

“It Isn’t Corruption, It’s Just Stealing”: An Experiential Metafunctional Analysis of Newspaper Reportage of Corruption Cases Among Political Office Holders in Nigeria

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Received 15 September 2025; accepted 21 October 2025

Published online 26 October 2025

Abstract

This study identifies linguistic strategies deployed by Nigerian newspapers to frame corruption involving Nigerian political elites, drawing insights from Halliday’s experiential metafunction. It examines how transitivity choices, particularly the choices of processes, construct meanings that reflect underlying ideological leanings. The study aims to uncover how language in media discourse functions not only to convey information but also to shape public perception of corruption, power, and accountability. The study employs both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data comprises fifteen purposively selected news reports, five each from *Punch*, *The Sun*, and *Leadership* newspapers, published between May 2022 and June 2024. The three newspaper organizations are chosen because they are among the top broadsheets in terms of readership in Nigeria. The time-frame is chosen because there were a lot of corruption cases reported among political office holders by the Nigerian news organizations within that period. The study reveals that transitivity choices in the newspaper reports are ideologically motivated. The political elites were portrayed as not being culpable of financial misconduct. The study also shows that the newspaper consistently made choices of institutions and anonymous persons as the accusers of political elites on financial misappropriation. This way, the newspapers try to appear neutral in reporting sensitive cases. Furthermore, process choices were used to obscure culpable political leaders and depersonalize corruption, ultimately reflecting a broader strategy to protect the

image of these individuals. The study concludes that newspapers do not act as neutral observers in the discourse on corruption, rather, they deliberately choose grammatical structures that ideologically help to shape the representation of corruption.

Key words: News reports; Corruption; Transitivity; Systemic functional linguistics; Political discourse

Alfred, B., & Sangodeji, F. A. (2025). “It Isn’t Corruption, It’s Just Stealing”: An Experiential Metafunctional Analysis of Newspaper Reportage of Corruption Cases Among Political Office Holders in Nigeria. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 31(2), 19-33. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/13899>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13899>

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, corruption has emerged as a recurrent and enduring feature of civil society. In Africa, scholars trace its roots both to pre-colonial and colonial structures. While Mulinge and Lesetedi (1998) argue that colonialism did not only introduce corruption to Africa but actively institutionalized it through strategic material inducements to the local chiefs, Igboin (2016) presents two contrasting views, the *Afrocentric* perspective which sees pre-colonial Africa as largely corruption-free due to communal ethics and the *Decolonization* perspective which believes that African leaders sometimes exploited communal systems for personal gain. By juxtaposing these perspectives with the argument made by Mulinge and Lesetedi (1998), a more nuanced understanding of corruption in Africa is gained. While colonial rule undeniably deepened corrupt practices by creating systems of exploitation, it is also important to acknowledge that elements of corruption might have predated European influence. This dual perspective helps in the understanding of the complexity of corruption in Africa, recognizing both its historical roots and the ways it evolved over time.

In Nigeria, corruption stands as one of the most persistent obstacles to national progress. Over the years, multiple steps such as the establishment of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) have been taken to curb the menace. Though these initiatives have brought about high-profile prosecutions and recoveries, the problem of corruption still remains. This is because corruption is not just a legal issue, it is also a battle for public perception. According to Okon and Ekpe (2018), access to information is essential if the fight against corruption will be won. This means that for any anti-corruption effort to truly succeed, it must not only punish wrongdoing but also reshape how people view and relate to the problem. This is where communication, particularly through the media, becomes central. The way corruption is reported, framed, and discussed in public spaces can either reinforce cynicism and apathy or awaken collective will for accountability. Newspapers are one of the oldest and respected sources of information in Nigeria. They do not just tell stories; they choose what to highlight. They decide how to describe people and events and they also determine the voices to amplify. Every word, headline, and photo choice contribute to how corruption is framed in the public imagination. In this way, newspapers play a silent but powerful role in shaping ideologies, that is, the deeper beliefs and assumptions people hold about society, leadership, and justice.

Existing studies on corruption in the Nigerian political system have adopted the perspectives of sociolinguistics (Oboko, 2023; Gronbeck, 1978), critical discourse analysis (Chiluwa, 2021; Ogunmuyiwa, 2015; Akinyemi 2024), and metaphoric constructions (Kamalu, Anasiudu, & Fakunle, 2023; Kamalu & Anasiudu, 2024; Negro, 2015). Alfred and Oyebola (2019), Asad, Noor, and Jaes (2019), Miranti (2014), Qasim, Sibtain, and Nawaz (2020), Mujahid and Mahmood (2025), El Houssine (2022), and Zakizadeh (2024) have worked on how news reports, editorials and headlines use transitivity to express their biases and shape readers' understanding of events.

Despite these contributions, there is, however, still a significant gap in literature concerning how corruption cases involving political elites in Nigeria are discursively constructed in news reports using the experiential metafunction. This gap is especially pressing in the Nigerian context, where corruption is not only widespread but also deeply politicized. In response to this scholarly gap, the present study seeks to undertake an experiential metafunctional analysis of selected newspaper reportage on political corruption by Nigerian political office holders, with the aim to uncover how news organizations in Nigeria infuse their ideologies and biases into their writings.

2. CORRUPTION DISCOURSE AND THE NEWS MEDIA

Corruption is widely recognized as a global issue as it affects political, economic, and social structures across nations (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Heywood, 2018). It is considered one of the greatest challenges of governance which damage institutions, impede economic development and dents public trust (Johnston, 2014). Despite its widespread, defining corruption remains a complex task. This is because scholars and institutions approach it from various disciplinary perspectives. One of the most cited definitions comes from Nye (1967) who defines corruption as a deviation from official responsibilities of a public officer to personal interests, whether for financial benefit or social status. Rothstein and Varraich (2017) describe corruption as an overarching concept that encompasses related governance issues such as *clientelism*, *patronage*, *patrimonialism*, *particularism*, and *state capture*. According to them, it is often difficult to draw a clear boundary between what constitutes legitimate political influence and what should be classified as corruption. They challenge the notion that corruption is simply about law-breaking and push for a broader understanding that considers how power is distributed and exercised.

This raises the question of universality of the definition of corruption. Perceptions of corruption vary. This means that what one society condemns as corruption, another might see as an acceptable norm. This subjectivity complicates the fight against corruption, as global anti-corruption frameworks such as those by *Transparency International* and the United Nations, may not always align with local cultural understandings of ethical governance.

The role of newspapers in exposing corruption has been a focal point for scholars examining the intersection of media, governance, and accountability. Rose-Ackerman (1999), as cited by Haque (2012), submits that the media plays a crucial role in reshaping public perceptions by highlighting behaviors that are often considered acceptable and revealing those that should be deemed corrupt and, through this, they can increase public awareness, reinforce anti-corruption values, and mobilize societal pressure against corrupt practices. More so, newspapers operate a special investigative power which enables them to deliver full-scale investigative coverage about corruption. According to Picard and Pickard (2017), newspapers influence public thoughts while raising political consciousness to motivate citizens against corruption by showing decisions in a transparent fashion. In other words, newspapers activate public opposition towards corruption through investigative reporting. The public observation of corruption creates an accountable environment which leads to legal as well as political interventions against unethical behavior.

A recurring theme in scholarly discourse is the tension between media independence and political interference. Tella and Franceschelli (2011) demonstrate how government advertising funding creates perverse incentives for newspapers to avoid critical coverage of corruption. Their study of Argentine media found that newspapers receiving substantial government ad revenue reduced front-page corruption stories by 18% of standard deviation. Similarly, Matherly and Greenwood (2024) link the closure of local newspapers in the United States to a rise in corruption prosecutions, a pattern mirrored in Nigeria's under-resourced media landscape. Nigerian journalists often lack the institutional support to pursue long-term investigations, a challenge exacerbated by threats of violence. Musa and Antwi-Boateng (2023) reveal that reporters, investigating high-profile corruption cases, risk imprisonment, harassment or even violent attacks. Jones Abiri, in 2019, was arrested and detained for two years without trial for reporting on corruption in Nigeria's oil industry. These risks, coupled with low wages and editorial pressures, discourage in-depth reporting (Egwu & Wogu, 2019) and lead to what Musa and Antwi-Boateng (2023) describe as a shift toward "promotional politics," where commercial interests take priority over serving the public. For instance, Oyeleye and Osisanwo (2013) examined how cover stories from two Nigerian news magazines, *TELL* and *The News*, expressed ideological pursuits in the 2003 and 2007 general elections. The findings revealed that the magazines presented the elections in ways that aligned with their ideological leanings. They portrayed their preferred political figures and groups in a positive light and downplayed their flaws. At the same time, they brought to the fore and emphasized the weaknesses of opposing groups and minimized their achievements. This highlights the need for more balanced reporting to ensure fair and objective political discourse.

Similarly, Robert (2020) examined the role of language of news headlines in communicating thoughts, shaping meaning and maintaining social solidarity. The study segmented fourteen (14) 2016 anti-corruption headlines from *The Nation* and *The Punch* into material, verbal, and mental processes and analyzed the data based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, specifically, the ideational metafunction. The study revealed that writers strategically use national representations, participant role allocation (through activation and passivation), and overlapping process categories to construct ideological narratives. According to Taiwo (2007), various elements of newspapers are often deliberately crafted through linguistic manipulations. These mean that the language of news reportage is not neutral; newspapers are not just information dispensers, they are molders of perceptions. Journalists carefully choose their words. With their linguistic choices, they guide how readers understand

events, form opinions, and engage with societal issues, subtly projecting their biases and ideologies.

Considering the challenges highlighted above, many scholars have discouraged overstating the impacts media can play in the fight against corruption. According to Starke, Naab, and Scherer (2016), media freedom and investigative reporting are essential for uncovering corruption, but their effectiveness depends on broader systemic factors. This means that though newspapers and investigative journalism can expose individual cases, they cannot really address the deeper structural issues that perpetuate corruption. Starke *et al.*, (2016), citing Vaidya (2005), also support the submission concerning the limitation of newspapers in the fight against corruption. According to them, governments can undermine the impact of media allegations through strategic "spinning" of stories. This manipulation dilutes public outrage and weakens the potential for systemic reforms. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018) agrees that media reporting plays a critical role in exposing corruption but its success is limited because it focuses on initiating short-term public or legal responses. The report emphasizes that investigative journalism frequently exposes financial crimes and bribery but struggles to break the entrenched networks of corruption because there is less follow-up on the part of law enforcers or policy makers.

According to Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2018), one of the main problems affecting the effectiveness of newspapers reporting in the fight against corruption in Nigeria is the issue of "brown envelope journalism" (the practice of journalists accepting bribes to suppress or skew stories). This phenomenon erodes trust in journalism and also allows corruption to persist unchecked. This report and many others reveal the need for complementary reforms (such as strengthening judicial systems, protecting journalistic independence, and fostering civic engagement) to amplify the long-term impact of media reporting on corruption.

3. THE TRANSITIVITY SYSTEM

Within Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, the transitivity system is a central component. Originally developed by M. A. K. Halliday in the 1960s and further refined in later works such as *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), transitivity investigates how language represents processes (actions, events, states of being) and the participants and circumstances involved. It provides a systematic means of examining how clauses encode different kinds of experience and, by extension, how they reflect the speaker or writer's worldview.

From a functional linguistic perspective, language serves three broad metafunctions: the ideational, the

interpersonal, and the textual. Transitivity falls under the ideational metafunction, which is concerned with how language represents reality. This reality is not merely physical but also psychological, relational, and existential. The transitivity system allows us to ask critical questions such as: Who is doing what? To whom? In what manner? And under what circumstances? These questions are grammatically realized through what Halliday termed the process, participants, and circumstances of the clause.

What distinguishes the transitivity system from traditional grammatical notions of transitivity (i.e., the presence of direct objects) is its functional and semantic orientation. In SFG, transitivity is not about verb valency or syntactic roles alone, but about how meaning is construed through grammatical structure. Every clause in English (and indeed, in any language) construes a slice of experience, and the way in which this is done is patterned and describable. Thus, transitivity provides a robust framework for analyzing how speakers or writers selectively represent actions, thoughts, and events, and how these choices shape our interpretation of texts. This makes transitivity particularly useful in the analysis of discourse, especially where issues of ideology, bias, power, or representation are at stake. In media texts, for example, grammatical choices within the transitivity system may reflect efforts to assign blame, downplay responsibility, obscure agency, or construct public figures in particular ways. A newspaper may use passive constructions to omit the actor in a corruption scandal ("Funds were mismanaged") or foreground certain participants ("The governor defended his actions") while backgrounding others. These choices are not merely stylistic. They are ideologically loaded and capable of shaping readers' understanding of events. In sum, the transitivity system is a powerful analytical tool for investigating language capacity to encode and manipulate representations of reality. It enables researchers to make visible the subtle and often hidden choices that writers and speakers make. These choices shape identities and have real implications for how information is interpreted.

With this conceptual foundation established, the following section outlines the six process types identified by Halliday and how each contributes to the linguistic construal of human experience.

3.1 The Processes in the Transitivity System

3.1.1 Material Process

Material processes are a fundamental aspect of transitivity in Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) that represents actions and events that occur in the physical world. Halliday (1994) defines them as those processes involving "doing" or "happening," where an actor (the initiator of the action) engages in an activity that affects a goal (the entity acted upon). Material processes are widely examined in discourse studies, particularly in media, politics, and critical discourse analysis. According to Liu (2021),

material processes are central to courtroom discourse as they dominate the speech of key participants, particularly judges, attorneys, and prosecutors. A significant reason for this prominence lies in the prosecutor's objective to show that the defendant's actions constitute a violation of the law. By their syntactic positioning of *Actors*, *Processes* and *Goals*, the prosecutor constructs a legal argument based on actions performed by the defendant and the victim. To Van Leeuwen (2008), *Actors* are always foregrounded or backgrounded to explicitly attribute blame (e.g., *The minister embezzled funds*) or obscure it through nominalization (e.g., *Embezzlement of funds occurred*). El Houssine (2022) also submits a similar postulation in his study of newspaper headlines on the Russian attack on Ukraine. According to the scholar, the use of the active voice foregrounds the actor while backgrounding the goal. This linguistic choice places greater emphasis on both the initiator of the action and the process itself and it makes the actor more prominent and accountable for the event.

Summarily, material processes appear frequently in both spoken and written discourse because they are fundamental in representing actions and events. They structure our descriptions of reality, allowing us to express what people do, what happens to objects, and how events unfold. Whether in news reports, legal discourse, or everyday conversations, material processes shape our understanding of causality and agency. :

- The chef {ACTOR} prepared {PROCESS} a delicious meal {GOAL}.
- The construction workers {ACTOR} built {PROCESS} a new bridge {GOAL}.

3.1.2 Mental Processes

Mental processes constitute another crucial category of transitivity that capture the realm of cognition, perception, and emotion. Unlike material processes, which describe observable actions in the physical world, mental processes operate internally, reflecting a participant's thoughts, feelings, and sensory experiences. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) define mental processes as those that involve "sensing" rather than "doing," distinguishing them as processes of perception (e.g., see, hear), cognition (e.g., think, understand), affection (e.g., love, fear), and desire (e.g., want, hope).

One defining feature of mental processes is their participant roles: the *Senser*, who experiences the mental activity, and the *Phenomenon*, which is the object of that experience. Unlike material processes, where the actor exerts control over an external entity, mental processes often reflect internalized, involuntary experiences. For instance, in the sentence *She believes in justice*, *She* is the *Senser*, and *justice* is the *Phenomenon*. Unlike material processes, where the actor physically impacts the goal, mental processes suggest internal engagement rather than direct physical interaction (Thompson, 2014).

According to da Silva (2010), mental and verbal processes play distinct roles in shaping the discourse of Science Popularization News (SPN). To the scholar, mental processes which involve cognition, perception, and emotion (e.g., think, understand, believe) are more frequent in the initial sections of SPN texts. Their dominance in the opening parts suggests that authors incorporate them to present the study, develop the research context, and capture the readers through the mental processing of the subject matter. With the focus on thoughts and comprehension, mental processes contribute to making complex scientific information more accessible to non-specialist audiences. The same kind of pattern is evident in legal discourse particularly in courtroom proceedings. In court proceedings, mental processes carry weight in the formation of arguments and the interpretation of perceptions. As Bartley (2018) notes, cognitive and perceptive mental processes are usually prominent in the closing statements of both prosecution and defense teams. They employ this to subtly guide the jury's interpretation of events under consideration. Liu (2021), in his transitivity analysis of courtroom interactions, also submits the same postulation that defendants and prosecutors employ mental verbs to construct credibility and shape narratives. By repeatedly referencing thoughts and perceptions, lawyers subtly guide jurors towards a particular understanding of the evidence while fostering a sense of independent reasoning. Mental processes are, thus, central to how language encodes thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. Their unique role in transitivity makes them a powerful tool in shaping discourse. They allow speakers and writers to frame subjectivity, assert authority, and influence interpretations.

- She {SENSOR} loves {PROCESS} chocolate {PHENOMENON}.
- The student {SENSOR} understood {PROCESS} the lesson {PHENOMENON}.

3.1.3 Verbal Processes

Verbal processes encompass processes of saying, reporting, and communicating. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) define verbal processes as those that involve a *Sayer* (the entity that produces speech or communication), a *Verbiage* (the content of what is said), and optionally, a *Receiver* (the participant who hears or receives the message). Another category of verbal processes involves instances where the *Sayer* performs a verbal action directed at another participant, thereby influencing or affecting them directly. This includes verbs such as *insult*, *praise*, *slander*, *abuse*, and *flatter*. The recipient of this verbal action is referred to as the *Target* (Anggraini & Fidiyanti, 2018). These processes are crucial in discourse analysis as they reveal how information is presented, attributed, and disseminated within different genres, including media, law, and political discourse.

Verbal processes play a central role in journalistic discourse, particularly in newspaper reportage, where they shape the representation of news events. According to da Silva (2010), verbal processes are predominantly found in the latter sections of Science Popularization News, where enunciative standpoints are called upon to explain research findings. This suggests that verbal processes are strategically deployed to attribute claims to authoritative sources, lending credibility and legitimacy to the discourse.

- The teacher {SAYER} explained {PROCESS} the lesson {VERBIAGE} to the students {RECEIVER}.
- She {SAYER} told {PROCESS} him {RECEIVER} the truth {VERBIAGE}.

3.1.4 Relational Processes

Relational processes function to establish relationships between entities, attributing qualities or identifying participants within a clause. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) categorize relational processes into three primary types: intensive (expressing identity or attribution, e.g., "She is a teacher"), possessive (indicating ownership, e.g., "She has a piano"), and circumstantial (linking participants to circumstances, e.g., "The meeting is at noon"). These processes play a crucial role in meaning-making across various discourses, including media, politics, and legal contexts.

Azhar, Afzal, Asif, and Mohsin (2018) illustrate the strategic deployment of relational processes in press releases and press conferences issued by elite forces in response to a special court verdict. Their analysis reveals that the spokespersons employed relational processes to positively frame the elite forces while casting the judicial system in a negative light. By describing the elite forces as a "dominant institution," the discourse reinforced the authority and legitimacy of the speaker's institution while subtly undermining the credibility of the judicial ruling. This highlights how relational processes are not just descriptive but serve as tools of ideological constructions. They shape how audiences perceive institutional authority and legitimacy.

The two types of relational clauses identified by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) are attributive and identifying relational clauses. Each of them differs in both functional orientation and representational structure.

3.1.4.1 Attributive Relational Process

In attributive clauses, a *Carrier* is assigned an *Attribute* that characterizes or classifies it. This type of clause answers the question: *What is X like?* or *What class/category does X belong to?* The clause thus performs a descriptive function by ascribing a quality, property, or classification to a participant. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), attributive clauses are inherently non-reversible, meaning that the grammatical *Subject* (the *Carrier*) cannot switch places with the *Attribute*.

- The minister {CARRIER} is {PROCESS} corrupt {ATTRIBUTE}.
- Serah {CARRIER} was {PROCESS} wise {ATTRIBUTE}.

In examples 23-25 above, the *Carriers* (The minister, Serah, The man) cannot switch places with the *Attributes* (corrupt, wise, intelligent). In other words, there cannot be "*Corrupt is the minister*". Also, as seen in example 26 above, the *Attribute* can contain an indefinite nominal group. The presence of indefiniteness is a key marker that distinguishes attributive process from the identifying process, as the *Attribute* does not seek to uniquely specify but rather to qualify or describe the *Carrier*.

3.1.4.2 Identifying Relational Process

Identifying clauses, on the other hand, establish a relationship of equation or identity between two participants. They serve to define or specify the identity of one entity by relating it to another. These clauses answer the question: *What is the identity of X?* or *Which one is X?*

Unlike attributive clauses, identifying clauses are reversible. That is, the roles of *Token* and *Value* can often be exchanged without altering the propositional meaning. For instance:

- The governor's aide is the thief > The thief is the governor's aide.
- Olu is the boy > The boy is Olu

Another important grammatical feature of identifying clauses is the use of definite nominal groups (usually proper nouns or uniquely specified phrases) in either the *Token* or *Value* position. This is in contrast to attributive clauses, which generally involve indefinite *Attributes* (e.g., a thief, a good leader).

- She {IDENTIFIED/TOKEN} is {PROCESS} the talented musician {IDENTIFIER/VALUE}.
- This {IDENTIFIED/TOKEN} is {PROCESS} the favorite song {IDENTIFIER/VALUE}.

3.1.5 Behavioral Processes

Behavioral processes represent psychological or physiological actions such as laughing, crying, or sleeping. These processes typically involve a *Behaver* (the entity performing the behavior) and often occupy an intermediate position between material and mental processes (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Martin and Rose (2007), in *Working with Discourse: Meaning Beyond the Clause*, elaborate on the role of behavioral processes in constructing ideational meaning. They argue that behavioral processes are particularly useful for representing human reactions and emotions, making them a key tool for constructing narratives and characterization. For example, in literary texts, behavioral processes provide insight into characters' emotional states and reactions.

While behavioral processes are a valuable tool for discourse analysis, some scholars have noted limitations. Thompson (2021), in *Introducing Functional Grammar*,

points out that behavioral processes can sometimes be ambiguous, as they often overlap with material or mental processes. For example, the sentence "She danced joyfully" could be interpreted as a material process (physical action) or a behavioral process (emotional expression), depending on the context. Martin and Rose (2007) also caution that the analysis of behavioral processes must consider the broader context of the situation because, for instance, the same behavioral process (e.g., "He laughed") can have different meanings depending on the cultural and social context.

- She {BEHAVER} laughed {PROCESS} nervously {CIRCUMSTANCE}.
- The baby {BEHAVER} cried {PROCESS} all night {CIRCUMSTANCE}.

3.1.6 Existential Processes

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) define existential processes as those that assert the existence of an entity or event. These processes are characterized by the presence of an *Existent* (the entity whose existence is being asserted) and are often introduced by the dummy subject 'there' (Azhar, *et al*, 2018). For example, in the sentence "There is a book on the table," 'there' serves as a grammatical placeholder, 'is' functions as the existential process, and 'a book' is the *Existent*. This structure allows speakers and writers to introduce new information into the discourse seamlessly:

- There **was** {PROCESS} a loud noise {EXISTENT}.
- There **is** {PROCESS} a problem with the system {EXISTENT}.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data comprises fifteen (15) purposively selected news reports from three national newspapers: *Leadership*, *The Sun*, and *Punch*. These newspapers are deliberately selected because they are among the top broadsheet in terms of readership in Nigeria. To ensure an equal representation, five reports are selected from each of the three newspaper organizations. The selected news reports are those between May 2022 and June 2024 because of the spate of news on corruption cases among political office holders within the period.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis is anchored on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (2004). Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) emerged in the mid-20th century as a major theoretical departure from formal and structuralist linguistic paradigms. Developed by Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday, SFL is both a theory of language and a model for linguistic description that integrates the analysis of structure with an interpretation of function, context,

and meaning. Central to this reconceptualization are the two key descriptors in the theory's name: "systemic" and "functional." The "systemic" aspect of SFL refers to the notion that language is organized as a network of interrelated choices rather than as a linear sequence of rules. Language is conceptualized as a *system of systems*. This means that language offers a range of options from which speakers select depending on their communicative goals. These choices are seen as systemic alternatives within the grammar. They reflect meaning potential rather than fixed structures (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The "functional" dimension has to do with the theory's commitment to explaining "what language does" and "how it works in context". Language is not treated as a system of arbitrary forms but as a resource for performing functions. Halliday identified three metafunctions of language: the ideational (representing experience), the interpersonal (enacting social relations), and the textual (organizing messages coherently). These metafunctions are not separate subsystems but simultaneous, integrated dimensions of language that operate within every clause.

At the core of this study is the ideational metafunction of language. The ideational metafunction refers to the capacity of language to construe human experience—both of the external, material world and the internal, mental and emotional realities. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) divide this metafunction into two interrelated components: the experiential and the logical. However, the present study focuses on the experiential component, which is realized through the transitivity system. The transitivity system identifies six distinct types of process: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioral, and existential. Each process type is characterized by its own typical participant roles and can be expanded with circumstantial elements that provide additional context. These process types are not merely linguistic classifications; they correspond to different domains of human experience. This study's analytical focus is primarily on this transitivity system because it offers an effective means of revealing ideological leanings embedded in texts. By examining how processes are represented, it becomes possible to explore how newspapers may align with, resist, or remain neutral toward particular institutional and political interests.

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is adopted as the theoretical anchor for this study because of its social orientation to analyzing language in use. SFL is suitable for this work because it focuses on how language functions in real-world contexts and has what it takes to analyze the social nature of the newspaper discourse which is the focus of this study. Through the use of this theory, the analysis of lexico-grammatical resources could provide insight into the ideological leanings of newspaper organizations about corruption cases involving Nigerian political office holders.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis covers 232 transitivity processes extracted from three major Nigerian newspapers (*The Sun*, *Punch*, and *Leadership*) over a defined period, carefully categorized into six key process types according to Halliday's model: material (actions and events), verbal (communication processes), relational (states of being and attribution), mental (processes of consciousness), existential (representations of existence) and behavioral. The aggregated data reveals a striking pattern: Verbal process dominates with 53.88% aggregate, material process follows, accounting for 35.78%, relational process accounts for 7.33%, while mental and existential processes account for (2.16%), and (0.86%) respectively. There is no occurrence of behavioral process in any of the news reportage. All these are illustrated in the tables below.

Table 1
A Table Showing the Percentages of the Occurrences of the Different Process Types Used across all the Newspapers

Newspapers	Material	Verbal	Relational	Mental	Existential
The Sun	38.67%	53.33%	5.33%	0%	2.67%
Punch	42.57%	47.52%	9.90%	0%	0%
Leadership	19.64%	66.07%	5.36%	8.93%	0%

Table 2
A Table Showing the Frequencies and Percentages of the Occurrences of the Different Process Types Used across all the Newspapers

Processes	The Sun	Punch	Leadership	Total Count	Total%
Material	29	43	11	83	35.78%
Verbal	40	48	37	125	53.88%
Relational	4	10	3	17	7.33%
Mental	0	0	5	5	2.16%
Existential	2	0	0	2	0.86%
Behavioral	0	0	0	0	0%
Total Process Choices	75	101	56	232	100%

6.1 Semantic and Ideological Implications of the Material Process as Used in the Newspapers

Excerpt 1:

The anti-graft agency {ACTOR} **had** on January 24, **arraigned** {MATERIAL PROCESS} Obiano {CIRCUMSTANCE} on nine charges bordering on theft of the state's security votes to the tune of N4bn {CIRCUMSTANCE}

(*Punch: Anambra, EFCC clash over Obiano's N4bn fraud trial; 14th March 2024*)

Excerpt 2:

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), {ACTOR} yesterday {CIRCUMSTANCE}, **opened** {MATERIAL PROCESS} its case against the immediate past governor of Anambra State, Willie Obiano, {GOAL} by calling two witnesses who testified before the Abuja division of the Federal High Court {CIRCUMSTANCE}.

(The Sun: Money Laundering: EFCC opens case against ex-gov Obiano; 26th June 2024)

This distribution suggests that institutional actors are slightly more foregrounded than politicians in initiating material actions, which reflect the media’s attempt to assert the legitimacy and procedural assertiveness of state anti-corruption mechanisms. EXT 1 and 2 above actively encode the EFCC and anti-graft agency as the initiator of legal and investigative actions, thereby foregrounding the state apparatus as authoritative and in control of the judicial process. This institutional agency is not ideologically neutral. While it seemingly affirms the anti-corruption stance of the state, it also reinforces a bureaucratic narrative in which the agency of the state overshadows that of the people, leaving little room for citizen engagement or societal critique.

Excerpt 3:

Former Imo state governor and presidential aspirant of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Senator Rochas Okorocha {ACTOR}, **has entered** {MATERIAL PROCESS} a plea of not guilty to the 17-count money laundering charge preferred against him and six others by the Economic Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC {GOAL}.

(The Sun: Alleged N2.9bn fraud. I’m not guilty-Okorocha; 30th May 2022)

Excerpt 4:

Obiano {ACTOR} **is facing** {MATERIAL PROCESS} a nine-count charge the anti-graft agency preferred against him, bordering on alleged N4 billion fraud {GOAL}.

(The Sun: Money laundering: EFCC opens case against ex-gov Obiano; 26th June 2024)

Excerpt 5:

The indicted former Minister of Aviation {ACTOR} **arrived** {MATERIAL PROCESS} at the Federal Capital Territory Command of the EFCC at about 1:00 pm on Tuesday {CIRCUMSTANCE}

(Punch: EXCLUSIVE: EFCC arrests Sirika over alleged N8bn Nigeria Air fraud; 23rd April 2024)

Excerpt 6:

The former governor {ACTOR}, alongside his company, Spotless Investment Limited {CIRCUMSTANCE}, **is standing** {MATERIAL PROCESS} trial over an 11-count charge of criminal breach of trust, theft and stealing of public funds {GOAL}.

(Leadership: Ex-Minister Gave Fayose N1.2bn For 2014 Governorship Election, EFCC Tells Court; Oct., 28, 2023)

In contrast, the politicians-as-actors constructions are carefully selected and often restricted to defensive

or procedural actions—not necessarily incriminating or aggressive. For instance, in Excerpt 3 (*Former Imo state governor... has entered a plea of not guilty...*), Excerpt 4 (Obiano **is facing** a nine-count charge...) and Excerpt 5 (*The indicted former Minister of Aviation arrived at the EFCC...*), the actions attributed to politicians are reactive, procedural, or symbolically redemptive. They are portrayed as participants cooperating with the legal process, rather than as perpetrators of criminality. This mitigated portrayal reflects ideologies of elite protectionism embedded in Nigeria’s socio-political culture; wherein political figures maintain a veneer of dignity even in the face of serious allegations. It constitutes a form of ideological square, wherein the media emphasize the positive actions of elites and de-emphasize their transgressions. This same ideological leaning is reflected in the newspapers’ choice of *Goals*. As seen in the table, only ten(10) of the forty-six(46) active material clauses assign politicians the grammatical role of *Actor*—a notable underrepresentation considering that they are the central subjects of the corruption allegations. Yet even within these ten instances, their agency is highly managed and ideologically loaded. Five(5) of the ten(10) clauses encode *Goals* that are directly crime- or offence-related—namely, *money laundering, fraud, theft, and criminal breach of trust*. However, this does not equate to a direct representation of guilt. Rather, the linguistic framing strategically distances political actors from moral culpability. In other words, while politicians are grammatically tied to these *Goals*, the semantic effect is displacement: the focus shifts from them committing wrongdoing to them being entangled in procedural or legal outcomes. This pattern recurs across clauses such as *Excerpts 3, 4, and 6*. In these constructions, the *Goals* (“a plea of not guilty to the 17-count money laundering charge preferred against him...” (Excerpt 3), “a nine-count charge... bordering on alleged N4 billion fraud” (Excerpt 4), and “trial over an 11-count charge... theft and stealing of public funds” (Excerpt 6)) all foreground the legal or institutional object of action rather than the politician’s culpable deed. Here, the politician’s role is reframed as one of responding to, or being subjected to institutional procedures, rather than as an initiator of wrongdoing. This shift from incriminating *Goals* to procedural or institutional *Goals* reorients the narrative away from moral failure and towards legal contestation. Consequently, political figures are allowed to preserve a degree of legitimacy and procedural dignity, even in the midst of grave allegations.

The newspapers’ choice of the passive material process is another detail that is worth examination. The unmarked ordering of the English clause structure is a clear *Actor-Process-Goal* sequence. Here, the person who instigates an action comes before the verb, which in turn precedes the recipient of that action. This canonical structure

reflects the basic cognitive mapping of events: agents act upon patients. When this natural order is systematically inverted, one must recognize that more than mere stylistic variation is at work. The restructuring of these elements in Nigerian corruption reportage reveals an ideology of political elites rehabilitation amid scandal. In other words, the passive construction's reordering constitutes more than a syntactic flip. It represents a complete reconfiguration of semantic responsibility. There are 37 passive material processes with political office holders serving as *Goals* in 32. Among the ones that have political leaders as *Goals*, only 10 have overt by-agent (*Actor*), which are called short passive constructions. This systematic grammatical patterning does more than simply report on political scandals. The predominance of political leaders as *Goals* in 32 out of 37 passive material processes underscores a deliberate discursive strategy to foreground their role as recipients of actions rather than active participants.

Excerpt 7:

He {GOAL} **was however arrested** {MATERIAL PROCESS} by operatives of the agency {ACTOR}, few hours before his political party, the ruling All Progressive Congress, APC, screened its presidential candidates {CIRCUMSTANCE}.
(*The Sun: Alleged N2.9bn fraud. I'm not guilty-Okorocho; 30th May 2022*)

Excerpt 8:

Okorocho, who was Imo state governor from 2011 to 2019 {GOAL}, **was accused** {MATERIAL PROCESS} of diverting funds belonging to Imo state, to the tune of about N2.9billion {CIRCUMSTANCE}.
(*The Sun: Alleged N2.9bn fraud. I'm not guilty-Okorocho; 30th May 2022*)

Excerpt 9:

Orji {GOAL} **is being investigated** {MATERIAL PROCESS} over alleged N551bn money laundering {CIRCUMSTANCE}
(*Punch; EFCC revives 13 ex-govs' N772bn fraud cases; 14th January 2024*)

This structural emphasis positions politicians as entities subjected to external forces which, in turn, cultivates a narrative of vulnerability. By framing politicians through the material process such as "arrested," "accused," or "investigated," the discourse subtly shifts focus from their agency in alleged misconduct to their position as passive recipients of these actions. This syntactic foregrounding is an ideological way of evoking sympathy, as the politicians are linguistically cast as figures enduring institutional actions rather than instigators of wrongdoings. With such a portrayal, newspapers organizations are subtly inviting audiences to perceive legal scrutiny of such political office holders as an imposition rather than a legitimate accountability mechanism.

Similarly, when 32 of 37 passive constructions position political leaders as *Goals* and 21 of those 32 cases omit any mention of who is performing the legal actions, the grammar itself begins constructing a reality

where accountability becomes something that happens to politicians rather than something institutions do to them. In other words, the machinery of justice operates in syntactic shadows, its agents conspicuously absent from clause structure. In the rare instances where anti-graft agencies do appear in by-phrases (only 10 cases), they typically appear when the accused is already politically weakened, that is, the appearances tend to coincide with moments when the political leaders have already been subjected to formal legal action such as arrest, detention, or ongoing interrogation. In other words, institutional actors are only made grammatically visible when the political figures involved have already experienced a form of symbolic or procedural disempowerment. This trend can be seen in *Excerpt 10*, where "Yari was arrested... by the EFCC," a clause that not only positions Yari as the *Goal* but also reveals the EFCC as *Actor*, albeit after the arrest had occurred and the politician's immediate influence had waned. Similarly, *Excerpt 11* states that "Goje is being probed by the commission for an alleged N5bn fraud," foregrounding the anti-graft agency's role only once the politician is already enmeshed in legal scrutiny. In *Excerpt 12*, Abdulfatah Ahmed is said to have been "grilled and detained by the EFCC," a construction that again makes the institutional *Actor* explicit only after the legal grip on the politician has tightened. This suggests a calculated linguistic choice to report prosecutorial actions in a way that limits the perception of journalistic bias or institutional alignment. By making the EFCC visible only after actions have occurred, the newspapers can claim to be merely recounting events rather than endorsing or driving them. The grammar thus becomes a strategic site where editorial caution is enacted—maintaining the appearance of neutrality while narrating accountability only after the political stakes have sufficiently diminished.

Excerpt 10:

Before the latest development, Yari {GOAL} **was arrested** {MATERIAL PROCESS} last year {CIRCUMSTANCE} by the EFCC {ACTOR} over allegations that he diverted billions of funds kept in a bank by the Zamfara State government {CIRCUMSTANCE}.
(*Leadership: EFCC Arrests Yari Over Accountant General's N84bn Probe; May 30, 2022*)

Excerpt 11:

Goje {GOAL} **is being probed** {MATERIAL PROCESS} by the commission {ACTOR} for an alleged N5bn fraud {CIRCUMSTANCE}
(*Punch: EFCC revives 13 ex-govs' N772bn fraud cases; 14th January 2024*)

Excerpt 12:

A former governor of Kwara State, Abdulfatah Ahmed {GOAL}, **was on Monday grilled** {MATERIAL PROCESS} and **detained** {MATERIAL PROCESS} by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission {ACTOR} for alleged fraudulent

transactions involving billions of naira that took place during his tenure as governor {CIRCUMSTANCE}.

(Punch: EFCC detains ex-Kwara gov Ahmed over alleged N10bn fraud; 20th February 2024)

Taken together, the passive patterns imply a dual ideological function. On one level, the syntactic fronting of politicians as *Goals* fosters a rhetoric of victimhood, potentially eliciting public empathy and deflecting attention from their alleged transgressions. This systematic fronting of *Goals* brings grammar itself into the delicate work of legitimizing elites even in the face of scandal. It turns syntax into a beacon guarding the political office holder against accusations. On another level, the omission of agents is a strategic neutralization of accountability. By not stating the actors, the newspaper organizations avoid clearly challenging political elites or endorsing anti-corruption frameworks. Simply, the passive constructions allow media houses to disseminate information about political scrutiny while subtly shaping public perception—whether by fostering sympathy for elites, downplaying institutional authority, or maintaining plausible deniability in their reporting.

6.2 Semantic and Ideological Implications of the Verbal Processes as Used in the News Reports

The dominant presence of verbal processes in the sampled newspaper reports is highly significant. With verbal processes constituting 53.88% of all identified processes, they far surpass material processes, which account for 35.78%. This overwhelming preference for attributing speech, rather than action, signals more than just a stylistic choice; it reveals an underlying ideological orientation in the discourse strategies employed by the newspapers. Rather than focusing primarily on what actors (particularly political elites) *do*, the narratives emphasize what they *say* more, thereby subtly redirecting attention from action (and by extension, culpability) to dialogue, contestation, and interpretation.

Notably, a considerable number of verbal processes are attributed to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and anti-graft agency:

Excerpt 13:

The anti-graft agency {SAYER} had, in the charge, **alleged** {VERBAL PROCESS} that the defendants sequentially siphoned funds from the Imo State Government House account and Imo State Joint Local Government Project account and diverted {MATERIAL PROCESS} same into accounts of private firms {VERBIAGE}.

(The Sun: Alleged N2.9bn fraud. I’m not guilty—Okorocho; 30th May 2022)

Excerpt 14:

The EFCC {SAYER} **said** {VERBAL PROCESS} he perpetrated the alleged theft during his eight-year tenure as Anambra State government. {VERBIAGE}

(Punch; Anambra, EFCC clash over Obiano’s N4bn fraud trial; 14th March 2024)

Excerpt 15:

The anti-graft agency {SAYER} **alleged** {VERBAL PROCESS} that Fayose and one Abiodun Agbele, who is also standing trial on alleged money laundering offences before another division of the court, on June 17, 2014, took possession of N1.219 billion, to fund his 2014 governorship campaign in Ekiti State {VERBIAGE}

(Leadership; Ex-Minister Gave Fayose N1.2bn For 2014 Governorship Election, EFCC Tells Court; Oct., 28, 2023)

While such attributions as the above might ostensibly suggest journalistic transparency, they also serve ideological functions. By consistently placing the EFCC in the role of the *Sayer*, the newspapers strategically foreground the agency as the primary mouthpiece of allegation and confrontation. This pattern is an effort to displace responsibility for the negative framing of political actors from the news media to the EFCC. In doing so, the newspapers implicitly construct the anti-graft agency as the *face* of the corruption battle, while the media remain ostensibly neutral conveyors of reported speech. This interpretive stance becomes even more pronounced when the analysis considers the frequent use of anonymous or indirect sources. Expressions such as the ones below are not only common, but often appear in segments of the reports that contain sensitive or potentially damaging information against high-profile political figures.

Excerpt 16:

“We believe he didn’t work alone with the minister. All those involved in the long chain will be brought in to explain their roles as investigations progress. No stone will be left unturned,” {VERBIAGE} the source {SAYER} **said** {VERBAL PROCESS}

(The Sun: EFCC grills, detains exhumanitarian minister over alleged N37bn fraud; 9th January 2024)

Excerpt 17:

The source {SAYER} **had said** {VERBAL PROCESS}: “The former minister is still pretending not to know anything about the alleged fraud. That, in itself, is a crime. It means she failed in her duties as supervising minister, to ensure that funds approved are used accordingly {VERBIAGE}.

(The Sun: EFCC grills, detains exhumanitarian minister over alleged N37bn fraud; 9th January 2024)

Excerpt 18:

A credible source in the Ilorin office of the EFCC {SAYER} **said** {VERBAL PROCESS} the ex-governor was not allowed to leave {VERBIAGE}.

(Punch: EFCC detains ex-Kwara gov Ahmed over alleged N10bn fraud; 20th February 2024)

Excerpt 19:

Multiple sources in the EFCC {SAYER} **told** {VERBAL PROCESS} our correspondents {RECEIVER} that the anti-graft agency was conducting preliminary investigations into transactions amounting to N10bn, during the tenure of the ex-governor {VERBIAGE}.

(Punch; EFCC detains ex-Kwara gov Ahmed over alleged N10bn fraud; 20th February 2024)

Excerpt 20:

“It is a preliminary investigation, so it is too early to say that this is what happened to the money. Investigations are still ongoing, so it is when investigations have been concluded that one can say this is exactly what happened to the money. But for now, it is just preliminary investigation,” {VERBIAGE} one of the sources {SAYER} **told** {VERBAL PROCESS} The PUNCH {RECEIVER}.

(Punch; EFCC detains ex-Kwara gov Ahmed over alleged N10bn fraud; 20th February 2024)

For instance, in Excerpt 16, a source confidently asserts that others involved with a former minister “will be brought in to explain their roles,” affirming the intensity of the investigation and promising that “no stone will be left unturned.” The pattern continues in Excerpt 19 and Excerpt 20 where multiple anonymous sources within the EFCC inform the press about an ongoing N10 billion preliminary investigations. While these statements suggest a level of transparency, they also function as a rhetorical strategy. It reflects the ideology of self-preservation. The fact that the newspaper organizations report corruption allegations is not the case. The real case is how they report them through linguistic structures that externalize voice, displace responsibility, and mitigate institutional risk. This creates a journalistic posture that is both involved and insulated, engaged yet ostensibly impartial. This pattern reveals a subtle yet powerful ideological commitment: to preserve institutional credibility, maintain access to elite networks, and avoid becoming direct casualties in the struggle between power and accountability.

6.3 Semantic and Ideological Implications of Relational Processes as Used in the News Reports

Within the transitivity system of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics, relational processes function to assign qualities, statuses, or classifications to participants in a clause. Specifically, attributive relational processes involve the ascription of attributes such as conditions, roles, or qualities to a subject. In this context of corruption reportage on Nigerian political office holders, the presence of politicians as *Carriers* within these attributive clauses allows newspapers to indirectly represent, evaluate, or sanitize their involvement in corruption-related issues. Through a systemic functional lens, these linguistic constructions do more than assign attributes, they strategically encode ideological perspectives.

Excerpt 21:

According to Mohammed, the former Kogi governor {CARRIER} **was** {ATTRIBUTIVE PROCESS} not afraid of arraignment {ATTRIBUTE}

(Leadership: Ex-Gov Yahaya Bello To Appear In Court Thursday; June 12, 2024)

In Excerpt 21, “*According to Mohammed, the former Kogi governor was not afraid of arraignment,*” the carrier, “*the former Kogi governor,*” is assigned

the attribute “*not afraid of arraignment.*” While the experiential process type is relational attributive, its interpersonal force is significant. The judgment (“not afraid”) frames the politician in a positive affective light, suggesting composure or innocence. The clause is further insulated by the projecting circumstance “According to Mohammed,” which distances the newspaper from the judgment and shifts responsibility to a secondary source. This is ideologically strategic: it permits the reinforcement of a narrative of strength and moral uprightness for the accused without breaching journalistic objectivity. The media, in this sense, appears protective or neutral toward the political office holder, thereby aligning subtly with elite interest.

The same narrative above is seen in the identifying relational type distinguished by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). A close examination of the identifying relational clauses in the selected newspaper texts reveals strategic ideological positioning on the part of newspaper organizations. In these clauses, the *Identified* is often a generalised or abstract term such as “*other defendants*” or “*others*”, while the *Identifier* consists of specific individuals, including well-known political office holders. These are linked via an identifying relational process, typically realized by the verb “*are.*”

Excerpt 22:

Other defendants {IDENTIFIED/TOKEN} **are** {IDENTIFYING PROCESS} Gloria Odita, Nwosu Emmanuel Nnamdi, Chukwuma Irene Chinyere, Global Offshore and Marine Limited, Tip Top Global Resources Limited, Crystal Television Limited, Sobora International Limited, and a foreign construction company {IDENTIFIER/VALUE}.

(The Sun: Alleged N7.9bn fraud: Again, Sen Oduah’s arraignment stalled; 11th May 2022)

Excerpt 23:

Others {IDENTIFIED/TOKEN} **are** {IDENTIFYING PROCESS} criminal breaches of trust and money laundering amounting to N8,069,176,864.00 during Sirika’s tenure in office {IDENTIFIER?VALUE}.

(Punch; EXCLUSIVE: EFCC arrests Sirika over alleged N8bn Nigeria Air fraud; 23rd April 2024)

Excerpt 24:

Others {IDENTIFIED/TOKEN} **are** {IDENTIFYING PROCESS} former Rivers State governor, Peter Odili; former Abia State governor, Theodore Orji; former Gombe State governor, Danjuma Goje; former Sokoto State governor, Aliyu Wamako; former Bayelsa State governor, Timipre Sylva; and former Jigawa State governor, Sule Lamido {IDENTIFIER/VALUE}.

(Punch; EFCC revives 13 ex-govs’ N772bn fraud cases; 14th January 2024)

In Excerpt 22, “*other defendants*” is the *Identified* and the listed names and entities are the *Identifier*. This structure categorizes these actors under a legal abstraction,

ostensibly aligning them with those already implicated in a criminal case. However, the ideological significance lies in the detachment effect this creates. By foregrounding the abstract legal status “*other defendants*”, newspaper organizations minimize the semantic weight of the specific actors’ involvement. Their identity is constructed as a type or category rather than as active agents in corruption, thus blunting the moral edge of the accusation. This may be interpreted as a discursive strategy to preserve the reputational capital of political elites or corporate actors by couching their implication in neutral, institutional language.

A similar narrative is noticed in Excerpt 24, where the clause, like the one in Excerpt 22, equates the vague term “*Others*” (*Identified*) with a list of politically powerful individuals (*Identifier*). By postposing the political identities of the actors and foregrounding a generalised group reference, the clause distances the reader from the gravity of the individual accusations. This grouping strategy disperses responsibility across a collective of known elites without assigning direct criminal roles to them within the clause. The use of honorific titles (“former governor”) further reinstates their political prestige, downplaying any presumed guilt. This linguistic strategy reflects an ideologically motivated softening, wherein the political class is represented with caution and institutional reverence, even in the context of corruption reportage.

Across these instances, the newspaper organizations employed the relational clauses to do more than assign labels—they carefully manage how political actors are construed experientially. By preserving institutional identities and avoiding direct links to corruption acts, the newspaper reportage often enacts an ideological bias that leans toward the elite, ensuring their symbolic capital remains intact despite allegations.

6.4 Semantic and Ideological Implications of Mental Processes as Used in the News Reports

Out of the 232 identified processes in this research work, mental processes only account for 2.16%. This scarcity is itself ideological. News organizations, in their bid to maintain a façade of objectivity, may deliberately limit processes that overtly disclose judgments, reflections, or subjective states. A close analysis of the mental process clauses reveals the cautious yet ideologically laden involvement of news organizations in assigning *Senser* roles either to the institutions of power (such as media bodies or councils) or to the political figures themselves.

Excerpt 25:

Though the details of the corruption allegations were not made public{CIRCUMSTANCE}, LEADERSHIP{SENSER} **recalls** {MENTAL PROCESS} that Akpabio has been under the investigation of the anti-graft agency for some time {PHENOMENON}.

(*Leadership; EFCC Summons Akpabio Over Alleged Corruption; March 30, 2023*)

Excerpt 26:

The council {SENSER} **recalled** {MENTAL PROCESS} in a letter of February 10, 2023 where they alerted the EFCC that the former minister was undergoing treatment for pneumonia and cardiac arrhythmia {CIRCUMSTANCE}.

(*Leadership; EFCC Summons Akpabio Over Alleged Corruption; March 30, 2023*)

Excerpt 27:

The former governor {SENSER} after intrigues surrounding his attempted arrest by EFCC operatives {CIRCUMSTANCE}, finally **agreed** {MENTAL PROCESS} to submit himself to the court at the last adjourned date {PHENOMENON}.

(*Leadership; Ex-Gov Yahaya Bello To Appear In Court Thursday; June 12, 2024*)

In Excerpt 25, the newspaper *LEADERSHIP* is encoded as the *Senser*, while the verb “recalls” functions as a mental process of cognition, specifically one of memory. The *Phenomenon* in this clause is the information regarding Akpabio’s ongoing investigation by the anti-graft agency. By construing the newspaper institution itself as a conscious participant capable of remembering, the clause does more than merely report; it positions *LEADERSHIP* as a credible and authoritative voice with an institutional memory that extends over time. This subtle linguistic choice foregrounds the notion that Akpabio’s alleged corruption is not a recent or isolated incident but is instead part of a sustained and historically rooted pattern of investigation. Thus, the clause operates ideologically by implicitly legitimizing the allegations through the accumulation of temporal weight, suggesting that where there is persistent scrutiny, there may indeed be grounds for concern.

However, the use of a mental process such as “recalls” also distances the newspaper from overt judgment or sensationalism. Rather than explicitly accusing the subject, the newspaper adopts a reflective stance, one that presents past knowledge as contextually relevant and worth remembering. This rhetorical strategy allows the reportage to subtly reinforce the continuity and seriousness of the allegations while maintaining an appearance of objectivity.

In Excerpt 27, “agreed” is the mental process of volition (a subtype of mental process indicating decision-making). The *Senser* is the former governor, and the *Phenomenon* is the action of submitting himself to the court. The mental process here constructs the accused as an agentive and cooperative individual, making a conscious, rational choice to comply with the legal system. By presenting the political figure as someone who has willingly “agreed” to face the judicial process, the clause distances him from the dominant narrative of resistance or evasion that typically surrounds individuals accused of corruption. Rather than depicting him as coerced, recalcitrant, or caught, the reportage repositions him within a moral and civic framework—one in which

he appears compliant with democratic principles and respectful of institutional authority. This framing subtly reconstructs the image of the former governor as a cooperative and law-abiding citizen.

6.5 Semantic and Ideological Implications of Existential Processes as Used in the News Reports

Excerpt 28:

There is usually{PROCESS}no movement {EXISTENT} in the state every Monday because of a sit-at-home order{CIRCUMSTANCE}.

(The Sun; Money laundering: EFCC opens case against ex-gov Obiano; 26th June 2024)

Excerpt 29:

Though the minister had denied any personal knowledge of the contractor, there were{PROCESS} fears that he could cave in and list names of his accomplices{EXISTENT}.

(The Sun; EFCC grills, detains exhumanitarian minister over alleged N37bn fraud; 9th January 2024)

In Excerpt 28, the clause “*There is usually no movement in the state every Monday because of a sit-at-home order*” functions to assert the habitual absence of activity as an ontological reality. The existential clause operates as a powerful linguistic mechanism that transforms a politically charged situation into an accepted state of affairs. By employing the existential process “There is” with “no movement” as the *Existent*, the construction presents the paralysis not as a consequence of human decisions or coercive enforcement, but rather as an objective, almost natural phenomenon that simply exists. This grammatical choice performs significant ideological work by stripping the situation of its political dimensions and historical contingencies. The adverbial “usually” further reinforces this normalization by encoding the disruption as habitual and predictable, framing it as an expected condition rather than an extraordinary circumstance requiring explanation or challenge. The existential framing also subtly discourages critical engagement with the situation. The structure does not give room for engagement because it presents the stagnation as an ontological reality (“There is no movement”). This linguistic arrangement reflects the silent attempt of the newspaper to cover the systemic failures or violent impositions of the political office holders. Similarly, in Excerpt 29, the clause “...*there were fears that he could cave in and list names of his accomplices*” introduces “fears” as the *Existent* through the existential process “were.” Here, the process does more than state the presence of emotion—it objectifies it, suggesting that these fears are not just individual sentiments but collective, ambient, and socially real phenomena. Crucially, in both clauses, the existential processes operate as discursive strategies that foreground or normalize certain conditions while backgrounding others. The absence of movement and

the presence of fear are represented as inevitable, non-negotiable facts rather than as socially or politically constructed outcomes. In doing so, the news discourse avoids attributing direct agency to particular actors, reducing the complexity of social issues to existential states.

7. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In line with the specific objective of this study to examine how linguistic features in the selected newspapers reflect ideological leanings, the findings of the study are summarized as follows: There are 232 transitivity processes in the selected newspapers. Verbal processes dominate with 53.88%, material processes follow, accounting for 35.78%, relational processes account for 7.33%, while mental and existential processes account for 2.16% and 0.86% respectively. There is no occurrence of behavioral processes in any of the news reportage. The material processes were made up of both the active and the passive constructions and both had ideological leanings. Fourteen (14) of the active material clauses have institutional actors such as EFCC and court and ten (10) have political figures as actors. When political office holders were represented as *Actors* in active clauses, the actions attributed to them were predominantly procedural, defensive, or cooperative. They were not portrayed as perpetrators of corruption. Instead, the syntactic roles given to them only framed them largely as compliant participants in legal processes. This preserves their legitimacy and distances them from overt blame. Passive constructions further amplified this deliberate effort of the news organizations in avoiding portraying political office holders as perpetrators of corruption. In the passive constructions, there was a predominance of politicians as *Goals*. This revealed the newspapers’ deliberate strategy to foreground the politicians as recipients of actions rather than active participants. This diluted the roles of the politicians in criminality and reshaped how readers eventually interpreted the corruption cases.

The dominant presence of the verbal processes also revealed underlying ideological orientation of the newspapers. By focusing more on what was said rather than what was done, the news organizations deliberately redirected attention from actions to dialogue, contestation and interpretation. The newspapers’ consistent and strategic framing of EFCC and anonymous sources as *Sayers* especially in clauses involving accusations or legal actions revealed their efforts to distance themselves from negative framing of political office holders. With this, they distanced themselves from the content of negative claims and shields themselves from direct confrontation with powerful figures.

The relational processes are made of both the attributive and identifying relational clauses and both had ideological implications in the news reportage. The

attributive clause presented the political office holder as *Carrier* of positive attributes. Identifying clauses frequently placed political office holders within vague categories like “other defendants.” The identity of the political office holders is constructed as a type or category rather than as active agents in corruption. By couching their identity in a neutral institutional language, the moral line of accusation was blunted and the public images of the political office holders were preserved. Even the less frequent process types (mental and existential) contributed meaningfully to the ideological structure of the reports. Mental processes were strategically used to construct institutional memory and reflection without overt judgment. Existential processes were used to represent conditions such as fear or immobility as fixed realities, devoid of agency. These constructions subtly normalized the status quo. It diverted attention from its political or social roots.

In sum, the linguistic choices in the newspapers consistently revealed an ideology of political elite protectionism, where political office holders maintain a veneer of dignity in the face of serious allegations. Language was used not only as a medium of information but also as a powerful tool in negotiating power, protecting reputation and reinforcing social hierarchies.

8. CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the transitivity constructions of newspapers reportage of corruption cases involving Nigerian political elites in *The Sun*, *Punch*, and *Leadership* newspapers. The findings showed that the newspapers were not impartial observers or reporters in the corruption discourse. They carefully selected and arranged their linguistic choices in a way that subtly reflected their bias and ideology. Their grammatical choices appeared objective but they subtly protected the image of political elites and shielded the news organisations from direct confrontations with powerful figures. Ultimately, the study concludes that language in news reportage is not just a vehicle for information but a tool for ideological negotiation and perception control.

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