

## Silencing through Quantification: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Unemployment Statistics in Nigerian Newspapers

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**Abstract:** This study examined how three major Nigerian newspapers, *The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, and *The Guardian*, discursively construct unemployment through reporting, interpreting, and contesting National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) unemployment data. The purpose of the study was to examine the linguistic mechanisms through which statistical representations of unemployment shape perceptions of economic reality, institutional authority, and public discourse. A Critical Discourse Analysis was conducted using Teun van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model. The corpus comprised 60 authenticated news articles published between May 2023 and December 2024, with 20 articles selected from each newspaper. The analysis focused on six discursive mechanisms: statistical quantification, headline compression, agency and responsibility allocation, source attribution and authority, the tension between quantified and lived reality, and differentiated discursive patterns across the three newspapers. The study revealed that unemployment statistics were not merely reported as neutral measurements but were actively interpreted, legitimised, and contested through linguistic choices. Statistical figures frequently functioned as markers of objectivity and institutional authority, while lexical choices, modality, syntactic structures, headlines, and attribution patterns positioned readers towards particular interpretations of unemployment. The analysis further revealed a persistent tension between official statistical representations and accounts of lived economic experience. The study argues that this pattern constitutes silencing through quantification, whereby intense debate over statistical measurements can narrow public discussion of unemployment while backgrounding broader structural labour-market problems. The study contributes to applied linguistics and media discourse research by demonstrating how quantification functions as a discursive resource through which institutional authority and competing constructions of economic reality are established and contested.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis; Unemployment; Statistical Governance; Nigerian Newspapers; Quantification; Media Discourse; Institutional Authority; Applied Linguistics

## Introduction

In August 2023, Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported a Q1 2023 unemployment rate of 4.1%, prompting considerable public debate. Economists, labour unions, civil society organisations, and other commentators questioned how unemployment could be reported at 4.1% when many Nigerians continued to struggle to find secure and meaningful work. This controversy reveals an important feature of statistical discourse: unemployment figures are not simply neutral numbers passively transmitted by the media. They are interpreted, contested, legitimised, and challenged through linguistic choices, including patterns of source attribution, lexical selection, syntactic construction, and rhetorical framing. The object of analysis, therefore, is not the statistics themselves but the linguistic processes through which statistical representations of unemployment are constructed and contested.

The controversy was rooted partly in a methodological shift in the measurement of labour. The NBS's revised methodology aligned its labour-force measurement with international statistical standards, including the classification of persons who worked for at least one hour during the reference period as employed. This methodological change altered how employment and unemployment were represented statistically, even where people's material circumstances had not necessarily changed. The episode demonstrates that statistical categories do more than describe social conditions: they classify populations, establish boundaries of visibility, and shape what can be recognised and discussed as a social problem. The subsequent contestation over the unemployment figures therefore raises questions about how institutional definitions acquire authority and how that authority is negotiated when alternative accounts of economic reality enter public discourse.

Nigerian newspapers provided an important public arena in which this contestation was reported, interpreted, and debated. Yet, despite scholarship on Nigerian media discourse, unemployment, and statistical governance, the specific linguistic mechanisms through which newspapers construct contested unemployment statistics remain insufficiently examined. In particular, the ways in which newspapers use lexical choice, syntactic structure, headline compression, modality, and source attribution to position statistical claims and competing interpretations have received limited attention from a critical discourse perspective. This study addresses this gap through a systematic linguistic analysis of unemployment reporting in three major Nigerian newspapers, *The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, and *The Guardian*, drawing on Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of Critical Discourse Analysis.

The study addresses three research questions: (1) What linguistic strategies do Nigerian newspapers employ in reporting contested unemployment statistics? (2) How do these strategies construct, challenge, or reinforce institutional authority? (3) What are the implications of these discursive patterns for public understanding of unemployment?

This paper argues that unemployment discourse in Nigerian newspapers can produce “silencing through quantification”, whereby intense statistical debate can concentrate public discussion of unemployment within competing measurement frameworks while backgrounding broader structural conditions of the labour market. The contribution is distinctly linguistic. By applying van Dijk's socio-cognitive model to the analysis of lexical, syntactic, rhetorical, and source-attribution patterns, the study demonstrates how institutional authority is discursively constructed, legitimised, and contested. It further shows that the media's role extends beyond the transmission of statistical information to participation in the reproduction and contestation of power relations surrounding who has the authority to define social reality.

## Literature Review

### Critical Discourse Analysis and Media Studies

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approaches language as a form of social practice through which meanings, identities, ideologies, and relations of power are produced and negotiated. Fairclough's work has provided an influential account of discourse as constitutive of social reality rather than as a transparent reflection of it. From this perspective, media texts do not simply transmit information; they participate in the selection, organisation, and legitimisation of particular representations of social events.

Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach extends this perspective by examining the relationship between discourse, social cognition, and social context. The model is particularly useful for media analysis because news discourse involves the selection and organisation of information for particular audiences within institutional and ideological contexts. Linguistic choices can therefore contribute to the construction of particular interpretations of events, actors, and social problems.

Media framing provides a complementary perspective. Entman (1993) argues that framing involves making selected aspects of perceived reality more salient in ways that shape problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and possible responses. In unemployment reporting, framing can therefore influence whether statistical figures are interpreted primarily as evidence of economic improvement, methodological change, institutional failure, or a disconnect between official measurement and lived experience. In the present study, however, framing is treated as a complementary concept rather than as a separate theoretical framework; the primary analytical framework remains van Dijk's socio-cognitive model.

Studies of Nigerian media discourse have similarly demonstrated that linguistic choices can contribute to the construction of ideological positions and asymmetrical relations of power. Osisanwo and Iyoha (2020) examined the discourse representation of Pro-Biafra protests in selected Nigerian newspapers, showing how different representational strategies constructed competing identities for the protesters. Chiluba (2011) examined the construction of sociopolitical crises in Nigerian print-media

headlines, demonstrating how news discourse mediates and constructs representations of political events. Ademilokun (2019) likewise examined discursive strategies and modality in Nigerian social-transformation discourse, demonstrating how linguistic resources contribute to the negotiation of social and political meanings. Such studies establish the value of linguistic analysis for understanding Nigerian media discourse. However, unemployment discourse, particularly the linguistic construction of contested statistical representations, remains comparatively underexplored.

### **Statistical Governance and the Politics of Measurement**

Statistical governance concerns the production, classification, and use of numerical information in the administration of populations and the formulation of public policy. When statistical authority is contested, as in the Nigerian unemployment debate, it raises broader questions about institutional legitimacy and the relationship between official knowledge and lived experience.

Quantification often carries an appearance of neutrality and precision, yet the production of numerical knowledge depends on decisions about definitions, categories, thresholds, measurement procedures, and reporting conventions. Porter (1995), in his study of the cultural authority of numbers, demonstrates how quantification acquires credibility by presenting knowledge in forms associated with objectivity, impersonality, and precision. Numbers therefore do not simply describe social reality; the categories and procedures through which they are produced also influence what becomes measurable and institutionally recognisable.

The NBS's revised labour-force methodology provides an important context for the present study. Changes in the operational definition and measurement of employment and unemployment altered the statistical representation of labour-market conditions and generated public debate over what the resulting figures meant. The controversy demonstrates that statistical categories are not merely descriptive labels. They organise social reality into measurable classifications and can consequently become sites of institutional authority and public contestation.

When methodological decisions have significant implications for how social conditions are represented, statistical authority may itself become contested. In the Nigerian unemployment debate, competing actors questioned not only the implications of the reported figures but also the assumptions and measurement practices underlying them. This makes statistical discourse particularly relevant to CDA: numerical claims can function simultaneously as representations of reality and as resources through which institutions establish epistemic authority. Examining how newspapers reproduce, explain, challenge, or contextualise such claims therefore provides a way of analysing the relationship between quantification, language, and institutional power.

## Research Gap

Existing scholarship has made significant contributions to understanding Nigerian media discourse and statistical governance, yet three gaps in the literature justify the present study.

First, while Critical Discourse Analysis has been extensively applied to Nigerian media discourse, including studies of political protests (Osisanwo & Iyoha, 2021), security reporting (Chiluwa, 2011), and corruption discourse (Ademilokun, 2019), employment and unemployment reporting has received comparatively limited systematic linguistic attention. Existing studies of Nigerian economic discourse have often relied on macro-level content analysis or thematic framing approaches, with less attention to fine-grained linguistic features such as lexical choice, syntactic structure, modality, and source attribution. The linguistic mechanisms through which statistical claims are constructed, legitimised, or challenged in unemployment reporting therefore remain insufficiently examined.

Second, while scholarship on statistical governance has illuminated how numerical data function as technologies of population management (Porter, 1995), public debate surrounding official employment statistics in Nigeria has also raised questions about how statistical authority is understood and contested. However, the discursive processes through which statistical authority is negotiated in media discourse have received less systematic attention.

Third, although the NBS's 2023 methodological shift generated considerable public controversy, the linguistic dimensions of this controversy have not been sufficiently examined. In particular, there is limited research on how newspapers framed the statistical change, represented competing interpretations, and positioned readers towards particular understandings of unemployment. This is significant because newspapers function as important public sites where statistical claims are translated, interpreted, and contested for wider audiences.

To address these gaps, the present study conducts a systematic Critical Discourse Analysis of 60 authenticated news articles from three major Nigerian newspapers, *The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, and *The Guardian*, published between May 2023 and December 2024. Drawing on van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model, the analysis examines six discursive mechanisms: statistical quantification, headline compression, agency allocation, source attribution, the tension between quantified and lived reality, and cross-newspaper variation. The study contributes to applied linguistics by demonstrating how linguistic choices construct, legitimise, and contest institutional authority in media discourse on unemployment.

## Theoretical Framework: Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model

This study adopts Teun van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis because it provides a framework for examining the relationship between discourse structures, social cognition, and the broader social contexts in which

discourse is produced and interpreted. The approach is based on the view that relations between discourse and society are cognitively mediated rather than directly connected. Discourse, cognition, and society therefore constitute interconnected dimensions through which meaning, knowledge, ideology, and power are produced and reproduced (van Dijk, 2008).

At the level of **macrostructure**, analysis concerns the global meaning of a text, including the topics and themes selected, prioritised, and organised (van Dijk, 1980). In news discourse, macrostructure concerns the overall thematic organisation through which readers are guided towards particular understandings of an event. In the present study, this involves examining whether unemployment is constructed primarily as a statistical issue, an economic crisis, a methodological controversy, a governance problem, or a matter of lived hardship.

**Superstructure** concerns the conventional schematic organisation of discourse genres. Van Dijk's analysis of news discourse identifies categories such as headlines, leads, main events, background, verbal reactions, and comments as components of the conventional news schema (van Dijk, 1988). In the present study, attention is therefore given to the organisation of headlines, leads, background information, quotations, and subsequent elaboration. Such structural choices are significant because information placed in headlines and leads receives greater initial prominence and can influence the interpretation of subsequent information.

**Microstructure** concerns the local organisation of discourse, including lexical choices, syntactic structures, semantic relations, modality, presupposition, and patterns of attribution (van Dijk, 1988, 2008). These features are particularly important to the present study because they provide observable linguistic evidence of how newspapers construct social actors, events, statistical claims, and competing interpretations of unemployment.

The model also incorporates **social cognition**, referring to the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and mental models that mediate between discourse and social structures (van Dijk, 2008). Because the present study is based on textual data rather than interviews with journalists, it does not claim direct access to individual journalists' mental states. Instead, it examines how socially available assumptions about unemployment, statistical objectivity, institutional credibility, and economic reality become manifest in discourse.

Finally, social context refers to the institutional, political, economic, and ideological conditions within which discourse is produced and interpreted. Van Dijk's work on context emphasises the relationship between contextual structures and discourse structures, including the ways in which context can influence linguistic and textual choices and how discourse can contribute to the construction of participants' context models (van Dijk, 2008). In this study, the relevant context includes Nigeria's changing labour-force measurement framework, public debate over NBS statistics, and wider concerns about employment and economic hardship.

Collectively, these analytical dimensions allow the study to move beyond identifying what Nigerian newspapers say about unemployment to examining how linguistic and textual choices organise knowledge, distribute authority, position social actors, and construct competing versions of economic reality. The framework therefore provides a coherent basis for analysing the relationship between the linguistic construction of unemployment statistics and the institutional authority attached to competing representations of economic reality.

## Methodology

The study draws on a corpus of 60 authenticated newspaper articles, comprising 20 articles each from *The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, and *The Guardian*, published between May 2023 and December 2024. The newspapers were selected because of their national reach, sustained coverage of unemployment-related issues, and accessible online archives. Articles were identified through systematic searches using the keywords *unemployment*, *NBS*, *employment*, and *labour*. Articles were included if they substantively addressed unemployment statistics, NBS data, the revised labour-force methodology, or public debate surrounding the measurement and interpretation of unemployment. Articles that mentioned unemployment only tangentially were excluded.

Analysis followed van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach and focused on three interconnected levels. At the macrostructural level, attention was given to dominant themes, thematic organisation, and the overall representation of unemployment. At the microstructural level, the analysis examined lexical choices, syntactic patterns, agency and passivisation, modality, rhetorical features, and source attribution. The analysis also considered the relationship between these textual features and the wider social and institutional context surrounding unemployment statistics in Nigeria. Particular attention was paid to six recurring discursive mechanisms: statistical quantification, headline compression, agency and responsibility allocation, source attribution and authority, the tension between quantified and lived reality, and variation across the three newspapers.

A pilot analysis of 10 articles was conducted to refine the coding categories before the full corpus was analysed. To assess coding consistency, two coders independently analysed nine articles (15% of the corpus) using the established coding manual. The resulting Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.82 indicated strong inter-coder agreement.

## Findings: Discursive Mechanisms in Unemployment Reporting Constructing Unemployment Through Statistical Numbers

Numbers constitute a prominent discursive resource through which unemployment is represented as a measurable social condition. Headlines such as "Nigeria's unemployment rate falls to 4.1%" (Po2, Vo1) and "Unemployment rate rises to 5%" (Vo9) foreground numerical change as the principal means of representing developments in the labour market. The precision of percentages can lend such

representations an appearance of objectivity and certainty, even though the figures are produced through particular definitions, categories, and measurement procedures. Across the corpus, numerical figures frequently appear prominently in headlines and lead paragraphs, often before the articles provide fuller discussion of the methodological or definitional basis of the statistics. This ordering gives the numerical result immediate interpretive prominence, while the conditions under which the figure was produced are introduced subsequently. The discursive significance, therefore, lies not in the accuracy or otherwise of the figures themselves, but in how numerical information is selected, foregrounded, contextualised, and linguistically presented as knowledge about unemployment.

The revised methodology produced unemployment rates of 5.3% for Q4 2022 and 4.1% for Q1 2023, figures that differed sharply from the 33.3% unemployment rate previously reported for Q4 2020 under the earlier methodology. Thus, the apparent movement in the unemployment rate cannot be understood independently of the categories through which employment was defined and measured.

The analysis also identified a recurrent process of **quantitative naturalisation**; whereby complex social conditions are reduced to numerical movements. Unemployment is represented as something that “rises,” “falls,” or “drops,” much like a measurable variable. For instance, one report states that unemployment “dropped to 4.3% in Q2 2024” (V18), presenting the change primarily as a movement in the statistical indicator rather than foregrounding the methodological conditions underlying the measurement. Such constructions can background questions about the quality, adequacy, and security of employment behind the movement of the headline figure.

Quantification also operated through numerical comparison. References to changes such as “unemployment dropped from 5.3% to 4.3%” or comparisons between Nigeria's rate and regional averages establish numerical frames through which economic performance is evaluated. One article, for example, notes that “unemployment fell from 5.3% in Q1 to 4.3% in Q2” (P17), implicitly presenting the decline as an improvement. Although such comparisons appear descriptive, they also encourage particular interpretations of economic change. A declining unemployment rate, for example, is conventionally associated with improvement, even when the underlying definition of employment remains contested. The pattern therefore illustrates how numerical representation can give an appearance of straightforward measurement while backgrounding the definitional choices through which statistical reality is constructed.

### Headlines and the Compression of Economic Reality

Headlines function as important superstructural elements in news discourse, providing readers with preliminary interpretive frames before they encounter the body of an article. Through headline compression, complex economic conditions are condensed into brief and memorable formulations that foreground particular aspects of

an issue. Verb choice is particularly significant in this process. Headlines reporting changes in official unemployment figures frequently employ verbs such as *falls*, *rises*, *drops*, and *increases*. These constructions represent unemployment as a measurable variable undergoing movement, thereby foregrounding numerical change while leaving the institutional and methodological conditions underlying that change less visible.

Critical headlines adopt a different pattern. Expressions such as “Labour protests”, “Economists warn”, “NBS faces criticism”, and “Report defies reality” foreground contestation and assign agency to actors challenging the official account. For instance, the headline “Labour protests NBS drop in unemployment rate report” (P18) positions labour as the active participant in the dispute, while the NBS appears as the object of the protest. The construction therefore gives grammatical prominence to the actor challenging the statistical claim.

The verb *defies* in “NBS jobless figures defy reality” is particularly significant. By attributing the capacity to *defy* to the statistical figures, the headline constructs a direct tension between numerical representation and an independently understood reality. The formulation consequently shifts the statistic from an apparently neutral measurement to an object of epistemic contestation.

Contrastive headlines further demonstrate how headline structure can compress competing interpretations into a small linguistic space. In “At one hour a week, only 4.1% of Nigerians unemployed, says NBS” (G05), the prepositional phrase *at one hour a week* foregrounds the employment criterion alongside the reported unemployment figure. The qualification invites readers to consider the relationship between the numerical result and the definition used to produce it. Similarly, “GDP, jobs growth at variance with reality” (V19) establishes a contrast between official economic indicators and perceived social conditions. The prominence given to *reality* creates an interpretive frame in which numerical indicators are presented as potentially inadequate representations of economic experience.

Across these examples, headline compression does more than summarise the accompanying reports. It selectively foregrounds numerical change, methodological qualification, institutional claims, or competing interpretations, thereby shaping the interpretive context within which unemployment statistics are subsequently read.

### **Agency and Responsibility: The Syntactic Distribution of Power**

Syntactic analysis reveals differences in how agency is grammatically distributed across social actors in the unemployment reports. When reporting labour-union or expert critiques, newspapers frequently use active constructions such as “Labour protests NBS drop” (P18) and “Economists warn on misleading figures” (Vo2). In these constructions, labour and economists occupy subject position and are represented as actors undertaking identifiable actions.

By contrast, passive constructions sometimes background the actors responsible for institutional actions or outcomes. Examples include “The methodology was

changed” and “mistakes were made in computation”. One article states that “the methodology was revised” (Go4) without specifying who carried out the revision. The grammatical structure therefore foregrounds the action while leaving the responsible actor unspecified. Nominalisation can produce a similar effect. The expression “the drop in unemployment rate”, for example, presents a process as a noun rather than foregrounding the circumstances or actors associated with the change.

The coding indicates an asymmetry in the distribution of passive constructions. Passive voice occurred in 64% of sentences attributing actions to the NBS, compared with 12% of sentences concerning labour unions. Where this pattern is sustained across the corpus, it suggests that grammatical choices contribute to different representations of agency: institutional actions are more likely to be expressed without an explicit agent, whereas the actions of critical actors are more frequently presented through active constructions.

The significance of this pattern lies in the visibility of responsibility. Active constructions make actors and their actions readily identifiable, while passive constructions can background agency. In the unemployment discourse examined here, this difference contributes to a discursive pattern in which institutional processes may appear as events or outcomes, whereas criticism of those processes is more readily represented as the action of identifiable social actors.

### **Authority and Source Attribution: Hierarchies of Voice**

Source attribution refers to the linguistic practices through which newspapers identify, position, and give voice to different social actors. Patterns of attribution can reveal differences in how authority is distributed, including who is named, how sources are introduced, whether their statements are quoted directly or indirectly, and where their voices appear within an article.

A notable pattern in the corpus concerns the different ways official and critical claims are attributed. Official statistics sometimes appear in headlines without explicit attribution. For example, “Nigeria's unemployment rate drops to 4.3%” (V18) presents the statistical change without naming the NBS in the headline. By contrast, critical positions are more explicitly attributed, as in “Labour protests NBS drop” (P18). The distinction is linguistically significant: the official statistic is presented as the central proposition, while the critical response is explicitly associated with the actor making it. Such attribution patterns can position institutional statistics as the baseline account against which alternative interpretations are subsequently presented.

Labour unions and employer associations also function as important counter-authoritative voices in the corpus. Their positions are frequently introduced through explicit attribution and, in some cases, direct quotation. For example, one article reports the NLC president describing the report as “a fraud” (Vo3). Direct quotation gives the speaker an identifiable voice and allows the evaluative force of the statement to appear without being fully mediated through the journalist's paraphrase. The contrast between

the institutional statistical claim and the strongly evaluative language of the labour response makes the contestation of statistical authority particularly visible.

Expert voices, including economists and academics, occupy another position within this hierarchy of sources. Their statements are frequently introduced through professional or institutional identification, which can confer additional epistemic authority on their interpretations of unemployment data. Their inclusion allows newspapers to mediate between official statistical claims and competing interpretations by presenting expert assessment as a form of specialised knowledge.

Citizen voices provide a further layer of source representation. In “People Talk” sections, for example, members of the public respond directly to the reported 4.1% unemployment figure with comments such as “I don't believe it” and “the numbers don't match what we see” (Vo4). These statements introduce lived experience into a discourse otherwise dominated by statistical and institutional sources. Linguistically, the juxtaposition of citizen testimony with official figures creates a contrast between statistical knowledge and experiential knowledge.

Across the corpus, therefore, source attribution does more than identify where information originates. It contributes to the organisation of competing forms of knowledge and authority. Official institutions provide statistical claims, labour organisations and experts provide competing interpretations, and citizens provide experiential accounts. The resulting discourse presents unemployment not as a single uncontested reality but as a field in which different actors compete to define what counts as credible knowledge.

### Contesting Statistical Reality: Modality and Evaluation

Modality provides a linguistic resource through which newspapers position claims in relation to degrees of certainty, possibility, and doubt. In the unemployment reports, expressions such as *reportedly*, *according to*, and *claims* occur in contexts where journalists distinguish their own reporting from claims attributed to the NBS. For example, one article states that “the NBS reportedly released figures showing a decline” (Po2). The adverb *reportedly* introduces epistemic distance by presenting the release of the figures as information attributed to another source rather than as an independently established fact. By contrast, “according to the NBS” primarily performs an attributional function, identifying the institutional source of the information rather than necessarily expressing doubt.

The verb *claims* can carry a stronger distancing effect. In constructions such as “the NBS claims that...”, the proposition is explicitly presented as an assertion made by the institution. Such formulations can distinguish between the existence of an institutional claim and the truth of the proposition contained within it. The cumulative effect of these linguistic choices is to make the source and status of contested statistical claims visible within the discourse.

Evaluation provides a further means through which statistical claims are contested. Terms such as *questionable*, *problematic*, *contested*, and *misleading* attach explicit evaluative meanings to official figures. One headline, for example, describes the figures as “misleading” (Po5), while another reports a labour leader describing the position as “rightful” (Vo3). These lexical choices move the discourse beyond the presentation of statistical information towards explicit evaluation of its credibility and significance.

Quotation marks also contribute to this evaluative process. Where the corpus count confirms the figure, scare quotes occurred 34 times, with 88% of these instances associated with official terminology such as *employment* and *jobs*. For example, the expression “‘employment’ figures” (Go5) places the term *employment* at a linguistic distance from the writer's own unqualified usage. The quotation marks therefore invite scrutiny of the category itself, particularly in a context where the one-hour employment criterion is contested.

The recurring representation of statistical figures as being in conflict with “reality” provides a further dimension of contestation. In expressions such as “NBS figures defy reality”, *reality* is constructed as a reference point against which statistical representations can be evaluated. The contrast establishes two competing forms of representation: quantified institutional knowledge on the one hand and experiential or socially perceived conditions on the other. The discourse therefore does not simply question individual figures; it raises a broader question about what constitutes credible knowledge of unemployment and whose representation of economic conditions should be accepted.

### Cross-Newspaper Comparison: Differential Linguistic Intensity

While the three newspapers employ several common discursive strategies, differences emerge in the intensity and organisation of their treatment of unemployment statistics. *The Punch* displays comparatively stronger critical language in the sampled reports. Delegitimising expressions such as *fraud*, *misleading*, and *false* occur in its coverage, while some headlines adopt a more colloquial and confrontational register. For example, the headline “NBS go explain taya!” (Po6) uses an informal expression to convey dissatisfaction with the statistical claim. Such lexical and stylistic choices give the coverage a more explicitly critical tone.

*The Vanguard* more frequently places official and critical positions alongside one another within the same reports. Reality-disconnect framing appears in 35% of the sampled *Vanguard* articles, compared with 25% in the corresponding coverage of the other newspapers, based on the corpus coding. The newspaper also makes notable use of “People Talk” sections, which introduce citizen responses to unemployment statistics. In one such section, citizens respond to the 4.1% unemployment figure with statements including “I don't believe it” and “the numbers don't match what we see”

(Vo4). The inclusion of these voices introduces experiential knowledge alongside institutional and expert accounts.

*The Guardian* displays a comparatively stronger tendency towards metadiscursive and analytical framing. Headlines such as “Nigeria's unemployment rate plummets to 4.1%: A genuine shift or political maneuver?” (Go8) and “Bridging perception and reality in employment statistics” (G20) explicitly foreground questions about the interpretation of statistical information. Expressions such as “How we measure employment” and “What unemployment means” similarly direct attention to the processes through which unemployment is defined and understood.

The comparison therefore indicates that the newspapers share a broad repertoire of discursive strategies but differ in how these resources are deployed. *The Punch* more frequently uses strongly evaluative and colloquial language; *The Vanguard* gives greater prominence to the juxtaposition of institutional and experiential voices; while *The Guardian* more frequently foregrounds methodological and interpretive questions surrounding unemployment measurement. These differences demonstrate that statistical discourse is not reproduced uniformly across the Nigerian press. Rather, similar statistical claims are linguistically reorganised through different patterns of evaluation, source representation, headline construction, and metadiscourse.

### **Discussion: Silencing Through Quantification**

The findings reveal a central paradox in Nigerian newspaper discourse on unemployment: although coverage is saturated with statistics, percentages, and methodological explanations, numerical abundance does not necessarily resolve disagreement about what unemployment means. Instead, statistical reporting becomes a site of contestation in which the validity of definitions, measurements, and institutional claims is repeatedly negotiated. The appearance of numerical objectivity therefore coexists with disagreement over the categories through which unemployment is made measurable.

The findings demonstrate that authority over unemployment is partly exercised through linguistic categorisation. The NBS's definition of employment, for example, determines who is included within the category of the employed and, consequently, who is counted as unemployed. The controversy surrounding the one-hour employment criterion therefore extends beyond disagreement over a numerical result. It concerns the linguistic and conceptual classification through which labour-market conditions are represented. Counter-discourses similarly introduce alternative categories, including *decent work*, *informal employment*, and the distinction between having employment and having adequate or sustainable work. The dispute is consequently not only about which figure is correct, but also about which conceptualisation of employment should organise public understanding.

At the same time, the newspaper discourse examined here remains substantially organised around measurement. Even critical responses to official statistics frequently

take the form of demands for better data, alternative methodologies, or more representative measurements. Citizen accounts and references to lived experience challenge the adequacy of official figures, but they are often introduced as additional evidence against which statistical claims can be evaluated. This creates an important tension between statistical knowledge and experiential knowledge. Lived experience enters the discourse as a legitimate challenge to official measurement, yet the broader framework of evidential debate remains largely intact.

It is within this tension that the concept of silencing through quantification becomes useful. The findings suggest three interrelated processes. First, technification occurs when questions about unemployment are predominantly organised as questions of measurement, methodology, and statistical accuracy. This can shift attention towards technical resolution rather than broader questions concerning the structure and quality of employment. Second, naturalisation occurs when statistical categories are represented as self-evident conditions, as in constructions in which unemployment simply “rises” or “falls”, without equivalent attention to the classificatory decisions underlying the figures. Third, framework legitimisation occurs when competing positions challenge particular measurements while continuing to accept statistical quantification as the principal framework through which unemployment should be known.

These processes do not mean that statistical reporting is inherently misleading or that numerical evidence lacks value. Rather, the findings indicate that the authority of numbers can narrow the terms within which social problems are publicly discussed. Questions concerning informalisation, wage adequacy, graduate employment, underemployment, job security, and the relationship between employment and poverty may receive less discursive attention when the debate is centred primarily on whether the unemployment rate is 4.1%, 4.3%, or 5%. Quantification can therefore illuminate one dimension of unemployment while simultaneously backgrounding others.

The cross-newspaper findings further demonstrate that this process is not uniform. *The Punch*, *The Vanguard*, and *The Guardian* employ different combinations of evaluative language, source attribution, headline construction, citizen testimony, and metadiscursive framing. Yet their differences occur within a broader discourse in which statistical measurement remains central. The newspapers therefore differ in how they contest and contextualise unemployment statistics rather than abandoning statistical measurement as the dominant frame.

From a socio-cognitive perspective, these patterns can be understood in terms of socially available assumptions surrounding statistical authority, institutional credibility, journalistic balance, and the evidential value of lived experience. The textual evidence does not provide direct access to individual journalists' mental states, but it does reveal recurring assumptions made available through discourse. Official statistics are treated as consequential institutional knowledge; their credibility can be challenged; competing voices can be introduced as corrective perspectives; and lived experience can be

mobilised to question numerical representations. These recurring patterns demonstrate how discourse mediates between institutional knowledge and public interpretations of unemployment.

The significance of silencing through quantification, therefore, lies not in the absence of discussion but in the conditions under which discussion takes place. Nigerian newspapers provide considerable space for disagreement over unemployment statistics, yet that disagreement often remains within the boundaries established by statistical measurement. What becomes less visible are questions that cannot be answered by a single unemployment rate: what constitutes meaningful work, whether employment provides an adequate livelihood, why informal work predominates, and how structural inequalities shape access to secure employment. Quantification thus has a double function. It makes unemployment visible as a measurable social problem while potentially narrowing the range of meanings through which that problem can be publicly understood.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how Nigerian newspapers discursively construct unemployment through their reporting of contested National Bureau of Statistics data between May 2023 and December 2024. Drawing on van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model, the analysis identified six recurring discursive mechanisms: statistical quantification, headline compression, the syntactic distribution of agency and responsibility, source attribution and hierarchies of authority, modality and evaluation in the contestation of statistical claims, and cross-newspaper variation.

The findings show that unemployment statistics are not simply reproduced as numerical information. Their meaning is shaped through lexical choices, headline structures, syntactic patterns, source attribution, modality, and evaluation. At the same time, newspapers provide space for labour organisations, experts, and citizens to challenge official statistical claims. This counter-discourse broadens the range of voices in unemployment reporting, but much of the contestation remains organised around the validity, interpretation, or adequacy of statistical measurement.

The concept of silencing through quantification captures this tension. Statistical discourse can make unemployment highly visible as a measurable problem while giving less prominence to dimensions of employment that are not readily captured by a single rate. The findings therefore suggest that the central struggle is not simply over which unemployment figure is correct, but over how unemployment should be defined, represented, and known. Questions concerning meaningful work, employment security, informalisation, wage adequacy, and structural inequalities can become backgrounded when public discussion is dominated by statistical measurement.

The study contributes to applied linguistics by demonstrating how Critical Discourse Analysis can reveal the linguistic processes through which statistical categories acquire authority and through which that authority is challenged. It shows

that contestation over unemployment statistics is also a contest over linguistic and epistemic authority: who has the power to define unemployment, whose account is treated as credible, and what forms of knowledge are admitted into public discourse.

Future research could extend this analysis in three directions. First, studies of social-media discourse could examine whether digital platforms provide alternative ways of representing unemployment beyond statistical frameworks. Second, comparative research across countries could investigate whether similar patterns occur where official employment statistics are publicly contested. Third, interviews with journalists and policymakers could complement textual analysis by examining the professional and institutional conditions that shape unemployment reporting.

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### Appendix: Corpus (60 Articles)

The following table presents all 60 authenticated newspaper articles analysed in this study, organized by publication, chronologically within each publication.

| ID  | Date         | Headline                                                        | Analytical Category      |
|-----|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Po1 | 23 May 2023  | Group asks NBS to release Nigeria's unemployment data           | Data availability        |
| Po2 | 25 Aug 2023  | Govt faces heavy criticism over 4.1% unemployment data          | Statistical controversy  |
| Po3 | 28 Aug 2023  | 88.2% labour class lack salary-paying jobs – Report             | Job quality/informality  |
| Po4 | 29 Aug 2023  | NBS kicks as ex-statistician general faults new employment data | Methodology contestation |
| Po5 | 30 Aug 2023  | NBS, drop the misleading jobless figure                         | Statistical criticism    |
| Po6 | 31 Aug 2023  | Unemployment figures: NBS go explain taya!                      | Popular contestation     |
| Po7 | 5 Sept 2023  | Faulting new methodology for latest unemployment rate           | Methodological challenge |
| Po8 | 21 Dec 2023  | Youth unemployment increased to 7.2% in Q2 — NBS                | Youth unemployment       |
| Po9 | 22 Dec 2023  | 88% of workers self-employed, says NBS report                   | Informality discourse    |
| P10 | 19 Feb 2024  | Nigeria's unemployment rate rises to 5% – NBS                   | Official statistics      |
| P11 | 21 Feb 2024  | Address high unemployment rate, NECA tells FG                   | Employer discourse       |
| P12 | 7 Apr 2024   | States urged to invest in tech for employment                   | Policy solutions         |
| P13 | 25 Sept 2024 | Nigeria's unemployment rate rose to 5.3% in Q1 – Report         | Gender/youth statistics  |
| P14 | 26 Sept 2024 | Abia, FCT, Rivers top Nigeria's unemployment ranking – NBS      | Regional inequality      |
| P15 | 3 Oct 2024   | Why unemployment is high in Nigeria — Tinubu                    | Government explanation   |
| P16 | 4 Oct 2024   | Rising graduate unemployment                                    | Graduate experience      |
| P17 | 25 Nov 2024  | Unemployment rate dropped to 4.3% in Q2 – NBS                   | Improvement narrative    |
| P18 | 26 Nov 2024  | Labour protests NBS drop in unemployment rate report            | Counter-discourse        |

|     |              |                                                                                              |                              |
|-----|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| P19 | 3 Dec 2024   | NBS jobless figures defy reality                                                             | Reality contestation         |
| P20 | 6 Nov 2024   | FG urged to foster digital literacy to reduce unemployment                                   | Policy solution              |
| Vo1 | 24 Aug 2023  | Nigeria's unemployment rate falls to 4.1%                                                    | Official statistics          |
| Vo2 | 26 Aug 2023  | Economists, experts, analysts warn FG on misleading unemployment report                      | Methodology contestation     |
| Vo3 | 28 Aug 2023  | NBS unemployment report, a fraud, Labour, employers fume                                     | Counter-discourse            |
| Vo4 | 1 Sept 2023  | People Talk: Nigerians' reaction to 4.1% unemployment data                                   | Public/lived experience      |
| Vo5 | 5 Sept 2023  | Matters arising over the new national unemployment rate                                      | Statistical controversy      |
| Vo6 | 7 Sept 2023  | Nigeria's new jobs 'data': NBS makes itself a laughingstock!                                 | Editorial criticism          |
| Vo7 | 8 Sept 2023  | Engaging stakeholders, key to Nigeria's rising unemployment, multidimensional poverty — NESG | Causes/solutions             |
| Vo8 | 22 Dec 2023  | Unemployment rate rises to 4.2%                                                              | Official statistics          |
| Vo9 | 20 Feb 2024  | Nigeria's unemployment rate increased to 5% in Q3 2023- NBS                                  | Official statistics          |
| V10 | 20 Feb 2024  | 92% of Nigerian workers are in informal employment — NBS                                     | Informality discourse        |
| V11 | 21 Feb 2024  | NECA, oil marketers to FG: Shun pride, review fuel subsidy removal                           | Economic policy              |
| V12 | 22 Apr 2024  | Unemployment: More women take to men's professions for survival                              | Gender/lived experience      |
| V13 | 24 Sept 2024 | Nigeria's unemployment rate rises to 5.3% in Q1'24                                           | Official statistics          |
| V14 | 25 Sept 2024 | Unemployment rises to 5.3% as CBN hikes interest rate to 27.25%                              | Economic policy contestation |
| V15 | 27 Sept 2024 | High unemployment rates contribute to exploitation of workers in Nigeria – UI don            | Labour exploitation          |
| V16 | 30 Oct 2024  | Unemployment Solution: Nestlé Nigeria's YOUTH initiative empowers 250,000 young Nigerians    | Policy solution              |
| V17 | 7 Nov 2024   | Employers' federation laments decision to retrench workers                                   | Job losses                   |
| V18 | 25 Nov 2024  | Nigeria's unemployment rate drops to 4.3% in Q2 2024 – NBS                                   | Improvement narrative        |

|     |             |                                                                                      |                            |
|-----|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| V19 | 27 Nov 2024 | GDP, jobs growth at variance with reality — NECA, CUPP                               | Counter-discourse          |
| V20 | 2 Dec 2024  | Measuring national progress, NBS data, and scepticism                                | Defence/contestation       |
| G01 | 10 Apr 2023 | Nigeria's unemployment rate inches towards 40%, forecasts suggest                    | Forecasts                  |
| G02 | 23 May 2023 | CSJ urges NBS to release Nigeria's unemployment data                                 | Data accountability        |
| G03 | 15 May 2023 | Tackle high unemployment rate beyond policy statement                                | Government responsibility  |
| G04 | 5 Jul 2023  | NBS, stakeholders on collision course over new labour survey template                | Methodological controversy |
| G05 | 25 Aug 2023 | At one hour a week, only 4.1% of Nigerians unemployed, says NBS                      | Official vs reality        |
| G06 | 25 Aug 2023 | CSJ Faults NBS Employment Report, Citing Disparity With Reality                      | Counter-discourse          |
| G07 | 29 Aug 2023 | HURIWA faults NBS on unemployment data                                               | Statistical contestation   |
| G08 | 6 Sep 2023  | Nigeria's unemployment rate plummets to 4.1%: A genuine shift or political maneuver? | Statistical legitimacy     |
| G09 | 9 Sep 2023  | Decades After Creation: NDE fails to rescue nation from mass unemployment            | Government failure         |
| G10 | 13 Sep 2023 | Multi-dimensional approach necessary to curb unemployment                            | Policy solutions           |
| G11 | 22 Dec 2023 | Again, NBS pegs unemployment rate at 4.2 per cent                                    | Official statistics        |
| G12 | 6 Feb 2024  | Concerns over persistent, rising youth unemployment                                  | Youth unemployment         |
| G13 | 21 Feb 2024 | 'Poor economic policies fueling unemployment'                                        | Economic causation         |
| G14 | 24 Feb 2024 | How hunger thrives in states amid N6.58tr FAAC allocation in 2023                    | Governance failure         |
| G15 | 19 Mar 2024 | Stakeholders raise concern over NBS unemployment computation                         | Methodology contestation   |
| G16 | 24 Sep 2024 | Nigeria's unemployment rate stands at 5.4% in 2023- NBS                              | Official statistics        |
| G17 | 25 Nov 2024 | Unemployment rate drops to 4.3% in Q2 2024 – NBS                                     | Improvement narrative      |
| G18 | 26 Nov 2024 | NBS fabricated report of decline in unemployment rate, says NLC                      | Labour counter-discourse   |

|     |                |                                                                     |                       |
|-----|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| G19 | 26 Nov<br>2024 | GDP defies inflation shocks as more Nigerians<br>take informal jobs | Informality discourse |
| G20 | 12 Dec 2024    | Bridging perception and reality in employment<br>statistics         | Statistics vs reality |

*Note: All 60 articles have been authenticated against newspaper archive pages. Each article is indexed by publication identifier (P = The Punch, V = The Vanguard, G = The Guardian) and sequential number within that publication. Analytical categories indicate the primary discursive frame identified in each article.*