

A Linguistic Stylistic Analysis of the Language Used by the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), Imo State Command, Owerri

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ABSTRACT

Language is a central instrument of policing: through it, the police inform the public, assert authority, justify actions and build or erode public trust. This study undertook a linguistic stylistic analysis of the language used by the Nigerian Police Force (NPF), Imo State Command, Owerri. It sought to identify the lexical, grammatical, graphological and discourse features of the Command's public communication and to explain the functions these features serve. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design and was anchored on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, with Leech and Short's levels of stylistic analysis as the analytical model. Data comprised press releases issued by the Command's Public Relations Office, public notices and signposts at police formations in Owerri, purposively selected for their representativeness of the Command's public discourse. Findings revealed a distinctive institutional register marked by legal-administrative and security jargon, euphemism, formulaic expressions, nominalisation, agentless passive constructions, long complex sentences, honorific and evaluative modifiers for officers and stigmatising labels for suspects, conventionalised graphological layout, and a recurrent narrative structure moving from incident to police action to public advisory. These features function to project authority and professionalism, legitimise police action, distance the institution from responsibility for adverse outcomes, and shape public perception. The study concludes that the Command's language is strategically constructed but sometimes sacrifices clarity and public engagement. It recommends plain-language training for police public relations officers, more balanced presentation of suspects, and greater use of indigenous languages and accessible formats in public communication.

Keywords: stylistics, register, police discourse, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Nigerian English, Imo State

INTRODUCTION

Language is never neutral. The words an institution chooses, the way it structures its sentences and the format in which it presents information all shape how its audience understands events and how they perceive the institution itself. This is especially true of the police, whose work depends on public cooperation and whose legitimacy rests partly on how they communicate. Gibbons (2003) observed that language pervades every stage of the

justice process, from the initial encounter between police and citizen to the courtroom, and that the power relations of legal settings are enacted largely through language.

The Nigeria Police Force is the principal agency for maintaining internal security in Nigeria, with statutory duties that include the prevention and detection of crime, the protection of life and property and the enforcement of laws (Police Act, 2020). The Force communicates with the public through many channels: press releases and briefings, social media posts, signposts and notices at police stations and checkpoints, and face-to-face interactions. In the age of social media, police press releases circulate widely and are often the first official account the public receives of a crime, an arrest or a security operation.

Imo State provides a significant setting for studying police language. In recent years, the state has experienced serious security challenges, including attacks on police formations and personnel, kidnappings and violent crime, alongside public concern about police conduct. The Imo State Police Command, headquartered in Owerri, communicates regularly about these events through its Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO). The language of these communications plays a role in shaping public understanding of insecurity and of the police response to it.

Stylistics, the study of distinctive features of language use in context and the effects they create (Simpson, 2004; Wales, 2011), offers tools for analysing such communication systematically. Although stylistic studies in Nigeria have covered literary texts, political speeches, religious discourse and media language, the language of the police, particularly at the level of a state command, has received limited attention.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Police communication in Nigeria is often perceived by the public as formal, formulaic and difficult to relate to, and sometimes as one-sided. Press releases may describe suspects in strongly negative terms before trial, use euphemisms for the use of lethal force, or rely on official jargon that ordinary citizens find opaque. Such features can affect public trust, the presumption of innocence and the effectiveness of police messages on safety. However, these impressions have rarely been examined through systematic linguistic analysis. Without such analysis, it is difficult to identify which features characterise police language, what functions they serve, and how communication could be improved. This study addresses that gap by analysing the language of the Imo State Police Command.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to carry out a linguistic stylistic analysis of the language used by the NPF, Imo State Command, Owerri. Specifically, the study sought to: (1) identify the lexical and semantic features of the Command's language; (2) examine the grammatical (syntactic) features of the Command's language; (3) describe the graphological features of the

Command's written communication; (4) analyse the discourse and pragmatic features of the Command's communication; and (5) explain the functions these stylistic features serve.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What lexical and semantic features characterise the language of the NPF, Imo State Command?
2. What grammatical features characterise the Command's language?
3. What graphological features characterise the Command's written communication?
4. What discourse and pragmatic features characterise the Command's communication?
5. What functions do these stylistic features serve?

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study was limited to the written public communication of the Imo State Police Command, Owerri: press releases issued by the Command's Public Relations Office, and public notices and signposts at police formations in Owerri metropolis. Oral interactions between officers and citizens were outside its scope.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Stylistics. Stylistics is the branch of linguistics that studies style, the distinctive way language is used in a particular text or context, and the effects that such use produces. Wales (2011) defines it as the study of style with an emphasis on the choices writers and speakers make from the resources of the language. Simpson (2004) stresses that stylistics is concerned not only with describing linguistic features but with explaining why they are used and how they create meaning. Although stylistics developed largely through the analysis of literature, it applies equally to non-literary texts such as advertisements, political speeches, legal documents and institutional communication. Crystal and Davy (1969), in their influential work on English style, analysed varieties such as the language of religion, newspaper reporting and legal documents, establishing a model for the stylistic study of non-literary language.

Register and Institutional Language. Register refers to a variety of language defined by its use in a particular situation (Halliday et al., 1964). Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explain that register is shaped by three variables of context: field (what is happening, the subject matter), tenor (who is taking part and their relationships) and mode (the role language plays, including the channel). Institutional languages, such as legal, medical, military and police languages, develop recognisable registers through repeated use in specific settings. These registers include specialised vocabulary, conventional formats and fixed expressions that mark membership of the institution and project its authority.

Police Language. Research on police language has examined interview and interrogation discourse, the language of cautions and rights, and police reports. Gibbons (2003) noted that police language often features nominalisation, passive voice and technical terms, which can obscure agency and make communication difficult for lay people. Studies of police press releases elsewhere suggest that they tend to frame events from the institution's perspective, highlight police success and describe suspects in ways that may prejudge guilt. Fairclough (1989) argued more broadly that institutional discourse reproduces power relations, as institutions use language to position themselves as authoritative and the public as recipients.

Nigerian English. Nigerian institutions communicate largely in English, which in Nigeria has developed distinctive features of vocabulary, idiom and usage (Bamgbose, 1995; Jowitt, 1991). Expressions such as "hoodlums", "miscreants" and "men of the underworld", and the extended use of formal and elevated vocabulary in official writing, are characteristic of Nigerian public discourse. Police language in Nigeria therefore combines features of the universal police register with features of Nigerian English and of the formal style of Nigerian officialdom.

Theoretical Framework. The study is anchored on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by M. A. K. Halliday (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). SFL views language as a system of choices that speakers and writers make to realise meanings in social contexts. It identifies three metafunctions of language: the ideational (representing experience: who did what to whom), the interpersonal (enacting social relations and attitudes) and the textual (organising messages into coherent texts). SFL is suitable for this study because it links linguistic choices to their social functions. For example, the choice between an active clause ("Officers shot the suspect") and a passive or nominalised one ("The suspect was neutralised") is an ideational choice about how agency is represented, with consequences for responsibility. For the practical procedure of analysis, the study adopted Leech and Short's (2007) levels of stylistic analysis, which examine texts at the lexical, grammatical, graphological and cohesion/context levels.

METHODOLOGY

Research design. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design, which is appropriate for identifying, describing and interpreting linguistic features in naturally occurring texts.

Sources of data. Data were drawn from two sources of the Imo State Police Command's written public communication: (1) press releases issued by the Command's Public Relations Office between January 2024 and June 2025, obtained from the Command's official social media pages and as reported in national newspapers, covering arrests, recoveries of stolen property and weapons, attacks on police formations, rescues of kidnap victims, security advisories and festive-period warnings; and (2) public notices and signposts displayed at the

Command headquarters and selected divisional police stations and checkpoints in Owerri metropolis, photographed by the researcher.

Sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 press releases and 15 notices and signposts that covered the main types of police communication and were complete and legible.

Method of data analysis. The texts were analysed qualitatively using Leech and Short's (2007) levels: lexical (vocabulary and semantic choices), grammatical (sentence and clause structure), graphological (layout, punctuation, capitalisation and typography) and discourse (text structure, cohesion and pragmatic functions). Recurrent features were identified across texts, illustrated with representative extracts, and interpreted in terms of Halliday's ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. To protect privacy, names of suspects and victims in extracts were replaced with general labels.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Research Question 1: Lexical and Semantic Features

Table 1

Major Lexical and Semantic Features of the Command's Language

Feature	Representative examples	Function
Security and operational jargon	operatives, tactical teams, credible intelligence, swift response, cordon and search, exhibits, operational base	Signals expertise and professionalism; marks institutional identity
Legal-administrative vocabulary	suspect, investigation, charged to court, in custody, discreet investigation, prosecution	Frames events within due process and legality
Euphemism	neutralised, fatally injured, succumbed to injuries, engaged in a gun duel	Softens references to killing and the use of lethal force
Evaluative modifiers for police	gallant operatives, vigilant officers, ever-ready, relentless, proactive	Constructs a positive, heroic institutional image
Stigmatising labels for suspects	hoodlums, criminal elements, bandits, miscreants, notorious kidnapper, armed robbery syndicate	Constructs suspects as threats and outsiders; legitimises police action
Elevated and formal diction	commence, effect an arrest, apprehend, reiterate, unflinching, pursuant to	Projects formality and authority, typical of Nigerian official style
Inclusive and appeal terms	law-abiding citizens, members of the	Positions the public as allies whose

public, residents, stakeholders

cooperation is sought

Extract 1 (representative): "Acting on credible intelligence, gallant operatives of the Command stormed the hideout of the hoodlums and engaged them in a gun duel, during which two of the suspects were neutralised." The extract combines operational jargon (credible intelligence, operatives), an evaluative modifier for police (gallant), a stigmatising label (hoodlums) and a euphemism (neutralised). Ideationally, it constructs a clear moral opposition between heroic officers and criminal suspects, while the euphemism softens the fact that people were killed.

Research Question 2: Grammatical Features

Agentless passive constructions. Clauses such as "two suspects were neutralized", "the victim was rescued unhurt" and "exhibits were recovered" omit or background the agent. Passives are used both to keep attention on outcomes and, in the case of fatalities, to avoid naming who carried out the action.

Nominalisation. Processes are frequently expressed as nouns: the arrest of the suspects, the recovery of the firearms, the conclusion of investigation, the restoration of normalcy. Nominalisation compresses information and adds formality, but it also removes participants and time from the representation of events, making them appear as facts rather than actions performed by people.

Long, complex sentences. Press releases often contain long sentences with multiple subordinate and participial clauses, for example opening with an adverbial participle ("Acting on credible intelligence...", "Following a distress call..."). These pack sequences of events into single sentences, which can reduce readability for ordinary readers.

Declarative and imperative mood. Most clauses are declaratives that report events. Imperatives appear in advisories and notices ("Report any suspicious movement to the nearest police station", "Stop! Police checkpoint"), directly enacting the institution's authority to direct the public.

Modality and third-person self-reference. High-value modal expressions mark the Command's determination and authority ("The Command will not tolerate...", "Perpetrators will be fished out and made to face the full wrath of the law"). The institution refers to itself as "the Command" rather than "we", reinforcing impersonality and institutional voice.

Research Question 3: Graphological Features

Table 2

Graphological Features of the Command's Written Communication

Feature	Description	Function
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Fixed letterhead and crest	NPF crest, Command name and "Press Release" heading	Authenticates the text and signals official status
Capitalised headlines	Titles in full capitals, e.g., "POLICE ARREST FOUR KIDNAP SUSPECTS, RESCUE VICTIM"	Attracts attention; foregrounds police success
Headline grammar	Present tense, omitted articles and auxiliaries	Creates immediacy, following journalistic convention
Capitalised institutional titles	the Commissioner of Police, the Command, CP, ranks and acronyms such as DPO, PPRO, DCP	Signals hierarchy and institutional importance
Signature block	Name, rank and title of the PPRO at the end	Attributes the text to an accountable official voice
Signage typography	Bold capitals, red and blue colours, short phrases ("STOP", "POLICE IS YOUR FRIEND")	Ensures visibility and quick comprehension; asserts authority
Hashtags and handles	Official hashtags and emergency numbers on social media	Extends reach and provides contact channels

Research Question 4: Discourse and Pragmatic Features

Recurrent generic structure. Press releases follow a stable sequence: (1) a headline announcing the outcome; (2) an orientation giving date, place and trigger; (3) an account of police action; (4) results, often listing arrests and recovered items; (5) a statement on further action; (6) the Commissioner of Police's commendation of officers and assurance to the public; and (7) an advisory or appeal to the public with contact numbers. This structure frames each event as a problem resolved by police action.

Formulaic expressions and intertextuality. Fixed phrases recur across texts, including "The Command wishes to inform the general public...", "The Commissioner of Police... has assured residents..." and "...urges members of the public to go about their lawful businesses". Releases frequently report the Commissioner of Police's directives and assurances, embedding the voice of the institution's head and reinforcing hierarchy.

Speech acts, presupposition and framing. The texts perform assertives (reporting events), commissives (promising action and safety), directives (instructing and appealing to the public) and expressives (commending officers). Labels such as "the notorious kidnapper"

presuppose guilt before trial. Phrases such as "engaged in a gun duel" presuppose that the suspects fired on police, framing lethal force as defensive.

Research Question 5: Functions of the Stylistic Features

Across the levels of analysis, the features serve five main functions: (1) projecting authority and professionalism, through jargon, formal diction, high modality, institutional self-reference and official graphology; (2) legitimising police action, through the problem-resolution structure, defensive framing and positive evaluation of officers; (3) managing responsibility, through passives, nominalisation and euphemism that background police agency in adverse outcomes; (4) constructing social categories, by contrasting "gallant operatives" and "law-abiding citizens" with "hoodlums" and "criminal elements"; and (5) reassuring and mobilising the public, through commissive promises, advisories and appeals for information.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings show that the Imo State Police Command communicates in a distinctive institutional register, consistent with Halliday's view of register as shaped by field, tenor and mode (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The field of crime and security explains the dense operational and legal vocabulary. The tenor, an authoritative institution addressing a mass public, explains the formal diction, high modality, imperatives and institutional self-reference. The mode, mainly written press releases circulated through social media and the press, explains the journalistic headline style and fixed generic structure.

The use of passives, nominalisation and euphemism supports Gibbons's (2003) observation that police language tends to obscure agency. In SFL terms, these are ideational choices that shape who is represented as acting and who is acted upon. When the Command writes that suspects were "neutralised" after a "gun duel", it represents a killing as the outcome of a mutual exchange, framing police action as defensive and necessary. This may be accurate in some cases, but the language makes independent scrutiny difficult and may weaken public confidence where police conduct is already questioned.

The contrast between evaluative terms for officers and stigmatising labels for suspects reflects what Fairclough (1989) described as the reproduction of power relations in institutional discourse. This construction can strengthen public support during insecurity, but it can also undermine the constitutional presumption of innocence, since people described as "notorious kidnappers" in press releases have not yet been tried. The elevated and formal diction reflects broader features of Nigerian official English (Jowitt, 1991). Combined with long, complex sentences, it projects seriousness and authority but may reduce accessibility for residents with limited formal education, many of whom are more comfortable in Igbo or Nigerian Pidgin.

CONCLUSION

The language of the NPF, Imo State Command, Owerri, is a carefully constructed institutional register. At the lexical level, it relies on security and legal jargon, euphemism, formal diction, and contrasting evaluative labels for officers and suspects. At the grammatical level, it favours agentless passives, nominalisation, complex sentences, high modality and impersonal self-reference. Graphologically, it follows official and journalistic conventions that authenticate and foreground police success. At the discourse level, it follows a stable problem-resolution structure with recurrent formulae and a range of speech acts. These features project authority, legitimise police action, manage responsibility, construct social categories and reassure the public. Yet the same features can reduce clarity, obscure accountability and prejudice suspects. Police language is therefore not merely a means of conveying information but a tool for shaping public perception, and it carries corresponding responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Imo State Police Command should train its public relations officers in plain-language writing, using shorter sentences and everyday vocabulary to make communication accessible to all residents.
2. Press releases should describe persons arrested as suspects and avoid labels that presume guilt before trial, in keeping with the presumption of innocence.
3. Reports of the use of lethal force should state clearly what happened and who was involved, rather than relying on euphemism, to strengthen transparency and public trust.
4. The Command should issue key safety messages and advisories in Igbo and Nigerian Pidgin alongside English, and in audio and visual formats, to reach a wider audience.
5. The Nigeria Police Force should develop a communication style guide for its commands that balances authority with clarity, accountability and respect for citizens.
6. Further studies should analyse oral police discourse, compare the language of different state commands, and examine how members of the public interpret police communication.

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