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Critical Discourse Analysis of Language Used in the Reportage of Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers' Crisis in Selected Nigerian Newspaper Excerpts

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ABSTRACT
This study examined the language used in the reportage of the Fulani herdsmen–farmers crisis in selected Nigerian newspapers through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The study was motivated by the growing concern over the role of the media in representing ethno-religious and communal conflicts and how linguistic choices in newspaper reports influence public perception, reinforce stereotypes, and shape intergroup relations. Specifically, the study investigated the linguistic features, ideological representations, framing strategies, and underlying power relations reflected in newspaper headlines and news reports concerning the crisis. The study adopted both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, using Content Analysis as its research method and Critical Discourse Analysis as its analytical framework. Data were drawn from selected excerpts of four Nigerian newspapers: *The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, *Nigerian Tribune*, and *The Leadership*. Purposive sampling was employed to select newspaper reports relevant to the subject under investigation, while relevant secondary materials were consulted to provide additional contextual understanding. The analysis focused on lexical choices, expressions, labels, headlines, representations of social actors, and the ideological implications of language use in the selected newspaper excerpts. The findings revealed that language played a significant role in shaping the representation of the Fulani herdsmen–farmers crisis. The newspapers employed different linguistic and discursive strategies in portraying the parties involved, assigning responsibility, and framing the conflict. The study further established that lexical choices, headlines, and patterns of representation could influence readers' perceptions and reinforce particular ideological positions concerning the crisis. It concluded that newspaper reportage goes beyond the mere presentation of events, as language serves as a powerful instrument for constructing social realities and influencing public opinion. The study therefore recommends that journalists and media organisations uphold the principles of accuracy, balance, fairness, and professionalism in reporting sensitive national issues to minimise prejudice, promote peaceful coexistence, and strengthen national integration.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Nigeria remains confronted with complex social, political, and religious challenges, including the Boko Haram insurgency, militancy in the Niger Delta, and recurring ethno-religious and communal conflicts, particularly the conflict between Fulani herdsmen and farmers. Among these challenges, the persistent clashes between herders and farmers have emerged as a significant national concern, threatening peaceful coexistence, national security, and socioeconomic development. The conflict has resulted in the loss of lives, destruction of property, displacement of communities, and disruption of agricultural activities. Agunbiade (1991) observes that inadequate deployment of the necessary military strength has contributed to the challenges associated with confronting perpetrators of violent crimes in the country.

According to Saliu (2004), the Fulani herdsmen–farmers conflict has constituted a growing threat to Nigeria's stability over the years. The conflict has generated considerable tension in several communities, particularly across Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Jigawa, Sokoto, and Zamfara States, as well as other parts of the North-West and North-Central regions. The recurring confrontations between pastoralists and farming communities have been attributed to several factors, including competition over land and water resources, climate change, population growth, and the increasing pressure on available grazing areas (Muazu, 1998). These factors have intensified disagreements over access to natural resources, occasionally resulting in violent confrontations and wider security challenges. Beyond its immediate consequences, the conflict has also raised concerns about national integration, food security, intergroup relations, and the effectiveness of conflict-resolution mechanisms in Nigeria.

The media occupies a significant position in the presentation and interpretation of such conflicts. As an important source of information, the media informs the public about unfolding events, shapes public opinion, and influences how individuals and communities perceive social and political realities. However, the responsibility of reporting conflict-related issues requires a high degree of professionalism, accuracy, fairness, and sensitivity. Adamu (2017) argues that although the media must report issues as they emerge, journalists and media organisations must exercise caution when covering stories involving violence and communal conflict. This is because irresponsible reporting can reinforce existing prejudices, spread fear, deepen hostility, and potentially escalate tensions among conflicting groups.

Adamu (2017) further identifies negative reportage, hate speech, inflammatory rumours, deliberate underreporting, misreporting, excessive reporting of crime, and sensationalism in the coverage of insecurity as practices capable of aggravating conflict. Such practices can distort public understanding of events and encourage negative perceptions of individuals or groups involved in a conflict. Consequently, media practitioners are expected to uphold the principles of responsible journalism and ensure that their reports contribute to conflict prevention, peaceful coexistence, and national development rather than aggravating existing divisions. The need for professionalism is particularly important in a multicultural society such as Nigeria, where media representations of ethnic, religious, and communal issues can have far-reaching consequences.

Despite the media's responsibility to provide accurate and balanced information, concerns have continued to emerge regarding bias, sensationalism, and the ideological orientation of media organisations in reporting sensitive national issues. Osisanwo et al. (2016) observe that newspaper reporting is sometimes influenced by the desire to attract readership and drive traffic to media platforms rather than by a commitment to factual and objective reporting. Similarly, Adeoti (2014) maintains that the ideological orientation of journalists, editors, and media organisations often influences the manner in which events and social issues are presented. This suggests that media reports are not always neutral reflections of reality; rather, the selection of words, headlines, sources, and perspectives can influence how audiences interpret particular events.

The manner in which the media represents social and political issues can therefore either promote understanding or intensify existing disagreements. In the context of the Fulani herdsmen–farmers conflict, the language employed in newspaper headlines and news reports may influence public perceptions of the groups involved. Ofem (2014) identifies several factors responsible for the recurring clashes between farming communities and nomadic cattle herders, particularly those of Fulani extraction. These include the destruction of farmlands by cattle, contamination of streams by livestock, disregard for traditional authority, overgrazing of fallow lands, and alleged sexual harassment of women by herders. Such issues demonstrate the complexity of the conflict and the need for careful and balanced media representation. The way these grievances are reported may shape public attitudes towards the Fulani community and the farming populations, potentially reinforcing stereotypes or encouraging mutual understanding.

Against this background, discourse analysis becomes relevant as an approach to examining how language is employed in the representation of social realities. In linguistics, discourse generally refers to language use beyond the level of individual sentences. It encompasses connected stretches of spoken or written language through which meaning is constructed and communicated within particular social contexts. Unlike traditional

linguistic approaches that concentrate mainly on smaller units of language, such as sounds, words, and sentence structures, discourse analysis examines how linguistic elements function together to produce meaning. It also considers the relationship between language, context, society, power, and ideology.

Discourse analysis is therefore concerned with how speakers and writers construct messages, how audiences interpret them, and the social implications of such communication. Whittaker et al. (2008) describe discourse analysis as the study of language beyond the sentence, emphasising the examination of larger linguistic structures and how they function in communication. The approach enables researchers to investigate the meanings embedded in language, including those that may not be immediately apparent. In newspaper reporting, for instance, the choice of headlines, descriptive expressions, labels, quotations, and narrative structures can reveal the underlying assumptions and ideological positions that influence the representation of particular events or social groups.

Similarly, Stubbs (1998) conceptualises discourse in relation to language use within social contexts, suggesting that discourse analysis can be applied to different forms of linguistic communication. Slem (2003) also observes that discourse analysis is not restricted to either spoken or written language. Rather, it accommodates different forms of communication through which meaning is produced and interpreted. This broad understanding makes discourse analysis particularly useful in examining newspaper publications, where language serves not merely as a medium of information but also as a means of constructing social identities, communicating ideological positions, and shaping public perceptions.

It is against this background that the present study examines the techniques employed by selected Nigerian newspapers in reporting the Fulani herdsmen–farmers conflict. Particular attention is given to the language, headlines, framing strategies, and discursive patterns used in presenting the conflict and the groups involved.

The broad objective of this study is to do a critical discourse analysis of language use in the reportage of Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers' crisis in selected Nigerian newspaper. Examine how Fulani herdsmen are framed in selected Nigerian newspaper reports. This paper evaluates the effects of linguistic choices commonly employed by newspapers in reporting the Fulani herdsmen–farmers conflict.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology constitutes the backbone of every research endeavour, as it determines the nature and direction of the research, the type of data to be collected, and the procedures for analysing such data. The population of this study comprises selected Nigerian newspapers. According to Polit and Hungler (1993), a population refers to the sum total of all individuals, objects, or elements that meet a specified set of criteria. In this regard, four Nigerian newspapers—*The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, *Nigerian Tribune*, and *The Leadership*—constitute the population of the study.

The study employed a combination of random and purposive sampling techniques in selecting the materials for investigation. Specifically, the researcher purposively selected four newspapers: *The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, *Nigerian Tribune*, and *The Leadership*. The selection was informed by the newspapers' coverage of the Fulani herdsmen crisis. Only newspaper publications that addressed the crisis were considered relevant for inclusion in the study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which research materials or participants are deliberately selected based on predetermined criteria relevant to the objectives of the study. Consequently, it enables the researcher to focus on materials that are most relevant to the research objectives (Nwosu, 2006).

The study relied primarily on newspaper publications as its major sources of data. These included newspaper headlines, captions, articles, and news reports relating to the Fulani herdsmen crisis. In addition, relevant reports from governmental and non-governmental organisations, as well as other media publications and official gazettes, were consulted to provide supplementary information and contextual understanding of the crisis.

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were adopted in analysing the data. The qualitative aspect of the study employed the Content Analysis Method (CAM) to examine the selected newspaper materials. This involved an in-depth examination of the headlines and news reports, with particular attention to their linguistic features, framing strategies, representations, and underlying meanings. Discourse Analysis was also employed as an analytical approach to examine how language was used to construct, represent, and communicate issues surrounding the Fulani herdsmen crisis in the selected newspapers. The quantitative aspect involved identifying and examining the frequency and distribution of relevant headlines and other textual features across the selected newspapers

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section deals with the presentation of data as sourced from different newspaper headlines and presented in form of excerpts with each excerpt addressing a particular heading drawn from the research objective. In the data being presented, each of the objectives is embedded and is also below each data presented. The first objective of this work is to examine how the Fulani herdsmen are framed in newspaper reportage. The different newspaper reports that were investigated, showed a similar trend of

framing of the Fulani herdsmen such as terrorists, as militants/militias.

The Frame of Fulani Herdsmen as Terrorists

A terrorist is someone who targets others with unlawful force and intimidation in order to further their own social, political, or financial objectives. The Fulani herdsmen were framed in the newspapers as terrorists who terrorize various regions of the nation, as seen in the excerpts in Table 1 below;

Table 1: Excerpts of newspapers framing of Fulani herdsmen as terrorists

Excerpts	Newspaper	Newspaper headlines	Date	URL
Excerpt 1	Tribune	Farmers-Herdsmen's Clashes or Terrorist Attacks?	May 29, 2018,	https://tribuneonlineng.com/farmers-herdsmens-clashes-or-terrorist-attacks/
Excerpt 2	Tribune	The impending judgment of nomadic terrorists	February 3, 2024,	https://tribuneonlineng.com/the-impending-judgment-of-nomadic-terrorists/
Excerpt 3	Punch	Hypocrisy in tackling Fulani herdsmen terrorism	10th January 2018	https://punchng.com/hypocrisy-in-tackling-fulani-herdsmen-terrorism/
Excerpt 4	Punch	Terrorists Now Disguise as Fulani Herdsmen" – President Goodluck Jonathan	10th January 2018,	https://punchng.com/hypocrisy-in-tackling-fulani-herdsmen-terrorism/)
Excerpt 5	Tribune	Benue: The mourning after the terror-herdsmen's victims were buried	January 14, 2018	https://tribuneonlineng.com/benue-mourning-terror-herdsmens-victims-buried

Source: Authors compilation, 2026

The representation of Fulani herdsmen as terrorists in the selected newspaper excerpts requires an examination of several critical discourse elements, particularly framing, power relations, stereotyping, ideology, and media representation. These elements reveal how language is employed in constructing identities, assigning meanings, and shaping public perceptions of the Fulani herdsmen–farmers crisis.

Framing

The choice of expressions such as "Fulani herdsmen" and "terrorists" establishes a particular frame through which the discourse is interpreted. While "Fulani herdsmen" identifies a group based on ethnic identity and occupation, the term "terrorists" carries strong negative connotations associated with violence, insecurity, and threats to public safety. The association of these two expressions creates a discursive connection between the Fulani herders and acts of terrorism, thereby influencing how readers perceive the group.

In Excerpt 1, the significant expressions are "farmers/herdsmen clashes" and "terrorist attacks." The writer presents two alternative descriptions of the conflict, thereby introducing different interpretative possibilities for the readers. While the expression "farmers/herdsmen clashes" suggests a confrontation between two opposing groups, "terrorist attacks" presents the situation as an act of organised violence perpetrated by aggressors. The preference for the latter expression suggests that the writer frames the activities of the Fulani herdsmen not merely as part of an intergroup conflict but as acts of terrorism. This framing shifts the interpretation of the crisis from a communal confrontation to a security threat.

In Excerpt 2, the term "terrorists" is preceded by the adjective "nomadic," which, within the context of the report, identifies the Fulani herdsmen. The combination of these expressions creates a negative association between nomadic pastoralism and terrorism. Through this linguistic construction, the headline appears to present the Fulani herdsmen as terrorists, thereby generalising the activities of some individuals to a wider social group. Such a representation overlooks the distinction between individuals accused of perpetrating violence and the broader Fulani population.

Excerpt 3 presents the expression "Fulani herdsmen terrorism." This nomenclature is particularly significant because it resembles the labels commonly used to identify established terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda, Hamas, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab. By adopting a similar linguistic construction, the writer places the Fulani herdsmen within the same discursive category as internationally recognised terrorist organisations. This association creates an impression of collective criminality and presents the activities of the herdsmen as a

coordinated terrorist phenomenon rather than examining the different circumstances surrounding the conflict.

In Excerpt 4, the writer juxtaposes the expressions "terrorists" and "Fulani herdsmen." Although the phrase "now disguised as" appears between the two expressions, it does not entirely eliminate the negative association created by their juxtaposition. Rather, the construction establishes an implicit relationship between the two groups. The underlying suggestion is that individuals identified as terrorists may be operating under the identity of Fulani herdsmen. This rhetorical construction can encourage readers to associate the broader Fulani herdsmen population with terrorism, even where the report does not establish that all members of the group are involved in violent activities.

Similarly, Excerpt 5 employs the expression "terror-herdsmen" in the headline, "The morning after the terror-herdsmen's victims were buried." The compound expression "terror-herdsmen" is particularly loaded because it combines the identities of terrorists and herdsmen into a single descriptive label. Within the context of the report, the expression refers to Fulani herdsmen and immediately positions them as perpetrators of terror. The writer does not need to provide an additional explanation of the identity of the alleged perpetrators because the compound expression has already established the intended association. Consequently, readers are directed towards interpreting the crisis through a framework that presents Fulani herdsmen as terrorists.

Power Relations

The representation of Fulani herdsmen as terrorists reflects an unequal power relationship in which one group is positioned as the aggressor, while others are represented as victims of violence. Such positioning is significant because language does not merely describe social relationships; it can also construct and reinforce them. By assigning the identity of terrorists to Fulani herdsmen, the newspaper discourse places the group in a position of social suspicion and condemnation. This representation may influence public attitudes, institutional responses, and policy decisions concerning the group. It can also legitimise punitive security measures and reinforce existing power inequalities between different social groups.

Stereotyping

The repeated association of Fulani herdsmen with terrorism contributes to the construction and reinforcement of ethnic stereotypes. By presenting the group through predominantly negative labels, the discourse risks portraying the Fulani community as inherently violent, dangerous, or criminal. Such generalisation fails to recognise the diversity within the Fulani population and does not distinguish between individuals involved in criminal activities and those who engage in legitimate pastoral occupations. It also overlooks the complex socioeconomic, political, environmental, and resource-related factors contributing to the herdsmen–farmers conflict. Consequently, this form of representation can promote prejudice, deepen ethnic divisions, and undermine peaceful coexistence.

Ideology

The use of the expression "terrorists" in the selected newspaper headlines also reflects the ideological dimension of language. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, lexical choices are rarely entirely neutral, particularly when they concern sensitive social and political issues. The repeated use of terrorism-related expressions constructs a particular understanding of the conflict and positions readers to interpret the Fulani herdsmen primarily through the lens of violence and insecurity. Such ideological representation may reinforce particular political or social interests by delegitimising one group and presenting it as a threat to national security. Furthermore, it may create public support for certain security interventions without sufficient consideration of the broader circumstances surrounding the conflict. The ideological implication is that language becomes an instrument through which particular interpretations of social reality are promoted while alternative perspectives are marginalised.

Media Representation

The media plays a crucial role in constructing public understanding of social and political events. Its choice of words, headlines, descriptions, and narrative structures influences how audiences interpret individuals, groups, and situations. In the case of the Fulani herdsmen–farmers crisis, the portrayal of Fulani herdsmen as terrorists through expressions such as "Fulani herdsmen terrorism" and "terror-herdsmen" can shape public attitudes towards the group. Such representations may generate fear, suspicion, mistrust, and hostility, particularly among communities already affected by the conflict. Although the media has a responsibility to expose violence and hold perpetrators accountable, it must also distinguish between individual criminal responsibility and collective ethnic identity. Therefore, balanced and responsible reportage is essential to preventing the escalation of existing tensions and promoting peaceful conflict resolution

The Representation of Fulani Herdsmen as Militants

Table 2: Excerpts of newspapers framing of Fulani herdsmen as militants

Excerpts	Newspaper	Newspaper headlines	Date	URL
Excerpt 6	Vanguard	Bloodbath in Benue: 50 killed as militia gangs go to war	March 7, 2024	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/03/bloodbath-in-benue-50-killed-as-militia-gangs-go-to-war/
Excerpt 7	Vanguard	Routing the Fulani herdsmen militants calls for external help	January 17, 2018	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/01/routing-fulani-herdsmen-militants-calls-external-help/
Excerpt 8	Vanguard	Insecurity: Fulani herdsmen aren't bandits but militants fighting ethnic war — Sheik Gumi	February 23, 2021	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/02/insecurity-fulani-herdsmen-arent-bandits-but-militants-fighting-ethnic-war-sheik-gumi/
Excerpt 9	Vanguard	The rise and rise of the Fulani militia	July 3, 2021	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/07/the-rise-and-rise-of-the-fulani-militia/

Source: Authors compilation, 2026

In Excerpt 6, the headline reads: "Bloodbath in Benue: 50 killed as militia gangs go to war." The headline employs highly emotive and sensational expressions, particularly "bloodbath" and "militia gangs," to construct an image of extreme violence and insecurity. The word "bloodbath" evokes a horrifying picture of widespread bloodshed, while the expression "militia gangs" presents the alleged perpetrators as organised and potentially armed groups. Within the context of the Fulani herdsmen–farmers crisis, this description positions the Fulani herdsmen as a powerful and organised force capable of engaging in large-scale violence. The choice of the expression "militia gangs" therefore goes beyond reporting the incident; it constructs a particular identity for the alleged perpetrators and influences how readers interpret the conflict. It also shifts attention from the complexities of the crisis to a representation that emphasises aggression, organised violence, and insecurity.

In Excerpt 7, the headline "Routing the Fulani herdsmen militants calls for external help" further demonstrates the relationship between language, framing, and power. The expression "Fulani herdsmen militants" directly associates the group with militancy, suggesting that they constitute an organised security threat requiring a forceful response. The word "routing" is particularly significant because it implies the complete defeat, removal, or destruction of an opposing force. Similarly, the phrase "calls for external help" suggests that the situation has become so serious that available local or national security measures may be insufficient to address it. Through these lexical choices, the writer constructs the Fulani herdsmen as a formidable militant group whose activities require intervention beyond the immediate environment. The headline therefore presents the conflict within a security and military framework rather than as a complex social conflict involving competing interests and grievances.

In Excerpt 8, although there appears to be a deliberate attempt to employ a specific vocabulary in describing the Fulani herdsmen, the linguistic representation also requires critical examination. The choice of labels and descriptive expressions used in the excerpt is important because such vocabulary can influence the interpretation of the group and the circumstances surrounding the conflict. Where the description associates the Fulani herdsmen collectively with violence or militancy, it risks constructing a generalised identity that does not distinguish between individuals involved in criminal activities and the wider Fulani population. This illustrates how newspaper language can establish particular social identities and reinforce existing perceptions through repeated patterns of representation.

Power Relations

The representation of Fulani herdsmen as militants reflects the relationship between language and power in society. The use of labels such as "militia gangs" and "Fulani herdsmen militants" positions the group as an aggressive and potentially dangerous force. Such descriptions create a power relationship in which the Fulani herdsmen are constructed as a threat to public safety and social stability, while the opposing groups and security institutions are implicitly positioned as victims or legitimate forces of resistance. This form of representation may influence public attitudes and legitimise demands for forceful security interventions against the group. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, such linguistic constructions demonstrate how media discourse can reinforce particular power structures by determining

which groups are perceived as threats and which are regarded as legitimate actors in a conflict.

Ideology

The framing of Fulani herdsmen as militants also reflects the ideological implications of newspaper reportage. The repeated association of the group with militancy, aggression, and organised violence can contribute to the perpetuation of ethnic stereotypes and the stigmatisation of the Fulani population. Such representations may reinforce existing ethnic divisions and encourage the perception that the Fulani are inherently violent or predisposed to extremism. However, this generalisation overlooks the diversity within the Fulani community and fails to distinguish between individual perpetrators of violence and law-abiding members of the ethnic group.

Furthermore, the ideological implications of this framing extend to the political and security dimensions of the conflict. By constructing Fulani herdsmen as militants, newspaper discourse may encourage public acceptance of military interventions and other forceful security measures in areas where the conflict occurs. The use of such labels can therefore legitimise particular approaches to addressing the crisis while marginalising alternative perspectives that emphasise dialogue, resource management, mediation, and peaceful conflict resolution. Consequently, the ideological function of the language lies in its ability to shape public understanding of the conflict and influence the attitudes and responses of different stakeholders.

Ultimately, the excerpts demonstrate that newspaper language is not merely a neutral instrument for communicating information. Rather, lexical choices, labels, and framing strategies play an important role in constructing social identities, reinforcing ideological positions, and reproducing power relations. The representation of Fulani herdsmen as militants therefore illustrates how media discourse can influence public perception of the Fulani herdsmen–farmers crisis and potentially deepen existing ethnic tensions.

The Representation of Fulani Herdsmen as Killers

Table 3: Excerpts of newspapers framing of Fulani herdsmen as killers

Excerpts	Newspaper	Newspaper Headlines	Date	URL
Excerpt 10	Tribune,	Fulani herdsmen murder 56 in fresh killings	May 29, 2021	https://tribuneonlineng.com/fulani-herdsmen-murder-56-in-fresh-killings/
Excerpt 11	Punch	Herdsmen kill 20, burn houses in fresh Benue attacks	April 24, 2018	https://punchng.com/herdsmen-kill-20-burn-houses-in-fresh-benue-attacks/
Excerpt 12	Vanguard	Herdsmen killings: The world is watching a repeat of Rwanda – Middle Belt group	April 24, 2018	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/04/herdsmen-killings-world-watching-repeat-rwanda-middle-belt-group/
Excerpt 13	Punch	Killing field: Benue valley becomes gunmen's haven, 92 residents killed in three months	20th June 2022	https://punchng.com/killing-field-benue-valley-becomes-gunmens-haven-92-residents-killed-in-three-months/
Excerpt 14	Leadership	Unmask Killer-herdsmen In Benue Now	Friday, March 8, 2024	https://leadership.ng/unmask-killer-herdsmen-in-benue-now/
Excerpt 15	Vanguard	Bloodbath in Enugu as Fulani herdsmen kill 40	April 26, 2016	https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/04/bloodbath-enugu-fulani-herdsmen-kill-40/

Source: Authors compilation, 2026

The word *kill* generally means to cause the death of a person or another living thing. In the selected newspaper excerpts, the headlines portray Fulani herdsmen as perpetrators responsible for the deaths of farmers and other members of communities with whom they are engaged in conflict. The repeated use of death-related expressions constructs an image of Fulani herdsmen as violent individuals who deliberately take human lives. This representation is particularly significant in Excerpt 10, where the writer employs the word "murder," a term with stronger legal and moral implications than the ordinary word "kill." Murder generally refers to the unlawful and intentional killing of another person. Its use in the headline therefore presents the reported incident not merely as an act resulting in death but as a deliberate criminal act. By employing this expression, the writer positions the alleged

perpetrators as criminals and reinforces the negative representation of Fulani herdsmen.

In Excerpt 11, although the ethnic identity of the actors is not explicitly mentioned, the context of the report suggests that the reference is to Fulani herdsmen. The omission of their ethnic identity does not necessarily eliminate the negative representation associated with the group. Rather, the description contributes to the construction of an image of herdsmen as violent individuals associated with killings and other criminal activities. Through this representation, the newspaper discourse reinforces the association between herdsmen and violence, potentially encouraging readers to perceive the group primarily through the lens of criminality.

Excerpt 12 employs the expression "herdsmen killings," which is particularly significant because of the way it constructs the relationship between the alleged perpetrators and the act of violence. The grammatical construction presents killings as an activity associated with herdsmen, suggesting a recurring pattern rather than an isolated incident. This choice of expression creates the impression that violence and the taking of human lives are characteristic of the group. Consequently, the headline contributes to the generalisation of criminal behaviour and reinforces the negative identity assigned to Fulani herdsmen in the selected newspaper reports.

In Excerpt 13, the writer employs the verb "killed" in a passive construction, as reflected in the expression "...92 residents killed..." Unlike the preceding examples, the headline does not explicitly identify the alleged perpetrators as killers. Nevertheless, the omission of the grammatical agent does not necessarily remove the association between the incident and the group under discussion. Within the broader context of the report, the Fulani herdsmen are implicated as the alleged perpetrators. The passive construction foregrounds the victims and the number of casualties while backgrounding the identity of those responsible. This demonstrates how grammatical choices can influence the distribution of attention and responsibility in newspaper reportage.

In Excerpt 14, the ethnic identity of the alleged perpetrators is replaced with the descriptive expression "killer herdsmen." Rather than identifying the actors simply as Fulani herdsmen, the writer employs a negatively loaded label that directly associates their occupational identity with the act of killing. The expression is particularly significant because it transforms an alleged criminal action into a defining characteristic of the group. This form of representation encourages readers to associate herdsmen generally with violence and criminality, without necessarily distinguishing between individuals accused of committing such acts and the wider population of Fulani pastoralists.

Furthermore, the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to the representation of Fulani herdsmen as killers requires an examination of the following elements:

Framing

Framing is an important element in the representation of Fulani herdsmen in the selected newspaper reports. The repeated use of expressions that associate the group with killing and violence demonstrates how journalists employ particular linguistic choices to construct specific perceptions of social actors. There is a significant difference between referring to individuals as "Fulani herdsmen" and describing them as "Fulani killers" or "killer herdsmen." While the former identifies a group based on ethnic and occupational characteristics, the latter attaches a criminal identity to the group. Such expressions are not merely descriptive; they carry ideological implications that influence how readers interpret the reported events.

Through the repeated use of these negatively loaded expressions, the selected newspapers construct a frame in which Fulani herdsmen are predominantly represented as perpetrators of violence. This framing can influence public perception by encouraging readers to associate the entire group with criminality and insecurity. Consequently, individuals who have no connection with the reported acts of violence may also become victims of suspicion, prejudice, and social exclusion. The implication is that media framing can transform the reporting of individual incidents into broader representations of an ethnic or occupational group, thereby reinforcing existing stereotypes and potentially deepening social divisions.

Power Relations

The representation of Fulani herdsmen as killers also reveals the relationship between language and power. In headlines such as "Fulani herdsmen murder 58...", "Herdsmen kill 20...", and "Herdsmen's killings...", the alleged perpetrators are placed at the centre of the discourse, while the voices, experiences, and perspectives of the communities involved are often given less attention. At the same time, the repeated association of the group with criminality positions them within a discourse of social condemnation and marginalisation.

From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, this raises questions about who has the power to construct social identities, determine how groups are represented, and influence public understanding of conflict situations. Newspaper organisations and journalists possess considerable discursive power because their linguistic choices can shape the identities assigned to individuals and communities. The groups being represented may have limited opportunities to challenge or provide alternative interpretations of the descriptions imposed on them. This

imbalance can reinforce existing power inequalities and marginalise the perspectives of those being represented.

Furthermore, the concentration of media attention on the alleged criminal activities of Fulani herdsmen, without sufficient attention to the broader circumstances surrounding the conflict, may produce a one-sided understanding of the crisis. Therefore, the power of newspaper discourse lies not only in what it reports but also in whose voices it amplifies, whose experiences it marginalises, and how it assigns responsibility for social problems.

Overall, the selected excerpts demonstrate how lexical choices, grammatical constructions, and descriptive labels contribute to the representation of Fulani herdsmen as killers. Through expressions such as "murder," "herdsmen killings," and "killer herdsmen," the newspapers construct a discourse that associates the group with violence and criminality. Such representations illustrate the ideological power of language and the role of newspaper reportage in shaping public perceptions of the Fulani herdsmen–farmers crisis.

Implications of Newspaper Framing on Public Perception of Fulani Herdsmen

The fourth objective of this study is to examine the implications of newspaper framing on public perception of Fulani herdsmen, particularly within the context of the herdsmen–farmers conflict in Nigeria. The analysis reveals several implications:

1. Stereotyping and Stigmatisation: The consistent portrayal of Fulani herdsmen as violent aggressors and perpetrators of conflict can reinforce negative stereotypes, encourage prejudice, and promote discrimination against the wider Fulani community.
2. Ethnic and Religious Bias: The repeated use of expressions such as "Fulani terrorists," "killer herdsmen," and "Muslim herders" can reinforce ethnic and religious prejudices. Such representations may deepen existing divisions and undermine peaceful coexistence among different groups.
3. Marginalisation of Herders' Voices: The predominant representation of herders as aggressors often sidelines their perspectives, grievances, and experiences. This limits public understanding of the complexities of the conflict and reduces opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding.
4. Influence on Policy and Public Response: Newspaper framing can influence public opinion and government responses to the crisis. Consistently portraying herders as the sole perpetrators may encourage demands for punitive security measures, whereas reporting that considers the underlying socioeconomic and environmental factors may promote more comprehensive approaches to conflict resolution.

Overall, newspaper framing has significant implications for public attitudes, social relations, and policy responses. Journalists and media organisations must therefore adopt balanced and responsible reporting practices that reflect the complexities of the conflict without promoting prejudice or hostility.

CONCLUSION

Using Van Leeuwen's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, this study examined the discursive representation of the Fulani herdsmen–farmers crisis in four Nigerian newspapers: *The Punch*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Leadership*, and *The Vanguard*. The analysis revealed recurring patterns of representation, lexical choices, and ideological constructions across the selected newspapers, suggesting similarities in how the crisis and the actors involved were portrayed.

The findings further revealed that newspaper language reflects underlying ideological positions and power relations. Fulani herdsmen were frequently represented through expressions associated with violence and criminality, such as "attack," "killings," and "invasion," while farmers were predominantly portrayed as victims through expressions such as "massacre," "victimised," and "defenceless." This pattern creates a largely opposing representation of the two groups and risks reducing a complex conflict to a simplistic distinction between perpetrators and victims.

The analysis also revealed that the selection of news sources influences the representation of the crisis. Government officials, security personnel, and community leaders featured prominently in the reports, while the perspectives of Fulani herdsmen were relatively less visible. This imbalance limits the diversity of perspectives available to readers and may reinforce the perception of herders as outsiders or threats rather than stakeholders in the conflict.

Furthermore, the study identified the use of sensational and emotive language in some newspaper headlines and reports. Such expressions can intensify public anxiety, reinforce negative stereotypes, and potentially aggravate existing tensions. The association of the conflict with broader ethnic, religious, and regional identities also contributes to the reinforcement of existing prejudices. The study therefore concludes that newspaper reportage goes beyond the presentation of events; it plays an important role in constructing social identities, reproducing ideological positions, and shaping public perception. Consequently, journalists and media organisations must recognise the power of language and embrace professional standards that promote accuracy, fairness, objectivity, and peaceful coexistence.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Nigerian newspapers should adopt balanced and responsible reporting practices by avoiding sensational, inflammatory, and ethnically prejudicial expressions in their coverage of conflicts.
2. Journalists should diversify their sources of information to ensure that the perspectives of all parties involved in conflicts are adequately represented.
3. Media organisations should provide sufficient historical, socioeconomic, and political context when reporting conflicts to prevent simplistic interpretations and misleading generalisations.
4. Journalists should distinguish between individuals accused of criminal activities and the wider ethnic or occupational groups to which they belong.
5. Further studies should examine and compare the discursive representation of different conflicts, such as the Boko Haram insurgency, the Fulani herdsmen–farmers crisis, and electoral violence, to identify similarities and differences in media framing and ideological representation.
6. Future researchers should also extend the scope of investigation beyond Nigeria to examine media representations of conflicts in other African and international contexts, including South Sudan, South Africa, and the Israel–Palestine conflict. Such comparative studies would provide broader insights into the relationship between language, media representation, ideology, and conflict

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