

Language and the Environment: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Flood Narratives in South-Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

Flood has become one of the most destructive environmental hazards in South-Eastern Nigeria. It displaces communities, destroys farmland, and reshapes public discourse on climate vulnerability. While hydrological and policy studies have examined its physical and administrative dimensions, little attention has been paid to how language constructs, naturalizes, or contests the disaster's meaning. This study applies Critical Discourse Analysis, informed by Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework, to a purposively sampled corpus of twenty-three publicly available, named, and dated Nigerian and international news reports, agency situation reports, and one investigative feature on flood and gully erosion in Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, and Ebonyi States between 2022 and 2026. Line-by-line analysis of directly cited excerpts identified the ideological and ecological work these choices perform. Five recurrent narrative patterns emerged: (i) an anthropocentric blame narrative erasing non-human ecological processes; (ii) a religious and fatalistic narrative that forecloses causal inquiry; (iii) a militarized narrative figuring floodwater as an animate adversary; (iv) a humanitarian vulnerability narrative positioning residents as passive or depersonalized recipients of aid; and (v) a governance-oriented narrative that rarely engages anthropogenic climate change. These narratives are neither neutral nor evenly distributed, with distinct implications for public perception, victim agency, and environmental accountability.

Keywords: ecolinguistics; environmental communication; flood; media discourse; South-Eastern Nigeria

1 Introduction

Climate change has moved from the margins of scientific debate to the center of global political and social life. The IPCC has warned that rising global temperatures are intensifying extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, and storms, with the greatest burden falling on countries that have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC, 2023). West Africa is a region of acute climate vulnerability: rainfall patterns have become less predictable and river systems more volatile. Nigeria, the continent's most populous country, sits at the center of this vulnerability, with successive years of flooding straining an already fragile disaster-response infrastructure. Environmental degradation in Nigeria is the cumulative product of decades of unregulated urbanization, deforestation, poor drainage planning, oil exploration in the Niger Delta, and weak enforcement of environmental laws, pressures that interact with an increasingly erratic rainfall regime. The 2022 flood event alone affected more than three million Nigerians, claimed over six hundred lives, and displaced

approximately 1.4 million people (OCHA, 2022). South-Eastern Nigeria, comprising Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, and Ebonyi States, has been especially susceptible, owing to gully erosion, poor urban drainage, riverine topography, and dense settlement patterns that leave little room for natural floodwater absorption.

Despite a growing body of Nigerian scholarship applying CDA to political discourse, gender representation, and conflict reporting (Adegoju, 2016; Talabi, 2023), and a smaller literature on ecolinguistic and environmental discourse analysis in Nigeria (Adedun, 2014; Ademosu, 2020; Agwuocha, 2020), there remains a paucity of research applying an integrated CDA-ecolinguistic framework specifically to flooding narratives in South-Eastern Nigeria. Existing studies of Nigerian flood discourse tend toward content-analytic or framing approaches (Adekola & Lamond, 2018), valuable for mapping thematic distribution but less attentive to the fine-grained linguistic mechanisms, lexical choice, transitivity, modality, and metaphor, through which those themes are constructed. This study addresses that gap by combining Fairclough's three-dimensional model with Stibbe's ecolinguistic framework to interrogate how language shapes public understanding of, and response to, flooding in South-Eastern Nigeria.

The problem this study addresses is twofold. Firstly, media and public discourse on flooding in South-Eastern Nigeria appears to oscillate between narratives that hold human actors accountable and narratives that displace responsibility onto divine or natural forces, with implications for how the public assigns responsibility and demands accountability from government agencies. Secondly, the linguistic strategies through which flood victims are represented, as agentive survivors or as passive, dependent sufferers, carry consequences for how humanitarian response is imagined and enacted. Without a systematic linguistic account of these patterns, media practitioners and policymakers lack a clear picture of how their own communicative choices shape public perception and environmental governance outcomes.

The aim of this study is to conduct a Critical Discourse Analysis, informed by ecolinguistic theory, of flood narratives in South-Eastern Nigerian print and online media, revealing the ideological patterns embedded in these narratives and their implications for environmental communication and governance. This aim is pursued through four objectives: (i) identifying the dominant lexical and grammatical choices used in representing flooding events; (ii) categorizing the recurrent narrative frames through which flooding is constructed in the sampled corpus; (iii) examining the ideological and ecological implications of these frames using Fairclough's and Stibbe's frameworks; and (iv) drawing out implications for environmental governance, climate communication, and media practice in Nigeria.

Correspondingly, the study is guided by four research questions: (i) What lexical and grammatical patterns characterise the representation of flooding in South-Eastern Nigerian media discourse? (ii) What narrative frames recur across the sampled texts, and how are they linguistically constructed? (iii) What ideological positions and ecological assumptions are embedded within these frames? (iv) What are the implications of these discursive patterns for environmental governance and public environmental education in Nigeria?

The significance of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it contributes to the dialogue between CDA and ecolinguistics by combining the two frameworks in the analysis of disaster discourse from a Nigerian standpoint, a context underrepresented in the predominantly Euro-American ecolinguistic literature (Alexander, 2018; Norton & Hulme, 2019). Practically, it offers media practitioners, environmental communicators, and disaster management agencies an evidence-

based account of how current reporting practices may inadvertently reinforce fatalism, stigmatize victims, or obscure institutional accountability, reinforcing the relevance of linguistic scholarship to national development concerns.

2 Literature review

Language occupies a foundational role in how societies understand, evaluate, and respond to environmental change. Ecological crises are apprehended by the public not directly but through mediated representations, the reports and commentaries produced by journalists and broadcasters (Ademosu, 2020). Because most citizens do not experience the full scientific complexity of a flood event, the media's linguistic choices become the primary lens through which the public constructs its understanding of cause, blame, and appropriate response.

Environmental journalism shapes public environmental awareness by selecting which aspects of an ecological event to foreground and which to omit (Adegoju, 2016), a selective foregrounding central to media framing. In the Nigerian context, framing analyses of urban flooding show newspaper coverage privileging certain policy actors, government, communities, business, and non-governmental organizations, while offering markedly different accounts of flooding's causes and solutions (Adekola & Lamond, 2018); government-oriented frames emphasize disregard for planning regulations, while other actor groups foreground climatic factors or corporate negligence.

Media framing of disasters influences not only public perception but also the allocation of humanitarian and political resources, since a disaster framed as unprecedented attracts different institutional response than one framed as routine and seasonal (Adekola & Lamond, 2018). This is relevant to South-Eastern Nigeria, where annual flooding is sometimes normalized as an expected seasonal event rather than an escalating crisis requiring structural intervention, with consequences for the urgency assigned to adaptation and mitigation policy.

Critical Discourse Analysis emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an interdisciplinary approach examining how texts participate in the production and reproduction of social power, dominance, and inequality (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1998), explicitly problem-oriented in exposing how vocabulary, grammar, and text structure encode and naturalize ideological positions (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Fairclough's central contribution is a three-dimensional model integrating textual analysis with discourse practice (production, distribution, consumption) and social practice (Fairclough, 1995, 2003). Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach complements this by foregrounding the mental representations, or "social cognitions," that mediate between discourse and society, ideologies as shared belief systems activated and reproduced through discourse structures such as topic selection and strategies of legitimation (van Dijk, 1998, 2008). Applied to Nigerian media discourse, this has illuminated how actors are constructed as legitimate or illegitimate, trustworthy or suspect (Talabi, 2023).

Wodak's discourse-historical approach adds the historical and intertextual embeddedness of discourse, arguing texts cannot be understood without reference to their socio-political context and the other texts with which they dialogue (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), valuable here since flood reports are read against earlier flood events and cultural memories of erosion and environmental precarity. CDA has been extended to environmental discourse by scholars examining how ecological issues are constructed or obscured in public texts; Alexander (2018) shows corpus-assisted CDA revealing patterns invisible to manual reading, while studies of UK climate reporting show newspapers construct-

ing markedly different "stories" of climate change, from skeptical to activist to technocratic (Norton & Hulme, 2019).

Ecolinguistics examines the relationship between language and the natural environment. Halliday argued linguistics could no longer remain ecologically neutral, since the grammar of modern industrial languages tends to encode assumptions of unlimited growth and human dominance over nature (Halliday, 2001), laying groundwork for ecolinguistics as a distinct field (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001). Stibbe (2015, 2021) develops the concept of "stories we live by": cognitive structures embedded in language and culture that shape how people perceive and act upon their relationship with the natural world, destructive when they encourage overconsumption or erasure of ecological concerns, beneficial when they promote ecological awareness. Stibbe's framework provides tools, ideology, framing, metaphor, evaluation, erasure, and salience, for identifying such stories in specific texts.

A central distinction within ecolinguistics is that between anthropocentrism, framing environmental issues in terms of human interest and blame, and ecocentrism, recognizing the intrinsic value and agency of the non-human environment. Climate reporting frequently oscillates between anthropocentric framings emphasizing economic cost and human suffering, and ecocentric framings foregrounding planetary limits (Norton & Hulme, 2019). Sustainability, in this sense, is a matter of narrative as much as policy: how floods are storied, as acts of God, human negligence, war, or manageable policy failure, has direct implications for what environmental action comes to seem thinkable, urgent, or unnecessary.

A number of Nigerian studies have applied CDA to environmental and disaster-related texts. Adedun (2014) examines the ecolinguistic resonances of a Nigerian newspaper editorial; Agwuocha (2020) applies conceptual metaphor theory to Niger Delta poetry addressing oil-related degradation; Ademosu (2020) analyses online environmental communication campaigns; and Agbeleoba et al. (2025) combine ecolinguistics and CDA to examine SDG communications, finding "contravention discourse" often privileges economic interests over ecological concerns. Beyond ecolinguistics narrowly defined, Talabi (2023) applies van Dijk's socio-cognitive model to political interviews, while Kusugh et al. (2025) use CDA on herders-farmers conflict reportage, finding Nigerian media privileges conflict-escalating over solutions-oriented frames. These studies confirm CDA's productivity for Nigerian media discourse while revealing a gap: none directly addresses flooding discourse in the South-East using an integrated CDA-ecolinguistic lens.

International studies offer useful comparison. Adekola and Lamond's (2018) content-analytic study of Nigerian newspaper coverage of urban flooding (2012-2016) remains the most directly relevant precedent, revealing that Nigerian print media under-emphasizes proactive disaster education while foregrounding blame attribution. Studies of flood metaphor elsewhere, including Malaysian flood reporting and social media discourse on the 2025 Pakistan floods, similarly reveal recurrent metaphors casting floods as adversarial forces, with measurable effects on public risk perception and evacuation behavior (Hauser & Fleming, 2021). Related work on militarized crisis language shows war metaphors, while effective in mobilizing urgency, can also produce passivity and stigmatization. This literature establishes both the apparatus and precedent for the present study while revealing a gap: the absence of an integrated CDA-ecolinguistic study of South-Eastern Nigerian flood discourse, which this study addresses by extending Adekola and Lamond (2018), Stibbe (2015), and van Dijk (1998) to a purposively sampled contemporary corpus.

3 Theoretical framework

This study adopts Fairclough's (1995, 2003) three-dimensional model as its primary framework, conceiving any communicative event as operating on three levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice. Textual analysis involves close description of vocabulary, transitivity (who is represented as doing what to whom), modality, and cohesion. In flooding narratives, this attends to whether flooding is represented through active or passive constructions, whether human agents or natural forces occupy the grammatical subject position, and what evaluative vocabulary, "disaster," "tragedy," "punishment," "negligence", recurs across the corpus.

The second dimension, discursive practice, examines how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed, including genre conventions, intertextuality, and the institutional routines of Nigerian journalism shaping which sources are quoted and which narrative arcs are expected. For flooding narratives, this considers how government press statements, NEMA situation reports, and eyewitness testimonies are incorporated, paraphrased, or contested within news texts. The third dimension, social practice, situates the discourse within its broader socio-political context, here, how flooding discourse intersects with debates about government accountability, corruption, urban planning failure, and the uneven distribution of infrastructural investment across Nigeria and within the South-East.

This model's relevance lies in moving fluidly between micro-level linguistic detail and macro-level social interpretation without treating either in isolation. A purely textual analysis would risk producing a catalogue of stylistic features disconnected from social significance; a purely macro-sociological account would lack the empirical grounding close textual analysis provides. Fairclough's model allows this study to demonstrate, with textual evidence, how linguistic choices in flood reporting are systematically linked to broader ideological positions on responsibility, victimhood, and environmental governance.

Complementing Fairclough, this study draws on Stibbe's (2015, 2021) ecolinguistic framework, extending CDA's concern with power and ideology into an explicit concern with ecological sustainability. Central is the concept of "stories we live by," cognitive structures, often invisible to those who hold them, that shape perception of and behavior toward the natural environment, operating through framing, metaphor, evaluation, and erasure (the linguistic backgrounding of ecological actors and processes). Stibbe distinguishes destructive stories, which normalize ecologically harmful practices, from beneficial stories, which encourage sustainable relationships with the environment.

The anthropocentrism/ecocentrism distinction is operationalized here as a continuum along which flooding narratives can be positioned. An anthropocentric narrative foregrounds human actors, suffering, and blame, often excluding the non-human environmental processes, river hydrology, soil erosion, wetland loss, equally implicated in the disaster; an ecocentric narrative foregrounds the agency and vulnerability of rivers, soils, and ecosystems themselves. Applied to South-Eastern Nigeria, Stibbe's framework enables this study to ask not only how flooding is represented, but what ecological work that representation performs: does a narrative encourage readers to understand flooding as an isolated, blameworthy human failure fixable through better governance alone, or a fuller appreciation of the entangled human-environmental processes, climate change, land-use change, drainage infrastructure, river ecology, that jointly produce the disaster? This ecological evaluative dimension distinguishes the analysis from purely socio-political CDA and constitutes its distinctive theoretical contribution.

4 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, situated within the interpretive tradition of discourse analysis, to achieve a contextually grounded understanding of how flooding is linguistically constructed in South-Eastern Nigerian media discourse. A qualitative design is appropriate because the objectives concern not statistical frequency but interpretive significance, the ideological and ecological work linguistic features perform within specific texts and contexts (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

The population of texts comprises publicly available online news reports, agency situation reports, and one investigative feature published by Nigerian and international news platforms between 2022 and 2026, focusing on flooding and gully-erosion events in Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, and Ebonyi States. This period was selected because it captures both the catastrophic 2022 flooding event and subsequent flood seasons up to the most recent reporting available, allowing analysis of both crisis-moment and routinized flood-risk representation.

The corpus consists of a purposively selected sample of twenty-three texts, listed in the Appendix, drawn from thirteen national and regional news platforms (Punch, including its Healthwise desk; The Sun Nigeria; Tribune Online; Premium Times; The News Chronicle; EnviroNews Nigeria; Housing TV Africa; Blueprint Newspapers; Gazette NGR; Daily Post Nigeria; BBC News; CBS News; and the Displacement Tracking Matrix of the IOM, also carried by ReliefWeb) together with one investigative feature (Chijioke, 2023). The corpus comprises seventeen news reports, two humanitarian situation reports, one investigative feature, and three wire-service reports (BBC News and CBS News); no editorial or opinion column meeting the criteria could be located, a gap discussed under Limitations. Twelve texts concern Anambra, four Abia, two Ebonyi, two Enugu, and one Imo, with two (BBC News; Gazette NGR) addressing more than one state; Anambra's disproportionate share reflects the greater volume of accessible English-language reporting on that state's crisis rather than deliberate analytical preference.

Purposive sampling was employed, rather than random or exhaustive sampling, to achieve analytical depth and thematic saturation across a representative range of source types, rather than statistical generalisation. Texts were selected according to: (i) explicit focus on flooding or gully-erosion within the five specified states; (ii) publication between 2022 and 2026; (iii) availability in full text through a publicly accessible archive; and (iv) sufficient linguistic substance (minimum 150 words). Data collection proceeded through systematic search of news archives using flood-related search terms combined with the target states and their local government areas, followed by screening against the criteria above.

The analytical procedure followed Fairclough's (1995, 2003) three-dimensional model in a staged sequence. Texts were first coded for transitivity, lexical choice, modality, and, where relevant, nominalization and pronoun choice, conducted manually through repeated close reading rather than automated software. Second, texts were analyzed for discursive practice, attending to genre conventions, sourcing patterns, and intertextual reference to official statements and prior coverage. Third, patterns were interpreted in relation to the broader social practice of Nigerian environmental governance and media culture. Throughout, Stibbe's (2015, 2021) categories, framing, metaphor, evaluation, and erasure, were applied as a complementary lens. This coding allowed the five thematic narratives presented in the analysis to emerge inductively; a theme was retained only where it recurred across at least three independent texts from different outlets.

Researcher reflexivity was treated as integral to the analytical process. As a first-language and professional user of Nigerian English familiar with Nigerian print media conventions, the researcher was well positioned to recognize culturally specific framings, like the religious register under Theme Two, that a non-Nigerian analyst might overlook, while guarding against over-reading significance into conventional journalistic phrasing that is largely formulaic. Coding decisions were revisited across multiple passes, each pattern checked against its recurrence across independent texts and outlets, and, in place of formal intercoder reliability testing, not feasible for a single-researcher study of this scope, each thematic category was cross-checked against its grounding in the theoretical apparatus of Fairclough and Stibbe.

Several ethical considerations informed the study. Because the corpus comprises publicly published texts rather than data from private individuals, no informed consent procedures were required; nonetheless, care was taken to avoid identifying private citizens beyond information already public, and illustrative excerpts preserve the dignity of flood-affected individuals rather than sensationalizing their suffering. In accordance with standard academic practice on copyrighted material, direct quotation in the analysis is limited to short, clearly attributed phrases sufficient to support the linguistic point, with surrounding context paraphrased in the researcher's own words.

5 Data analysis and discussion

5.1 Theme one: anthropocentric blame narrative

Fifteen of the twenty-three corpus texts attribute flooding, wholly or partly, to human negligence or institutional failure rather than to climatic or hydrological processes alone. This narrative is carried by transitivity patterns in which human actors occupy the grammatical subject position as agents of harmful action. A Housing TV Africa report on flooding in Ifite-Awka, Anambra, states that "residents blamed the persistent flooding on poor urban planning, indiscriminate construction and weak enforcement of building regulations" (Housing TV Africa, 2026); this places "residents" in the position of social actors performing an active accusatory speech act, while the causes named are nominalizations that compress specific institutional failures into abstract, agentless noun phrases. In Fairclough's (2003) terms, the newspaper reports residents' accusatory framing rather than asserting it directly, distributing responsibility while still making the claim prominent.

A comparable pattern appears in an investigative feature on the 2022 Ogbaru flooding, where a federal legislator "blamed the devastating flood and its impact in Ogbaru on the government's dismal preparedness in addressing the root causes" (Chijioke, 2023). The adjective "dismal" performs strong negative appraisal, a rare instance of a named official, rather than an anonymous "resident," being quoted as the source of institutional blame, shifting discursive practice from lay accusation to elite political critique. A third, more self-critical instance comes from Governor Chukwuma Soludo of Anambra State, who, declaring a state of emergency on the environment, stated: "we blocked the drainages" (Tribune Online, 2026). The first-person plural "we" is significant: rather than externalizing blame onto "residents" or "developers," the chief executive absorbs collective responsibility into a shared civic "we," performing accountability while diffusing it across the citizenry.

Together, these excerpts show the anthropocentric blame narrative operating across a cline of agency specification, from vague, collectivized nominalization (Housing TV Africa) to named institutional critique (Chijioke) to civic self-implication (Soludo/Tribune Online). Ecolinguistically, however, all three share a significant erasure: none refers to the altered rainfall regimes, river hydrology, or

wetland loss that [Stibbe's \(2015\)](#) framework would identify as equally implicated non-human actors. Flooding is discussed almost exclusively as a matter of "who is to blame" among human institutions and citizens, with the river, the rainfall, and the changing climate rendered linguistically inert.

5.2 Theme two: religious/fatalistic narrative

A second but less dominant pattern, present in four of the twenty-three texts, frames flood through fatalistic vocabulary. The clearest instance is The Sun Nigeria's feature on Ogbaru, reporting that "the ecological challenge is perceived as a huge curse" ([The Sun Nigeria, 2023](#)). The passive "is perceived" removes the perceiving subject from view, presenting the fatalistic interpretation as a free-floating cultural belief rather than any specific, nameable person's view; "a huge curse" supplies a nominalization that, in [Fairclough's \(2003\)](#) terms, forecloses further causal inquiry, since a curse is by definition not amenable to technical remedy. A related instance appears in a 2022 community leader's lament in The News Chronicle: "sometimes, we wonder why this happens to us" ([The News Chronicle, 2022](#)), positioning the speaker's community as the grammatical patient of an unexplained external force.

From [Stibbe's \(2015, 2021\)](#) perspective, this fatalistic framing constitutes a "closed" story: unlike the blame narrative, which implies different institutional choices could have altered the outcome, the curse and wonder framing offers no discursive opening toward mitigation. This narrative reflects a genuine cultural resource, Christian and indigenous cosmological frameworks for processing communal trauma, coexisting uneasily alongside the accountability-oriented blame narrative, often within the same article; The Sun Nigeria piece moves within paragraphs from the "curse" framing to a direct appeal for "the state and federal governments and relevant agencies to come to their rescue" ([The Sun Nigeria, 2023](#)).

5.3 Theme three: militarized representation of flood

A third pattern, in six of the twenty-three texts, draws on the vocabulary of war and existential threat. Its clearest instance is Governor Soludo's statement that "whole communities are being swallowed, and we are battling it" ([Tribune Online, 2026](#)). "Swallowed" figures the flood as a devouring, animate antagonist, consistent with antagonist-metaphor patterns documented in comparative disaster research ([Hauser & Fleming, 2021](#)), while "battling" recruits the vocabulary of armed conflict for the government's response. In the same address, flooding and erosion are named "Anambra's number one existential threat" ([Tribune Online, 2026](#)), a securitizing phrase elevating an environmental hazard to a threat to the state's survival, justifying extraordinary measures that would be harder to justify under a more routinized framing.

This militarization is reinforced elsewhere by transitivity patterns in which floodwaters occupy the subject position of active, forceful verbs, floods "ravage," "wreak havoc," "submerge", constructing the river and rain as an animate, hostile force rather than elements of an ecological system shaped by upstream land use and rainfall change. This framing plausibly serves a mobilizing function, conveying urgency where under-preparedness has cost lives; comparative research indicates antagonist framings can increase perceived severity and encourage protective behaviors ([Hauser & Fleming, 2021](#)). Ecolinguistically, however, the "nature as enemy" story constructs the river as the adversary to be "battled," rather than foregrounding the upstream human interventions, sand mining, waterway obstruction, deforestation, that the same speakers elsewhere acknowledge as contributing causes.

5.4 Theme four: humanitarian vulnerability narrative

A fourth narrative, in eight of the twenty-three texts, constructs flood-affected populations through the vocabulary of humanitarian need. In a Punch (Healthwise) report on relief distribution in Enugu State, NEMA's Head of Operations is quoted urging beneficiaries to "make judicious use of the relief materials" (Punch/Healthwise, 2025), positioning displaced residents as recipients requiring guidance rather than agents of their own recovery. A starker instance appears in a Premium Times report on Abia State, where a resident addressing the governor appeals, "our Governor, have mercy upon us" (Premium Times, 2026b), constructing a relationship of dependency and personalized patronage between citizen and executive (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

A more technocratic register appears in the Displacement Tracking Matrix's situation report for Imo State, recording that the assessment team "identified 60,761 individuals in 10,228 households affected by the floods" (Displacement Tracking Matrix, IOM, 2024), an impersonal, quantified vocabulary that renders victims countable but strips away individual voice. Together, these excerpts show a cline from personalized supplication (Premium Times) through institutional directive (Punch/Healthwise) to depersonalized quantification (DTM/IOM); in Fairclough's (2003) terms, all three cast flood-affected residents predominantly as grammatical objects, or statistical entities, of processes performed upon them rather than as agents of active verbs. This passivisation is significant less for what it erases ecologically than socially: indigenous coping practices reported elsewhere, such as Ogbaru residents "using canoe to access their various houses" (The News Chronicle, 2022), a rare active-voice instance of resident agency, are marginal relative to the dominant passive framing.

5.5 Theme five: implications for environmental governance

A fifth pattern, in nine of the twenty-three texts, concerns the explicit representation of environmental governance and technical response. Anambra's Ministry of Environment official explains the state's compound-management regulation conditionally: "if everywhere is free, water will flow on its own, no matter the volume" (EnviroNews Nigeria, 2026a), constructing flooding as a predictable, manageable outcome of alterable human practices, offering, in Stibbe's (2015) terms, a more "open," solution-oriented story than the closed fatalism of Theme Two. A second excerpt, from a Gazette NGR report on NEMA's 2026 sensitization campaign, describes plans to "identify higher grounds and update...existing IDP camps' condition" (Gazette NGR, 2026), drawing intertextually on NiMet's seasonal prediction and NIHSA's flood outlook.

This governance narrative translates the anthropocentric blame narrative of Theme One into constructive argumentation, moving from "who is responsible" toward "what should be done." Even here, explicit reference to anthropogenic climate change is rare; only an Ebonyi relief report mentions a local government chairman identifying "climate change as one of the issues in flood disasters" (Tribune Online, 2023), briefly, before returning to relief-distribution vocabulary. This relative silence, against the densely populated blame, fatalistic, militarized, and humanitarian framings documented above, echoes the scientific consensus that anthropogenic climate change is intensifying extreme rainfall (IPCC, 2023) while suggesting this consensus has not yet been integrated into South-Eastern Nigerian flood-governance discourse.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

This study has applied an integrated Critical Discourse Analysis and ecolinguistic framework to a purposively sampled, fully referenced corpus of twenty-three flooding-related texts from South-

Eastern Nigeria published between 2022 and 2026. Anchoring on Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Stibbe's ecolinguistic theory of "stories we live by," and grounding every interpretive claim in named, dated, directly cited excerpts, the analysis identified five recurrent narrative patterns: an anthropocentric blame narrative constructing flooding primarily as a failure of human institutions while erasing non-human ecological processes; a religious and fatalistic narrative that forecloses causal inquiry through nominalization and passive experiencer constructions; a militarized narrative figuring floodwater as an animate adversary and elevating flooding to an "existential threat"; a humanitarian vulnerability narrative positioning flood-affected residents along a cline from personalized supplication to depersonalized statistical quantification; and a governance-oriented narrative that translates blame into policy argumentation but rarely engages substantively with anthropogenic climate change.

6.1 Contribution of this study

This study makes four contributions. To Critical Discourse Analysis, it shows that Fairclough's three-dimensional model applies productively to a genre rarely examined together, news reports, humanitarian situation reports, and gubernatorial statements, showing that the same speaker (as in Governor Soludo's remarks) can voice accountability, militarization, and blame narratives within a single address. To ecolinguistics, it extends Stibbe's (2015, 2021) "stories we live by" framework beyond its European and North American base (e.g., Norton & Hulme, 2019) into an African disaster-discourse context, where anthropocentric erasure operates less through celebration of economic growth than through the near-total absence of climatic and hydrological process even within accountability-seeking narratives. To African environmental discourse studies, it responds to the gap identified by Adekola and Lamond (2018) and Agbeleoba et al. (2025) for linguistically fine-grained analysis, combining CDA and ecolinguistics for South-Eastern Nigerian flooding texts rather than Niger Delta oil-degradation texts (cf. Agwuocha, 2020). Finally, it shows that a governance-oriented narrative register exists (Theme Five) but remains disconnected from the climate-change register dominating international scientific communication (IPCC, 2023).

6.2 Limitations of this study

Several limitations qualify these findings. The corpus of twenty-three texts, while sufficient for thematic saturation, is small relative to the total volume of flood-related publication in Nigeria, and a larger corpus might reveal additional patterns. The study examined only English-language media; a substantial amount of flood-related communication circulates in Igbo-language broadcast and social media, and these findings cannot be assumed to extend there without further research. The corpus was confined to online-archived journalism and situation reports; broadcast and social media, significant regional sources, were excluded, so the study captures institutional framings more fully than vernacular, peer-to-peer ones. The corpus's geographic distribution is uneven, with Anambra over-represented relative to Imo, Abia, Ebonyi, and Enugu, reflecting reporting availability rather than flooding severity. Finally, no editorial or opinion-column text meeting the criteria could be located, so the account of religious-fatalistic and governance framing rests on the more restrained register of news reporting; future research using a broadcast-inclusive, multilingual corpus would help establish how far these findings generalize.

6.3 Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, the study offers the following stakeholder-specific recommendations. For individual journalists and reporters: when covering a flood event, deliberately include at least one sentence naming the climatic or hydrological contribution to the disaster (altered rainfall timing, river-level data, wetland loss) alongside the customary attribution of human and institutional blame, so audiences are not left with the impression that flooding is solely an administrative failure; and favor active-voice, agency-attributing language when describing affected residents' own coping actions (as in the rare "using canoe to access their houses" construction identified in Theme Four) rather than defaulting to passive, recipient-only phrasing.

For media organizations and editorial boards: adopt an in-house style guidance note for disaster reporting that flags militarized vocabulary ("battle," "invade," "combat") for deliberate rather than default use, reserving it for moments that genuinely warrant urgency; and commission periodic follow-up features, of the kind exemplified by Chijioke's (2023) investigative series, that revisit flood-affected communities months after the acute crisis to document longer-term adaptation and recovery, correcting the corpus's current skew toward crisis-moment reporting.

For environmental and emergency-management agencies (NEMA, state SEMAs, and Ministries of Environment): incorporate explicit, plain-language climate-attribution statements into routine sensitization and situation-report communications, building on the existing practice of citing NiMet and NIHSA forecasts (as in the Gazette NGR, 2026, sensitization report), so seasonal flood alerts consistently connect local risk to the broader pattern of climatic change; and review relief-distribution messaging for opportunities to acknowledge community self-help efforts rather than framing residents solely as recipients of agency-directed aid.

For educational institutions, including universities and colleges of education: integrate case studies of Nigerian flood and disaster discourse, of the kind developed in this study, into applied linguistics, mass communication, and environmental studies curricula, so the next generation of journalists, communication officers, and environmental professionals graduates with explicit awareness of how their own linguistic choices shape public risk perception and adaptive behavior.

For government policymakers at state and federal level: ensure that public statements on flooding, of the kind exemplified by gubernatorial addresses in the corpus, pair militarized or existential-threat framing (which may be warranted for mobilizing emergency resources) with concrete, named policy commitments and timelines, so that discursive urgency translates into the traceable governance accountability that Theme Five shows is possible but currently underdeveloped; and support, through ministries of information and NEMA/SEMA communication units, interdisciplinary collaboration with linguists and media researchers, so Nigeria's response to escalating flood risk is underpinned by a public discourse environment that is accountability-oriented, ecologically literate, and adaptation-focused.

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