

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.68251/cjmr.v3i5.4>

The Fourth Estate as a Political Watchdog in *The Nation* Editorial “Divided the Government Stands”

Joshua Taiwo Ajenifari 

Department of English and Literary Studies, Kogi State University, Kabba, Kogi State, Nigeria

Correspondence: tjajenifarijoshua@ksukabba.edu.ng

RECEIVED

22 August 2026

REVISED

07 October 2026

ACCEPTED

15 October 2026

PUBLISHED

21 October 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines how *The Nation*'s watchdog stance is linguistically constructed in the editorial “Divided the Government Stands!”, published on 3 October 2007. The editorial was purposively selected because it juxtaposes conflicting statements by two senior economic officials, evaluates the institutional consequences of their disagreement, and explicitly recommends corrective action. Its age is treated as methodologically relevant rather than a weakness: the text preserves a bounded historical instance of press intervention that can be re-examined once the immediate controversy has passed, and it is not offered as evidence of contemporary press practice. Adopting a qualitative descriptive design, the study closely analyses fourteen lexico-syntactic and discourse categories, including lexical choices, nominal and verbal groups, modality, sentence structure, coordination, subordination, lexical cohesion, figurative expressions, pronouns and headline structure. Systemic Functional Linguistics provides the main grammatical description, Appraisal theory supports the classification of evaluation, and Critical Discourse Analysis guides the interpretation of language, authority and responsibility. The findings reveal a consistent movement from attributed policy positions to explicit editorial evaluation and, finally, to prescription. Evaluative expressions such as “disturbing”, “grave” and “unbecoming”, together with obligation and urgency constructions, frame governmental disagreement as a problem of institutional cohesion and public responsibility. The study therefore demonstrates how a single historical editorial constructs a watchdog voice through identifiable linguistic choices, and it illustrates the value of combining grammatical, evaluative and critical analysis of editorial discourse.

KEYWORDS: Fourth Estate • Political watchdog • Newspaper editorial • Lexico-syntactic analysis • Political discourse • Governmental accountability

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE • APA 7

Ajenifari, J. T. (2026). The Fourth Estate as a political watchdog in *The Nation* editorial “Divided the Government Stands”. *Concrescence Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Research*, 3(5), 42–52. <https://doi.org/10.68251/cjmr.v3i5.4>

Copyright: © 2026 The Author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

1. Introduction

One role of the media is to make public decisions visible and open to questioning by the citizens and this is known as the watchdog role. Norris (2000) identifies this watchdog role as one of the political functions of the news media. Fairclough (1989) provides a basis for examining its linguistic expression by noting that language does more than report public affairs; it can allocate responsibility, normalise interpretations and authorise criticism. Nigerian newspaper editorials offer a useful context for examining this relationship because they generally express an institutional position and move from description to evaluation and recommendation (Adeniran, 2015). Recently, studies have examined these evaluative and interventionist roles of Nigerian editorials through different linguistic and rhetorical approaches. Eze (2022) demonstrates moral and process-oriented appeals in election editorials, Jegede (2022) shows how editorial choices create experiential meanings for the participants represented in editorials, and Agbede and Mheta (2023) identify pragmatic acts and discourse strategies in editorials on insecurity. Osisanwo (2025) examines the ideological self/other representation in editorials on security challenges. These studies attest to the fact that editorials do not simply express opinions; they represent actors, articulate values and recommend actions with patterned choices of discourse.

Hence, this paper examines The Nation editorial “Divided the Government Stands!” published on 3 October 2007 (The Nation, 2007). The editorial juxtaposes Central Bank Governor Charles Soludo, who opposed fresh foreign borrowing, with Finance Minister Shamsuddeen Usman, who favoured access to external finance for development. It then evaluates their disagreement and urges restraint and presidential intervention. The study addresses a specific question within this literature. Adeniran (2015), Agbede and Mheta (2023), Eze (2022), Jegede (2022) and Osisanwo (2025) have established recurrent editorial functions, rhetorical patterns, participant roles and ideological strategies. Ajenifari et al. (2023) included the present editorial in a broader lexico-syntactic study. This work asks how lexical selection, grammatical organisation, and evaluation construct a watchdog stance towards public officials, rather than whether either policy position was correct or whether the editorial influenced government policy.

2. Literature Review

A newspaper editorial is not just a collection of attributed reports; it is also a statement of an institutional stance. In her study of 79 editorials from The PUNCH published on weekdays in 2015, Adeniran (2015) reported that government programmes and actions featured prominently in editorials. Eze (2022) also finds that Nigerian election editorials went beyond reporting events; they appealed to political actors, advocated credible electoral processes, and called for public responsibility. These studies may be used as evidence of the use of editorials for the investigation of the Fourth Estate ideal, but neither criticism nor recommendation alone is sufficient proof of political independence, impartiality or political influence.

Linguistic studies explain the development of this institutional voice. Fairclough (1989) offers a critical examination of language and social power; Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) offer grammatical categories for analysing processes, participants, nominal groups, and modality; and Martin and White (2005) outline types and degrees of evaluation.

Studies related to editorial discourse are also adopted in more recent studies in Nigeria. Participant configurations contribute to the representation of actors’ actions and how situations are construed, as seen by Jegede (2022), and thematic choices play a role in framing and stance, as seen by Alfred and Taiwo (2019). Insecurity editorials, by contrast, include pragmatic acts such as advising, accusing, and questioning, in addition to discourse acts, as identified by Agbede and Mheta (2023). Additionally, Osisanwo (2025) shows how discourse strategies can create ideological differentiation between social groups. The general understanding is that editorial tone should be shown rather than assumed from negative words that are picked up from individual passages. Ajenifari et al. (2023) investigated lexical and syntactic characteristics of selected Nigerian newspaper editorials, including “Divided the Government Stands!” The present study therefore does not claim novelty in its choice of text.

Its narrower focus is the distinction between official statements and the newspaper's own evaluations, the roles of modality and appraisal, and the progression towards recommendations for official action. A statement attributed to a public official should not automatically be treated as the newspaper's position.

The studies reviewed vary in size and focus. Adeniran (2015) looks at editorial purposes and topics; Alfred and Taiwo (2019) compare editorial topics across newspapers; Eze (2022) studies electoral topics; Jegede (2022) studies roles of participants, and Agbede and Mheta (2023) emphasise pragmatic acts and strategies in discourse, while Osisanwo (2025) concentrates on the representation of ideas. These studies confirm that editorials in Nigeria are linguistically and rhetorically complex, but they also allow for a more specific description of how an editorial transitions from reporting a position on a policy to assessing an action and recommending another. The value of a single-text study depends on making its evidence and interpretations explicit and open to scrutiny. The selected editorial is well suited to this purpose, as it names and assesses an institutional conflict (as in: "diametrically opposed directions") and then moves toward prescription (as in: "should therefore exercise restraint" and "It is high time"). The study examines how each of these forms interacts with the surrounding clauses. It does not presume that expressions of evaluation are necessarily political messages or that a past editorial is a reflection of current practice in this newspaper.

3.0 Methodology and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive design to examine the lexico-syntactic features and discourse organisation of one historical editorial. The working text is "Divided the Government Stands!", from The Nation's Comment page on 3 October 2007 (The Nation, 2007). The newspaper was selected because the text is an identifiable institutional editorial. The article was purposively chosen because it brings together three features relevant to the research question: contrasting statements by senior officials, an explicit evaluation of their institutional implications and a call for corrective action. The editorial's historical value lies in preserving a bounded instance of press intervention. It captures a particular moment when a newspaper attributed responsibility and evaluated official conduct. Its suitability depends on the research question, not its recency. The findings are not presented as evidence of contemporary journalism or of The Nation's practice across the intervening years.

The unit of analysis is a word, group or clause to be interpreted in the context of the preceding paragraph. The fourteen analytic categories examined are: Lexical Choices, Nominal Groups, Verbal Groups, Modality, Adverbial Groups, Prepositional Groups, Sentence Structure, Coordination, Subordination, Apposition, Lexical Cohesion, Figurative and Idiomatic Expressions, Pronouns, and Headline Structure. Punctuation marks are not viewed as an independent category, as emphasis is placed in the research on lexical, grammatical and evaluative resources. The process aims to differentiate between a reported official statement and the newspaper's evaluative voice, identify the relevant form, determine its grammatical or appraisal category, and then connect the interpretation to the context in which it appears in the text.

3. Theoretical Framework

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides the main descriptive framework because the study examines how grammatical choices represent actors, processes, certainty and obligation. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) guide the analysis of nominal groups, process types, modality and clause organisation. For example, "assured" and "affirmed" attribute propositions to officials, while "should" and "may" express obligation or possibility, depending on context. Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal framework complements this grammatical description by distinguishing judgement of behaviour from appreciation of situations and by identifying degrees of evaluative force. Thus, "unbecoming" evaluates an official's conduct, whereas "grave" evaluates the seriousness of a situation. Fairclough's (1989) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the wider interpretive framework for examining how these linguistic resources

construct authority, responsibility and an entitlement to criticise public officials. CDA follows the grammatical description. The study does not use van Dijk's socio-cognitive model because it supplies no evidence about readers' mental models or reception. Any interpretation of possible reader effects remains tentative.

Data Presentation

The working transcription of the editorial is reproduced below (The Nation, 2007). Quotations in the analysis refer to the numbered paragraphs of this transcription; the original newspaper page has not been independently verified.

THE NATION — WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2007

COMMENT

Divided the government stands!

• Soludo, Usman take different positions on foreign loans

At the Nigerian Investment Conference held in far away New York, the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Professor Charles Soludo, assured his audience that Nigeria is not likely to go a-borrowing anytime soon. He reminisced over the country's previous debt burden—the eventual buyback deal that led to the loan repayment—and concluded that having just exited the Paris Club and other multinational creditor organisations, seeking fresh foreign loans is neither an attractive nor a compelling option for Nigeria.

However, here at home, in what appears like a sharp contradiction to Soludo's position, Dr Shamsuddeen Usman, the finance minister, affirmed the willingness, if not the readiness of government to access huge foreign financial assistance, such as long-term and interest-free loans. For him, massive capital projects and the drive for infrastructural renewal can only be achieved through the intervention of such soft loans. The catch for Usman is: if the loanable funds are available and at the same time affordable, then Nigeria should go ahead and access them for specific developmental projects in the overall interest of the country.

The tale of the two top government functionaries canvassing two diametrically opposed directions on what should ordinarily be the same policy agenda is, to say the least, disturbing. The implications are quite grave.

First, it sends a wrong signal to both Nigerians and the international community that the inner workings of government lacked the requisite cohesion. Secondly, the quibbling of the finance minister is worrisome at two levels. His media responses to the CBN governor, particularly of late, have been embarrassingly antagonistic and rather unbecoming of a high-ranking minister of the government. If personal scores are to be settled between the minister and the CBN governor, it certainly should not be at the nation's expense.

The question of whether Nigeria takes loan or otherwise will at least require the input of the legislative chamber. Therefore, making categorical statement and asserting the need for government to take loan facilities is not entirely within the purview of the minister's responsibility.

For now, it is not in the interest of Nigeria to take fresh foreign loans and thus mortgage the future of coming generations. The finance minister should therefore exercise restraint in making statements that may not wholly represent government's position. In the same vein, we can only hope that the reality of a diminishing stature and its accompanying low confidence crisis will not force the CBN governor out of office soon.

At first, it was the currency denominational saga and now, a major clash of policy imperatives over foreign loans and capital sourcing initiatives. But, should Soludo be eased out, the unintended consequences of subordinating true 'civil service' to the whims and caprices of the political class may be overwhelming. This may spell doom for the country.

It is high time President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua moderated his lieutenants' excesses by calling them to order.

The tale of the two top government functionaries canvassing two diametrically opposed directions on what should ordinarily be the same policy agenda is, to say the least, disturbing. The implications are quite grave'.

4. Data Analysis

Lexical and grammatical choices in the construction of watchdog stance

The editorial contrasts two accounts of foreign borrowing and then evaluates how they are presented to the public. Soludo's reported position invokes the country's earlier debt burden, whereas Usman's reported position invokes developmental needs. The analysis concerns how the editorial frames this difference; it does not independently establish the accuracy of either official's statement or the economic merits of either position. The analysis identifies expressions in the editorial, describes their lexical or grammatical form and interprets them within their immediate context. Examples are drawn from the primary text reproduced above (The Nation, 2007).

4.1 Lexical Choices and Political Representation

At the lexical level, the editorial relies substantially on words associated with government, policy, finance, responsibility, conflict and national interest. Expressions such as "government," "policy agenda," "foreign loans," "financial assistance," "capital projects," "infrastructural needs," "specific developmental projects," "nation's interests," "civil service," and "political class" establish the semantic field within which the editorial frames the controversy. These lexical items are predominantly institutional and political rather than personal. Their accumulation consequently elevates the issue from an interpersonal disagreement to a matter of public governance.

The repeated use of the lexical item "government" is particularly significant. The headline, "Divided the government stands!", establishes the central semantic contradiction around which the editorial is organised. The conventional maxim "united we stand, divided we fall" is transformed through lexical substitution and syntactic restructuring. The editorial consequently foregrounds division rather than unity as the defining condition of government. The headline thus operates as both a concise summary of the editorial's argument and an evaluative frame through which the subsequent disagreement is interpreted. Similarly, the expression "two top government functionaries" is strategically significant. Rather than presenting Soludo and Usman as two individuals with different opinions, the noun phrase categorises them by institutional status. The modifier "top" foregrounds their seniority, while "government functionaries" places their utterances within the institutional machinery of government. Their disagreement therefore becomes consequential precisely because it emanates from senior officials whose public statements may reasonably be interpreted as representing governmental policy. The editorial explicitly identifies their positions as "two diametrically opposed directions" on what should ordinarily constitute "the same policy agenda."

The lexical choice "diametrically opposed" is especially evaluative. It does not merely indicate difference; it frames the positions as opposite ends of a policy spectrum. Similarly, "disturbing," "grave," "wrong signal," "embarrassingly antagonistic," "unbecoming," "diminishing stature," "low confidence crisis," and "doom" constitute an important cluster of evaluative expressions. Through these items, the editorial voice moves beyond neutral reporting and openly evaluates governmental conduct. In appraisal terms, "disturbing" and "grave" can be read as negative appreciation of the disagreement and its implications. By contrast, "unbecoming" evaluates the propriety of a minister's conduct and is therefore a judgement. These distinctions provide a textual basis for describing the editorial as evaluative (Martin & White, 2005). They do not establish that its assessment of the officials is impartial.

4.2 Nominal Groups and the Construction of Institutional Authority

The editorial makes extensive use of complex nominal groups to identify institutions, actors, policies and consequences. Examples include:

“the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria”; “the finance minister”; “fresh foreign loans”; “the country’s previous debt burden”; “other multinational creditor organisations”; “foreign financial assistance”; “long-term and interest-free loans”; “the drive for infrastructural renewal”; “specific developmental projects”; “the inner workings of government”; “the nation’s expense”; “coming generations”; “the political class”.

These nominal constructions enable the editorial to compress substantial political and ideological information into relatively compact linguistic units. For example, “the inner workings of government” turns the disagreement between two officials into a broader question about the state’s internal organisation and coherence. Likewise, “the nation’s expense” provides an evaluative standard against which the conduct of public officials is judged. The expression “coming generations” is particularly significant because it extends the temporal scope of the argument. The editorial’s objection to fresh foreign borrowing is not represented merely as a present economic preference; it is framed as an issue involving obligations that may be inherited by Nigerians who are not yet participants in the current policy process. The lexical choice therefore strengthens the editorial’s appeal to collective responsibility.

4.3 Verbal Groups, Agency and Responsibility

The verbal groups in the editorial are equally important in constructing agency and responsibility. Verbs such as “assured,” “reminisced,” “concluded,” “affirmed,” “sends,” “settled,” “asserting,” “exercise,” “represent,” “force,” “subordinating,” “moderated,” and “calling” attribute specific actions, positions and responsibilities to identifiable political actors. “Assured” and “affirmed” function as verbal processes: they identify an official as the source of a proposition. In “Soludo ... assured his audience”, Soludo is the Sayer and the audience the Receiver; the following clause carries the reported message. Usman is likewise represented as the source of the proposition about foreign assistance. Attributing these contrasting propositions distinguishes the officials’ voices from the newspaper’s later evaluation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

The editorial subsequently shifts from reporting to judgement. The statement that the minister’s responses have been “embarrassingly antagonistic and rather unbecoming” assigns responsibility for the deterioration of institutional relations to a particular actor. The construction “If personal scores are to be settled between the minister and the CBN governor, it certainly should not be at the nation’s expense” further establishes a conditional relationship between alleged personal conflict and its possible public consequences. The verbal construction “should not be at the nation’s expense” is particularly important because it introduces an explicit normative judgement. It establishes a hierarchy of values in which personal disagreements are subordinated to national interest. This is one of the clearest linguistic manifestations of the newspaper’s watchdog position.

4.4 Modal Verbs and the Expression of Editorial Authority

The editorial contains expressions of likelihood, possibility, prediction and obligation. “Is not likely to” concerns probability; “may” qualifies a possible consequence; and “should” can express obligation. “Certainly” is a modal adjunct rather than a modal verb, while “can only hope” combines a modal auxiliary with a mental process. These forms need to be classified in context rather than grouped indiscriminately as modal verbs (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

In “Nigeria is not likely to go a-borrowing anytime soon”, the assessment of likelihood is attributed to Soludo. In “This may spell doom for the country”, “may” marks the predicted consequence as possible, not established. The obligation in “should therefore exercise restraint” belongs to the editorial’s recommendation. Distinguishing these voices prevents reported official positions from being mistaken for the newspaper’s own assessment.

“The finance minister should therefore exercise restraint in making statements that may not wholly represent government’s position” contains two different modal meanings. “Should” expresses a medium-value obligation directed at the minister, while “may” qualifies the possibility that his statements do not fully represent the government. The obligation is explicit even though the premise remains qualified (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

This obligation signals a prescriptive editorial stance. In the critical interpretation, the newspaper presents itself as entitled to assess the appropriateness of an official’s public conduct. That reading follows from the named addressee, the modal obligation and the action “exercise restraint”; it is not inferred from the modal auxiliary alone. The closing sentence, “It is high time President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua moderated his lieutenants’ excesses by calling them to order”, reinforces the recommendation. It is grammatically declarative, but pragmatically urges overdue action. Its directive force comes from “It is high time” and the specified presidential action, while “excesses” adds a negative judgement of the officials’ conduct.

4.5 Adverbial Groups and Evaluative Modification

Adverbial constructions contribute significantly to the editorial’s evaluative force. Expressions such as “anytime soon,” “here at home,” “to say the least,” “quite grave,” “certainly,” “for now,” “therefore,” “in the same vein,” and “at first” provide temporal, modal, logical and evaluative modification. The expression “to say the least” in “is, to say the least, disturbing” is particularly significant. It functions rhetorically as an understatement while simultaneously intensifying the negative evaluation. The editorial implies that “disturbing” may be a restrained description of a much more serious condition. In “The implications are quite grave”, “quite” modifies the adjective “grave”, intensifying the evaluation of the implications; it does not directly modify the noun. “For now” limits the editorial’s assessment to the immediate period, while “therefore” presents restraint as a consequence of the preceding argument. These forms organise the newspaper’s reasoning, although their presence does not prove that its economic judgement is sound.

4.6 Prepositional Groups and the Representation of Political Relations

Prepositional constructions are also prominent in the editorial. Examples include: “at the Nigerian Investment Conference”; “in what appears like a sharp contradiction”; “over the country’s previous debt burden”; “for specific developmental projects”; “at home”; “at the nation’s expense”; “in the interest of Nigeria”; “of coming generations”; “out of office”; “to the whims and caprices of the political class”. The prepositional constructions locate events and relate actions to purposes or affected interests. “at the nation’s expense” frames a possible personal dispute as carrying a public cost. The interpretation rests on the conditional clause that precedes it; the text does not establish that such a personal dispute actually occurred. Similarly, “to the whims and caprices of the political class” constructs a relationship of subordination. The noun phrase “whims and caprices” portrays political interference as arbitrary and potentially destructive to institutional autonomy.

4.7 Sentence Structure and the Organisation of Editorial Argument

The syntax is predominantly declarative, enabling the editorial to present propositions, evaluate circumstances and formulate conclusions authoritatively. For example: “The tale of the two top government functionaries canvassing two diametrically opposed directions on what should ordinarily be the same policy agenda is, to say the least, disturbing.” (*The Nation*, 2007, para. 3). The complex structure packages the policy disagreement as a single phenomenon before evaluating it through “is ... disturbing.” The syntax thus mirrors the progression from description to evaluation.

4.8 Coordination and Contrast

Coordination links associated items, including “long-term and interest-free loans” and “whims and caprices”. Contrast between the officials’ positions is organised mainly through the adversative

“However” at the opening of the second paragraph and the juxtaposition of their attributed statements. The juxtaposition of “At first” with “now” links an earlier currency-policy episode to the present disagreement over foreign borrowing. This wording suggests a sequence of conflicts, although the elliptical construction requires caution in analysing its clause structure.

4.9 Subordination and the Construction of Cause, Condition and Consequence

Subordinate constructions establish relationships of condition, cause and consequence. The sentence: “If personal scores are to be settled between the minister and the CBN governor, it certainly should not be at the nation’s expense.” (*The Nation*, 2007, para. 4). contains a conditional subordinate clause and a main clause. The structure raises the possibility of personal conflict while establishing the normative principle that national interests should not be sacrificed to personal disagreement. Another significant construction is: “But, should Soludo be eased out, the unintended consequences of subordinating true ‘civil service’ to the whims and caprices of the political class may be overwhelming.” (*The Nation*, 2007, para. 7). “should Soludo be eased out” is an inverted conditional, equivalent here to “if Soludo were eased out”; its “should” does not impose an obligation on Soludo. The subsequent “may” qualifies the predicted consequence. The passive “be eased out” leaves the agent unspecified. The surrounding reference to “the political class” invites a political interpretation but does not identify who would remove him.

4.10 Apposition and Institutional Identification

“The Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Professor Charles Soludo” combines an institutional title with a proper name, while “Dr Shamsuddeen Usman, the finance minister” adds an appositional role description. These constructions identify the participants by public office. They support a reading of the disagreement as institutional, although an office title alone does not establish that every statement represents agreed government policy.

4.11 Lexical Cohesion and the Semantic Field of Governance

Lexical cohesion is created through terms relating to government, finance, loans, policy, national interest, public service, political class, office, responsibility and development. This cohesive field gives the editorial thematic unity. A second semantic field concerns conflict and instability. Items such as “contradiction,” “diametrically opposed,” “disturbing,” “antagonistic,” “clash,” “crisis,” “excesses,” “whims and caprices,” and “doom” construct a continuum of institutional disorder. Governmental disagreement is therefore presented as a threat to institutional stability.

4.12 Figurative and Idiomatic Expressions

The editorial uses figurative and idiomatic language to strengthen its rhetorical force. The most prominent example is: “Divided the government stands!” (*The Nation*, 2007, headline). The expression deliberately reworks the familiar maxim concerning unity and division. Its inversion creates a paradox in which a divided government is nevertheless represented as standing, thereby establishing an interpretive frame for the subsequent argument. Other expressions include “personal scores are to be settled,” “at the nation’s expense,” “eased out,” “spell doom,” “whims and caprices,” and “calling them to order.” These expressions intensify the editorial’s critique. The expression “spell doom for the country” is especially significant. The verb “spell” metaphorically represents an action or condition as producing a negative consequence, while “doom” dramatises the perceived danger of political interference.

4.13 Pronouns and the Construction of Collective Interest

The text contains one instance of “we”, in “we can only hope”. It most directly marks an editorial voice. It may invite readers to share the concern, but the text alone does not show that readers accept it or that the pronoun includes all Nigerians. “Hope” also acknowledges uncertainty about the governor’s position.

Conversely, references to “the minister,” “the CBN governor,” “government,” “future generations,” “the country,” “Nigeria,” and “the political class” establish distinct social and institutional categories. These references construct relationships among government officials, the political establishment and the national community.

4.14 The Headline as a Lexico-Syntactic Compression of the Editorial Thesis

The headline condenses the central argument: “Divided the government stands!” (The Nation, 2007, headline). Lexically, “divided” evokes fragmentation and institutional disagreement, “government” identifies the institution under scrutiny, while “stands” evokes stability. The unusual ordering creates syntactic markedness and rhetorical prominence. The headline therefore attracts attention, frames governmental division as a contradiction and anticipates the argument that conflicting pronouncements from senior officials can undermine confidence in governmental coherence. The subheading, “Soludo, Usman take different positions on foreign loans,” provides the immediate referential explanation for the rhetorical headline. The combination of a figuratively charged headline and an informational subheading establishes the issue and its evaluative frame.

4.15 Watchdog stance and editorial authority

The analysis supports a watchdog reading because the text connects official statements with standards of public responsibility and then recommends action. Negative vocabulary alone would show criticism; the combination of identified public offices, an appeal to national interest, and a recommendation for presidential restraint provides a more specific basis for the interpretation. The main patterns are the framing of disagreement, the evaluation of conduct and the assignment of obligations. First, contrastive lexicalisation constructs the Soludo-Usman disagreement as a conflict between incompatible policy positions. Terms such as “contradiction,” “diametrically opposed,” and “clash” turn policy divergence into an institutional concern. Second, evaluative lexis enables the editorial to move beyond neutral reportage. Words and expressions such as “disturbing,” “grave,” “embarrassingly antagonistic,” “unbecoming,” “diminishing stature,” “low confidence crisis,” and “doom” encode explicit judgement. The obligation “should therefore exercise restraint” addresses the finance minister directly. The final “It is high time” construction urges presidential intervention. Together, these grammatical resources establish a prescriptive stance. In this case, the watchdog stance is a textual position from which the newspaper questions official conduct. This does not prove that the newspaper influenced policy, represented public consensus, or consistently exercised an independent monitoring role across its publications.

5. Discussion of Findings

This study set out to describe how lexical selection, grammatical organisation and evaluation construct a watchdog stance towards public officials in a single editorial, rather than to adjudicate the policy dispute the editorial reports or to measure its effect. Read as a whole, the analysis indicates that the watchdog stance is not carried by any isolated negative term but by an ordered movement across the text: the editorial first attributes competing positions to named officials, then evaluates their disagreement, and finally prescribes corrective action. Verbal processes assign the reported positions to Soludo and Usman, relational clauses evaluate the disagreement as “disturbing” and its implications as “grave”, and the obligation that the minister “should therefore exercise restraint” moves the argument from assessment to prescription. This reporting–evaluation–prescription progression connects the grammatical description to the watchdog interpretation and is consistent with the three frameworks, which perform distinct tasks: Systemic Functional Linguistics describes the verbal and relational processes and the modality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), Appraisal theory classifies the shift from appreciation of a situation to judgement of conduct (Martin & White, 2005), and Critical Discourse Analysis interprets how these resources authorise criticism of public office (Fairclough, 1989). The progression also aligns with prior accounts of Nigerian editorials as evaluative and interventionist rather than merely reportorial. Eze (2022) found that election editorials moved beyond reporting events to appeal to political actors and call for public responsibility,

and Agbede and Mheta (2023) identified pragmatic acts such as advising and questioning; the present editorial's closing appeal for presidential restraint can be read as a comparable advisory act realised through obligation and urgency constructions. Situated more broadly, the pattern instantiates the watchdog function that Norris (2000) treats as a core political role of the news media and that Adeniran (2015) documents in editorial practice, where government programmes and official conduct feature prominently as objects of scrutiny.

The treatment of the two officials, however, is uneven. Usman's conduct is judged as "unbecoming", whereas the prospect of Soludo's removal frames him as vulnerable to political pressure rather than as an object of censure. A watchdog reading must therefore acknowledge the editorial's apparent sympathy towards the governor rather than assume equal scrutiny of both officials. This differential positioning resonates with Osisanwo's (2025) account of how editorial discourse constructs ideological differentiation between participants, distinguishing a favoured from a disfavoured actor; here the contrast is realised lexically ("unbecoming", "diminishing stature") and grammatically through the agentless passive "be eased out", which casts Soludo as affected rather than culpable. The analysis describes how this asymmetry is textually produced; it does not establish that either official's position was improper.

The editorial also frames governmental cohesion as a matter of public concern. Its claim that the disagreement "sends a wrong signal" to Nigerians and the international community projects a public reaction, but the text offers no evidence of reception, so the analysis rests on a textual construction of that reaction rather than a measured response. This framing of an institutional dispute as a governance problem is consistent with Adeniran's (2015) finding that government actions dominate editorial attention, and with work on how thematic and framing choices construct stance in Nigerian editorials (Alfred & Taiwo, 2019). The call for cohesion nonetheless permits more than one reading: it may advocate effective policy coordination, or it may privilege a public appearance of unity over legitimate inter-institutional difference. The study therefore examines how the editorial presents and judges the disagreement without adopting that judgement as a verified fact.

At the level of participant representation, the editorial's reliance on complex nominal groups and appositional identifications ("the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Professor Charles Soludo"; "two top government functionaries") constructs the dispute as institutional rather than interpersonal. This supports Jegede's (2022) observation that nominal choices configure participants and construe situations, and it shows the mechanism by which an exchange between two individuals is elevated to a question about "the inner workings of government". The marked headline, in which "government" is the grammatical subject and "Divided" is a fronted predicative element, reworks the familiar maxim about unity and division to frame the disagreement as a problem of institutional coherence; this concerns the headline's rhetorical function and does not establish how readers responded. These findings refine, rather than replicate, the existing literature. Ajenifari et al. (2023) included "Divided the Government Stands!" within a broader lexico-syntactic survey; the present study's narrower contribution is to separate reported official statements from the newspaper's evaluations and to trace the role of modality and appraisal in the movement towards recommendation. Read together with Schultz's (1998) account of the press as an instrument of democratic accountability, the analysis shows how a watchdog stance can be located in identifiable textual choices rather than assumed from negative vocabulary alone. The claims remain deliberately bounded.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of the historical newspaper editorial "Divided the Government Stands!" demonstrates the development of a "watchdog" role in a newspaper in a recognisable sequence from reporting to evaluation to prescription. Verbal processes attribute competing positions to Soludo and Usman, evaluative expressions describe the dispute and features of official action, while obligation and urgency constructions lead to the recommendations of restraint and presidential intervention. Thus, the

watchdog interpretation is not based entirely on the negative use of the vocabulary, but on the interplay of attributive and evaluative uses, as well as on appeals to national interest and on explicit recommendations for official action.

The findings also qualify this interpretation. The editorial appears more sympathetic to Soludo than to Usman, and its demand for government unity treats institutional cohesion as desirable. The analysis does not establish how Nigerians or international observers viewed the disagreement, whether the newspaper's preferred economic position was correct or whether the editorial influenced policy. These limits distinguish textual interpretation from conclusions requiring external historical or reception evidence. The study contributes to the literature on Nigerian editorials by illustrating, within a bounded context, the potential of combining SFL description, Appraisal analysis, and critical interpretation without collapsing reported voices into editorial judgement. It also shows the importance of returning to an older editorial, rather than using age as a guarantee of contemporary representation. This account could be further substantiated by verifying the original newspaper page, conducting further independent coding, and comparing it with a larger collection of editorials over a longer span of time to see whether the same shift from attribution to evaluation to prescription can be identified again.

ORCID iD

Joshua Taiwo Ajenifari  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2458-9142>

Declarations

Conflicts of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Adeniran, R. (2015). Playing the fourth estate of the realm through newspaper editorials. *Media and Communication Review*, 1(1), 50–66.
- Agbede, G. T., & Mheta, G. (2023). Pragmatic acts and discourse strategies in Nigerian newspaper editorials: A socio-cognitive approach. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Economics and Business Law*, 12, 117–133.
- Ajenifari, J. T., Orebe, O. O., Oboko, U., & Fadeyi, I. O. (2023). Language as an instrument of social (re)-engineering and change: A lexico-syntactic investigation of some selected Nigerian newspaper editorial opinions. *EKSU Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, 4(1), 1–21.
- Alfred, B. Y., & Taiwo, R. (2019). Framing and perspective: Exploring the discourse functions of thematic choices in newspaper editorials on terrorism in Nigeria. *Ghana Journal of Linguistics*, 8(1), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.4314/gjl.v8i1.205>
- Eze, O. U. (2022). The voice of reason: A thematic appraisal of editorial coverage of Nigeria's 2015 elections. *Social Dynamics*, 48(3), 533–549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2022.2146263>
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Longman.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2014). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Jegede, O. O. (2022). Nominal choices in Nigerian newspaper editorials: A functional grammar approach. *American Research Journal of English and Literature*, 8(1), 70–75. <https://doi.org/10.21694/2378-9026.220015>
- Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230511910>
- Norris, P. (2000). *A virtuous circle: Political communications in postindustrial societies*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511609343>
- Osisanwo, A. (2025). Discourse of 'self' and 'other' in newspaper editorials on insecurity in Nigeria. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 60(6), 4001–4021. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096241243295>
- The Nation. (2007, October 3). Divided the government stands! [Editorial]. *The Nation*.
- Schultz, J. (1998). *Reviving the fourth estate: Democracy, accountability and the media*. Cambridge University Press.