

The Linguistic Resources of Tropes in the Media Construction of Anti-Graft Campaign in Nigeria (2015-2022)

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ABSTRACT

The major hindrance causing underdevelopment in African countries, including Nigeria is corruption, and the role of the media in combating the menace is crucial. Therefore, this study examines the manner in which tropes in media reports shape public knowledge and perception of graft, with a view to fighting corruption through the writers' presentation of anti-graft campaign within the Nigerian context. Data in the study comprise headline news, top stories, news and opinion articles which represent online version of the newspapers and news report Journals. The publications represent the media presentation on graft and anti-graft campaign in Nigeria which fall within the period of 2015 to 2022. The study uses descriptive, interpretative, and explanatory methods to analyze language patterns in the data. It applies conceptual metaphor theory to examine how media reports frame corruption. Findings show that the use of tropes in anti-graft campaigns helps engage the public, making them more receptive to critical and rational media reports that address corruption from different perspectives.

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Introduction

Corruption in Nigeria not only causes suffering, economic hardship, and emotional distress but also contributes to poor infrastructural development. This study examines how the media use linguistic tropes in their anti-graft campaigns to engage, sensitize, influence, and mobilize the public toward good governance and social change. The linguistic resources of tropes in media discourse have far-reaching implications, as they employ lexico-semantic features such as metaphors, irony, similes, and hyperbole to shape meaning and public perception. Existing studies on anti-corruption discourse often focus on policy implications and governance frameworks (My Nhat & Thu Hien, 2023), overlooking the pragmatic and cognitive dimensions of metaphor use in shaping societal attitudes. Most prior research also relies on quantitative approaches or broad thematic analyses, whereas this study employs a qualitative, discourse-oriented approach to uncover the deeper ideological functions of metaphors. However, despite extensive research on

metaphorical framing in media discourse, there remains a notable gap in examining how metaphors systematically shape public perception of corruption, particularly in the Nigerian context. While previous studies have explored metaphor use in political and economic discourse (Awwad et al, 2021; Boutilier, 2021), few have provided a detailed linguistic analysis of how metaphors in media reports construct ideological narratives around corruption (Kamalu et al, 2023; Chiluwa, 2021).

Additionally, while Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has been widely applied in metaphor research, its application in Nigerian media discourse on corruption is underexplored. This study fills this gap by critically analyzing how Nigerian media employ metaphorical constructions to reinforce or challenge dominant narratives about corruption, governance, and accountability.

By addressing these gaps, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of metaphorical framing in media discourse and its role in influencing public perception and ideological positioning in Nigeria's anti-corruption campaigns.

Tropes are a distinct class of rhetorical strategies that involve figures of speech whose intended meanings differ from their literal interpretations (Clark, n.d.). Classical rhetorical analysis viewed tropes as linguistic and poetic strategies used by orators to persuade their audiences (Burgers et al, 2016). However, the "cognitive turn" in the late 1970s led to a revised perspective, incorporating conceptual metaphor theory, which sees metaphors as cognitive tools rather than mere literary devices. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define conceptual metaphors as understanding one domain of experience (typically abstract) in terms of another (typically concrete). For instance, expressions such as "Her ego is very fragile," "I'm going to pieces," and "She is easily crushed" illustrate the conceptual metaphor The mind is a brittle object (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Such linguistic metaphors are embedded in native speakers' mental lexicons and demonstrate polysemy and idiomaticity in language structure.

In metaphor studies, the term "mapping" describes how elements from a source domain are projected onto a target domain. The source domain consists of stored attributes and relationships in the mind, while the target domain is abstract and derives its structure from the source via metaphorical links (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This perspective has significantly advanced the study of tropes, leading to new insights into how metaphor, hyperbole, and irony function in discourse (Gibbs, 2011). In public debates, these tropes often combine into 'figurative frames,' which serve as powerful rhetorical tools (Burgers et al, 2016).

A. Objectives

1. To analyze how the media use linguistic tropes in anti-graft campaigns to shape public perception of corruption.
2. To examine the role of conceptual metaphors in constructing narratives around corruption

and governance.

3. To explore the persuasive and mobilizing functions of tropes in media discourse.
4. To investigate how figurative language enhances critical engagement with anti-graft messages in Nigeria.

B. Relevance of the Study

This study contributes to linguistic and media discourse analysis by demonstrating how tropes serve as cognitive tools for understanding corruption. It highlights the media's role in shaping public perception through rhetorical strategies and provides insights into how language can be harnessed to promote social change. By exploring the relationship between metaphorical framing and public engagement, the study underscores the importance of effective communication in the fight against corruption in Nigeria.

In examining the role of tropes, the study also considers experiential behavior as a crucial linguistic strategy in media constructions of anti-graft campaigns. This approach aims to expose corruption and educate the public on its harmful effects, fostering greater awareness and accountability in governance.

C. Theoretical Background

This study is anchored on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Otherwise called CMT, the theory focuses on the explication of metaphors, which is considered as cognitive tools, and not just mere literary figures of language use. CMT is more to the cognitive thinking of how the mind infers and perceives a specific phenomenon (Zhang, 2021). The theory is employed to understand abstract concepts in terms of more concrete ones, to enable us link one idea to another for better understanding of linguistic expressions. In this study, we shall focus on the two conceptual domains, the Source domain and Target domain. While the former explains a number of attributes and relationships stored in mind, the latter is largely an attempt to explore the abstract structure from the source domain via the "metaphorical link", by the mapping between the two domains of experience (source-target), for proper understanding of the idea being portrayed in a particular context. The study examines how tropes in media reports shape public knowledge and perception of corruption within the Nigerian context. In doing so, it aligns with Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which argues that people comprehend abstract domains (such as corruption and governance) through metaphorical mappings from more concrete domains.

For instance, corruption is often framed using metaphors related to disease (corruption is a cancer), war (fighting corruption), or contamination (a rotten system). These tropes influence public perception by shaping how corruption is understood and responded to. Media writers employ such linguistic resources to construct anti-graft narratives that sensitize, influence, and mobilize the public toward rational and critical engagement with governance issues (Kamalu et al,

2023; Isaza&Ossewaarde, 2021; Kusumawati, N., & Liliani, 2023).

Moreover, the media's use of figurative devices, especially metaphor reflects the rhetorical function of tropes in public discourse (Sun et al, 2021; Musolff, 2023; Taylor, 2021). This is consistent with classical rhetorical theory, which views tropes as persuasive tools used by orators (Clark, n.d.; Burgers et al., 2016). By integrating conceptual metaphor theory with rhetorical strategies, the study highlights how media discourse strategically constructs corruption narratives to drive social change and accountability.

Method

This study is situated within discourse studies and adopts a qualitative research approach, using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as its theoretical framework. The methodology focuses on analyzing linguistic tropes as rhetorical and cognitive tools in media discourse on corruption.

A. Sample Selection and Data Sources

The study examines media reports on corruption in Nigeria published between 2015 and 2022. Data were purposively selected from online newspaper articles, news reports, editorials, and opinion pieces to ensure a comprehensive representation of media discourse on anti-graft campaigns. The selection criteria included:

1. Relevance to corruption discourse: Only publications explicitly discussing corruption or anti-graft efforts were included.
2. Diversity of media sources: Data were drawn from a range of national online news platforms to capture varied journalistic perspectives.
3. Authorship: The study focused on texts written by media editors, socio-analysts, and critics who influence public perception through their linguistic choices.
4. Use of tropes: Articles containing figurative language (metaphors, personification, hyperbole, similes, etc.) were prioritized for analysis.

B. Analytical Approach

The data analysis follows a multi-step discourse analysis approach, integrating:

1. Thematic Identification: Extracts from selected media reports were categorized based on recurring rhetorical patterns in corruption discourse.
2. Foregrounding of Tropes: The study identifies the key figurative device, especially metaphors, personification, hyperbole, similes used in shaping public perception.
3. Conceptual Mapping: Applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the analysis explores how abstract notions of corruption are constructed through concrete imagery (e.g., "corruption as a disease" or "corruption as a battle").
4. Functional Interpretation: The study examines how linguistic tropes serve mobilizing, persuasive, and integrative functions, influencing readers' attitudes and engagement with

anti-corruption discourse.

By systematically analyzing how media texts construct corruption narratives, this study demonstrates the power of linguistic framing in shaping public perception and fostering accountability.

Discussion

This study examines the media's portrayal of anti-graft campaigns using tropes, figurative language devices such as metaphor, personification, hyperbole, and simile; to highlight corruption in Nigeria and advocate for good governance. It investigates how media writers employ these linguistic tools to frame corruption discourse, influence ideological meanings, and elicit emotional responses from readers. The analysis focuses on lexico-semantic markers that reflect attitudes, judgments, and commitments regarding corruption as depicted in media reports.

A. Corruption in Public Institutions

Media reports on anti-graft campaigns reveal systemic corruption in public institutions, particularly in the education sector, where bribery and mismanagement are widespread.

Extract 1:

*"Britain's former Prime Minister David Cameron was once caught on camera describing Nigeria as '**fantastically corrupt**', **bribes**, **inflated prices**, and **abandoned projects are a huge problem...** '**procurement in Nigeria has been a significant hotspot for corruption**,' says Eva Anderson."* Rebecca Ratcliffe ([Guardian News, August 9, 2017](#)).

The highlighted expressions, huge problem, hotspot, and hefty payments, function as metaphors to depict the extent of corruption. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) helps explain how these metaphors' structure public perception, mapping corruption onto pervasive, destructive forces. These tropes amplify readers' emotional engagement and reinforce negative evaluations of public officials' unethical behaviors, particularly in awarding and mismanaging government contracts.

The hyperbolic markers further emphasize disappointment and frustration over corruption, using figurative expressions to highlight the decayed state of public infrastructure due to financial misappropriation. The media, through these tropes, aims to mobilize public sentiment against corrupt practices.

Extract 2:

*"Since taking office last year, Mr. Buhari has vowed to tackle rampant official corruption, which has **stunted economic growth** across the country as part of the campaign..."* – Martin Patience ([BBC News, October 9, 2016](#)).

*"Nigeria is corrupt, and nobody is trying to cover the fact: The president took the comment with a **pinch of salt**."* – Emma Amaize ([Vanguard News, May 25, 2016](#)).

Here, "stunted economic growth" personifies Nigeria's economy as an entity whose progress has been crippled by corruption, reinforcing the conceptual metaphor Corruption is a Disease.

Similarly, with a pinch of salt metaphorically critiques the government's lackluster response to corruption, portraying the leadership as dismissive and indifferent. These tropes serve to influence readers' perception of governance and accountability.

B. Corruption in Public-Private Corporations

Public-private enterprises such as the Power Holding Company (PHC) and the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) have been consistently linked to corruption.

Extract 3:

*"Nigeria's **notoriously anaemic power** sector has long been undermined by **grand corruption**..."* – Matthew T. Page ([Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 17, 2018](#)).

Extract 4:

"50% of power generated in Nigeria is stolen by customers through illegal connections and bypassing of meters, especially in BEDC franchise areas." – Funke Osibodu (Independent Newspapers Nig., May 26, 2019).

"Notoriously anaemic" personifies the Nigerian power sector as a weak, diseased entity, aligning with the Corruption is a Disease metaphor. This framing amplifies the media's critical stance, painting corruption as a chronic affliction eroding national progress. Similarly, stolen power metaphorically criminalizes fraudulent activities, positioning corruption as an active agent.

Extract 5:

*"The epicenter of petro-corruption is the Nigerian National Corporation (NNPC). Petroleum revenues are the **lifeblood** of official corruption in Nigeria."* – Matthew T. Page ([Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 17, 2018](#)).

The phrase "lifeblood" of corruption draws from the Corruption is a Living Entity metaphor, reinforcing the idea that corruption in the petroleum sector sustains broader systemic malfeasance. These tropes strategically heighten public awareness and encourage accountability.

C. Corruption in the National Assembly

Media discourse often frames the Nigerian legislature as a hub of corruption.

Extract 6:

*"Nigeria's legislature: **A den of robbers?**... Where is democracy, equity, fairness, and justice where there is untold suffering?"* – Ola Ojo ([Punch Newspaper, March 16, 2018](#)).

Here, "den of robbers" metaphorically equates lawmakers with criminals, reinforcing the Government is a Criminal Organization metaphor. This figurative depiction challenges the credibility of legislators and suggests that political elites lack integrity and commitment to democratic values.

D. Corruption in JAMB (Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board)

Media reports on financial misappropriation within JAMB employ figurative language to ridicule fraudulent activities.

Extract 7:

“Snake Allegedly Swallows #36 million from JAMB Office Vault.” – Juliet Ebirim & Adetutu Adesoji (Vanguard, February 17, 2018).

The metaphorical use of “snake” symbolizes deception, greed, and danger. This aligns with Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) assertion that metaphors shape conceptual understanding, positioning the incident as absurd and evoking public outrage. The media thus constructs an anti-graft narrative that underscores the implausibility and severity of corruption.

E. Corruption in Federal Governance

The media’s depiction of national governance often employs pervasive metaphors to criticize leadership inefficacy.

Extract 8:

*“To mend a broken nation: The Easter Metaphor (on Nigeria). Nigerians can no longer recognize their country, which has been **battered and buffeted** by men and women from the **dark womb of time**... Our politics is broken. Our economy is broken. Our energy system is broken. Our security system is broken. Our roads and rails are broken. Only corruption is **alive and well**.” – Mathew Hassan Kukah (Premium Times, April 17, 2022).*

The recurring broken metaphor conceptualizes Nigeria as a fragmented entity in need of repair, reinforcing the Nation as a Fragile Object metaphor. The contrast between systemic failure and corruption’s resilience (alive and well) accentuates government inefficiency. These figurative elements enhance the emotional appeal of the anti-graft discourse.

This study lends credence to the fact that in previous research, metaphors play a key role in shaping public perception of corruption. Similar to prior studies using Conceptual Metaphor Theory, it finds that corruption is often framed through metaphors of disease, war, and darkness. However, unlike earlier research that focuses on Western media, this study provides a Nigerian perspective, reflecting local socio-political realities. Also, while many previous studies rely on quantitative methods, this research takes a qualitative approach to uncover deeper ideological meanings. Past studies emphasize how metaphors evoke emotions, but this study highlights their role in shaping governance discourse and influencing policy debates. Viewing this from a holistic perspective, this study extends existing research by showing how Nigerian media use metaphors not just to describe corruption but to frame public attitudes and ideological positions.

Conclusion

By employing figurative language, the media shapes public discourse on corruption, evoking emotional responses and reinforcing ideological positions. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) elucidates how these tropes frame corruption as a disease, a living entity, and a destructive force, thereby influencing public perception. The strategic use of metaphors, personifications, and hyperboles in media reports underscores the significance of linguistic choices in constructing anti-

graft campaigns. These findings highlight the power of discourse in shaping governance narratives and mobilizing societal action against corruption.

This study has examined the strategic use of metaphors in media discourse on anti-graft campaigns, highlighting how corruption is framed across various institutions, agencies, and entities. Applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the analysis demonstrates that corruption is systematically conceptualized through specific source domains that shape public understanding of the issue. While the traditional two-domain mapping (source and target) is evident, the study also reveals instances where a more complex model involving multiple conceptual spaces is required to fully capture the metaphorical structuring of corruption discourse (Kövecses, 2002).

Rather than merely conveying the moods and emotions of writers, the findings indicate that metaphors play a crucial role in shaping public perception of corruption by reinforcing particular ideological stances and influencing societal attitudes. By analyzing the linguistic choices in media reports, this study underscores the ideological function of metaphors in constructing narratives around corruption, governance, and accountability. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how metaphorical framing in media discourse serves as a powerful tool in shaping public discourse and policy debates on corruption in Nigeria. In view of this, we suggest that future studies could explore how metaphorical framing of corruption in Nigerian media differs across various languages and indigenous newspapers, revealing potential cultural and linguistic influences. Additionally, a comparative analysis between Nigerian and international media could provide deeper insights into how global and local narratives shape public perception. Researchers may also examine the impact of these metaphors on readers' attitudes and policy responses through audience reception studies. Expanding the scope to include social media discourse would further highlight how digital platforms reinforce or challenge traditional media portrayals of corruption.

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