioned the node word 21 times each as the Actor and thematic element while *Daily Trust* mentioned it 4 times as Actor and Circumstance, 8 times as Goal, 4 times as thematic element and 9 times as part of the Residue. What is evident in these patterns of reportage is substantial concurrence between both *The Punch* and *The Vanguard*, and substantial divergence between *Daily Trust* and the other two newspapers.

Table 3.*Comparative Frequencies of Fulani/Herdsmen Mentions across Headlines*

Type of Analysis	“Mention” Type (Elements)	<i>The Punch</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>
Transitivity	Actor	21	21	4
	Goal	-	-	8
	Circumstance	-	-	4
Textual	Thematic	21	21	4
	Rhematic	-	-	9

4.1.2. Transitivity Analysis of Main Reports

The results of transitivity and textual analyses for the 800 sampled sentences across all stories and newspapers are summarised in Table 4. As shown in the table, the comparative mention frequencies of “Fulani herdsmen/herders” were identified for each category of transitivity and thematic element.

Table 4.*Comparative Participant Role Assignment to “Herdsmen/Herders” across Newspapers*

Process Types	Participant Types	<i>The Punch Newspapers</i>	<i>The Vanguard Newspapers</i>	<i>Daily Trust Newspapers</i>	Total
Material	Actor	150	162	24	336
	Goal	18	25	158	201
Verbal	Sayer	0	0	10	10
	Verbiage	57	69	66	192
Mental	Senser	10	4	0	14
	Phenomenon	3	3	0	6
Relational	Carrier	18	15	0	38
	Attribute	9	12	21	42
Behavioural	Behaver	0	0	0	0
	Behaviour	3	3	0	6

The two transitivity elements in focus here are the “process” and the “participants”. While the process shows the types of action involved in the reporting clauses, the participant element shows the type of persons (or things) that serve as both the “doer” of the action and the persons (or things) to whom the action has been done (i.e. the direct receiver of the action) in the reporting clauses. The material process type was found to be the most predominant in the analysed data. Instances of material process type found in the data included *killed, razed, kidnapped, raped, injured, chop-off, shot, attacked, sacks*, etc. These verbs showed the various kinds of crimes being reported. The participant element indicates both the persons “perpetrating the crime” (the doer) – Actor, and the persons receiving the actions (the done-to) – Goal. The comparative results in Table 4 thus show that of the total 336 Actor elements, *The Punch* has 150 instances (45%), *The Vanguard* has 162 instances (48%), while *Daily Trust* has only 24 instances (7%). This means the word Herder/herdsmen appears as “doer” participant (persons allegedly reported as perpetrating the crimes) far much less in *Daily Trust* newspapers than the other two newspapers. Interestingly however, the word “herdsmen/herders” appears as “done-to” participant (receiver of the acts of crime) far much more in *Daily Trust* (158, i.e. 79%) than the other two newspapers (18, i.e. 9% for *The Punch*; and 25, i.e. 12% for *The Vanguard*).

4.2 Textual Analysis (Theme and Rheme)

The result of comparative textual analysis is presented in Table 5. The thematic and rhematic analysis enables an understanding of message parts that speakers or writers consider to be prominent and of more importance (Theme), compared to the parts of messages considered to be less important and less prominent (Rheme). Elements made to constitute the Theme are elements of focus and emphasis, and thematically foregrounded elements of some sort, while all other elements in messages are de-focused and de-emphasised, thus “junked” as Rhematic elements.

Table 5.

Comparative Results of Textual (Theme-Rheme) Analyses of Herders/herdsmen

Textual Elements	<i>The Punch Newspapers</i>	<i>The Vanguard Newspapers</i>	<i>Daily Trust Newspapers</i>	Total
Thematic elements	180	195	60	435
Rhematic elements	120	105	165	390

As shown in the table, the headword “Herders/herdsmen” occurs as thematic elements in 180 clauses in *The Punch* data, 195 clauses in *The Vanguard* data, but in only 60 clauses in *Daily Trust* data, making comparative percentages of 41, 44 and 13 respectively. In terms of the rhematic composition across data, the highest occurrences of “Herders/herdsmen” were found in *Daily Trust* at 42%, while similar occurrences were found to be very low in *The Punch* (31%) and *The Vanguard* (27%). These comparative figures are shown graphically in Fig. 1.

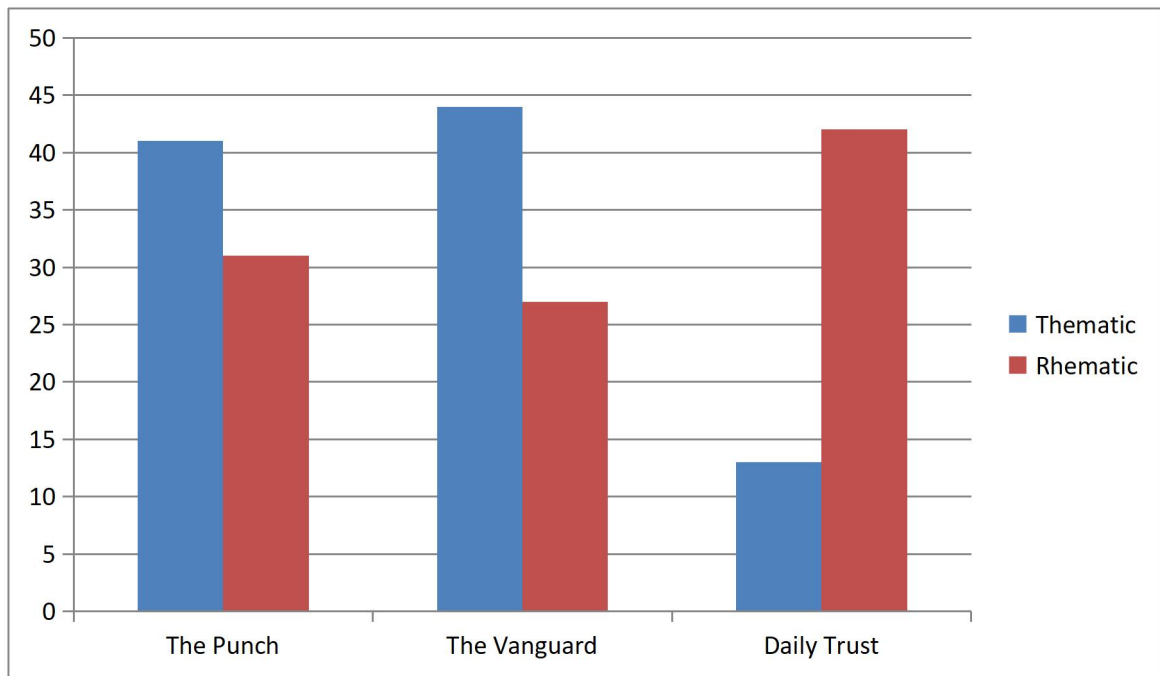


Figure 1: Comparative Thematic and Rhematic Occurrences of “Herders/herdsmen”

The results of comparative transitivity analysis above establish reportorial concurrence between *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers in terms of the allegedly reported perpetrators of crimes (as herdsmen/herders) and reportorial divergence between *Daily Trust*

newspapers and the other two (as *Daily Trust* represented herdsmen/herders not as alleged perpetrators of crimes but victims of reported crimes). This reportorial trend is also established from the results of textual analysis, which show both *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* as foregrounding and emphasizing “herdsmen/herders” as thematic elements compared to *Daily Trust* which substantially de-emphasises and backgrounds same words by “junking” them as rhematic elements of clauses. Based on these results, it can be argued that the substantial divergence of the reporting patterns in *Daily Trust* from those of *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* suggests an indication of biased reporting on the part of *Daily Trust* newspapers.

4.3 Identified Linguistic Strategies for Media Bias

A close study of the patterns of biasedness in the newspapers shows a number of linguistic strategies often consciously deployed by reporters. One of such strategies that are obvious from the results of transitivity analyses is deliberate participant role-reversal. This is a strategy exercised when the role assigned to the participant elements in reporting clauses are twisted or reversed. In these instances, the “doer” element of the participant in one reporting clause (e.g. *Herders burn down villages*) is twisted to become the “done-to” element of the participant in another reporting clause of the same incident (as in: *Villagers burn herders*). Examples of these from the data are shown in Table 6.

Table 6.

Comparative Instances of Participant Role-Reversal in the Data

<i>The Punch</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>
<i>Farmers flee as herdsmen(Actor) allegedly attack Igangan again</i>	<i>Fulani herders (Actor) attack 2 as tension mounts in Ibarapa</i>	<i>Youths attack Fulani communities(Goal) in Oyo</i>
<i>Herdsmen attack angry rice farmers</i>	<i>Fulani herdsmen reportedly kill seven hunters in Kwara</i>	<i>Tension in Kwara as angry youths move to evict Fulani residents (Goal).</i>
<i>Herdsmen invade Enugu communities, kill 13</i>	<i>Fulani herdsmen (Actor) killing, sacking people from their ancestral homes</i>	<i>Youths attack herdsmen (Goal) in Enugu communities</i>

The second strategy identified is thematic patterning in message structure and organization. This has to do with emphasised and de-emphasised parts of messages, as shown in the elements made to constitute both the Theme (important part) and the Rheme (less important part) in reporting clauses. In this strategy, what both *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* newspapers project as important information elements (the Theme) are projected in most cases as part of the information junk (the Rheme) in *Daily Trust* newspapers. With this strategy, the focus and attention of the public have the potentials of gradually shifting from “herdsmen/herders” as perpetrators and topic of discussion to another information element. An example of this is in the following comparative statements on the same event:

- 1) Some Fulani herders [Theme] have allegedly attacked two persons with machete at Igangan in Ibarapa North Local Government of Oyo State [Rheme] (*The Vanguard*).
- 2) The Fulani there [Theme] usually destroy their farms [Rheme] (*The Punch*).
- 3) Security operatives [Theme] were earlier stationed around the Fulani communities... [Rheme] (*Daily Trust*).

The third strategy identified in the study is outright exclusion of events in coverage and reportage, a type of bias referred to as filter bias (Gentzkow et al, 2015) and exclusionary reportage (Kuypers, 2002) or “killed stories”, a situation where a media organization excludes “data about an altered reality that might otherwise disrupt existing support”. Every media organisation has exclusive power to determine what should be published or not published. Though there may be other criteria for publishing or not publishing a news item, ideological interest cannot be ruled out of such criteria. In this study, *Daily Trust* newspaper chose not to report all the thirty instances of crime investigated even though both *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* reported all the stories. Another strategy identified from the analysis is the use of mitigated reportage. This happens in situations where incomplete or unrepresentative figures are provided in news reports. Examples of this are shown in Table 7, where *Daily Trust* reports far less number of attackers and/or victims of attack compared to the other two newspapers.

Table 7.

Examples of Mitigated Casualty Figures in the Data

<i>The Punch</i>	<i>The Vanguard</i>	<i>Daily Trust</i>
<i>Dad, three siblings killed when about <u>200</u> Fulani attacked us</i>	<i><u>300</u> Fulani herdsmen attacked us</i>	<i><u>12</u> killed in Fresh Benue attacks</i>
<i><u>Five</u> vigilantes shot dead in Anambra</i>	<i>Gunmen killed <u>five</u>, set vigilante office, vehicle ablaze in Anambra</i>	<i>Gunmen attack Anambra police station, kill inspector.</i>
<i>Bandits kill <u>93</u> in Zamfara</i>	-	<i><u>15</u> policemen, 10 bandits killed in Zamfara</i>

Lastly, the use of contrasting lexicalisations (Fairclough, 2010) is also an obvious linguistic strategy in the reportage pattern of *Daily Trust*. By contrasting lexicalization, a newspaper opts for a different lexeme to convey its version of a story. This sometimes involves mitigating the semantic weight of words (e.g. the use of *Herders attack villagers* instead of *Herders wipe villages*) and in some cases comes through passivisation of reporting clauses (e.g. *Ekiti communities sacked*–Passive-, instead of *Fulani herdsmen sack Ekiti communities*-Active).

5. Discussion

The main aim of this study is to determine biased journalistic reportage of major incidents of violence in Nigeria using three newspapers as a case study. The focus of analysis is on how reported major crimes relating to herdsmen (with *Fulani herdsmen*, *herdsmen* and *herders* as variants) are reported in each of the newspapers within a period spanning between June 2020 and June 2021. Using the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar as analytical approach, the choice of experiential metafunction (transitivity analysis) has provided insight into how each of the three newspapers identifies participants and attributes criminal roles to participants in each of the events reported. Given that all the major incidents of crime analysed are similar for all newspapers, it is evident that while both *The Punch* and *The Vanguard* predominantly identify herdsmen (and other variants) as the alleged perpetrators of the reported criminal incidents, *Daily Trust* identifies and projects the same group of people not as perpetrators but as the receivers of the negative criminal activities reported in most cases, or as having nothing to do with such events in some cases. This is subtly achieved largely through role assignment to participants and patterns of thematisation. Since language

use is a conscious activity that involves choice-making from available lexico-grammatical resources provided by language, this conscious and deliberate pattern of reporting appears to be a clear evidence of biased reporting, language manipulation or distortion bias (Kuypers, 2002; Gentzkow et al, 2015) in the context of this study.

Every media organisation has exclusive power to determine what should be published or not published. Though there may be other criteria for newsworthiness of events, ideological interest cannot be ruled out of such criteria. Beyond issues of language and language patterns, the only newspaper with substantial variation in reportage patterns in the study, *Daily Trust*, is owned by a Nigerian from the northern part of the country where the newspaper is also based. Incidentally too, the herdsmen or herders constantly projected as the perpetrators of the criminal activities in the analysed data are also from the northern part of Nigeria. A jointly shared ethno-cultural, religious and tribal ideology can thus be established between the constantly alleged perpetrators of the reported crimes and the ownership of the newspaper with substantial reportage variation in this study.

The outcome of this study therefore underscores the kind of dialectical relation between discourse and other elements of the social process. As Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak (2009) note, discourse is socially constitutive and socially shaped. Discourse, at individual levels, can be argued to be a product of multi-parametric mental and psychological processes with such social factors as gender, class, ethno-political, tribal and religious affiliation as contributory variables. Fairclough (2013) notes that at institutional levels, discourse entails different “formulations and symbolisations of a particular set of ideological representations”, and that “particular ways of talking are based upon particular ways of seeing” (p.41). This study therefore corroborates some previous studies that have empirically established “a one-to-one relationship between ideological formations and discursive formations” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 43), with the resultant danger of misleading the public to accept an ideology-laden point of view, a perspective that protects particular ethno-religious and ethno-tribal ideological beliefs.

6. Conclusion

The issues of objectivity and subjectivity in media reportage of crimes cannot be determined by mere speculations. What has been done in this study is to have a critical look at the use of language to project a social group in the news reports of three major Nigerian newspapers. Using some aspects of the systemic functional grammar as analytical framework, the study has shown, first, that a particular newspaper substantially varied its patterns of reporting crimes compared to the other two, and this pattern variation implicates some implicit solidarity with the social group being studied, hence the argument that the newspaper is biased in its reportage. The productivity and relevance of transitivity analysis as shown in the study corroborates van Dijk (2001), who notes that “events and actions may be described with syntactic variations that are a function of the underlying involvement of actors” (p.359), while that of textual analysis shows the line of difference between what a speaker (or writer) considers to be of importance and less importance in the way they convey their messages (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Secondly, the study can identify five major strategies for language manipulation and distortion bias. These include participant role reversal, thematic patterning, exclusionary reporting, mitigated reporting, and contrasting lexicalisations.

A critical discourse interpretation of the results of analysis suggests that the identified reportorial manipulation may be consistent on the part of *Daily Trust*, and it may be an implicit way of exercising the public’s mind control by showing ethno-tribal and ethno-religious ideological solidarity with the groups that allegedly constantly perpetrate crimes in

different parts of the country as far as the data used for the study showed. The findings of this study are consistent with those of several existing studies on media bias (such as Shojaei, Youssefi & Hosseini, 2013; Dahunsi, 2016, 2018; Sriwimon & Pattamawan, 2017), most of which have observed that media organisations often slant their journalistic reports to achieve some implicit ideological goals.

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