

Layers of Meaning in Political Cartoons on Corruption in *Vanguard* Newspaper

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Abstract

This study examines how visual and textual elements are integrated to critique the representation of corruption in political cartoons selected from *Vanguard* newspaper. The study specifically focused on how multimodal resources such as image, text, colour, and spatial arrangements are employed in political cartoons to construct meanings that expose and condemn corrupt practices among Nigerian leaders. The data for this study comprised 10 purposively selected cartoons from *Vanguard* newspaper, which were analysed qualitatively using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Grammar of Visual Design. Findings reveal how visual elements construct meanings at different levels, clearly categorising the participants in the cartoons according to their different social classes. At the representational level, processes such as action process, reactional process, speech process, and conceptual process depicted political leaders as actors actively engaging in corrupt practices such as looting of public funds. At the interactive level, contact, size of frame, modality, and social distance position the viewers as observers, prompting reflection on the nature of corruption in Nigeria. And at the compositional level, information value, salience, and framing narrates the journey of corruption and show how public funds are diverted to private pockets. The findings reveal that multimodal features through the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, and symbolism play a vital role in communicating critical messages about leadership failure, corruption, and the marginalisation of the masses. The cartoons are found to expose the contradictions between public rhetoric and private greed, positioning viewers to take moral and emotional stances against corruption.

Keyword: Political cartoons, Corruption, Visual grammar, Multimodal discourse

Introduction

Cartoons are combinations of written words – captions – and pictures – symbols. As a form of visual and textual narrative, cartoons simplify complex realities, making them accessible to a wide audience. In political discourse, they lend themselves as crucial media of engaging the citizens about socio-political realities within a society, harness linguistic and non-linguistic devices as vital instruments of both information dissemination and reflection on social practices. Often featured in newspapers, these cartoons distil complex political narratives into visually striking and thought-provoking messages. They use satire, exaggeration, symbolism, and caricature to criticize leaders, expose political vices or highlight societal contradictions (Nasiru & Oparaugo, 2017). As tools of political criticism, they provoke reflection and sometimes outrage, drawing attention to governance, policy failures, or public sentiment.

Corruption, which has persistently undermined Nigeria's development, remains a central theme in national discourse. Often, it manifests as an "action or inaction of a person, or group (public or private) deliberately perpetrated to secure advantages for oneself, a relation, associate or group(s) in a manner that detracts from the accepted regulations, morals, and/or ethical standards or codes and hence constituting a travesty of justice, equity and fair play" (Ofoeze, 2004). In Nigerian socio-political life, corruption manifests among the political leaders and public servants as kickbacks, nepotism, misappropriation of funds, the use of contrived security threats to the state to divert state funds into private pockets, the personalisation of public offices by public servants, abuse of power by security officers charged with the maintenance of public order, and the exploitation of privileged relationship with key public sector managers for the purpose of acquiring personal wealth. The general impact of this is social destabilisation often manifest in trust deficits between the leaders and the citizens.

To engage with this manifest maleficence in Nigerian public life, the media usually deploy cartoons as satire and means of protestation against such vices that devalue governance and destroy social order. One advantage this has over written reports is that its critique-commentary appears in picturesque and yields visual imagery of the depicted corrupt situation being illustrated, thereby increasing reader's and citizens awareness of the issues. The present study is therefore an attempt to explore how the media deploy a combination of linguistic and visual resources to expose corruption in Nigeria and engage the citizens through cartooning.

Literature Review

A number of studies have paid some attention to the visual properties of cartoons in Nigerian media (Ejabena&Akpaki, 2021; Onwuka &Udoeye, 2022; Adeoti, 2023; Adeagbo & Kabir, 2024; Chukwuokoro, et al., 2024; Onugha&Ezeifeke, 2024; Adeagbo & Oyindamola, 2024). While Adeagbo and Oyindamola (2024), Adeagbo and Kabir (2024), Chukwuokoro, et al (2024) deployed Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to explore cartoons on general socio-political issues in Nigeria, the 2023 presidential election, insecurity, Ejabera and Akpaki (2021) was a social semiotic study of institutional corruption in editorial cartoons. Other studies on cartoons focused on general socio-political issues in Nigerian media cartoons, examining pragmatics of humour (Adeoti, 2023), visual metaphor (Sani & Umaru, 2014), and satire and imagery (Usman & Momoh, 2016). These earlier studies are profound and authenticate the capacity of media cartoons to highlight various social issues for their readers in vivid and memorable forms. There yet remains, however, a necessity to explore the representation of corruption in cartoons by the media through the lens of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Grammar of Visual Design to account for how the visual properties of such cartoons were deliberately deployed to negotiate memorable meaning. This dimension is crucial to the negotiation of meaning in discourse as an embodiment of social practice. This study, therefore, explores how the media deploy a combination of linguistic and visual resources to expose corruption in Nigeria and engage the citizens through cartooning.

Theoretical framework and research method

Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) Grammar of Visual Design serves as the theoretical framework for this study, and the study is done within the framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). Visual grammar's focus is on the way language, image and other semiotic modes integrate to convey meaning. For Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), just as language has grammar (syntax, semantics, pragmatics), visuals also have grammar too, in reference to principles that govern visual resources and anchor their texture. Hence visual grammar is a system of rules and conventions that govern how visual elements (images, symbols, layout, colour, and perspective) are structured to communicate meaning. This grammar draws from the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) developed by Michael Halliday. To explore visual meanings in multimodal texts, Kress

and van Leeuwen (2006) developed three systems akin to Halliday's three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, textual). Their terms for these systems in visual grammar are representational, interactive, and compositional meanings.

For Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), a visual like every other semiotic mode has to serve several communicational requirements, in order to function as a full system of communication. The representational meanings mean that "any semiotic mode has to be able to represent aspects of the world as it is experienced by humans" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 42). This level of meaning is further divided into the narrative process and the conceptual process, based on the presence or absence of vector – a set of oblique or diagonal lines formed by depicted images to connect one or more participants and implies action. When participants are connected by a vector, they are represented as doing something to or for each other. They are distinguished on the basis of the kinds of vector and the number and kind of participants involved. The actor is the participant from which the vector emanates, or which itself, in whole or in part, forms the vector. For the reactional process, it is when the vector is formed by an eyelid, the direction of the glance of one or more of the represented participants, not actors but reactors, not goals but phenomena. Meanwhile a speech process occurs when the main narrative activity involves verbal communication, represented visually through speech balloons or speech vectors.

For the interactive meaning, "any mode has to be able to represent a particular social relation between the producer, the viewer and the object represented" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Contact, social distance, attitude, and modality comprise four essential elements that construct interactive meaning. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, contact is a perceived connection between an image participant and the viewer established through the gaze. This relates to whether or not the represented participants in the image are engaging directly with the viewer. Contact is of two kinds demand and offer. Social distance plays a significant role in establishing the connection between image participants and viewers, which can reflect the nature of their social relationships and it is closely related to size of frame which consists of Close-up (shows head and shoulders of the subject): suggests closeness, familiarity, or emotional intensity; medium shot (cuts off the subject approximately at the waist); long shot (the human figure occupies about half the height of the frame). Finally, the compositional meaning refers to the composition of the whole, that is the way in which the representational and interactive

elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole. What makes up such a meaningful whole are the value of information (ideal/real, given/new), the salience (shots, sizes, colour saturation) and framing (or how (non) structured the elements are organized). This framework is found to be suitable in accounting for the multimodal meaning negotiations in the corruption cartoons under study. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design anchored on a multimodal discourse analysis of political cartoons on corruption in *Vanguard* newspaper. The study's population consists of all political cartoons on corruption from online *Vanguard* newspaper. A total of 10 political cartoons on corruption published in the online version of *Vanguard* newspaper between 2022 and 2025 were purposively selected using a Redmi 12 phone for a high picture quality. The sampling method for these cartoons were based on the following. The period was chosen to ensure a robust and more recent representation of corruption related themes in Nigeria political discourse. The selected cartoons were those explicitly related to corruption and those that made use of a combination of texts and other visual materials, for a better understanding of multimodality.

The corruption cartoons were analysed using qualitative descriptive method where the various levels of meaning as enunciated in Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar were adopted to analyse each cartoon selected. For the representational meaning, action process, reactional process and speech process were analysed; in the interactive meaning, the participants' contact, social distance, size of frame and modality were analysed. Lastly, for the compositional meaning, information value, salience, and framing were analysed in the cartoon.

Analysis

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the grammar of visual design operates on three levels of meanings: representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. These correspond respectively to ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings in Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. In this study, the political cartoons on corruption published in Vanguard Newspaper are analyzed based on these three levels of meanings to uncover how images visually critique corruption in Nigeria's political landscape.

Representational Meaning

The representational meaning in visual grammar focuses on how participants, actions, and processes are visually constructed to communicate experiences and events. It reveals what is being represented and how those representations contribute to meaning-making within the multimodal text. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the representational meaning is subdivided into two main categories: the narrative process and the conceptual process. The narrative process represents actions, events, or interactions between participants through vectors, lines of direction that connect people, objects, or symbols. Within the selected *Vanguard* corruption cartoons, narrative processes such as action, reactional, speech, and mental processes are prominent.

The Action Process, according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) occurs when a participant (called the Actor) is engaged in a physical or observable action that creates a vector. The Actor is the participant from whom the vector emanates, that is, the one performing the action. The vector may be a hand, arm, leg, object, or even the whole body pointing toward something or someone. The participant toward whom the action is directed is called the Goal. This is evident in Plate 1 and Plate 2

Plate 1

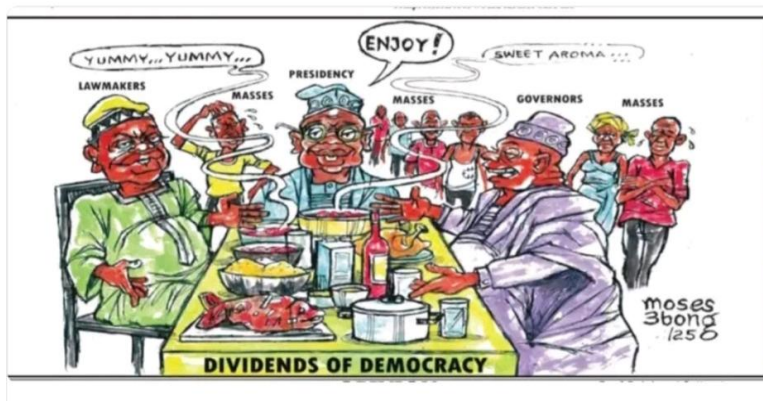
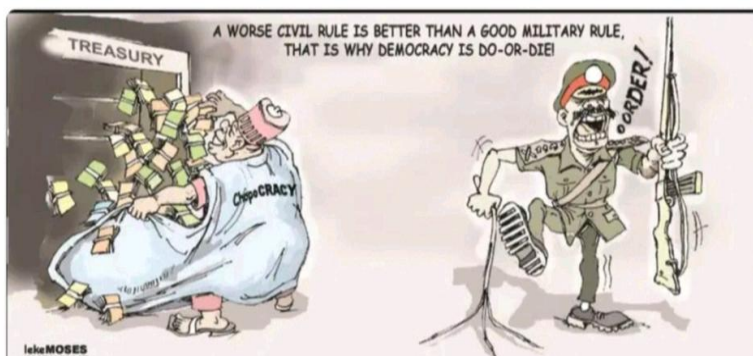


Plate 2



The cartoon in Plate 1 primarily depicts an action process where participants are engaged in physical actions. In this visual, the political elites labelled “Lawmakers, Presidency, and Governors” are the “actors”, while their action involves eating, drinking, and enjoying the food spread before them. Their hand movements (vector), gestures, and expressions indicate active engagement in consuming the “dividends” of democracy. The masses standing behind them, however, are passive and excluded from the feast; they are “goals” who merely perceive and respond to the elites’ actions rather than participating. This type of process effectively illustrates inequality in the political system. While the elites actively enjoy the benefits of democracy, the masses remain spectators, inhaling only the “sweet aroma” of what belongs to them but is denied in reality. While they verbally claim economic hardship, their possession of the “monthly allocation” bag as in Plate 2 visually contradicts such claim. In Plate 2, a civilian politician labelled “ChopoCRACY” (a pun on the word “democracy,” suggesting deceit or fraud) is shown aggressively grabbing bundles of money from the Treasury. His movement toward the pile of cash creates a clear vector, establishing him as the Actor in this process. The Goal of his action is the Treasury, symbolizing the nation’s collective wealth. This action relationship visually communicates the act of looting.

Standing to the right side is a military officer holding a gun and stamping his foot while shouting “Order!” Although he is not physically involved in the looting, rather he symbolizes the authoritarian past of Nigeria’s military rule and serves to give the caricature of democracy (chopocracy) which the civilian leaders operate some legitimacy. This is what is done with the statement: “a worse civil rule is better than a good

military rule”. It is as though to say to the people, don’t ever think of a military intervention because, they the soldiers are more corrupt than we are. Together, the two figures juxtapose civilian democracy and military dictatorship, creating a visual commentary on governance and corruption in Nigeria.

The Reactional process is evident in Plate 1. In Plate 1, there is also the reactional process, as the vector is formed by the gaze of the citizens. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this process occurs when the vector is not formed by an action, but by a gaze, the direction of a participant’s eyes. Here, the key participant is called the Reactor, and the participant or object being looked at is called the Phenomenon. The vector in this case is the eyeline, the direction of the glance or look. The Reactor is the participant who is looking. The Phenomenon is what or whom the Reactor is looking at. In plate 1, the politicians seated comfortably at a large dining table and the food and drinks overflowing the table constitute the Phenomenon.

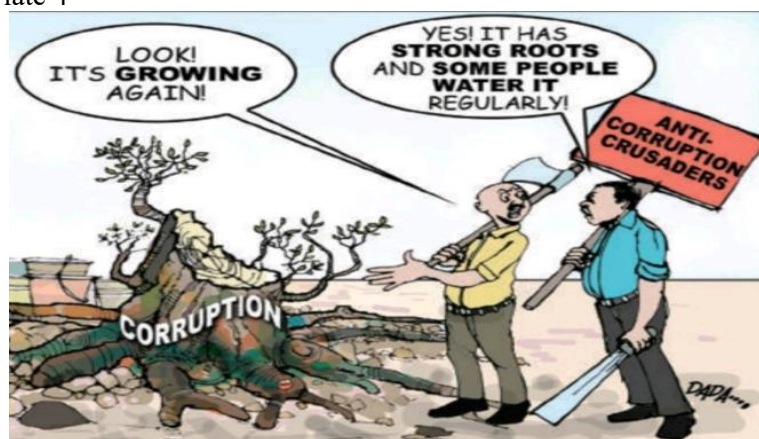
A few steps away, the citizens stand behind, looking directly at the politicians and the dining table loaded with food with a sad, helpless expression. The citizens’ eyes form the vector, directed toward the feasting politicians. The politicians, however, are too engrossed in eating to notice the gaze. The citizens are the Reactor, the one who is looking. The direction of the glance establishes the relationship between both participants.

The citizens’ gaze conveys emotional reaction: disappointment, frustration, and powerlessness toward the politicians’ corruption and selfishness. This reactional process visually criticizes the moral insensitivity of leaders who ignore the suffering of ordinary people. The gaze establishes empathy between the viewer and the poor and helpless citizens, prompting viewers to share the same moral judgment with them. The Speech Process includes a represented participant (the one speaking) and a vector (a line or direction) that connects the speaker to what is said. The verbal vector is usually shown as a speech balloon or speech bubble in cartoons, comics, or political cartoons. The spoken content (inside the balloon) functions as the “projected clause” it represents the idea or message being communicated. This is shown in plate 3 and plate 4.

Plate 3



Plate 4

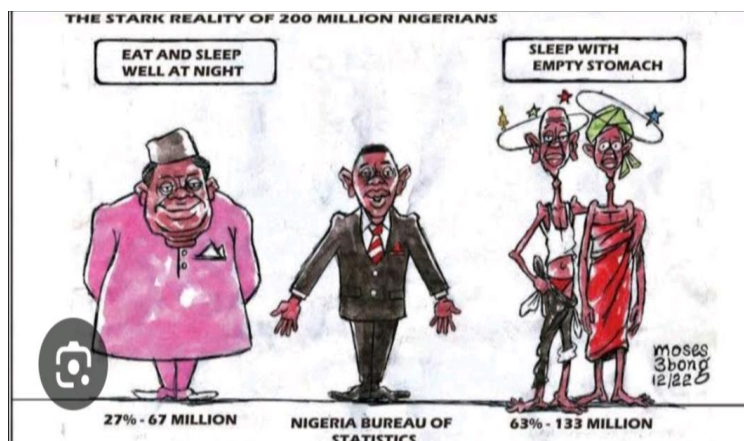


The speech process in Plate 3 is visually realized through the two speech balloons that contain the phrases “Drink responsibly!” and “We’re still credit worthy!”. These utterances act as verbal vectors, connecting the two main participants: the IMF official and the Nigerian leader. The IMF official’s statement, “Drink responsibly!”, is metaphorical advice warning against excessive borrowing and careless spending. It mirrors the real-world economic caution the International Monetary Fund often

gives to nations with growing debt burdens. Conversely, the Nigerian leader's reply, "We're still credit worthy!" reveals a dismissive attitude toward the IMF's warning, implying that Nigeria refuses to acknowledge the gravity of its economic situation.

In Plate 4, the interaction between the two men foregrounds a speech process. The speech process here serves as a vehicle for social commentary. Through their conversation, the participants symbolize the voice of the public and civil society, acknowledging the deep-rooted and recurring nature of corruption. The dialogue suggests that while efforts have been made to eliminate corrupt practices, they continue to resurface because certain individuals "water it regularly". Usually in visual grammar, the Conceptual Process present participants in a more static, generalized way. It focuses on concepts, ideas, or categories, not actions. It shows what participants are or represent, not what they do through their different processes such as classificational, analytical, symbolic, etc. This is shown in Plate 5 and Plate 6 below.

Plate 5



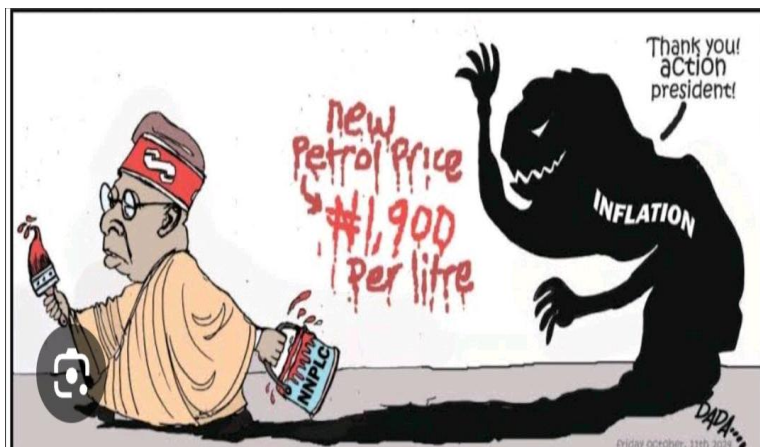


Plate 5 employs a classificational conceptual process which depicts participants in terms of class. The obese man represents the wealthy elite and political class who have access to the nation's resources. His size and satisfied appearance signify overconsumption and privilege. In contrast, the skeletal man and woman stand for the poor majority, their thin frames symbolizing hunger, deprivation, and exclusion from national wealth. The central figure from the Bureau of Statistics represents institutions that record and publish inequalities but appear powerless to change them. In this way, the cartoon presents Nigerian society as structured into two extremes: a privileged minority and a suffering majority.

This cartoon in Plate 6 employs conceptual process, showing a cause-and-effect relationship. The president figure symbolizes political authority, while the NNPC bucket and dripping paint represent government fuel policies. The red paint connotes blood and suffering, implying that citizens pay the real price, and that they pay it with their life. The inflation monster personifies economic hardship, showing that the government's decision increases inflation. Thus, the cartoon represents government policy as the root cause of worsening living conditions.

Interactive Meaning

Interactive meaning has to be able to represent a particular social relation between the producer, the viewer and the object represented." The

interactive meaning in visual grammar focuses on the relationship between the image and the viewer, that is, how visual elements position the viewers to see, feel, and judge what is represented. It examines how contact or gaze, social distance, size of frame and Modality construct power relations, emotional involvement, and degrees of intimacy between participants in the image and those viewing it (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Through this, political cartoons not only depict corruption but also engage viewers to take a moral stance toward it. This is evident in Plate 7 and Plate 8 below.

Plate 7

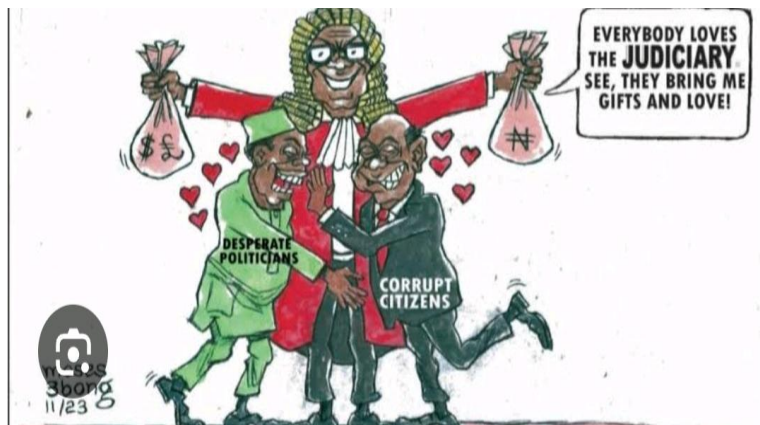


Plate 8



In Plate 7, there is no eye contact between the participants making the offer in the image. The smiling face of the judge and the two figures reinforce complicity and satisfaction with the corrupt system. The medium-long shot presents the full figures, ensuring that the relationship between judiciary, politicians, and citizens is clearly visible. The close personal distance shows the intimate relationship the participants have with corruption. The modality, or truth value, is high, since corruption in the judiciary is a widely acknowledged problem in Nigeria, making the cartoon's exaggeration credible and recognizable.

In Plate 8, none of the participants look directly at the viewer. This "offer" positions the audience as observers of systemic dysfunction, rather than active participants. The medium-long shot, showing the full figures, establishes a sense of social distance that allows viewers to take in the broader inequality on display. The far personal distance between the state governor and the family, and the far social distance between the other politician and them implies that the modality, or degree of realism, is relatively low. The cartoon employs caricature and symbolic exaggeration rather than naturalistic representation.

Compositional Meaning

The compositional meaning in visual grammar concerns how the elements of an image are arranged and integrated to produce a unified message. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), compositional meaning is realized through three key forms: information value, salience, and framing. These systems determine how visual components: participants, objects, colors, and text are positioned and connected to guide the viewer's attention and construct ideological meaning. This is exemplified in Plate 9 and Plate 10 below.

Plate 9

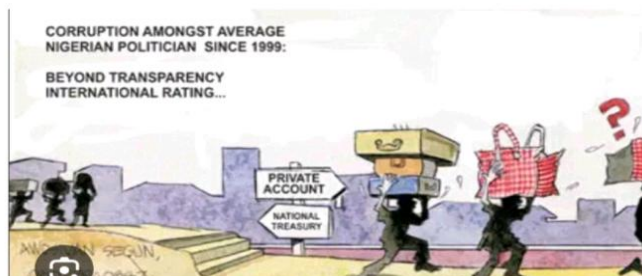
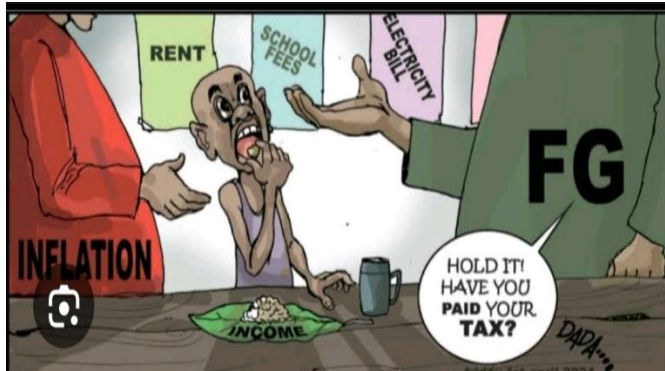


Plate 10



For information value, the principle of information value deals with the placement of elements in the visual space left versus right, top versus bottom, and center versus margin, each carrying specific communicative significance. The left side, which features the "National Treasury", represents what Kress and van Leeuwen describe as the "given" information, the starting point or the familiar state of public wealth belonging to the people. The right side, which depicts the "Private Account", represents the "new" information what the producer wants the viewer to understand and react to: the final destination of stolen funds.

In terms of Salience, the black silhouettes of the politicians dominate the image, creating a strong visual contrast against the light background. Their exaggerated postures and the direction of their strides make them visually prominent and dynamic, immediately attracting the viewer's focus. The dark coloration symbolizes secrecy, moral darkness, and the shadowy nature of corrupt practices, while the oversized bags they carry represent the heavy burden of theft and greed.

The Framing refers to the use of visual boundaries or connecting devices that either separate or link different elements of the image. It indicates whether the participants and ideas are related or isolated from one another. There are no visible barriers, boundaries, or dividing lines between the National Treasury and the Private Account, suggesting that the movement of funds between public and private domains happens freely and without restriction. This absence of framing elements visually

communicates the lack of accountability and institutional control in Nigeria's governance system.

In Plate 10, the Federal Government (FG) is positioned on the right-hand side, where the "new" or "ideal" information is usually located. The FG is shown as the one speaking and demanding taxes from a poor citizen, emphasising governmental authority and dominance. The citizen is placed at the left, representing the "given" or already known information, namely ordinary Nigerians' poverty and struggle for survival. This spatial organisation visually contrasts the two participants: one side representing power and demand, and the other representing suffering and deprivation. The inflation and economic burdens, such as "rent," "school fees," and "electricity" are placed in the upper left, hovering over the helpless man, thereby symbolising the heavy load of hardship that is already "given" in his daily life.

Salience determines which elements in the image draw the viewer's attention first, through visual cues such as size, colour, contrast, and placement. In the cartoon, the most salient elements are the emaciated man, the large figure labelled "FG," and the word "INFLATION" written in bold red colour. The use of dark, bold lettering for "FG" and "INFLATION" visually dominates the scene, making these forces appear overwhelming and oppressive. The empty plate and tiny morsel of food in front of the man also hold salience through their central placement. While the poor man can barely eat, the government still insists on tax collection.

For Framing, there are no clear visual boundaries separating the poor citizen from the government official or the burdens labelled "inflation," "school fees," and "rent." This lack of separation visually connects them, implying that these social and economic challenges are interrelated. The absence of any frame or barrier between them suggests that the citizen cannot escape the system, he is visually and economically trapped within it.

5. Discussion

The analysis of representational meaning revealed that political cartoons use narrative processes such as action process, reaction process and speech process to depict corruption as an active and continuous phenomenon. The action process in the cartoons such as politicians feasting on public wealth or physically grabbing bundles of money from the national treasury construct corruption as a visible, bodily act of exploitation. For instance, the image of leaders eating at a lavish table

while citizens look on helplessly symbolically communicates the unequal distribution of resources and the exclusion of the masses from democratic benefits. This agrees with the findings of Adeagbo and Oyindamola (2024) that political cartoons are vital means of representing the socio-economic disparity between the Nigerian populace and their political elite.

In reactional process, the gaze of impoverished citizens is directed towards corrupt leaders. These eye lines invite viewers to empathise with ordinary Nigerians who are disillusioned by their situation (Adeagbo & Kabir, 2024) and morally condemn the greed of political elites. Similarly, speech process represented through dialogue or speech balloons reveal the hypocrisy and denial of corrupt officials. The verbal exchange between politicians and institutions like the IMF exposes how deceptive language sustains corruption under the guise of governance and diplomacy.

The conceptual process further reinforces corruption as a systemic and structural condition rather than isolated incidents. Cartoons showing obese elites and starving citizens highlight class division and institutionalised inequality. The use of symbols like fuel buckets, dripping paint, and inflation monsters links government policies to citizens' suffering. Interactive meaning analysis demonstrated that the cartoons strategically position the viewer as an observer of corruption rather than a direct participant. Most images employ the "offer" type of gaze, in which participants do not look directly at the viewers. By not involving the audience directly, the cartoons subtly encourage viewers to adopt a detached, evaluative stance prompting reflection. Social distance within the visuals further constructs relationships of power and complicity. The medium-long shots and close personal distances among corrupt elites emphasise their unity and shared responsibility, while the wider distances separating them from citizens symbolise exclusion and inequality. The modality values (levels of realism) are deliberately exaggerated through caricature, which enhances the satirical tone of the cartoons.

In compositional meaning, the spatial arrangement of visual elements plays a vital role in construction of meaning. The use of information value, the placement of elements from left to right or top to bottom guides interpretation. For example, the "National Treasury" on the left (representing public wealth) and the "Private Account" on the right (representing stolen funds) visually narrate the journey of corruption, showing how public resources are diverted for personal gain.

The salient elements draw the viewer's attention to the moral and economic consequences of corruption. Framing further emphasises fluidity between public and private wealth. The absence of boundaries in many cartoons suggests that corruption flows freely between state institutions and individuals without accountability.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to identify and analyse how visual and textual elements are used to criticise corruption in selected corruption cartoons from *Vanguard* newspaper. Through the three levels of meanings in visual grammar (representational, interactive and compositional meaning), the study examined the deployment of visual resources to criticise corruption in selected political cartoons in *Vanguard* newspaper. The study revealed that corruption cartoons function as potent tools for public criticism of corruption in Nigeria. In Representational meaning, political leaders are depicted as the actors in action process, actively engaging in looting of public resources. The interactive meaning positions viewers as observers, prompting critical reflection on the nature of corruption in Nigeria. The compositional meanings organise visual elements and expose the greed of political leaders extorting from the masses and enriching themselves.

The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to describe and interpret meaning beyond surface-level humour. From the conceptual process perspective, corruption is represented as a recurring national condition. Corruption cartoons expose the systemic corruption by leaders in Nigeria. In the speech process, textual elements like speech balloons expose how corruption is deeply rooted in governance in Nigeria. Conceptual process on the other hand, presents corruption as a systemic and timeless condition. The interactive meaning analysis shows a clear contrast between the ruling elite and the ordinary masses. The findings highlight the importance of multimodal features in fostering how these visual and textual elements communicate critical messages about leadership through humour, irony, and exaggeration.

This study provides an in-depth understanding of how multimodal resources are utilised in political cartoon on corruption in *Vanguard* newspaper. The findings explored the role of corruption cartoons as pivotal tools of public criticism of corruption in Nigeria through the use of the three levels of meanings in Visual Grammar propounded by Kress and Van Leeuwen, by depicting a clear contrast between the corrupt ruling elites and the suffering poor masses. Hence

the conclusion drawn from the analysis indicates that corruption cartoons go beyond entertainment; they serve as critical instruments of public discourse and accountability. The study's revelation that corruption is a collective and recurring national issue involving both the politicians and sometimes those outside state governance as seen in the speech process in the representational meaning raises a loud alarm as to the perversity of corruption in Nigeria. This also suggests that dealing with corruption in Nigeria will involve everyone.

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