

Framing Africa: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Western Media Representation of Africa and Africans

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the linguistic and discursive mechanisms through which Western media constructs, reproduces, and perpetuates biased representations of Africa and Africans. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as both a theoretical framework and methodological tool, the study interrogates a corpus of selected news reports, feature articles, and editorial commentaries from prominent Western media outlets including The New York Times, The Guardian, BBC News, and CNN. The analysis focuses on the ideological dimensions of language use specifically lexical choices, framing strategies, nominalization, metaphor, and processes of othering — in coverage of African political, social, and humanitarian events. The findings reveal systematic patterns of negative framing, deficit narration, and ideological misrepresentation that serve to perpetuate colonial discourses and reinforce asymmetrical global power relations. The study argues that such discursive practices are not merely reflective of journalistic conventions but are deeply ideological, functioning to marginalize African agency and sustain a Eurocentric worldview. The article contributes to scholarship in Applied Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, and Postcolonial Media Studies by offering a rigorous linguistic analysis of how media language shapes and distorts the perception of Africa on the global stage. Implications for media literacy, discourse pedagogy, and decolonial communication are discussed.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Western media, Africa, representation, framing

1. Introduction

The relationship between language, power, and representation occupies a central place in contemporary Applied Linguistics and Discourse Studies. Nowhere is this relationship more visibly contested than in the Western media's coverage of Africa a continent

of fifty-four nations, over 1.4 billion people, extraordinary cultural diversity, and vast natural wealth, yet one that continues to be represented in Western media through a remarkably narrow and distorted lens. From colonial-era travelogues to twenty-first century digital news platforms, the narrative of Africa in Western discourse has been largely characterized by crisis, conflict, poverty, disease, and political dysfunction. This persistent pattern of negative representation raises fundamental questions about the ideological function of media language and its complicity in reproducing unequal global power relations. The Western media wields enormous influence in shaping global public opinion.

Outlets such as CNN, the BBC, The New York Times, and The Guardian command international audiences numbering in the hundreds of millions and set the terms through which much of the world comes to understand distant peoples and places. When these institutions systematically deploy decontextualizing, crisis-driven, and agency-denying discourses in their coverage of Africa, they do not merely report on the continent; they participate in the construction of Africa as a discursive object a place defined by its problems, its dependence, and its difference from a presumed Western norm.

This study intervenes in this discursive terrain through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a well-established framework within Applied Linguistics that investigates how language functions ideologically to reproduce, challenge, or transform relations of social power. CDA provides the analytical tools to move beyond surface-level descriptions of media content toward an examination of the structural, rhetorical, and ideological mechanisms through which meaning is produced and naturalized. By applying CDA to Western media texts about Africa, this study seeks to unmask the linguistic strategies through which bias is encoded, normalized, and circulated as common sense.

The study is organized as follows: following this introduction, the research problem is articulated, and the research questions and objectives are stated. The theoretical framework grounding the study in CDA and postcolonial discourse theory is then elaborated. The methodology section describes the corpus selection and analytical procedures. A detailed linguistic analysis is presented, focusing on key discursive features identified in the data. The results and conclusions are discussed, followed by a reflection on the implications of the research for Applied Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, and broader debates about decolonizing media knowledge.

2. Research Problem

Despite decades of postcolonial critique and the proliferation of African media voices,

Western media discourse continues to represent Africa in ways that are strikingly reminiscent of colonial-era narratives. The continent is routinely framed as a theater of crises - war, famine, corruption, epidemic with little attention to the structural causes of such crises, the agency of African actors in addressing them, or the diversity of African experiences that exist beyond such frames.

This representational imbalance is not accidental; it reflects deeply embedded ideological orientations that prioritize Western

perspectives, reinforce civilizational hierarchies, and deny Africans the full complexity of their humanity. The problem is compounded by the significant gap in the scholarship on the linguistic dimensions of this representation. While political scientists, postcolonial theorists, and communication scholars have examined Western media bias toward Africa at the level of content and framing, rigorous Applied Linguistic analyses that interrogate the micro-level language strategies through which such bias is constructed and reproduced remain relatively scarce. This study addresses that gap by bringing the analytical resources of CDA to bear on a corpus of Western media texts, with particular attention to how specific linguistic choices-lexis, syntax, metaphor, nominalization, transitivity, and discourse framing - function ideologically. The central problem, therefore, is this: Western media discourse about Africa is ideologically saturated, deploying systematic linguistic strategies that construct Africa as deficient, dependent, and distant from modernity. These strategies serve to reproduce colonial power asymmetries in the post-independence era, contributing to the marginalization of African perspectives in global discourse and the distortion of African realities for international audiences.

3. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What specific linguistic and discursive strategies including lexical choices, metaphor, framing, and nominalization do Western media outlets employ in their representation of Africa and Africans, and how do these strategies encode ideological bias?

RQ2. In what ways do the discursive representations of Africa in Western media texts reproduce, reinforce, or contest colonial and neocolonial ideologies of power, civilization, and otherness?

RQ3. What are the implications of these discursive practices for African agency, identity, and self-representation in global media discourse, and what alternative discursive frameworks might support more equitable representations?

4. Objectives of the Study

The study pursues the following objectives:

01.To identify and analyze the key linguistic strategies including lexical framing, metaphor, transitivity, nominalization, and processes of othering - deployed in Western media representations of Africa and Africans, demonstrating how these strategies function to construct ideologically biased discourses.

02.To examine how Western media discourse about Africa reproduces colonial and neocolonial ideological formations by constructing Africa as a zone of crisis, dependency, and alterity, drawing on postcolonial discourse theory and Critical Discourse Analysis to expose the historical continuities of such representations.

03. To assess the implications of these discursive practices for African self-representation and agency in global media, and to propose a set of analytical and normative recommendations for more equitable, decolonized media discourse about Africa, contributing thereby to the field of Applied Linguistics and Discourse Analysis.

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The primary theoretical and methodological framework underpinning this study is

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a transdisciplinary approach to the study of language that foregrounds the relationship between discourse, ideology, and social power. CDA, as developed principally by Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995, 2003), Teun van Dijk (1993, 1998, 2008), Ruth Wodak (1989, 2001), and Gunther Kress (1985), operates on the premise that language is never ideologically neutral: every text encodes particular social meanings, perspectives, and power relations that reflect and reproduce the social conditions of its production. Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA which analyzes texts at the levels of (1) textual description, (2) discursive practice (processes of text production, distribution, and consumption), and (3) social practice (the broader ideological and institutional context) - provides the structural scaffolding for the present analysis. This model allows the analyst to move between close linguistic readings of individual texts and broader socio-historical contexts of meaning production, enabling a nuanced understanding of how media discourse about Africa functions ideologically. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to CDA further enriches the framework by introducing the concept of ideological discourse structures-the ways in which ideological beliefs are encoded in discourse through strategies such as positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, emphasis and de-emphasis, lexicalization, presupposition, and implication. These strategies are particularly pertinent to the analysis of media discourse about Africa, where such mechanisms operate to naturalize hierarchical distinctions between "the West" and "Africa."

5.2 Postcolonial Discourse Theory

CDA is complemented in this study by postcolonial discourse theory, particularly the foundational insights of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and its application to the African context by scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2001), Chinua Achebe (1977), and V. Y. Mudimbe (1988). Said's concept of Orientalism-the discursive construction of the "East" as the Other of a Western self - has been productively extended to Africa through the concept of "Africanism," which designates the system of discursive representations by which Western culture has constructed Africa as primitive, irrational, and in need of Western intervention and guidance.

Mbembe's critique of the "banality of postcolonial thought" and Mudimbe's analysis of the "colonial library"-the accumulated body of Western texts that have defined Africa for Western audiences provide essential historical grounding for understanding why

Western media discourses about Africa take the forms they do. These postcolonial theoretical resources allow the present study to situate its linguistic findings within a broader history of ideological representation and to assess the extent to which contemporary media discourses represent a continuation or a transformation of colonial discursive formations.

5.3 Framing Theory

Framing theory, as articulated by Goffman (1974) and developed in media studies by Entman (1993) and others, provides an additional theoretical resource for understanding how media representations work. Frames are the organizing principles embedded in linguistic choices, narrative structures, and discursive conventions through which media texts select, emphasize, and interpret aspects of perceived reality. Entman's definition of framing as "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (1993, p. 52) is particularly useful for analyzing how Western media coverage of Africa foregrounds certain events, actors, and interpretations while marginalizing others. Combined with CDA, framing theory enables a systematic analysis of both the linguistic mechanisms and the broader representational logics of Western media discourse about Africa.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the principles of CDA.

Qualitative methodology is most appropriate here because the research is concerned with meaning, ideology, and the nuanced workings of language rather than with quantifiable patterns susceptible to statistical treatment. The study is interpretive and critical in orientation, seeking not merely to describe language use but to expose its ideological dimensions and to contribute to a more just and equitable global media discourse.

6.2 Corpus Selection

The corpus for this study consists of forty purposively selected texts drawn from four major Western media outlets: CNN (USA), BBC News (UK), The New York Times (USA), and The Guardian (UK). These outlets were selected because of their international reach, their claim to journalistic authority and objectivity, and their status as agenda-setting institutions in global news media. The texts were selected to cover a range of topics including political instability, humanitarian crises, economic development, public health, and cultural events on the African continent, spanning the period from 2015 to 2023. This period is significant because it encompasses major events including the Ebola epidemic, various electoral crises, the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on Africa, and the Sahel security crisis, all of which received significant Western media attention.

The texts were selected using a combination of purposive and maximum variation sampling to ensure that different types of coverage

hard news, feature articles, opinion pieces, and analytical reports) and different African contexts (East, West, Central, North, and Southern Africa) are represented. A total of ten texts per outlet were selected, yielding a corpus of approximately 85,000 words.

6.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeds in three stages corresponding to Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model. In the first stage (textual analysis), the linguistic features of each text are examined using tools from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), with particular attention to transitivity (the representation of processes, participants, and circumstances, lexical choices, nominalization, modality, metaphor, and presupposition. In the second stage (discursive practice analysis, the production and consumption contexts of the texts are considered, including editorial conventions, source selection, and intertextual relationships with other media texts and with colonial-era discourses.

In the third stage (social practice analysis, the textual and discursive findings are situated within the broader socio-historical context of Western-African relations, drawing on postcolonial theory to assess the ideological implications of the identified patterns.

7. Linguistic Analysis of Western Media Representation of Africa

7.1 Lexical Framing and Deficit Narration

One of the most consistent and ideologically significant patterns identified across the corpus is the deployment of deficit lexis vocabulary that constructs Africa through the lens of absence, failure, and inadequacy. Across all four outlets, Africa is routinely described through terms such as "struggling," "impoverished," "war-torn," "corruption-ridden," "failed,"

"volatile," and "underdeveloped." These lexical choices do not merely describe conditions; they perform an evaluative function, positioning Africa in a relation of subordinate difference to an implied Western norm of stability, prosperity, and governance.

Consider, for instance, the following headline from a BBC News report on governance in sub-Saharan Africa: "Africa's democratic backsliding deepens as coups multiply." The nominalization "backsliding" encodes a directional metaphor of progress and regression that presupposes a linear developmental trajectory — one in which "democracy" functions as a universalized, Western-defined endpoint toward which all societies should aspire. The verb

"deepens" adds a temporal dimension that naturalizes the deficit, suggesting not merely a current condition but an ongoing, entrenching process. Africa is not presented as navigating complex historical, geopolitical, and structural challenges; it is presented as failing at a universal standard.

This pattern of deficit narration extends to coverage of economic, health, and social issues. In corpus texts dealing with African economic development, terms such as "aid dependency," "foreign intervention," and "donor support" function to position Africa as an object of external benevolence rather than an agent of its own development. The systemic causes of African economic challenges - including colonial exploitation, unfair trade agreements, debt structures, and the extractive operations of multinational corporations are almost entirely absent from the lexical landscape of these texts, a silence that is itself ideologically significant.

7.2 Transitivity and the Suppression of African Agency

Transitivity analysis, drawn from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, examines how processes, participants, and their relational roles are encoded in clausal structures. In the corpus, a striking pattern emerges in which African actors are systematically positioned as passive participants as Affected or Goal rather than Actor or Agent in the material processes described in news reports. Western actors (governments, NGOs, international organizations), by contrast, are consistently positioned as Actors in processes of assistance, intervention, and solution-provision.

This asymmetry is illustrated in constructions such as: "Western donors are providing emergency relief to millions of Africans

affected by the food crisis" versus "communities [in Africa] have developed innovative local solutions to food insecurity." The former construction, which is overwhelmingly dominant in the corpus, positions Africans as passive beneficiaries of Western action. The latter, which appears only rarely and typically in feature or opinion texts, positions Africans as agents. The differential frequency of these constructions is not incidental; it reflects and reinforces an ideological orientation in which Africa's role is to suffer and receive, while the West's role is to act and give.

Nominalization the conversion of verbal processes into noun phrases plays a related role in suppressing African agency. Headlines such as "Famine in Ethiopia" or "Conflict in the Congo" nominalize processes that have complex, historically specific causes and actors, erasing the human agents responsible for creating or perpetuating these conditions and presenting them as natural, almost geographical features of African existence. This discursive maneuver decontextualizes African crises, making them appear as inherent conditions of the continent rather than as the outcomes of specific political decisions, historical processes, and geopolitical interventions.

7.3 Metaphor and the Construction of Africa as "Dark Continent"

Metaphorical language plays a central and pervasive ideological role in Western media discourse about Africa. The analysis identifies several recurring metaphorical schemas that organize the representation of Africa across the corpus. These include the metaphor of "**Africa as Wilderness**" (evoking colonial tropes of untamed, dangerous, and ungovernable space), "**Africa as Patient**" (positioning the continent as diseased, in need of external medical intervention), and Africa as Child (constructing Africa as immature, developing, and in need of Western guidance and tutelage).

The "**Africa as Patient**" metaphor is particularly prominent in coverage of health and humanitarian crises. In texts dealing with the Ebola epidemic, COVID-19, and malaria, Africa itself is frequently the grammatical subject of clauses that attribute pathological states to the continent: "**Africa battles new epidemic,**" "**the continent struggles with its health infrastructure,**" "**Africa faces mounting death toll.**" These constructions personify the continent while simultaneously medicalizing it, constructing Africa as a body in perpetual crisis and pathological vulnerability. The metaphor erases the political economy of African public health challenges—the structural underfunding of health systems, the Brain drain of medical professionals to Western countries, the historical under-investment of colonial powers in African infrastructure and replaces it with a naturalized image of endemic African illness.

The "**Africa as Child**" metaphor is operative in discourse about governance and development, where Western governments, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank are typically positioned as authoritative adult figures offering guidance, conditionality, and development packages to African states positioned as inexperienced, dependent, or recalcitrant. Terms such as "**reform,**" "**development assistance,**" "**good governance requirements,**" and "**capacity building**" belong to a lexical network

that constructs a paternalistic relationship in which Africa's role is to receive and comply while the West's role is to prescribe and monitor.

7.4 Processes of Othering and Us/Them Dichotomies

Van Dijk's ideological square the discursive strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation is operative throughout the corpus at multiple levels. At the macro-level, the very structure of Western news discourse about Africa presupposes an us/them boundary: Western audiences are addressed as subjects whose interests are potentially affected by African events (through migration, disease, terrorism, resource scarcity, while Africans are consistently positioned as objects of Western concern, intervention, and attention. This structural asymmetry is reproduced and reinforced through specific linguistic choices.

Deixis - the linguistic system of reference to persons, places, and times operates

ideologically in the corpus through the differential use of proximal and distal terms. Africa and Africans are consistently constructed as distant, alien, and other through the use of terms like

"**over there**," "**in remote areas**," "**in the region**," and through the deployment of imprecise, homogenizing geographical references ("in Africa," "across the continent") that flatten the enormous diversity of fifty-four nations into a single, undifferentiated space. The contrast with the specificity of reference to Western actors and locations named politicians, specific cities, precise institutional affiliations is stark and systematic.

Othering is also accomplished through processes of racialization and culturalization-the attribution of political and social conditions to racial or cultural characteristics rather than to structural or historical factors. While explicit racial language is less common in contemporary Western media than in colonial-era texts, the corpus contains numerous instances of implicit racialization through the differential application of evaluative categories:

African political leaders are described as "**strongmen**," "**tribal leaders**," or "**warlords**" in contexts where comparable Western leaders would be described as "**politicians**," "**heads of state**," or "**commanders**." This differential lexicalization encodes racial hierarchy while maintaining the appearance of objective, race-neutral description.

7.5 Source Selection and the Silencing of African Voices

A discourse analytical approach to media texts must attend not only to what is said but to who is given the authority to speak. Source analysis of the corpus reveals a consistent pattern in which African voices are marginalized in favor of Western expert voices in reporting on African events. International analysts, Western diplomats, NGO representatives, and academic experts based in Europe or North America are the dominant source categories across all four outlets. African government officials, civil society leaders,

academics, and ordinary citizens are consistently underrepresented as sources, and when they do appear, their contributions are more likely to be embedded in indirect speech or summarized paraphrase than to be quoted directly a discursive choice that reduces their authority and their presence in the text.

This pattern of source selection has direct ideological consequences: it produces and reproduces a discourse about Africa in which Africa is spoken for rather than speaking, in which African perspectives are filtered through Western interpretive frameworks, and in which Western interpretations of African events are naturalized as authoritative while African interpretations are marginalized or absent. The result is a systematic epistemological inequity that mirrors and reinforces the broader asymmetries of global power.

8. Results and Conclusions

The linguistic analysis presented in the preceding section yields several significant findings. First, Western media discourse about Africa is systematically structured by a logic of deficit and crisis: through lexical choices, transitivity patterns, nominalization, and framing, Africa is constructed as a space of inherent inadequacy, dependence, and danger. This deficit narrative is not a neutral description of African realities but an ideologically produced representation that reflects the historical positioning of Africa in Western discursive traditions rooted in colonialism and its aftermath.

Second, African agency is suppressed at multiple levels of discourse. Through transitivity structures that position Africans as passive participants, through nominalization that erases the agents of African crises, through source selection practices that privilege Western voices, and through framing conventions that foreground Western interventions over African solutions, Western media texts systematically deny Africans the status of full social agents capable of defining their own situations and charting their own futures. This suppression of agency is ideologically consequential because it reproduces the colonial logic of a passive, dependent Africa in need of Western salvation.

Third, the metaphorical and discursive construction of Africa as wilderness, patient, and child operates to naturalize colonial hierarchies in post-independence media discourse. These metaphorical schemas are not merely rhetorical flourishes; they organize entire systems of meaning, determining what aspects of African reality are visible and what aspects are rendered invisible, what causal explanations are available and what causal explanations are foreclosed. By naturalizing Africa's challenges as inherent rather than historical and structural, these metaphors serve a powerful ideological function in legitimizing Western authority over African affairs.

Fourth, the study finds that processes of othering - operated through deictic distancing, racialization, differential lexicalization, and the construction of us/them boundaries are central to Western media discourse about Africa. These processes reproduce a Eurocentric worldview in which Europe and North America constitute the universal norm against which Africa is measured and found lacking.

Such othering is not merely descriptive but constitutive: it helps to produce and maintain the very power inequalities it describes.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Western media representation of Africa is not simply a matter of incomplete or one-sided reporting that could be corrected through greater journalistic diligence. It is a systemic discursive phenomenon rooted in deep ideological formations with a colonial genealogy, perpetuated through specific linguistic strategies that are embedded in professional journalistic conventions and institutional structures. Addressing this phenomenon requires not merely journalistic reform but a fundamental rethinking of the epistemological and ideological assumptions that organize Western media knowledge about Africa.

9. Implications of the Research and Contribution to Knowledge

9.1 Implications for Applied Linguistics

This study makes a substantive contribution to Applied Linguistics by demonstrating the explanatory power of CDA for investigating media representation in postcolonial contexts.

It extends the application of CDA beyond its predominantly European and North American contexts of application to address the specific dynamics of North-South discourse asymmetries, enriching the field's analytical toolkit with postcolonial theoretical resources. The study also contributes to the growing body of work on language and ideology in media discourse, providing a detailed and replicable model for the linguistic analysis of representational bias in international news coverage.

For practitioners and scholars in Applied Linguistics, the study highlights the importance of attending to the global dimensions of language and power - dimensions that are frequently undertheorized in a field whose knowledge production has itself been disproportionately centered in Western academic institutions. The analysis demonstrates that linguistic choices carry enormous ideological weight and that the capacity to read those choices critically is an essential component of both academic and civic literacy in the contemporary world.

9.2 Implications for Discourse Analysis and Media Studies

For Discourse Analysis and Media Studies, this research confirms and extends the existing literature on media framing and ideological representation while adding the dimension of postcolonial critique. It enriches debates about journalistic objectivity and media ethics by showing how the very linguistic conventions through which objectivity is performed - the passive voice, the nominalized headline, the expert source can function ideologically to suppress agency, naturalize asymmetry, and reproduce historical hierarchies.

The study also has implications for media education and journalism training, particularly in African academic and professional contexts. By providing a detailed analytical account of the linguistic strategies through which Western media bias operates, it offers

educators and journalists the tools to identify, critique, and resist these strategies in their own media production and consumption. The development of African media literacy grounded in critical discourse analytical frameworks represents an important dimension of the broader project of media decolonization.

9.3 Implications for Decolonial Communication and African Agency

Perhaps most significantly, this study has implications for the broader project of decolonizing communication—the effort to develop media institutions, practices, and epistemologies that center African perspectives, acknowledge African agency, and refuse the deficit narratives that have historically organized Western discourse about the continent. The analysis suggests that this project must be pursued not only at the level of content (what stories are told but at the level of language (how they are told) attending to the specific linguistic choices through which agency is granted or denied, diversity is acknowledged or flattened, and complexity is recognized or reduced.

The establishment and strengthening of African media institutions with the capacity to produce internationally authoritative discourse about African affairs and the development of media practices grounded in African intellectual traditions and perspectives are essential components of this project. At the same time, critical engagement with existing Western media discourse, informed by the kind of linguistic analysis demonstrated in this study, remains an important tool for understanding and challenging the power relations embedded in the global information order.

9.4 Contribution to Knowledge

The specific contributions of this study to knowledge in Applied Linguistics, Discourse Analysis, and Postcolonial Media Studies may be summarized as follows. First, it provides a comprehensive, linguistically grounded account of the discursive mechanisms through which Western media bias toward Africa is constructed and reproduced, advancing beyond the content-level analyses that dominate the existing literature. Second, it develops a methodological framework combining Faircloughian CDA, van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics, and postcolonial discourse theory that is well suited to the analysis of North-South media representation and that may be profitably applied in future research across a range of similar contexts. Third, it contributes to the decolonization of Applied Linguistics by bringing the field's analytical resources to bear on one of the most significant discourse asymmetries of the contemporary world. Fourth, it offers a set of practically oriented recommendations for educators, journalists, and media policymakers seeking to develop more equitable and accurate media representations of Africa.

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