

"Spare Tyre" or Economic Engine? Ideational Metafunction and Political Positioning in Nigerian Vice-Presidential Debates

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Abstract

This study examines the ideational metafunction in the text of the 2019 Nigerian vice-presidential debate, paying particular attention to how candidates used transitivity choices to construe the role of the vice-president and position themselves in relation to national governance. Anchored in Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) Systemic Functional Linguistics, the study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of the debate. The televised debate was transcribed, and selected responses by the five participating candidates to the question concerning the status of the vice-presidential office were analysed in terms of process types, participants, and circumstances. The findings reveal that material and mental processes predominated, although relational, verbal, and existential processes also contributed significantly to candidates' representations of political experience, institutional authority, ideological orientations, and governance. The candidates deployed these grammatical choices strategically to assert legal and institutional authority, project executive competence, critique prevailing economic conditions, promote human development, and construct party identities. The study concludes that transitivity choices function as important discursive resources through which political actors construct agency, responsibility, political identity, and competing representations of national affairs. The findings demonstrate the usefulness of SFL in analysing political debate discourse in the Nigerian context.

Keywords: Ideational Metafunction; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Transitivity; Political Discourse; Vice-Presidential Debate; Nigerian Politics.

Introduction

Political debate offer itself as a particularly productive and crucial domain of discourse studies because unlike campaign slogans or

prepared political speeches, debates involve relatively spontaneous interaction in which candidates respond to common questions and, at times, directly challenge competing interpretations of political events (Wicke & Bolognesi, 2025). Usually, the participants are expected to explain their records, articulate policy proposals, defend their parties, identify national problems, and appeal to voters to see their capacity to govern. In this, they construct representations of themselves, their opponents, their political parties, and the state. A transitivity analysis can therefore illuminate how these representations are realized grammatically and how different political actors position themselves as agents, beneficiaries, experiencers, communicators, or identifiers within their accounts of national affairs.

The Nigerian political environment provides a particularly important context for investigating such processes, for political communication in Nigeria is characterised by competing narratives concerning governance, economic development, unemployment, poverty, corruption, security, infrastructure, education, health, and the management of public resources. Consequently, political actors engage in persistent discursive struggles over the interpretation of national situations and the attribution of responsibility for them. The linguistic construction of these issues is significant because political candidates must persuade voters that their interpretation of the problems is correct and that their proposed solutions are preferable to those of their opponents.

The 2019 Nigeria Vice Presidential Debate was organised by the Nigeria Elections Debate Group in collaboration with the Broadcasting Organisation of Nigeria and civil society organisations and was held on 14 December 2018 in preparation for the 2019 presidential election. Five vice-presidential candidates participated: Ganiyu Galadima of the Allied Congress Party of Nigeria (ACPN), Yemi Osinbajo of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Khadija Abdullahi-Iya of the Alliance for New Nigeria (ANN), Peter Obi of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and Umma Getso of the Young Progressives Party (YPP). The major focal issues raised during the debate include the status of the office of the vice-president, economic management, unemployment, infrastructure, corruption, electricity, insecurity, social investment, and petroleum subsidy.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), with its conception of language as a social semiotic resource, provides an appropriate framework for investigating the relationship between linguistic choice and social meaning (Halliday, 1970; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Halliday's systemic functional theory views language as simultaneously serving three broad metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational metafunction deals with the representation and construal of experience; the interpersonal metafunction is concerned with social relations and attitudes; while the textual metafunction enables speakers to arrange meanings into coherent messages (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Of particular relevance to the present study is the ideational metafunction, specifically its experiential component, which is realised principally through the grammatical system of transitivity, providing linguistic resources for construing experience in terms of processes, participants, and circumstances. Through this system, speakers can represent actions and events, states of being, perceptions, communication, behaviour, and existence.

Existing studies demonstrate that systemic functional approaches can provide valuable insights into Nigerian political discourse. Koutchadé's (2015) systemic functional analysis of Muhammadu Buhari's official acceptance speech, for example, examined experiential meaning through transitivity alongside interpersonal meaning through modality. The study found that these linguistic resources contributed to the representation of events and the expression of ideological positions and persuasive strategies. More recently, Muhammad (2024) applied the SFL transitivity framework to Nigerian newspaper political headlines and found that material processes constituted the largest category in the dataset, followed by mental, verbal, and relational processes. The study argues that process choices in Nigerian political headlines contribute to the construction of political actions, intentions, actors, and narratives.

Despite these contributions, there is comparatively less attention given to the ideational metafunction in Nigerian vice-presidential debate discourse. Engaging with this discourse is important because a debate constitutes a different communicative situation from a prepared political speech or a newspaper headline. It is also important in understanding the perspectives of the vice-presidential candidates, considering that they play crucial roles in the governance of the nation.

Literature review

Halliday's metafunctions of language and particularly, the ideational metafunction have been applied to a range of different text types, in explication of meaning. Some of the studies are linguistic approaches to the study of literature (Bilal, 2012; Alaei & Ahangari, 2016) where the examination of the metafunctions enabled critical analysis of the

characters that people the text and the discourse issues projected in the texts. Haig (2007) explored ideological inclinations in radio news bulletin concerning youth crime report establishing that the process types enabled the news producers to emphasise police reports on the crimes, over and above eye witness accounts. SFG has also been deployed in the study of legal arguments as exemplified in Fuzer and Barros (2009), where the focus was on transitivity functions in the genre concluding arguments of lawyers in courts. The study revealed that one characterising feature of the text is that the social actors are usually backgrounded in the text, believing that the judge to whom the text is addressed is contextually aware of the referents.

A number of studies on presidential debates which include those of the vice presidents have also been undertaken, mainly in United States of America, but also in other nations. Holbrook's (1999) study of presidential debates between 1976 and 1996 is an investigation into the impact of presidential debates on voters' knowledge of the candidates. The study established that such debates give the voters ample opportunities to know the candidates, if they are conducted early. Still within the American presidential debate studies, Alafifi (2021) investigated the strategies of conversational dominance between Joe Biden and Donald Trump in the 2020 American presidential debate. The study places Trump tops in the deployment of strategies of conversational dominance, linking this to hegemonic masculinity. A more recent study of the presidential election debate in 2024 from the angle of turn-taking has also revealed that Mr Trump commonly engaged aggressive interruptive taking the turn strategies much more than his opponent. In another study of Finnish presidential debates by Isolatus (2011), it was pointed out that there are marked differences between Finnish presidential debate and that of the US, noting that analysis of presidential debates ought to take deliberate account of cultural context. This view of giving attention to cultural context is taken up by Yuniar et al. (2025) who note that the dressing of presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 2024 Indonesian election debates functionalised the dynamics of identity building that reflected cultural and religious affiliations.

There have also been fewer studies on vice-presidential debates, particularly in America. These studies note that even though vice-presidential election debates are under studied as many focus on the presidential candidates, the debates of vice-presidential candidates do have real impacts on the people and the election (Holbrook, 1999), and

that indeed, millions of people watch the televised debates (Painter, 2009). Earlier scholarship on Nigerian presidential election debate are mainly CDA studies that reveal the discursive strategies of representation of self and others in the debate (Ajibiye, 2015; Ajibiye & Kayode, 2015). These were linguistic assessments of performances of the presidential candidates. However, there remains a need to examine the texts of the vice-presidential candidates, considering that in Nigerian political campaigns, the presentation of the vice-presidential candidate is a crucial aspect of negotiating electoral victory.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study is anchored on Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) ideational metafunction as realised through transitivity. Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) to which it belongs has a long-standing interest in discourse analysis, going back to Firth's (1957) concern with meaning as function in a context.

In SFG, ideation is concerned with the semantics of lexical relations as they are deployed to construe institutional activity. This system subsumes Halliday & Hassan's (1976) work on lexical cohesion in a framework which considers the ways in which activity sequences and taxonomic relations (of classification and composition) organise the field of discourse. Transitivity analysis of texts has been a feasible method of exploring different text types. Halliday (2000) proposed three (3) components of transitivity which include Processes, Participants, and Circumstances. These provide the frame of reference for interpreting our experience of what goes on. The concepts of process, participants and circumstance are semantic categories which explain, in the most general way, how phenomena of the real world are represented as linguistic structures. Process is the embryo of the clause without which there is actually no clause. It is the key element in transitivity, which can be related with one or more participants and circumstances. The process is the action, state or whatever that is being referred to, and is realised as a main verb. The process is categorised into: material process, mental process, relational process, behavioural process, verbal process, and existential process.

The material process is the process of doing or happening. Bloor and Bloor (2011) said that it involves doing-words. It represents the notion that some entity does something which may be done to some other entities. So, what we can know or what we can probe is: what did

someone or something do to whom or what? And it mainly involves two participants: Actor and Goal.

The study adopts a qualitative textual analysis wherein the tools of the transitivity system are deployed in the interpretation of the text of the 2019 Nigeria Vice Presidential Debates. The video recording of the live debate was downloaded from YouTube and transcribed into written text. The transcribed data were subjected to analysis following the transitivity system. Different clause statements in response to the question about the status of the office of the vice president by each of the 5 candidates were extracted as excerpts for ideational metafunction exploration. The hosts, the moderator and other circumstantial elements were ignored. The parties' names were rather preferred in this analysis than the names of the candidates.

Analysis

In transitivity analysis, three basic tasks are involved: to identify the process pattern of clauses, to identify associated participants and the roles those participants play. In a debate, one has the choice to agree or disagree with an opinion as can be seen in excerpt one below. Here, the candidates were told that the office of the vice president was often seen as a spare tyre to that of the president, and were asked of their views. The ACPN candidate bluntly refused to accept such by making his points clear. He depicted from the excerpt below that he had not seen the office of the vice president as a spare tyre. His stand was that both the president and the vice president possess the same qualification. He maintained that the vice president has the legal right to take decisions when the president is away and that the president can never go against such decisions whenever he returned. He elucidated this with an example of what had happened in the country when the president was away and the vice president was taking decisions as the acting president, noting that although one is higher than the other, none is inferior to the other. See Excerpt 1 below.

Excerpt 1: ACPN

I have not seen the office of the Vice President as a spare tyre because it is the same qualification that the president of our country must have that the vice president must have, and besides, roles were specified for both the president and the vice president. And don't forget that if the president is not around, it is the vice president that takes over. And I want to tell you to know how

important the office of the vice president is, that it is not inferior to that of the president. If the vice president of our country takes any decision as acting president, the president of a country cannot legally go against that action. I remember when our President was away for some time, the vice president acted, and all decisions that were taken by him as acting president of this country were never controverted by the president. So, the vice president of this country is just like the president; they have the same status, although one is higher but none is inferior to the other.

From the excerpt above, the ACPN candidate used 11 clauses with four mental processes of seeing, forgetting, knowing, remembering. The participant “I” is the Senser and “the office of the vice president as a spare tyre”, “the office of the vice president”, “how important the office of the vice president is”, and “when our president was away for some times” are the Phenomena. He used mental processes in his response to the question on his ambition because of his unwillingness to see the office of the vice president as a spare tyre, especially as it was what he was vying for.

He also used five material processes of doing which gives the audience a feeling of strength and power. Here, we have the participant “the vice president” as the Actor and “the office of the vice president” as the Goal. The processes involve acting and taking decisions. He used one verbal process of telling with “I” as the Sayer and “to know how important the office of the vice president is” as the Verbiage. He applied one relational process of being with “the vice president of this country” as the Carrier and “is just like the office of the president” as the Attribute. It could be deduced that the above speaker was well acquainted with roles of the vice president; thus, his passion for the position. He is quite aware that his office could be called to represent or act as the president.

The next speaker on the same issue rather diverted the attention of the audience to the potentialities of herself and her party. She saw herself as a nation builder that builds human being, and as such, the office of the vice president was to be taken with all seriousness because the vice president was the one to see a problem and resolve it. She praised her party for not having politicians that promise without fulfilling their promises. They implement their policies collectively in her party. See Excerpt 2 below.

Excerpt 2: ANN

Thank you for the opportunity to be here. Being a nation builder starts from the heart. Somebody that builds from the heart builds a human being that starts from the human development. So, to take the position of a vice president is not something that should be taken lightly because a nation builder is that person who sees a problem and resolves it. Our party is known, well known for what it stands for. We are not talking about eh, we are not the politicians of these days that promise this and that. So, what we are going to do is to ensure that every policy that has been taken collectively as a party will be implemented effectively. We have shared values, we understand what the policies are, we understand what the issues are; which issues go to the root of humanity, that is what we stand for. We stand for humanity and community development. So, being a vice president of Nigeria, of the eh Federal Republic of Nigeria is an office which must be taken seriously. It's an office which participates in all the cabinet meetings, and office which is about the economic development, which handles the issues of economy. So, what we are trying to do in our party is to ensure that the economy is diversified, the economy is vibrant enough to stop the too much dependency on a mono economy that we are used to, to ensure that every aspect, every aspect of the 774 local Government that we have in Nigeria is upgraded to a commercial hub where every resource, every mineral resources would be em, would be enhanced and upgraded. We would ensure that the issue of unemployment and every other issue that affects or curb economy right now would be well taken care of. So, it is not an office that should be taken for granted. And as I stand because of my background in humanitarian services and issues, and as a mother, these are the issues. We are used to a country who put politics before economics. In our party, we are putting economics before politics because economics is the driving force. We are doing agriculture, we are talking about the diversification of agriculture which this administration has already been doing but what we will do is much more than what the eh, this administration is doing right now. Thank you.

ANN candidate from the excerpt above made use of 28 clauses. She started off with a relational process of being with herself as the Carrier

and “a nation builder” as the Attribute. She also used a relational process with the office of the vice president as the Carrier and “which participates in all the cabinet meetings” as the Attribute. These make it a total of two relational processes. She used 6 material processes with “somebody” as the Actor and “a human being”, and “from the human development” as the Goals. She also used several other participants as the Actors and Goals involved in the processes of building, starting, doing, standing, putting, ensuring, with strong and powerful determination, mainly attributed to describe the actions that the new party would take if elected into government. She used these processes to bring to the fore her passions as a nation builder. She used two mental processes of seeing, understanding with “a nation builder” and “we” as the Sensors and “a problem and resolves it”, “what the policies are”, and “what the issues are” as the Phenomena. She used 1 verbal process of talking with “we” as the Sayer and “about the diversification of agriculture” as the Verbiage. This represents her and her party as interested in improving the economy.

The constant use of “we” positions the speaker as one who is determined to carry out the policies of her party collectively. It was her intention to summon the people to take action together, and involve as many audiences as possible into her stance. Hearing this, the audience could unconsciously accept her viewpoint and align themselves with her, which is just what the speaker wants. One of such things that could catch the attention of the audience is her statement that her party puts economics before politics. They have this incorporated in their policies as those intending to do things differently.

Unlike the ANN candidate above, the APC candidate (as can be seen in Excerpt 3 below) was deliberate to humourise the topic, as a strategy both to get the audience and to communicate his view on the question. His statement about his gray hair was to depict how tasking the office of the vice president could be. He acknowledged that the vice president was the chief adviser to the president and had a reflection of roles to that of the president. He listed the roles of the vice president as they were specified in the constitution insisting that the role of the vice president was not that of a spare tyre. As one who has occupied the office of the vice president, he knew about delegation of roles from the president to the vice president.

Excerpt 3: APC

Thank you very much. I, first, am sure that those that know me quite well know that my hair was not this gray when I started out in 2015. (The audience laughs). So really, it has been tasking. It has been tasking but, it has also been an incredibly rewarding experience especially from the point of view of the ability to do the things that one wanted to do all along as an individual. But the role is one way you are in many sense the chief adviser to the president of the country and possibly the one person that will represent him even just when he is absent, you know for a meeting as supposed, even when he is absent for a longer period. So, there is a sense in which the role of the vice president is one that very closely mirrors the role of the president in very profound ways. But our vice presidency is different from the vice presidency of other countries because unlike other countries, even countries that have similar constitution, our own constitution actually specifies roles for the vice president. For the vice president is the chairman of the National Economic Council, that is the council that are, that is the council where all the governors of the states meet every once in a month, and the vice president chairs that. That is a constitutional role. Aside from that, the vice president is also the chairman of the NCP that is the National Council on Privatisation. The vice president is also the statutory chairman of over 22 different parastatal and agencies, and these are all defined by law. So, in some sense, I mean those who say, for example that the vice presidential, the role of the vice president is a spare tyre have it wrong because they probably are looking at other jurisdictions. In our jurisdiction, there are very specific roles that the vice president is entitled to or is empowered by law to perform. But, I think that one of the more interesting things about that role also is the fact that the law depends on the trust that exists between the president and the vice president, because the president does delegate several of his roles, and he can daily get those roles, depending of course on how, on the kind of trust that exist between ah, between both parties. So, many times also, that role is one way a good degree of trust is required between ah. the two players namely: the president and the vice president. Where that trust exists, I think there is plenty of room for activity for the vice president, there is plenty for what the vice president can do. And finally, I think

that the role of the vice president, you know, is one which also requires, you know, I think a great deal of patience; a great deal of patience because you may not always agree, you know. You may not always agree with policy, you may not always agree with the various aspects of what is being done, you may not.

In all, there are 27 clauses from the above excerpt. This speaker used 6 mental processes of knowing, looking, thinking with “I” as the Senser and “that my hair was not this gray when I started out in 2015”, “at other jurisdictions”, “that one of the more interesting things about that role also is the fact that the law depends on the trust that exist between the president and the vice president”, “that the role of the vice president, you know is one which also requires, and a great deal of patience” as the Phenomena. He used four existential processes of the verb “be”. The only participant is the Existent represented by “has been” and “is”. This candidate used the Existent “has been” to tell how tasking and rewarding his experience in the office has been as the incumbent vice president. The “is” Existent projects how the roles of the vice president and the president are both similar and divergent. He used five material processes of doing, representing, specifying, meeting, chairing with “one”, “the vice president”, “our constitution”, “all the governors of the states”, “the vice president” as the Actors and “all along as an individual”, “even just when he is absent”, “roles for the vice president”, “every once in a month”, “that is a constitutional role,” as the Goals.

The office of the vice president was something that required recognition and as such the speaker chose these processes to lay bay the enormous roles that await the vice president, although everything depends on the trust existing between the president and the vice president. They were also used to depict how delicate the roles were because misunderstanding could set in between the president and the vice president anytime.

The position of the APC candidate is also corroborated by the PDP candidate as can be seen in excerpt 4 below. He anchors his position on the centrality of the economy in the business of the state and leverages this position to market himself as the most qualified to occupy the office of the vice president. In comparing Nigeria’s economy with that of other nations, he suggests that the nation’s economy was not doing well as evidenced in Nigeria’s inability to join the BRICS nations, implying that the seating vice president who was also standing election was not doing well.

Excerpt 4: PDP

Well, I assume that would not be the case because like it is clearly stated, vice president has a role, and the role of the vice president is the most critical role because we are talking about the economy of this country. The main problem of this country today, it is the economy. Economy is on the knees because it is not working, because it is not creating jobs, it is not doing anything. The vice president is in-charge of regaining this economy, rebuilding it to where you can create jobs, to where you can be able to ensure that there is financing in various areas of our government. The vice president is in-charge of that management. Today, we are virtually at a level where our debt is not sustainable because we are using over 50% of our revenues to service debt which means that we do not even have enough to be able to do infrastructural project that is highly needed in this country. Today, your country is owing about 22.7 trillion, 80 billion dollars, and we need to do more, and you cannot even find the money to do what you should do. So, the vice president's office is critical. That you are not today part of G 20, you are not part of BRICS nation, even the mid nation where you are is because you have a poor economy. Because even if you look at the BRICS nations, every other government there; Mexico has a GDP of over 1 trillion and per capital of over 8,000. Turkey that is there has a GDP of 800 billion and per capital of over 10,000. Indonesia has even, and your own is low. So, the vice president has a role to build the economy, to create jobs, to be able to make the country work; so, it is a critical role. On falling out with the president, if you are doing the right thing, you cannot fall out with anybody. I can assure you of that if you continue to do the right thing, because the president who chose you, chose you for a reason. He knows that you have something to deliver. So, you are not there, you are there to be loyal to him and serve Nigeria faithfully. So, I do not see whether there is a problem. I can tell you that I have never had any issues with anybody in government, and it would not start with this because, we will together start making Nigeria work again.

From the excerpt above, there is a total of 40 clauses. In his first clause, he used "I" as the Senser participant that is involved in the mental process of assuming and "that would not be the case" as the

Phenomenon. He did this because of his notion that he would not fall out with his president if he emerged as the vice president, especially as the constitution had the roles specified. We also have the mental process of looking, and knowing with “you”, and “he” as the Sensors and “at the BRICS nations”, and “that you have something to deliver” as the Phenomenon. This made it a total of three mental processes. These were a portrayal of the abilities of the vice president. He used verbal processes. The verbal process identified by talking has “we” as the Sayer participant and “the economy of this country” as the Verbiage. This was triggered by the critical role of the vice president as enunciated by the speaker. It also went with assuring, having “I” as the Sayer and “if you continue to do the right thing” as the Verbiage. He still used another verbal process of telling with “I” as the Sayer and “I have never had any issues with anybody in government” as the Verbiage. The speaker used this to point to his experience as former governor, and to further market his candidature as one with antecedence. He used five material processes of regaining, rebuilding, creating, ensuring, building, creating, making, doing, and starting with “the vice president”, and “we” as the Actors and “this economy”, “to where it can create jobs, jobs, that there is financing in various areas of our government, jobs, the country work, the right thing, and making Nigeria work again” as the Goals. He used much of this process to enumerate the enormous nature of the roles of the vice president.

Though he used more of material processes which depict actions, they were mostly on the negative sides. He used them to blame the current government concerning the poor economy of the country; thus, his constant use of *you*. He disassociated himself especially with this statement “Today, your country is owing about 22.7 trillion, 80 billion dollars.”

In Excerpt 5, representing the candidate of YPP, the candidate avoided the question asked and rather concentrated her explaining how her party had offered women equal opportunities. She stated that they had 50-50 gender equity as their most priority which was incorporated in Professor Kingsley Moghanu’s Presidency.

Excerpt 5: YPP

Thank you very much Mr. Moderator. Let me start from the platform we are on, in Young Progressives Party. I think there is no any other party in Nigeria that has given priority to women because most of the offices that we have, even at the national

level, are always either the woman is up and the man is deputising or the man is up and the woman deputising. Professor Kingsley Moghanu's presidency is about giving 50 50 opportunity to women to participate in his government at all levels of all offices. So, I do not think there is any presidential candidate who came up openly without any reservation to make this public and am very very sure him making this public, really, he really means business, and I do not think at this level he will reverse it. That 50-50 gender equity is almost the priority in whatever we are doing in YPP and Moghanu presidential candidacy. Thank you very much.

The excerpt above has a total number of seven clauses. This was purely depicted with four mental processes of thinking and assuring. It has "I" as the Sensors and "there is no any other party in Nigeria that has given priority to women", "there is no any presidential candidate who came up openly without any reservation to make this public", "he really means business", and "at this level he will reverse it" as the Phenomena. All these were to show that her presidential candidate was prepared to carry everybody along. She said that it was what they do in her party, YPP, thus her use of three material process of starting, giving, and doing with "me", "Professor Kingsley Moghanu's Presidency", and "we" as the participant Actors and "from the platform where on in Young Progressive Party", "50 50 opportunity to women", and "in YPP" as the Goals.

Discussion

The transitivity analysis of the 2019 Nigerian vice-presidential debate reveals how competing political actors strategically deploy grammatical choices to define the constitutional role of the vice-president, evaluate national conditions, and project executive competence. Far from being a passive background role, the vice-presidential office becomes a contested discursive site where candidates negotiate authority, accountability, and political identity. Across the dataset, material and mental processes dominate the discourse, serving distinct rhetorical functions depending on the candidate's political positioning. This can be seen from the table below.

Candidate Rhetorical Stance by Process Type

Candidate/ Party	Dominant Process Types	Primary Discursive Strategy
ACPN	Mental & Material	Asserting legal independence
ANN	Material & Relational	Ideological and grassroots frame
APC (incumbent)	Mental, Material & Existential	Institutional legitimization
PDP (main opposition)	Material & Mental	Economic critique and agency

The responses to the question of the status of the office of the vice president were mainly framed around legal authority and institutional reality, with contrasting transitivity choices between the incumbent and opposition candidates. Through legal assertiveness, the ACPN candidate used mental processes (*see, know, remember*) to explicitly reject the "spare tyre" metaphor, pairing them with material processes (*acting, taking decisions*) to construct the office as legally co-equal with that of the president, noting that it is active when the presidential is absent. For the incumbent APC, institutional experience was deployed, leveraging the existential processes (*"has been tasking," "is the chairman"*) and mental processes (*thinking, knowing*) to ground his representation in institutional reality. By highlighting specific statutory roles (e.g., chairing the National Economic Council) and introducing the variable of "trust", the APC candidate framed the vice-presidency as a high-stakes balancing act of delegation and loyalty.

It is observed that the main opposition party/ candidate (PDP) discursively enacted macro-economic agency and political distance using the transitivity framework to critique the ruling administration and reframe the governance narrative altogether. His approach to the question was through an economic diagnostic. He relied heavily on material processes (*regaining, rebuilding, creating*) directed at the economy. Crucially, he used pronominal choices (*"your country," "your debt"*) alongside material processes of systemic failure to distance himself from current economic realities while projecting himself as an experienced economic manager capable of restoring growth.

In the response of the ANN candidate, there is a refocusing of the discussion which frames the issue around human development and economic reform rather than elite political maneuverings, deploying relational processes ("*being a nation builder*") and material actions (*building, diversifying*). This contrasts with the response of the YPP candidate whose discursive approach was marked by deflection and identity construction, relying almost exclusively on mental processes (*think, am sure*) to move away from the focus on executive duties and steer towards party ideology. By foregrounding gender equity and 50–50 participation, her transitivity choices functioned as a branding exercise, positioning her party as an inclusive alternative to the political establishment.

Conclusion

This study applied Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, specifically the experiential system of transitivity, to investigate how candidates in the 2019 Nigerian vice-presidential debate construed the office of the vice-president and positioned themselves relative to national governance. The findings reveal that transitivity choices are not merely stylistic, but serve as powerful ideological tools. The material processes were consistently deployed to signal action, economic management, and executive capacity; the mental processes enabled candidates to articulate ideological orientations, project conviction, and establish cognitive authority; while relational and existential processes served to define political identities, validate past performance, or delineate constitutional boundaries.

By moving beyond prepared speeches and newspaper headlines, this study highlights the unique discursive dynamics of live political debates in a developing democracy. Candidates were seen attempting to spontaneously balance self-presentation, institutional loyalty, and opposition critique under pressure. The study demonstrates the utility of SFL for uncovering subtle power dynamics, agency shifts, and ideological framing in African political discourse. Future research could expand this framework by integrating interpersonal metafunctions (such as modality and mood) or incorporating multimodal analysis to evaluate how non-verbal cues complement grammatical choices during broadcasted electoral debates.

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