

WHO IS TO BLAME FOR CORRUPTION? REGISTER-BASED ANALYSIS OF RESPONSIBILITY CONSTRUCTION IN NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER LEAD PARAGRAPHS

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ABSTRACT

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of corruption by assigning responsibility, attributing blame, and legitimising actors within public discourse. As the “Fourth Estate,” the press not only exposes corruption but also frames who is held accountable through its linguistic choices. This study investigates how Nigerian newspapers construct blame and responsibility in corruption issues by examining register and framing patterns in newspaper lead paragraphs, using the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Specifically, it analyses how contextual variables, Field, Tenor, and Mode, shape representations of agency and institutional authority in reports involving government officials and public institutions. Adopting a qualitative approach supported by frequency counts, the study purposively sampled 40 lead paragraphs from four Nigerian newspapers: *Vanguard*, *The Nation*, *Leadership*, and *Daily Trust*, published between January and December 2024. The findings reveal that blame attribution in corruption reporting is strongly influenced by contextual configurations: the Field is predominantly legal and institutional (30%), Tenor largely foregrounds political elites and state actors (58.8%), while Mode is uniformly formal and fact-oriented (100%). These patterns suggest a tendency to frame corruption as an institutional process rather than individual wrongdoing, thereby reinforcing existing power structures and diffusing personal accountability. The study contributes to SFL-based media discourse scholarship by demonstrating how register choices function ideologically in corruption reporting and offers insights for journalists and policymakers on the ethical implications of language use in attributing blame.

KEYWORDS: SFL, Register, Framing, Blame, and Corruption.

INTRODUCTION

Corruption is widely conceptualised as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International). The World Bank (2000) further defines it as “the misuse of public office for personal enrichment,” while Nye (1967) describes it as behaviour that deviates from formal public duties for personal benefit. In the Nigerian context, corruption manifests in diverse forms, including bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, fraud, and abuse of power, and remains deeply embedded in the country’s

political, economic, and social institutions (Akindele, 2005). Its pervasiveness has continued to undermine governance, weaken public trust, and obstruct socio-economic development. The role of the media in shaping public discourse around corruption cannot be overemphasised. As a key institution within democratic societies, the press holds the power to investigate, expose, and critique governance failures by public office holders. However, media representations of corruption are not ideologically neutral.

Corruption narratives in newspapers are constructed through patterned linguistic choices that reflect specific contextual configurations, namely Field, Tenor, and Mode. Field relates to the nature of social activity being reported, such as allegations of fraud, bribery, or abuse of public office; Tenor concerns the social relations and roles of participants involved, including public officials, institutions, journalists, and the judiciary; while Mode refers to the channel and rhetorical organisation of discourse, typically characterised by formal, edited, and fact-oriented print reporting. These contextual variables are central to Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which provides the theoretical framework for this study. Through their interaction, Field, Tenor, and Mode shape how corruption is framed, whether as isolated individual misconduct or as a systemic institutional problem, and how agency and responsibility are distributed across social actors (Fairclough, 2003; Richardson, 2007).

Previous studies on corruption reporting in Nigerian newspapers have offered valuable insights into the linguistic and ideological construction of corruption discourse. For example, Jegede (2015) and Adisa et al. (2018) demonstrate how framing influences corruption in news reports, while other studies have examined editorials and online media representations. Nonetheless, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to newspaper lead paragraphs, despite their strategic role in foregrounding events, signalling evaluative stance, and guiding readers' interpretation of corruption cases. Consequently, how Field, Tenor, and Mode are deployed at this critical stage to construct narratives of corruption, particularly those involving government officials and public institutions, remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by adopting an SFL-based register perspective to examine how contextual variables operate in Nigerian newspaper lead paragraphs to construct blame, agency, and institutional responsibility in corruption reporting.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although the media plays a crucial role in promoting transparency and accountability in democratic societies, the linguistic framing of corruption in Nigerian newspapers has not been sufficiently or systematically examined. Existing studies on corruption discourse have largely concentrated on editorials, full-length news reports, digital media platforms, or the influence of political affiliation and ownership on media content. While these studies provide valuable insights, they have paid limited scholarly attention to newspaper lead paragraphs, despite their strategic function in foregrounding events, signalling evaluative stance, and shaping readers' initial interpretation of corruption narratives.

More importantly, within this underexplored discursive space, there remains a paucity of research that interrogates how corruption involving public officials and institutions is linguistically constructed through contextual parameters. Specifically, little is known about how the variables of Field, Tenor, and Mode operate in newspaper lead paragraphs to distribute agency, attribute blame, and frame institutional responsibility in corruption reporting. As a result, the role of register choices in shaping ideological meanings and public perceptions of corruption at this critical stage of news reporting remains insufficiently understood. This study addresses these gaps by adopting a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach to analyse Nigerian newspaper lead paragraphs on corruption cases. By examining how contextual variables structure meaning in corruption reporting, the study contributes to media discourse scholarship and offers insights relevant to ethical journalism practice and public accountability.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To investigate the linguistic construction of corruption involving public officials and institutions in Nigerian newspaper lead paragraphs
2. To identify the dominant Field categories through which corruption events are represented and how these thematic choices shape the framing of responsibility.
3. To analyse how Tenor configurations distribute agency, blame, and institutional authority among participants in corruption reports.
4. To examine how Mode contributes to the formal positioning of corruption narratives and influences the construction of accountability.
5. To evaluate the ideological implications of these register choices for public perception of corruption and responsibility in Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is corruption involving public officials linguistically constructed in Nigerian newspaper lead paragraphs?
2. What Field patterns dominate corruption reporting, and how do they frame responsibility?
3. How does Tenor configuration distribute agency and blame among participants?
4. What role does Mode play in shaping corruption narratives?
5. What ideological implications emerge from these register choices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews relevant studies on newspaper discourse and their implications for the framing of corruption cases, with particular emphasis on the role of contextual variables: Field, Tenor, and Mode in shaping news representations. In

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Field refers to the nature of the social activity and subject matter being construed, Tenor concerns the social relations and roles of participants in discourse, and Mode relates to the channel and rhetorical organisation of communication. These contextual variables significantly influence linguistic choices in news reporting, thereby shaping how corruption is represented, evaluated, and interpreted in public discourse.

Jegade (2015) employs Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, with particular focus on the ideational meta-function, to analyse how language in Nigerian newspaper editorials constructs and conveys ideology. By categorising different process types such as material, relational, and mental processes, the study interprets how editorials reference authorities, citizens, social values, and national concerns to articulate opinions on socio-political issues. Findings reveal that the selected editorials use distinct process types to express ideological positions, describe societal actors, and appeal to authorities for solutions to national problems, thereby illustrating how linguistic choices shape meaning beyond surface content. Jegede concludes that SFL provides a robust analytical lens for readers to uncover deeper nuances of meaning in editorial discourse, enhancing understanding of both language use and media ideology in the Nigerian print context.

Similarly, Adisa et al (2018) examine how Nigerian newspapers frame corruption involving public officers through a comparative content analysis of selected print media. The study reveals that corruption is predominantly framed using episodic and conflict-oriented perspectives, with strong emphasis on individual culpability rather than systemic or institutional causes. By foregrounding allegations, arrests, and court proceedings, the newspapers construct corruption largely as a moral failing of specific public officials, while giving limited attention to underlying structural factors such as governance failures or institutional weaknesses. It is argued that such framing patterns shape public perception by personalizing corruption and potentially obscuring its broader socio-political roots. The study is significant for highlighting the ideological role of media framing in corruption discourse, although it is limited by its reliance on content analysis and does not explore the deeper linguistic choices through which framing is realized in news texts.

Collectively, these studies provide valuable insights into the linguistic and contextual mechanisms through which Nigerian newspapers frame corruption. However, despite these contributions, existing studies have largely focused on editorials, full news reports, or digital and multimodal discourse, with limited attention paid to newspaper lead paragraphs. Given their strategic role in foregrounding events, allocating agency, and setting the interpretive and ideological direction of news stories, lead paragraphs remain an underexplored site of analysis.

Moreover, there is a paucity of research that systematically examines how corruption cases involving government officials and public institutions are linguistically constructed at the level of lead paragraphs using an integrated SFL register analysis. This study addresses this gap by adopting a Systemic Functional Linguistics approach to examine how Field, Tenor, and Mode operate in Nigerian newspaper lead paragraphs on corruption cases, thereby contributing a focused and

nuanced account of how ideological meanings are constructed at the most influential entry point of corruption reporting in Nigerian newspapers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by Michael Halliday (1978), which conceptualises language as a social semiotic system, a resource for making meaning within specific social and cultural contexts (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Unlike formalist approaches that treat language as a set of abstract rules, SFL emphasises how linguistic choices are functionally motivated and socially situated. This orientation makes it particularly suitable for analysing media discourse, where meaning is shaped by ideology, institutional practices, and power relations. By foregrounding the relationship between language and context, SFL provides a principled framework for examining how corruption is discursively constructed in newspaper reporting.

Central to SFL is the notion that language simultaneously performs three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational meta-function represents experience through processes, participants, and circumstances; the interpersonal meta-function enacts social relations, authority, and evaluative stance; and the textual meta-function organises discourse into coherent and contextually appropriate messages. These meta-functions operate within the broader contextual variables of Field, Tenor, and Mode, which together define the register of a text (Halliday, 1978; Eggins, 2004). Field concerns the nature of the social activity and subject matter being represented; Tenor addresses the roles and power relations among participants; and Mode relates to the channel of communication and rhetorical organisation. In newspaper reporting, these variables shape stylistic choices, degrees of formality, attribution patterns, and the structuring of headlines and lead paragraphs (Thompson, 2013).

Applied to corruption reporting, SFL enables a systematic analysis of how agency and responsibility are discursively distributed. Field influences whether corruption is framed as legal procedure, financial misconduct, or institutional failure; Tenor reveals how journalists position political actors, state agencies, and readers through modality and attribution; and Mode structures the presentation of information within the conventions of formal written news. In this study, blame is conceptualised not merely as the presence of agency but as the linguistic attribution of responsibility accompanied by evaluative positioning. Through the analysis of participant roles, process types, and modality choices within lead paragraphs, the framework illuminates how corruption narratives construct accountability, mediate ideological stance, and shape public perception in Nigerian media discourse.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were collected from the digital archives of four major Nigerian newspapers: Vanguard, The Nation, Leadership, and Daily Trust. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select forty (40) lead paragraphs, with

ten lead paragraphs from each newspaper published between January and December 2024.

This study draws on a dataset of 40 lead paragraphs from Nigerian newspapers originally compiled for the author's master's thesis. Another study using the same dataset has examined a different linguistic feature: transitivity. The lead paragraphs were manually retrieved using targeted search terms, including corruption, bribery, embezzlement, misappropriation, fraud, and probe. Selection criteria emphasized thematic relevance, linguistic richness, and editorial depth, rather than strict numerical balance, to ensure that the corpus reflected meaningful instances of corruption reporting. The analysis involved a systematic qualitative examination of how Field, Tenor, and Mode shape the construction of corruption narratives. To provide quantitative support, the study calculated the frequency of occurrence of linguistic features and expressed them as percentages using the formula: number of occurrences of an item divided by the total number of instances, and multiplied by one hundred. This method ensures a clear quantification of linguistic patterns and facilitates comparison of how different newspapers utilize language to frame corruption-related issues.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the register analysis of corruption-related lead paragraphs in selected Nigerian newspapers. In line with the study's objectives, the analysis examines how corruption involving public officials and institutions is linguistically constructed (Objective 1) through the contextual variables of Field, Tenor, and Mode. Specifically, the section addresses: the dominant thematic configurations through which corruption events are represented (Objective 2 - Field), (2) the distribution of participant roles in the construction of agency and blame (Objective 3 - Tenor), and (3) the communicative channel and rhetorical organization through which corruption narratives are framed (Objective 4 - Mode).

The ideological implications of these register patterns (Objective 5) are developed through interpretive analysis within each subsection and further synthesised in the Discussion section. The results are presented sequentially to reflect these objectives, combining quantitative frequency distribution with qualitative interpretation to demonstrate how register choices shape the framing of responsibility and institutional accountability in corruption reporting. The following are some selected examples of the analysis out of the corpus:

Vanguard: January 10, 2024

"ABUJA – AS various corruption scandals rock strategic Ministries, Departments and Agencies, MDAs, a forensic expert, Prof Mannix Paul, Wednesday, urged President Bola Tinubu, to restructure anti-graft agencies to frontally fight and curb corruption."

This shows that the field focuses on an anti-graft reform call, highlights concerns over corruption in MDAs, and the need for restructuring anti-graft agencies.

The mode is a written, formal news report intended for public readership. The tenor consists of Prof. Mannix Paul, a forensic expert advocating for reform, President Bola Tinubu, the key decision-maker being urged to take action, and Ministries, Departments, and Agencies, the institutions implicated in corruption scandals.

The Nation: February 11, 2024

“The House of Representatives has denied allegations that its committee overseeing the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) was extorting money from University Vice Chancellors, Rectors of Polytechnics, and Provosts of Colleges of Education before allowing them access to the 2024 intervention fund.”

The field is the rejection of extortion claims by a government body. The mode is a written, formal news report. The tenor consists of the House of Representatives as the authority refuting the allegations, the TETFund committee as the institution facing the accusations, and University Vice Chancellors, Rectors, and Provosts as the alleged victims of the extortion claims.

Leadership: April 23, 2024

“The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) has arrested former Minister of Aviation Hadi Sirika over the botched Nigeria Air project.” The field focuses on the legal action taken against Hadi Sirika. The mode is a written, formal news report. The tenor includes the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission as the arresting authority and Hadi Sirika as the accused individual.

Daily Trust: 23 Sep 2024

“A former governor of Kogi State, Yahaya Bello, who has been having a running battle with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) over alleged N80.2bn money laundering, has been urged to make himself available in court on Wednesday, September 25, 2024.” This presents a corruption case in the field, calling for the accused to make himself available in court. The mode is a written, formal news report, ensuring a structured and objective account. The tenor consists of the EFCC as the prosecutors, Yahaya Bello as the accused, and the court as the judicial authority responsible for adjudication.

Field: Thematic Construction of Corruption (Objective 2)

To address Objective 2, which seeks to identify the dominant Field categories through which corruption is represented, the lead paragraphs were categorized based on thematic focus.

Table 1

Field Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Corruption Investigations & Probes	08	20%
Court Rulings and Trials	12	30%
Political & Government Accountability Calls	07	17.5%
Arrests & Detentions	04	10%
Protests & Public Reactions	04	10%
Financial Mismanagement Cases	05	12.5%
Total	40	100%

The distribution of Field categories reveals that corruption reporting in Nigerian newspaper lead paragraphs is predominantly framed through institutional and legal processes rather than moral or civic lenses. Court rulings and trials constitute the highest proportion (30%), followed by corruption investigations and probes (20%) and political/government accountability calls (17.5%). This pattern indicates that corruption is primarily constructed as a judicial event rather than as an ethical or structural crisis.

The dominance of court-related reporting suggests that newspapers foreground adjudication over initial wrongdoing. By situating corruption within legal proceedings, the discourse shifts attention from the act of corruption itself to its procedural resolution. This framing may delay definitive blame attribution, as responsibility becomes contingent upon court verdicts rather than investigative exposure or public moral judgment. In this way, corruption is normalized as a recurring legal matter rather than an urgent governance failure demanding immediate civic response.

Similarly, the prominence of investigative and probe-related reports (20%) positions anti-corruption agencies as central institutional actors, reinforcing the perception that corruption control is primarily a bureaucratic function. While this highlights state responsiveness, it may also institutionalize accountability, confining it within official mechanisms and limiting broader societal engagement.

The relatively lower representation of protests and public reactions (10%) further indicates that grassroots voices and civic resistance are marginal in lead paragraph constructions. This imbalance suggests that corruption narratives are elite-driven and institutionally contained, potentially minimizing the visibility of citizen victimhood and public dissent.

Overall, the Field configuration demonstrates that Nigerian newspapers frame corruption as a formal institutional process managed by courts and investigative bodies. The implication is that corruption becomes proceduralized and bureaucratized, which may subtly diffuse moral urgency and reinforce reliance on state institutions as the primary arbiters of accountability.

Tenor: Distribution of Agency and Blame (Objective 3)

In line with objective 3, this section examines how participant roles (Tenor) distribute agency and attribute blame within corruption narratives.

Table 3

Tenor Category	Participants and Roles	Frequency	Percentage %
Government & Political Leaders	Accused officials, public officeholders, political figures (e.g., Governors, Ministers, Lawmakers)	70	58.8%
Anti-Corruption & Law Enforcement Agencies	Prosecutors, Investigators, Arresting Agencies (e.g., EFCC, ICPC)	22	18.5%
Judiciary & Legal Bodies	Judges, Courts, Legal Authorities handling cases	14	11.8%
Private & Institutional Entities	Business executives, financial institutions, and corporate bodies involved in corruption cases	07	5.9%
Civil Society & Public Actors	Whistleblowers, NGOs, Protesters, and Advocacy Groups calling for action	06	5%
Total		119	100%

The Tenor analysis reveals a clear dominance of government and political leaders (58.8%) as central participants in corruption-related lead paragraphs. This heavy concentration of elite actors indicates that corruption discourse is primarily constructed around powerful institutional figures. By foregrounding governors, ministers, and lawmakers, newspapers position political elites as the principal agents within corruption narratives.

Anti-corruption and law enforcement agencies (18.5%) constitute the second most prominent group, functioning as investigative and prosecutorial authorities. Their presence reinforces institutional accountability mechanisms and frames corruption as a state-managed issue. Judiciary and legal bodies (11.8%) further institutionalize the discourse by mediating outcomes and legitimizing final determinations of guilt or innocence.

In contrast, civil society actors and public voices account for only 5% of participant representation. This limited presence suggests that ordinary citizens, whistleblowers, and advocacy groups are marginal in lead paragraph constructions. As a result, corruption is framed predominantly as an elite interaction between accused officials and state institutions, rather than as a societal crisis affecting citizens directly.

This distribution of Tenor roles demonstrates a vertical accountability structure, where agency and responsibility circulate among institutional actors while the public remains largely positioned as indirect or passive victims. The implication is that corruption narratives are controlled within elite discourse spaces, potentially restricting broader democratic participation in accountability processes.

Overall, the Tenor configuration reinforces institutional authority, centralizes elite actors, and shapes readers' perception of corruption as a high-level political and legal phenomenon rather than a lived social experience.

Blame Attribution Patterns in Lead Paragraphs

Although political elites dominate participant representation in the lead paragraphs, responsibility is frequently mediated through institutional attribution rather than directly asserted by newspapers. Accusations are typically framed through reported statements from anti-corruption agencies, courts, or official sources, often accompanied by cautious modal expressions such as "allegedly" and "reportedly." These linguistic strategies signal procedural neutrality and distance the newspaper from overt evaluative judgment.

This pattern suggests that newspapers rarely assume a direct accusatory voice. Instead, blame is constructed as emerging from institutional authorities, positioning investigative and judicial bodies as primary arbiters of responsibility. While this reinforces journalistic objectivity and procedural legitimacy, it also regulates the intensity of moral condemnation by embedding accusations within official discourse rather than presenting them as assertive editorial claims.

Mode: Formal Framing of Accountability (Objective 4)

To fulfil Objective 4, the analysis considers how Mode contributes to the structuring and positioning of corruption narratives.

Table 2

Mode Category	Frequency	Percentage %
Formal Written News Report	40	100%
Total	40	100%

To fulfil Objective 4, the analysis examines how Mode contributes to the structuring and positioning of corruption narratives. All sampled lead paragraphs (100%) are presented in a formal, written news format. Although this uniformity may appear analytically neutral, it has important discursive implications.

The formal written mode of newspaper reporting is characterized by edited structure, informational density, and cautious attribution. This mode constructs institutional authority and reinforces journalistic objectivity through impersonal phrasing, procedural sequencing, and reliance on official sources. Linguistic features such as passive constructions and attribution markers (e.g., "allegedly," "according to the EFCC," "the court ruled") mediate the assignment of responsibility, ensuring that blame is often framed within institutional processes rather than directly asserted by the newspaper.

This formalization contributes to the proceduralisation of corruption discourse. Rather than foregrounding moral condemnation, the mode emphasizes verification, investigation, and due process. As a result, corruption is framed less as an immediate

ethical rupture and more as a matter subject to legal scrutiny and institutional determination.

While this enhances credibility and aligns with professional reporting standards, it may also diffuse explicit blame attribution. Responsibility is frequently suspended until confirmed by courts or official agencies, which shifts interpretive authority from journalists to state institutions. Consequently, corruption narratives become institutionally regulated, potentially reducing overt moral urgency and limiting emotive engagement with public victimhood.

The uniform Mode configuration therefore reinforces a bureaucratic framing of corruption, positioning accountability within formal institutional channels and shaping readers' perception of corruption as a structured legal matter rather than a spontaneous moral crisis.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings of this study demonstrate that corruption in Nigerian newspaper lead paragraphs is predominantly constructed through institutional and procedural frames. The dominance of court rulings and trials within the Field configuration aligns with Norman Fairclough's (2003) assertion that institutional discourse often legitimizes power by embedding events within formal structures of authority. By foregrounding adjudication and legal resolution, corruption is positioned as a matter for judicial determination rather than immediate moral evaluation. This finding resonates with O. O. Jegede (2015), who observed that Nigerian newspaper discourse frequently privileges institutional actors and formal processes in socio-political reporting. However, unlike studies that emphasize ideological polarization in editorials, the present study finds that lead paragraphs adopt a more proceduralized and restrained framing, suggesting that blame is institutionally mediated rather than explicitly asserted.

The Tenor distribution further supports this institutional orientation. The prominence of government and political elites (58.8%) as central participants reflects patterns noted by J. R. Martin and P. R. R. White (2005), who argue that media discourse often constructs authority figures as primary agents in public narratives. However, while Adisa et al. (2018) found that Nigerian newspapers tend to personalize corruption through episodic framing, this study suggests a more complex pattern: although elites dominate representation, explicit blame is frequently deferred to institutional sources through verbal attribution ("alleged," "denied," "charged"). Thus, rather than overt personalization, the discourse demonstrates institutional mediation of blame. Responsibility circulates within elite and state structures, while civil society voices remain marginal. This finding contrasts with studies that emphasize conflict framing and instead suggests a bureaucratized pattern of accountability in the lead paragraphs.

The uniform reliance on formal written Mode reinforces what M. A. K. Halliday (1978, 1994) conceptualizes as register determined by the context of situation. The formal, edited structure of newspaper reporting constructs authority and

credibility, but it also regulates evaluative intensity. As P. R. R. White (2004) notes, even seemingly neutral media discourse carries evaluative positioning. In the present study, however, evaluation is subtle and procedural rather than overtly condemnatory. Blame is embedded within institutional processes rather than expressed through strong attitudinal language. This suggests that Nigerian newspaper lead paragraphs balance professional neutrality with accountability framing, privileging due process over moral outrage.

Taken together, the findings extend previous scholarship on corruption framing in Nigeria by demonstrating that register configurations at the level of lead paragraphs play a decisive role in structuring responsibility. While earlier studies have emphasized framing strategies or ideological bias, this study contributes by showing how SFL register variables systematically shape the attribution of agency and blame at the entry point of news narratives. The analysis reveals that corruption is discursively institutionalized: agency is concentrated among elites, blame is mediated through official channels, and public victimhood is backgrounded. This configuration may reinforce procedural legitimacy while simultaneously normalizing corruption as a routine institutional occurrence.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Nigerian newspapers' lead paragraphs construct blame and responsibility in corruption reporting through the contextual variables of Field, Tenor, and Mode within a Systemic Functional Linguistics framework. The findings reveal that corruption is predominantly framed as a procedural and institutional matter, with court rulings, investigations, and official pronouncements dominating thematic representation. Agency is concentrated among political elites and state institutions, while civil society voices remain marginal. Although public officials frequently appear as accused actors, explicit blame is typically mediated through institutional attribution and cautious modality, positioning responsibility within legal and investigative processes rather than through direct journalistic condemnation.

These patterns suggest that corruption discourse in Nigerian newspapers is discursively institutionalized: accountability is structured vertically among elite actors, and interpretive authority is deferred to courts and anti-corruption agencies. While this reinforces professional neutrality and procedural legitimacy, it may also normalize corruption as a routine bureaucratic occurrence rather than an urgent civic crisis. By demonstrating how register choices shape the attribution and mediation of blame at the entry point of news narratives, this study highlights the powerful role of language in organizing public perception, legitimacy, and democratic accountability in corruption reporting.

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