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## Reporting the Powerful: Linguistic Strategies in Print Media Coverage of Murders in Kenya

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### Abstract

This paper explores the linguistic strategies used by journalists in reporting murders implicating prominent personalities. Notably, it examines how these strategies are employed to construct the identities of the perpetrators, underscoring how journalists navigate power dynamics inherent in such stories while managing potential harm to themselves, the subjects involved, and the broader sociopolitical context. The study further examines the critical role of language in shaping public discourse on justice. Utilizing ten purposively sampled headlines and lead paragraphs from The Daily Nation and The Standard newspapers' 2018 coverage of murders linked to prominent figures in Kenya, a qualitative investigation reveals how journalists negotiate power asymmetries and the implications of this navigation for both their safety and public perceptions of justice. Guided by Roger Fowler's Critical Linguistics (1970), the findings indicate that journalists employ distinct linguistic strategies - such as nominal references and transitivity choices - differently based on the subject's status and the media outlet. There's a notable tendency for the Daily Nation to use both the nominal references and transitivity to implicate suspects, emphasizing accusation, thereby reinforcing a narrative of guilt implicitly. Conversely, The Standard's use of similar strategies tends to deflect blame, offering protection to suspects. These divergent patterns raise essential questions about media framing and power asymmetries in crime reporting and highlight the need for policy and advocacy efforts to foster ethical and balanced journalism. The theoretical implications suggest that linguistic choices intersect with power dynamics in media discourse, warranting broader analyses in future research. Recommendations include investigating digital and audio media, as well as cases involving less powerful individuals, to deepen our understanding of how language mediates issues of justice and inequality across various platforms.

**Keywords:** Critical Linguistics, inequalities, linguistic strategies, murder reporting, power dynamics, prominent personalities.



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## Introduction

The role of language in the media is pivotal in shaping public discourse, particularly regarding murders associated with prominent individuals. Journalistic linguistic strategies are often influenced by the power dynamics surrounding these cases, given the significant influence these personalities wield. Reporters encounter challenges such as retaliation, legal threats, and the need to protect their integrity, compelling them to navigate their narratives with care.

This study highlights the linguistic choices employed when reporting murders involving prominent individuals, investigating how these dynamics are manipulated and perpetuated through language, and revealing their contributions to social inequalities and injustices. By scrutinizing these linguistic strategies, the paper advocates for a critical engagement with media content, encouraging news consumers to analyze murder reports more discerningly, thus enabling more informed evaluations of crime portrayals in newspapers.

Scholarship on crime reporting has extensively examined how linguistic and framing choices construct social actors and negotiate power. For instance, Okoth (2020) employed Critical Discourse Analysis and media framing theory to demonstrate how gendered language in Kenyan crime reports reinforces entrenched hierarchies. Similarly, Nwabueze (2017) revealed how framing in Nigerian press coverage shapes public perceptions of crime.

Other studies, such as those by Bednarek and Caple (2014) and Tabbert (2016), linked newsworthiness to perceived risk and analyzed narrative structures in crime reportage, respectively. Macharia (2013) highlighted the persistence of media stereotyping in the Kenyan press, while Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) emphasized methodological considerations in discourse-oriented research. Collectively, these studies underscore the significance of naming practices, transitivity patterns, and actor representation in shaping audience interpretations. However, there remains a gap in scholarship regarding the linguistic strategies used to represent victims and perpetrators in high-profile Kenyan murder cases involving prominent personalities. This study addresses this gap by critically exploring how these linguistic choices influence both media narratives and societal perceptions.

## Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze the linguistic strategies used by Kenyan print media in reporting high-profile murder cases, revealing unethical practices and social injustices. Data were collected from 10 purposively sampled headlines and lead paragraphs from The Daily Nation and The Standard newspapers, focusing on their coverage of murders involving prominent individuals in 2018; a year marked by a notable increase in such cases. A purposeful sampling strategy targeted information-rich cases that received significant media attention. The analysis followed a discourse framework using Fowler's (1991) critical linguistics tools to examine lexical choices and transitivity presentation. The sampled articles are referred to by their newspaper abbreviation, article number, and year of publication, e.g., DN Article 1 (2018).

## Results and Discussions

The report analyzed is on a case of a university student murder, which implicates a County Chief and his PA. The study examined 10 sampled headlines and lead paragraphs as presented in this section.

### Discursive Features

#### a) Lexical Structure: Naming and Describing

This discursive practice examines the employment of noun phrases in constructing murder events.

##### 1. DN Article 1 (2018) L

**Governor** struggles to show that there was no animosity between **him and his girlfriend**

##### 2. STD Article 2 (2018) L

**Governor** denies any link to the murder of **student**, says he planned to support her.

**Governor** is a common noun referring to the specific role or title held by the individual. In both the DN and STD reports, **Governor** functions as the subject of the sentence. It identifies the leading actor in the statements and actions described. The DN author goes further to opt for the nominal reference **him and his girlfriend**, which is a compound noun phrase. **Him** is a pronoun that refers to the Governor. **His** is a possessive pronoun modifying **girlfriend**, showing ownership or association. **Girlfriend** is a common noun referring to the Governor's romantic partner. The entire noun phrase **him and his girlfriend** functions as a complement of the preposition **between** in the phrase **between him and his girlfriend**. It specifies the relationship being discussed, namely the lack of animosity and a proof of innocence.

Both reports employ honorifics, as evidenced by the nominal reference **governor**. A governor is a highly powerful and influential figure in society. In relation to **his girlfriend** in 1, the governor's greater power creates a relation of power inequality, further emphasized by the possessive **his** in the noun phrase **his girlfriend**. The identification of the victim solely through her **romantic relationship** with Gregory reinforces an association of the victim with the offender, reducing the social gap between them and implicitly links him to the murder allegations. This strategy may serve the DN's agenda of unmasking power dynamics with the governor. The verb **struggles** represents Gregory as the actor. This choice casts doubt on the sincerity of his claims regarding a lack of animosity with the victim. The implication is that a truly innocent person would not need to exert such effort to disprove animosity towards his girlfriend. This portrayal frames Gregory negatively and potentially builds a case against him by unmasking power dynamics through exposing his potential influence.

The STD report uses the nominal reference **student** to distance the governor from the victim, thereby widening the social gap between them. This gap is further emphasized by the word **denies**, which disconnects the governor from the murder case. The use of the word **planned** further alienates the governor from the murder, as it suggests he had intended to take positive actions on behalf of the slain student, indicating he meant well for her and therefore could not have been her murderer. This language choice masks power dynamics by framing the governor innocently. Additionally, such language use can be seen as a strategy by the reporters to navigate power dynamics with the governor, likely due to his influential position.

Such language use creates, to the readers, a sense of impunity for the elite, giving rise to a suggestion that the powerful individuals are protected from scrutiny, hence reinforcing the perception of a media landscape that is biased in favor of the wealthy and influential. Both reports, therefore, reveal how lexical choices influence narrative framing. While the DN subtly implicates Gregory, the STD leans towards masking his culpability. These differing approaches underscore the role of language in shaping public perceptions, highlighting how word choice can carry nuanced implications in news reporting.

### 3. DN Article 3 (2018) H

**Gregory's PA** still in custody as police intensifies watch over all.

### 4. STD Article 4 (2018) L

**Man at the epicenter of murder mystery, Herman Kreg, the man holding the trump card in the killing of Sharlyne Kirk** is a quiet man with intimidating physique.

To identify the perpetrator, the DN author uses the nominal reference **Gregory's PA**, which is in the possessive form, indicating a relationship of ownership or association. The STD author, on the other hand, uses a complex nominal reference **man at the epicenter of murder mystery, Herman Kreg, the man holding the trump card in the killing of Sharlyne Kirk**, which has **Herman Kreg** as the head noun; a proper noun identifying a specific individual. **Man at the epicenter of murder mystery** is a pre-modifier having the common noun **man** and a prepositional phrase **at the epicenter of murder mystery**, which provides additional context.

The phrase functions as an appositive subject. It gives a detailed description of **Herman Kreg**, emphasizing his central role in the narrative. The same head noun is post-modified by a defining relative clause **the man holding the trump card in the killing of Sharlyne Kirk** in the form of a noun phrase having **Man** as the head noun, which is a common noun and a relative clause **holding the trump card in the killing of Sharlyne Kirk** which functions as a post-modifier, providing specific details about the man's involvement in the murder case. The nominal reference elaborates on the identity and significance of the subject within the narrative. The same sentence has a nominal reference **man with intimidating physique** describing the physical appearance of the man. This nominal reference has **man**, a common noun, as the head noun being post-modified by the prepositional phrase **with intimidating physique**. This nominal reference functions as a subject complement, providing additional descriptive information about the subject **Herman Kreg**.

The Daily Nation (DN) report avoids referring to the suspect by name; instead, it uses the possessive nominal reference **Gregory's PA**. This form of reference assigns the offender to Gregory, a powerful governor, thus centering Gregory in the discourse and diverting attention from the PA, who is implicated in the murder case. This close association with a powerful figure effectively shields the PA from accusations, making reporters fail to incriminate the suspect and instead masking power dynamics and reproducing partiality and social inequalities in the murder discourse. The STD report, on the other hand, explicitly identifies Herman Kreg as the key figure in Sharlyne Kirk's murder, highlighting power dynamics through direct naming.



It also allows for the navigation of power dynamics with influential actors involved and could serve the broader ideology of the media houses they are associated with, potentially ensuring their safety. This interpretation suggests that media houses may prioritize their relationship with powerful figures over the pursuit of truth and justice, raising questions about media ethics and accountability.

### 7. DN Article 7 (2018)

Gregory owns up to Sharlyne affair  
 sayer process:verbal target  
 In a statement to police, governor confesses that he was in a  
 Sayer process:verbal  
'romantic' affair with university student even as he trots out  
 Target agent process:material  
his wife and children in an attempt to shore up his family credentials.  
 Goal process:material goal

### 8. STD Article 8 (2018)

Gregory brings out family, denies role in Sharlyne's murder  
 agent process:material goal process:verbal target  
Governor appears at news conference with wife and son,  
 Carrier process:relational circumstance of place  
proclaims innocence and calls for speedy probe into rogue  
 process:verbal verbiage conj Process:verbal verbiage  
university students killing

The DN headline uses the verbal process **owns up** to implicitly connect Gregory to the murder case by stating that he admits to an affair with Sharlyne. This choice of this process enacts Gregory as the sayer, enhancing the credibility of the story. By avoiding giving the governor a voice, the writer thrusts him into an actor position and thus finds an opportune moment to link him to the murder through the governor's owning up to the affair.

By framing Gregory negatively, this linguistic strategy unmask power dynamics with him, constructing his culpability. In the opening statement, the DN authors use the verbal process **confesses** alongside two material processes, **trots out** and **shore up**. The verbal process **confesses** implies admitting to the truth, similar to **owns up** in the headline. This word choice suggests a solemn admission of guilt, similar to a religious confession. The DN authors deliberately use this term to imply that Gregory acknowledges his relationship with Sharlyne and seeks public forgiveness, particularly from his wife and children, for his secret affair. The STD headline uses both material and verbal processes.

The material process **brings out** enacts Gregory as an agent performing the action of 'bringing out'; the verbal process **denies** enacts Gregory as the sayer who denies the accusations leveled against him. Gregory personally introduces his family, emphasizing his marital status to imply he is incapable of murder. He explicitly denies killing Sharlyne and implicitly denies the affair reported in the DN. This portrayal suggests the reporters' attempt to frame Gregory as an innocent person, possibly aligning with their media house's ideology and navigating power dynamics with him. In the opening statement, the STD authors use the verbal processes **proclaims** and **calls for** to convey the story's experiential content.

These processes frame Gregory as an innocent in the murder case, enabling the reporters to mask power dynamics. **Proclaims** carries significant weight, forcefully asserting his innocence. Additionally, the verbal process **calls for** (a speedy investigation) further distances him from the allegations. The authors' choice of these verbal processes aims to convince readers of Gregory's innocence, support the media house's ideology, navigate power dynamics with Gregory, and ensure the safety of the involved media fraternity.

The circumstance of place **at news conference** provides Gregory a platform to address millions of Kenyans, allowing him to clarify his stance and dispel any doubts about his guilt. This privilege, reserved for influential individuals, further masks power dynamics and supports Gregory’s innocence, aligning with the media house’s ideological views.

Though operating within some notion of truth, the two stories are slanted differently, reflecting the political orientations of the newspapers and their ideological stances: The Daily Nation aligns with the political left; The left-wing ideology typically champions ideals of equality, social justice and collective responsibility, advocating for government intervention to address societal inequalities and to provide public services while the Standard aligns with the political right: The right-wing ideology primarily champions social conservatism asserting the importance of traditional values. This interpretation, stemming from textual analysis to questions of political bias, aligns with the purpose of the critical linguistic method used in this study. It highlights that texts are not neutral but reflect institutional and political discursive practices. In the long run, the revelation of potential power dynamics between media houses and influential entities can erode public trust in the media’s ability to provide unbiased and accurate reporting.

### 9. DN Article 9 (2018)

Ten more days: Governor accused of murdering his girl friend

agent

walked into court a bullish man yesterday ‘highfiving’ friends

process:material

and looking forward to freedom - the judge had other ideas

conj process:mental

carrier process:Relational attributive

### 10. STD Article 10 (2018)

Governor’s shock: Judge rejects Migori County chief’s bail

Sayer process:verbal target

application, Says his release could pose threat to witnesses. She

process:verbal

quoted

sayer

also rules that he should not be given special treatment in remand prison.

process:verbal

quoted

By post-modifying the head noun **governor** with a dependent clause featuring the passive verb **accused**, the DN author places the governor in the goal position while omitting the agent, thereby rendering the information less credible and unproven. The subsequent clause, utilizing the material process **walked**, positions the governor as the agent, portraying him as confidently entering the court with the manner described as **a bullish man as he high-fives his friends**. This depiction contrasts sharply with the previous clause, suggesting that the governor is an aggressive and proud individual, potentially capable of the crimes he is accused of. However, the evaluative language employed here introduces subjectivity, as the author appears to inject personal judgment into the narrative. The final clause, enacted through the relational process **had**, is separated from the previous one by a long pause indicated by a hyphen, highlighting the contrast between the judge’s perspective and Gregory’s. The use of **had** combined with the adjective **other** subtly ridicules Gregory’s aggressiveness and arrogance, as depicted in the preceding complex clause.

In contrast, the STD article presents Gregory differently, not introducing him actively. Instead, readers learn about him through three verbal processes, all attributed to the judge: **rejects**, **says** and **rules**. This portrayal downplays Gregory’s aggressive nature by denying him a voice or agency role, presenting him in a less harshly manner compared to the DN’s depiction. The language choices in the DN and STD articles highlight the power of language in shaping public perception. The reporters’ portrayals not only depict the event but also potentially reveal their ideological stances, potentially influencing readers’ interpretations of Gregory’s character and culpability.

### **Findings from the analysis of the data**

The study found that both newspapers, The Daily Nation (DN) and The Standard (STD), employ similar linguistic strategies to construct power relations within their murder report narratives differently. For instance, the DN's use of the verbal process **owns up** and the material process **trots out** to frame Gregory as an active participant in the affair and potentially linked to the murder, reveals a strategy to unmask power relations and incriminate Gregory. In contrast, the STD opts for the verbal process **proclaims** and **calls for** to assert Gregory's innocence and maintain a distance from any implication, masking power relations and negotiating with the powerful figure. These linguistic choices significantly shape public perception of Gregory's involvement and contribute to the negotiation of power dynamics between the media, the investigative units, and influential figures like Gregory.

The findings suggest that these linguistic choices align with broader ideological and institutional perspectives of the media houses. The DN's strategy appears to be focused on exposing the culpability of the perpetrators. In contrast, the STD seems to seek to protect the reputation of Gregory, especially given his status and political influence. This distinction points to a clear divergence in the media houses' editorial policies and potential political orientations.

### **Recommendations**

To enhance journalistic integrity, media professionals should undergo training in ethical reporting and fact-checking to reduce subjective interpretations and ensure balanced coverage. Establishing editorial guidelines that prioritize accuracy, transparency, and accountability is essential, especially in sensitive reporting on issues like murder. This includes incorporating diverse perspectives to minimize bias. Finally, expanding research to include online and audio platforms will provide a broader understanding of language use in various news formats in Kenya, enriching analyses of murder reporting.

### **Conclusion**

This study underscores that language use in media reports of murder cases is a crucial factor in shaping public perception and revealing underlying power relations. Both the Daily Nation and The Standard employ distinct linguistic strategies that either mask or unmask power dynamics, influencing how audiences perceive culpability, innocence and institutional integrity. While these reports may retain elements of factual truth, their narratives are shaped by broader political and editorial influences, making them susceptible to bias. Enhancing transparency, ethical reporting, and objective journalism are essential for safeguarding public trust and ensuring fair and accurate representations of complex social events. Such efforts will promote a more informed and equitable media landscape.

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