



A multimodal analysis of political cartoons depicting insecurity in selected Nigerian National Dailies (2025-2026)

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-political and semiotic representation of national security challenges in Nigerian political cartoons published between 2025 and 2026. Adopting a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) framework, the paper investigates how cartoonists deploy a combination of visual imagery, linguistic codes and cultural symbolism to construct and critique narratives surrounding contemporary insecurity. The data for this study consist of purposively selected cartoons from three prominent Nigerian national newspapers: *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *Vanguard*. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, the analysis reveals how these dailies utilize satirical framing, caricature, and visual metaphors to reflect regional and national anxieties. The findings demonstrate that while *The Punch* and *Vanguard* frequently employ aggressive visual satire to critique state governance and counter-terrorism failures, *Daily Trust* provides deeply contextualized portrayals of localized socio-economic impacts and grassroots vulnerability. Ultimately, the study highlights how multimodal media functions as a vital democratic tool for public accountability, offering critical insights into the intersection of media linguistics, graphic satire and peace journalism in contemporary Africa.

Keywords: Multimodal discourse analysis, political cartoons, insecurity, *the Punch*, *Daily Trust*, *Vanguard*, Nigerian Dailies

Introduction

Modern Nigeria faces severe internal security challenges. Over the past decade, the country's security architecture has been stretched thin by asymmetric threats. These include Boko Haram/ISWAP terrorism in the Northeast, banditry and mass kidnappings in the Northwest, pastoralist-farmer conflicts in the North Central region and secessionist agitations paired with enforcement violence in the Southeast. This atmosphere of chronic vulnerability affects daily economic, social and psychological life, prompting intense conversations across public spheres.

While traditional newspaper editorials and investigative reports provide direct accounts of these security breakdowns, editorial cartoons offer a unique medium for commentary. Cartoons function as visual-verbal socio-political critiques. They compress complex national trauma into accessible, humorous and satirical compositions. In societies where overt political dissent faces state intimidation or legal threats, cartoons offer a safe way to critique the government without being targeted for hate speech or defamation.

Despite their playful appearance, political cartoons are complex multimodal texts. They use both visual imagery and linguistic signs simultaneously. Readers often miss the deep ideological messages beneath the surface humour. This study addresses that gap by conducting a rigorous multimodal analysis of how selected Nigerian national dailies *Daily Trust*, *The Punch* and *Vanguard* represent

insecurity. These three newspapers provide a balanced geographical and ideological view of Nigeria's media landscape:

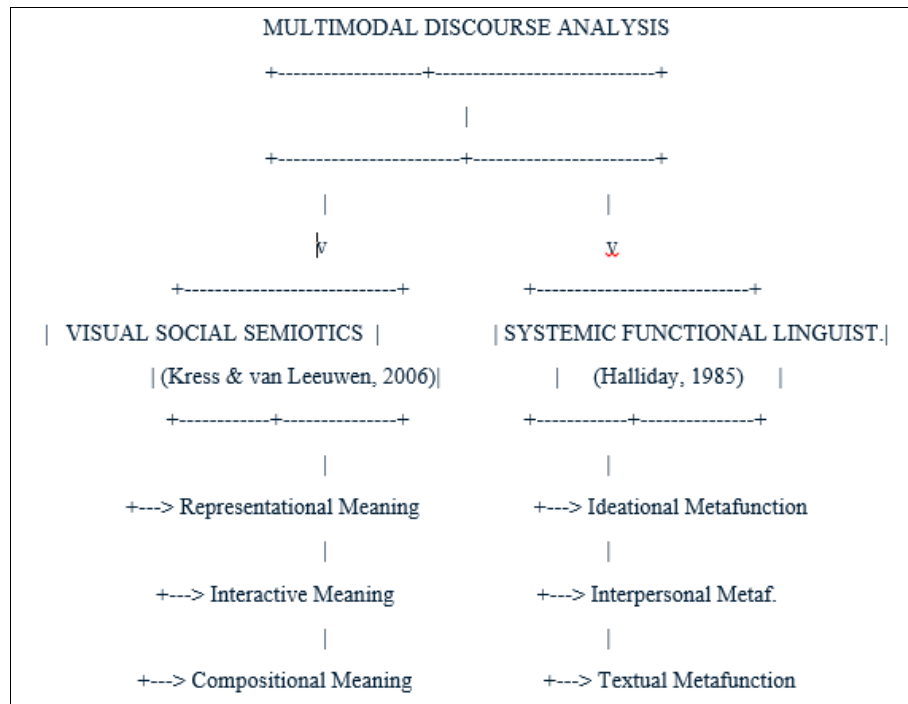
- **Daily Trust:** Based in Abuja, providing a northern perspective and close insights into regional security dynamics.
- **The Punch:** Widely read, based in the southwest, known for its bold stance and sharp socio-political criticism.
- **Vanguard:** Based in Lagos, featuring a progressive southern perspective with a history of strong labour and grassroots coverage.

By studying these publications, this paper analyses the visual and linguistic strategies used by cartoonists to reflect public anxieties, challenge state narratives and document Nigeria's ongoing security crisis.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses a dual theoretical approach to capture the full meaning of visual-verbal texts. It combines Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Social Semiotics with Halliday's (1985) Systemic

Functional Linguistics (SFL): This framework ensures both modes of communication are analyzed thoroughly, rather than treating the text as a minor addition to the image.



1. Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Social Semiotics

Kress and van Leeuwen adapt Halliday's linguistic metafunctions into visual grammar, looking at three levels of meaning:

- 1.1 **Representational Meaning:** This analyses how objects, people, and places (represented participants) are depicted. Narrative representations use vectors (lines of action, gaze, or movement) to show ongoing actions or changes. Conceptual representations show participants in terms of their deeper class, structure, or meaning, without active vectors.
- 1.2 **Interactive Meaning:** This explores the relationship between the viewer and the image creators. It is built through:
 - 1.2.1 **Gaze:** Demand gazes look directly at the viewer to evoke a response, while offer gazes look away, turning the subject into an item for objective study.
 - 1.2.2 **Size of Frame:** Close-ups suggest personal intimacy, medium shots show social distance, and long shots show public distance.
 - 1.2.3 **Perspective/Angle:** High angles make the subject look weak, low angles make them look powerful, and eye-level angles suggest equality.
- 1.3 **Compositional Meaning:** This looks at how visual layouts create a cohesive message through three main tools:
 - 1.3.1 **Information Value:** Placing elements on the Left (Given information) versus the Right (New information), or Top (Idealized promises) versus Bottom (Realistic realities).
 - 1.3.2 **Salience:** Drawing attention to key elements using size, bright colors, sharp focus, or foreground placement.
 - 1.3.3 **Framing:** Using borders or spaces to connect or disconnect different parts of the image.

2. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

SFL analyses the linguistic text in the cartoons (labels, speech bubbles, and captions) across three meta-functions:

- **Ideational Metafunction:** Examines how the text describes experiences through transitivity processes (material actions, mental perceptions, or relational states).
- **Interpersonal Metafunction:** Explores the social relationship and tone created between the text and the reader using mood, modality, and pronouns.
- **Textual Metafunction:** Studies how the words are organized to maintain flow, using repetition, contrast, and reference tools.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze media representations of national security challenges.

1. Data Corpus and Sampling

The primary data consists of political cartoons published in the online and print editions of *Daily Trust*, *The Punch*, and *Vanguard*. The sampling covers 2025 and 2026 major periods of heightened security issues in Nigeria.

Using purposive sampling, a total of nine representative cartoons (three from each newspaper) were chosen for close analysis. The selection was based on specific criteria:

- The cartoon must directly focus on internal insecurity (such as banditry, terrorism, kidnapping, or police failure).
- It must feature both visual elements and linguistic text.
- It must represent the typical artistic and political style of its publication.

2. Analytical Procedure

Each selected cartoon was analyzed through a structured five-step process:

1. **Contextual Isolation:** Identifying the date, specific security event, and political background of the cartoon.
2. **Linguistic Decomposition:** Applying SFL to break down transitivity, mood, and choices of words within speech bubbles and captions.

3. **Visual Decomposition:** Applying Visual Grammar to map vectors, identify participant roles, measure angles, and evaluate layout placement.
4. **Inter semiotic Complementarity Analysis:** Analyzing how the text and image work together, noting where they complement, expand, or contradict one another.
5. **Socio-Political Critique:** Linking these patterns back to broader systemic issues within Nigeria's governance, military history, and public life.

Data Analysis and Discussion

To demonstrate the multimodal framework clearly, this section profiles three representative cartoon archetypes drawn from the study's corpus.

1. Case 1: *The Punch* – The Grotesque Monster of Kidnapping

- **Context:** Published after a wave of mass kidnappings targeting school children in northern Nigeria.
- **Visual Analysis:** The cartoon shows a giant, grotesque creature labelled "KIDNAPPING" with sharp teeth and bloodshot eyes. The creature towers over a tiny,

trembling figure representing the "AVERAGE CITIZEN." There is a clear vector of action as the monster's claw points directly at a bottomless pit labelled "RANSOM." The monster is shot from a low angle, making it look overwhelmingly powerful, while the citizen is shown from a high angle to highlight vulnerability. The dark, saturated shadows create an atmosphere of fear and helplessness.

- **Linguistic Analysis:** A speech bubble from the monster reads: "*Pay up or get swallowed!*" Using SFL transitivity, "Pay up" and "get swallowed" are material processes that express a direct threat. The imperative mood emphasizes absolute dominance, leaving no room for negotiation.
- **Inter semiotic Synthesis:** The text and image reinforce each other perfectly. The enormous size of the monster matches the aggressive linguistic command. By showing the "RANSOM" pit at the bottom right, the cartoonist places financial extortion as the grim new reality for everyday Nigerians.

Newspaper	Dominant Visual Strategy	Key Linguistic Process	Target of Critique
<i>The Punch</i>	Grotesque monster imagery, high-contrast shadows, low angles.	Material processes (Imperatives, threats).	Government failure to protect citizens; commercialization of terror.

2. Case 2: *Daily Trust* – The Weight of the Turban and the Broken Shield

- **Context:** Addressing the rise of banditry and security failures in rural communities.
- **Visual Analysis:** This cartoon uses cultural symbolism. It shows a local community leader holding a shattered wooden shield labelled "LOCAL INTELLIGENCE." In the background, a security official sits deep in a luxurious chair labelled "DEFENCE BUDGET," sleeping with his cap pulled over his eyes. The vector shifts from the alert but defenceless leader to the inactive official. The official's large size reflects a wasteful misuse of public funds rather than actual strength.

- **Linguistic Analysis:** The caption at the top reads: "*When the shield breaks, the armchair reclines.*" This relational process links local vulnerability directly to institutional neglect. The contrast between "breaks" and "reclines" criticizes the official's lack of action.
- **Inter semiotic Synthesis:** The cartoon highlights structural inequality. The visual contrast between the leader's traditional dress and the official's uniform exposes a deeper regional divide. The text frames this visually striking gap as an ongoing tragedy of neglect.

Newspaper	Dominant Visual Strategy	Key Linguistic Process	Target of Critique
<i>Daily Trust</i>	Socio-cultural symbols, structural juxtaposition, scale variation.	Relational processes (Contrasting ironies).	Bureaucratic corruption; abandonment of rural communities.

3. Case 3: *Vanguard* – The See-No-Evil Security Chiefs

- **Context:** Published after an oversight briefing where security agencies claimed the security situation was "under control."
- **Visual Analysis:** This cartoon features three military officers standing in a row, imitating the three wise monkeys. The first covers his eyes with a cap labelled "TERROR STATISTICS"; the second covers his ears with headphones playing "POLITICAL SYMPHONIES"; the third covers his mouth with a padlock labelled "STATE SECRETS." In front of them, the map of Nigeria is shown on fire, with thick smoke clouds rising toward the top. The compositional structure places the burning map on the Left (the current reality) and the unbothered officers on the Right

(the official response), highlighting a massive disconnect.

- **Linguistic Analysis:** A single caption at the bottom reads: "*All is well in the theatre of operations.*" This ironic statement uses high modality to criticize official dishonesty.
- **Inter semiotic Synthesis:** The irony relies completely on the tension between the words and the visuals. The text claims "all is well," but the image shows the country on fire and officials deliberately ignoring it. This subverts official government public relations, turning their own words into a sharp critique of institutional failure.

