

Language, Power, and Crime: A Discourse Analysis of Murder Reporting in Kenyan Newspapers

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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 perpetrators' identities, underscoring how journalists navigate the power dynamics inherent in such stories while managing potential harm to themselves, the subjects involved, and the broader sociopolitical context. The critical role of language in shaping public discourse on justice is also examined. Utilizing ten purposively sampled headlines and leads from The Daily Nation and The Standard newspapers' 2018 coverage of murders implicating 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 nominal references and transitivity choices differently, depending on the subject's status and the media outlet. There's a notable tendency for the Daily Nation to use both nominal references and transitivity to implicate suspects, thereby emphasizing accusation and implicitly reinforcing a narrative of guilt. 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, power asymmetries in crime reporting, and highlight the need for policy and advocacy efforts to foster ethical and balanced journalism. 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.*

INTRODUCTION

Language in the media is not merely a neutral vehicle for reporting events; rather, it functions as a powerful semiotic resource through which social realities are constructed, negotiated, and legitimized. In crime reporting, particularly in murder cases implicating prominent personalities, linguistic choices play a crucial role in shaping public understandings of responsibility, victimhood, and culpability. Media texts do not simply reflect reality; they actively organize it through selective representation, framing, and evaluative positioning. Drawing on Roger Fowler's *Critical Linguistics* (1991), this study analyses media reports on murders implicating prominent personalities in Kenya's *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* (DN and STD). Critical Linguistics offers a systematic framework for examining how grammatical and lexical structures, such as transitivity patterns, agency assignment, nominalization, and passive constructions, encode ideological meanings and reproduce unequal power relations. Within this approach, news discourse is viewed as a site where power relations are reproduced through subtle textual strategies since the discourse is understood as being shaped by institutional constraints and socio-political pressures that influence what can be said and how it is expressed. Journalists, operating under risks such as legal threats, political pressure, and reputational concerns, may therefore deploy linguistic strategies that mitigate blame, obscure agency, or foreground particular actors.

However, Critical Linguistics also has limitations. Its strong focus on micro-level textual analysis may underemphasise broader socio-discursive processes such as production contexts, intertextuality, and audience reception. In contrast, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed by Fairclough, van Dijk, and Wodak, extends analysis beyond textual features to include the socio-cultural and institutional conditions in which discourse is produced and consumed. CDA highlights the dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure, enabling a more layered understanding of power, ideology, and hegemony. It can, for instance, illuminate how newsroom routines, editorial policies, and political economies shape reporting practices. Despite these limitations, Critical Linguistics remains

central to this study due to its precision in identifying how ideology is embedded in linguistic structure.

Existing scholarship underscores the importance of language in crime reporting. Okoth (2020) shows how gendered representations in Kenyan news reinforce hierarchical relations, while Nwabueze (2017) demonstrates how framing shapes public interpretations of criminality. Bednarek and Caple (2014) and Tabbert (2016) link narrative structure and newsworthiness to perceptions of risk and drama, and Macharia (2013) highlights persistent stereotyping in Kenyan media discourse. Collectively, these studies emphasise naming practices, transitivity patterns, and social actor representation in meaning-making. However, limited attention has been given to how Kenyan print media represent victims and perpetrators in high-profile murder cases involving powerful individuals, where asymmetries of power are especially pronounced. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how newspapers deploy linguistic strategies - including naming patterns, participant roles, evaluative language, and framing devices - to construct social actors, distribute agency, and negotiate accountability in such reports. While grounded in Critical Linguistics, the study remains theoretically reflexive by drawing on CDA insights where necessary to contextualize textual findings. It demonstrates how media narratives may subtly privilege powerful actors while marginalizing others, thereby contributing to processes of social inequality and symbolic injustice.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how linguistic choices in Kenyan newspaper murder reports construct meaning, negotiate power, and shape public discourse on justice. Qualitative approaches are appropriate for discourse analysis because they allow for detailed interpretation of language within its socio-political context (Creswell, 2013). The analysis is grounded in Critical Linguistics, which conceptualizes language as a social practice embedded in ideology and power relations (Fowler et al., 1979; Fowler, 1991). The dataset consists of ten purposively selected headlines and leads from *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, published in 2018 during heightened media coverage of high-profile murder cases. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich texts directly

aligned with the study's focus, particularly those that explicitly frame suspects and victims (Patton, 2015). Headlines and leads were chosen due to their central role in shaping audience interpretation and framing events (van Dijk, 1988). While the small dataset enables detailed linguistic analysis, it limits statistical generalizability. The study therefore, adopts analytic generalization, where findings illuminate recurring discursive tendencies rather than represent the entirety of Kenyan media discourse.

Each text was systematically coded by newspaper, article number, and year of publication to ensure traceability and analytical clarity. Data analysis followed a critical linguistic procedure focusing on how language constructs agency. This involved examining lexical choices and naming practices, analyzing transitivity structures (Halliday & Hasan, 1985), and identifying nominalization and passive constructions that may background or suppress agency (Fairclough, 1995).

A key analytical concern was whether such linguistic strategies actively obscure agency and whether this reflects intentional bias or routine journalistic practice. Rather than assuming intent, the study adopts a cautious interpretive approach focused on patterned regularities across texts. Linguistic features were analyzed in terms of their discursive effects - particularly whether they consistently foreground or background specific actors - rather than as evidence of authorial intention. Recurrent patterns, such as systematic backgrounding of powerful actors through passivation or nominalization, were treated as analytically significant, especially where more agentive alternatives were available. A comparative analysis between the two newspapers was conducted to identify convergences and divergences in representation strategies. To ensure credibility and ethical rigour, the study relied on transparent analytical procedures, an established theoretical framework, and publicly available data. The focus remained on identifying systemic discursive patterns and their ideological implications rather than attributing intent to individual journalists (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS & 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

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.

The language use in STD creates a sense of impunity for elite actors, suggesting that powerful individuals may be shielded from scrutiny and reinforcing perceptions of media bias in favour of the wealthy and influential. Both reports show how lexical choices shape narrative framing. While DN subtly implicates Gregory, STD tends to obscure his culpability. These contrasting approaches highlight the role of language in shaping public perceptions, demonstrating how word choice carries significant 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 in 3, 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 to a **man with an 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. The absence of any association with the governor implies Kreg's lower social status, signaling that he lacks the influence to warrant anonymity. This direct framing portrays Kreg as both central to the crime and socially isolated, reinforcing how power dictates visibility in media narratives. The descriptive modifiers **quiet** and

intimidating physique shape Kreg's image, implying both secrecy and potential aggression, which frames his physical presence as a form of power while simultaneously constructing a perception of guilt through non-verbal cues. This portrayal demonstrates how language can package assumptions as facts, as noted by Jeffries (2010). The decision to expose Kreg's identity highlights how power dynamics influence who is protected or exposed in public discourse. Such linguistic choices not only shape public perception but also reproduce social inequalities by amplifying the vulnerabilities of those with less power.

The social implications of this framing are significant, as it reinforces power hierarchies and shapes public perceptions of guilt and innocence based on social status. By exposing Herman Kreg's identity, the report reproduces the narrative that less powerful individuals are more likely to be culpable, while powerful figures remain shielded from public scrutiny. This disparity in representation normalizes inequality in media coverage, where social status dictates visibility and accountability. Additionally, by using physical descriptions such as **quiet** and **intimidating physique**, the report frames Kreg's character through non-verbal cues, potentially biasing public opinion based on stereotypes rather than evidence. The focus on Kreg as the central figure also diverts attention from the broader power dynamics that may have facilitated the crime, such as the governor's potential involvement. Moreover, such selective exposure can endanger journalists, as it signals their willingness to confront less powerful suspects while avoiding confrontations with influential figures, highlighting the risks reporters face when challenging those in power. Ultimately, this framing not only shapes public discourse but also reproduces social inequalities by amplifying the vulnerabilities of the powerless while protecting the powerful from scrutiny and accountability.

Transitivity Analysis and Verb Voice

This study employs transitivity analysis within the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Simpson & Mayr, 2010) to examine how clauses represent actions, participants, and processes - specifically, who is constructed as doing what to whom, under what conditions, and with what degree of responsibility. In media discourse, these grammatical configurations are not neutral formal choices; they are representational resources that allocate or obscure agency, thereby

mitigating blame, diffusing accountability, or depersonalizing violence, particularly when prominent personalities are implicated.

By systematically comparing how victims and prominent personalities are grammatically positioned - whether foregrounded as agents, backgrounded as circumstances, or excluded from clauses - the analysis reveals patterned asymmetries in the distribution of agency. These asymmetries are consequential because they guide audience interpretation: actors constructed as agents are more readily associated with culpability or intent, while those grammatically obscured are less likely to be perceived as responsible. In this way, clause-level choices contribute to broader narrative framings of guilt, innocence, and legitimacy.

To capture these effects, each headline and lead is coded for (a) process types (material, mental, verbal, relational), (b) participant roles (Actor, Goal, Beneficiary, etc.), (c) active versus passive voice, and (d) nominalization or agent deletion. These linguistic features are then interpreted within their wider discursive and institutional contexts to show how recurring grammatical patterns align with professional caution, legal risk management, and the protection of influential actors. Thus, transitivity analysis functions not merely as a descriptive grammatical tool but as a means of tracing how micro-level linguistic choices participate in the communicative construction of power relations and public understandings of justice.

5) DN Article 5 (2018)

Gregory and Sharlyne: Murder plot thickens
Goal process: material

6) STD Article 6 (2018)

Pregnant varsity student likely raped before killing
Goal circumstance process: material circumstance.

The analysis of transitivity and verb voice in texts (5) and (6) illustrates how grammatical structure shapes the representation of agency and responsibility. Both headlines employ passive or agentless constructions, which background or omit the actor responsible for the reported actions. Such syntactic choices shift attention from identifiable perpetrators to the event itself, thereby reducing explicit attribution of blame. In Systemic

Functional terms, these clauses realize material processes without clearly specified Actors, limiting the clause's capacity to answer the question of 'who did what to whom.'

For instance, the *Daily Nation* headline 'Murder plot thickens' relies on a supervision-type material process **thickens** that lacks an inherent agent and cannot easily be reformulated into an active structure. This grammatical configuration presents the murder as an abstract, unfolding situation rather than the outcome of deliberate human action. By contrast, the material process "raped" in the *Standard* headline is compatible with active-passive alternation, yet the agent remains omitted, again obscuring responsibility. In both cases, the depersonalization of action diffuses accountability and constructs violence as circumstantial rather than attributable to specific actors.

Importantly, these patterns are interpreted cautiously. Passive constructions are common in headlines due to requirements of brevity, compression, and legal defensiveness. For this reason, the analysis does not treat isolated instances as evidence of ideological manipulation. Instead, interpretation is based on recurring tendencies across texts and situated within the broader sociopolitical context in which journalists operate. When agent deletion repeatedly appears in reports involving socially or politically influential actors, the pattern becomes less easily explained by routine stylistic convention alone and more indicative of strategic caution or institutional pressure. Focusing on prominent personalities therefore does not assume intentional bias, but highlights contexts where communicative risk is heightened and linguistic mitigation is more likely to occur.

Within such contexts, agent suppression and non-committal phrasing may function as protective strategies that allow journalists to report sensitive events while reducing potential legal or political repercussions. These micro-level grammatical choices contribute to broader interpretive effects, as they influence how readers assign responsibility, guilt, and legitimacy. Consequently, media representation may subtly shape public understanding of justice, particularly in high-profile cases where power relations are sensitive. This raises important ethical questions about whether media institutions consistently balance professional caution with their responsibility to ensure transparency, fairness, and accountability in reporting.

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. The 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 unmasks 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 acting for '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 actor 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 grounded in claims to factual reporting, the two newspapers construct victims and perpetrators in ways that reflect distinct ideological orientations, shaping how responsibility and worth are socially perceived. *Daily Nation* tends to foreground issues of equity and accountability, while *The Standard* more often aligns with narratives that resonate with social conservatism and respect for established authority. These representational choices are not merely stylistic; they contribute to broader processes of social inequality and symbolic injustice by differentially humanizing victims, mitigating the culpability of powerful actors, or reinforcing hierarchies of credibility and legitimacy. Such patterns demonstrate how media discourse can normalize asymmetrical power relations and influence public judgment. Consequently, media institutions bear a critical ethical responsibility to ensure balanced, transparent, and accountable reporting practices. This includes avoiding systematic backgrounding of the agency, ensuring equitable representation of social actors, and actively reflecting on how editorial choices may reproduce or challenge existing social inequalities.

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, 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 less harshly 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. It is worth pointing out that transitivity analysis in this study is combined with contextual interpretation of journalistic routines, legal constraints, and institutional pressures. This multi-level approach allows the analysis to distinguish between ordinary headline conventions and patterned representational strategies that align with existing power asymmetries in Kenyan murder reporting of murders implicating.

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 link him to the murder, revealing a strategy to unmask power relations and incriminate Gregory. In contrast, the STD opts for the verbal process **proclaims** and **calls for** the assertion of Gregory's innocence and maintaining 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 receive training in ethical reporting and fact-checking to promote balanced coverage. Clear editorial guidelines prioritizing accuracy, transparency, and accountability are essential, especially in sensitive

crime reporting. Incorporating diverse perspectives can reduce bias. Future research should also extend to online and audio platforms in Kenya.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that linguistic choices in crime reporting are not merely stylistic features but communicative resources that shape how events, actors, and responsibilities are publicly understood. Through the analysis of naming practices, transitivity patterns, and verb voice, the findings show how Kenyan print media construct differential representations of perpetrators in murders implicating prominent personalities. These linguistic strategies influence the foregrounding or backgrounding of agency, thereby shaping readers' interpretations of culpability, innocence, and institutional legitimacy. The study further recognizes that interpreting such strategies raises important ethical and methodological concerns. Institutional, political, and economic pressures - such as legal risks, editorial policies, and ownership interests - can influence how journalists represent powerful suspects, often encouraging cautious, mitigated, or indirect forms of expression. While these constraints do not necessarily indicate intentional bias, they may still affect the distribution of agency and responsibility in ways that risk undermining balanced reporting. Importantly, intent cannot be inferred from textual evidence alone, as many linguistic features may reflect routine newsroom conventions. The analysis, therefore, focuses on representational effects, showing how structural constraints can subtly shape accountability and fairness in media discourse.

Future research could strengthen these findings through methodological triangulation. Interviews with journalists and editors, ethnographic studies of newsroom practices, or analysis of editorial policies would help clarify how professional routines and legal considerations influence reporting choices. In addition, audience reception studies could explore how readers interpret strategies such as agent suppression or mitigation and whether these representations influence perceptions of guilt, responsibility, and justice. Combining textual, production, and reception perspectives would offer a more comprehensive understanding of crime reporting as a socially situated communicative process.

By situating micro-level linguistic patterns within broader communicative and institutional contexts, this study contributes to scholarship on media discourse by showing how journalistic language participates in the symbolic negotiation of power. Recognising the constructed nature of murder reporting is essential for promoting critical media literacy and encouraging ethical journalism that balances caution with transparency, fairness, and accountability.

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