



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Language and Linguistics*

Metaphorical representations of political action and resistance in Kenyan newspaper headlines, 2024

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of metaphor in the construction of political and socio-economic discourse in Kenyan newspaper headlines published between January and December 2024. A corpus of over 600 headlines was drawn from The Daily Nation and The Standard. Three theories are used together: Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) by Charteris-Black (2004, 2011), Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) by Lakoff & Johnson (1980, 2003), and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by Fairclough (1995, 2003) to establish how metaphors framed government action, leadership, crisis, leadership, and citizen unrest. The findings reveal dominant metaphorical framings of politics as war, governance as illness, the economy as a burden, and protest as a natural force or bodily disruption. These metaphors contribute to the ideological positioning of actors, shape public perceptions, and reinforce elite centred narratives. In this paper, I argue that metaphor in headline discourse functions as a key ideological resource in the reproduction of political hegemony within Kenya's contested media space. Importantly, the study demonstrates the value of the integrating CMT, CMA and CDA approach to unpack the ideological dimensions of media metaphor, thus offering new insights into how hegemonic discourses are constructed and how they are contested in the Kenyan public discourse.

KEYWORDS: Critical Discourse Analysis, Critical Metaphor Analysis, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Kenyan Newspapers, Media Discourse, Metaphor, Political Framing

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Introduction

The examination of newspaper headlines reveals their significant role in shaping public perception and conveying ideological perspectives. (Ahmed, 2020) employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how headlines about Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's decision to step down as senior royals utilize discursive strategies to influence reader interpretation, underscoring the ideological underpinnings embedded within headlines. Similarly, Haimed et. al., (2021) examine headlines related to the Yemen war, emphasizing how ideological content is often embedded in headlines, which serve as key sites for ideological representation and framing of conflicts.

The persuasive power of headlines is closely tied to linguistic construction. (Hadidi et.al., 2021) investigates the linguistic strategies that make headlines distinctive and influential, designed to attract attention and encourage reader engagement. This supports the broader understanding that headlines are carefully crafted to manipulate perception through various linguistic choices. Furthermore, (Arshad et. al., 2022) demonstrate that headlines about political events, such as the motion of no-confidence against Imran Khan, are ideologically framed, with different newspapers presenting the same event through varying discursive lenses aligned to their editorial preferences. Metaphors in headlines also play a critical role in shaping how readers conceptualize events. Mulonzi et al. (2023) illustrate how COVID- 19 related headlines in Kenyan newspapers deploy metaphorical language to frame the pandemic, thereby influencing public understanding and actions through specific metaphors. This metaphorical framing exemplifies the power of headlines in constructing social realities.

In addition to ideological and linguistic analysis, structural and stylistic features of headlines are examined through comparative studies. (Karunakaran et. al., 2023) investigate the semantic and syntactic functions of adjectives in headlines, revealing how descriptive language contributes to the tone and emphasis of news stories in print media. (Gamboa et. al., 2023) analyze headlines from a university newspaper, emphasizing their function as summaries that provide an overview of the news content, which is essential for reader orientation and engagement. Translational challenges associated with headlines are also explored, with (Hanaqtah et. al., 2023) identifying difficulties faced by students translating headlines from English into Arabic, highlighting the complexity of linguistic and cultural nuances embedded in headline language.

Thus, the literature confirms that newspaper headlines are not mere summaries but are strategic, discursive instruments that serve ideological, persuasive, and informational functions (Omoke, 2025). They employ various linguistic devices, metaphors, and stylistic techniques to shape how readers perceive, interpret and engage with news events (Nwammuo and Nwafor (2020).

This discursive power of headlines becomes particularly salient when situated within moments of political upheaval. In Kenya, the year 2024 was marked by intense political contestation, sparked by intense debates surrounding the 2024 Finance Bill, the implications of a rising tax regime, and resultant widespread public protests. A Gen Z-led uprising emerged, challenging entrenched power structures and demanded accountability in governance. These developments unfolded in a media dynamic media environment where headlines played a pivotal role in shaping the interpretations of these events for a diverse and often polarized public.

It is within this context that the present study investigates the ideological functions of metaphors in the headlines of Kenya's newspapers, *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard* as identified by the Media Council of Kenya (2022). By analyzing how these metaphors framed political actors, actions, and events, the study seeks to reveal the discursive strategies through which Kenyan newspapers shaped public perceptions of power, protests, and governance structures during this historically significant moment.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study adopted three theoretical approaches: Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). They are used to examine how metaphors operate both cognitively and ideologically within Kenyan newspaper headlines. They were integrated to offer complementary perspectives on how the use of metaphors influences public perceptions of political discourse and contributes to the production and reproduction of hegemonic narratives in media texts, specifically through newspaper headlines.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) treat metaphor as a cognitive tool that shapes how people reason about politics. In this study, I use their insights specifically to unpack how Kenyan headlines structure public understanding of crisis. Metaphors, therefore, operate at the level of thought and shape the conceptual structures through which people interpret and understand the world. It is observed that metaphor is pervasive in everyday language and not just in literary or poetic language. It provides systematic mappings between source domains, which are concrete, and target domains, which are considered abstract. Lakoff and Johnson demonstrate that conceptual metaphors such as ARGUMENT IS WAR (e.g. “He attacked every weak point in my argument,” “I defended my position”) or TIME IS MONEY (e.g. “You’re wasting my time,” “How do you spend your time?”) are used to reveal how metaphorical structuring influences patterns of reasoning, communication, and actions. These metaphorical mappings enable individuals to understand complex or abstract experiences like argument and time in terms of more familiar domains such as physical combat, financial transactions, or spatial movement.

In political and media discourse, CMT suggests that conceptual metaphors play a central role in structuring public understandings of governance, leadership, policy, and public life. Studying metaphors provides cognitive frames that helps us understand how audiences make sense of political events, actors, and processes. In this way, metaphor influences not only the linguistic representation of political reality but also the cognitive models through which citizens evaluate and respond to that reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 2004).

Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA)

Charteris-Black (2004, 2011) builds on the insights of Conceptual Metaphor Theory. He uses a critical and socio-political perspective on metaphor in discourse through the CMA approach by looking at metaphor as a strategic linguistic and ideological resource that operates within power-laden discourse practices. In this view, metaphor is not just a reflection of thought but an instrument of persuasion, ideological stance, and social control. Additionally, Charteris-Black (2004) indicates that CMA aims to reveal how metaphor is used to achieve persuasive goals and to legitimate political and social ideologies.

Further, CMA asserts that metaphor contributes to the naturalization of social hierarchies and the legitimization of dominant worldviews. The media uses metaphor to selectively highlight certain aspects of political events while backgrounding others that have a relatively equal weight. This guides public perception in ways that align with hegemonic interests. CMA, thus, positions metaphor as a central mechanism in the discursive construction and reproduction of power relations. It views media texts not simply as linguistic artefacts but as sites of ideological struggle, where metaphors serve to legitimize or contest particular social and political orders (Charteris-Black, 2004; 2011).

CMA is not limited to linguistic description but adopts an explanatory orientation. It asks why particular metaphors are preferred in certain genres, how they align with institutional interests, and how they affect audiences’ perceptions. In this respect, CMA aligns closely with Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2003), the concern of hegemony, power, and social critique.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

This study situates the analysis of metaphor within the dynamics of power, ideology, and social practice. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is therefore used to provide the broader theoretical lens. The study adopts Fairclough’s dialectical-relational approach to CDA (Fairclough, 1995; 2003), which conceptualizes media discourse as a site where hegemony is constructed, negotiated, and potentially contested. CDA views discourse as a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by social structures, institutional power relations, and ideology. Media discourse is conceptualized as a key site for the construction, negotiation, and contestation of hegemony. From this perspective, headlines are not just neutral summaries of the day’s events but carefully constructed resources that communicate particular ideological leanings. Richardson (2007) emphasizes that headlines are not neutral because they employ lexical and grammatical strategies that frame events and social actors in ideological ways. They serve to foreground certain social actors and ideas while downgrading others. These foregrounding and backgrounding strategies lead to hegemony. In Fairclough’s model, media discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions by framing political problems, constructing social identities, and defining the boundaries of thoughts and actions.

CDA further emphasizes the dialectical relationship between discourse and social context, where texts are shaped by institutional, economic, and political forces, while simultaneously shaping social consciousness and action. This view is relevant in the Kenyan media context, where profit motives, elite interests, and political contestation work together to produce headlines that are highly summarized, charged with ideologically importance (van Dijk, 2013; Fairclough, 1995).

Within this framework, metaphor is considered a key discursive resource through which hegemony is constructed and maintained. As Fairclough (2003) notes, metaphor recontextualizes social events and relations to offer particular framings that privilege certain interpretations while downplaying or excluding others. Metaphorical framings contribute to the reproduction or contestation of ideological power through shaping how political actors, events, and struggles are represented. CDA, therefore, provides the principal theoretical grounding for this study's integrated approach: it enables a critical reading of metaphor not simply as a linguistic or cognitive phenomenon, but as an instrument of ideological work situated within the institutional and political economy of Kenyan media discourse.

An integrated theoretical framework combining **Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)**, **Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA)**, and **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** offers a comprehensive approach to understanding the ideological work of metaphor in media discourse. Each of these approaches contributes distinct yet complementary insights, and this triangulation strengthens the analysis in this study. CMT helps reveal the mental structures that guide public understanding of political events. The shortcoming of CMT is that, even though it offers reliable tools for mapping conceptual patterns, it does not account for the ideological and power-related dimensions of metaphor in public discourse. **CMA, therefore, comes in to address this gap by explicitly foregrounding the persuasive and ideological functions of metaphor in political language, media, and public communication.** It helps us to see **why certain metaphors are chosen**, whose interests they serve, and how they maintain or challenge dominant ideologies. It deepens the cognitive focus of CMT by placing metaphor in the dynamics of **power, persuasion, and ideology**. Finally, using Fairclough's **dialectical-relational** framework of CDA ensures that the analysis is sensitive to the **socio-political contexts** in which these metaphors are used. By situating metaphor analysis within CDA, we move beyond isolated textual patterns and consider the socio-political contexts, and we are able to examine how metaphors contribute to the **discursive construction of political realities** in Kenya.

The integration of these three approaches allows us to identify what metaphors are used (CMT), understand how they function persuasively and ideologically (CMA), and situate them within power-laden discursive practices (CDA). This integrative approach is particularly well-suited to the analysis of newspaper headlines, which are simultaneously cognitively resonant, ideologically loaded, and strategically crafted forms of media discourse. In the highly polarized and contested media landscape of Kenya in 2024, such an approach is essential for unpacking how metaphors work to shape public perceptions of power, protest, and crisis.

3. Methodology

Data for this study consists of a corpus of over 600 newspaper headlines published between January and December 2024, drawn from two of Kenya's leading daily newspapers: *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*. Headlines were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to capture those most directly concerned with contexts with rich metaphorical framing, such as political, economic, and protest-related events. Following Richardson's (2007) approach to newspaper discourse, this study examined both the lexical choices and metaphorical framings in headlines, with particular attention to how they construct political actors and crises. This study follows the methodological principles of Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), as outlined by Charteris-Black (2004, 2011), who outlines the following three analytical stages:

- Identification of metaphorical expressions in the corpus through manual reading and, where appropriate, corpus-assisted tools (e.g., concordance analysis) to detect metaphor candidates;
- Interpretation of these expressions by mapping their underlying conceptual metaphors and considering their semantic and pragmatic functions.
- Explanation- situating the use of metaphors within their social, political, and ideological context to uncover how they serve persuasive functions and reflect power relations.

The goal of CMA is, therefore, to map metaphor patterns across a corpus while also providing nuanced,

contextual interpretations that explain why particular metaphors are selected in specific genres (such as political and media discourse) and how they affect the audience’s thoughts and actions. The analysis, therefore, employed a manual coding process, in which each headline was carefully examined for metaphorical expressions. The identified metaphors were grouped into conceptual domains following the principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Critical Metaphor Analysis. In addition, the coding process remained attentive to instances of conceptual blending (Musolff, 2016), allowing for metaphorical expressions that draw simultaneously on multiple source domains, for example, headlines that frame governance as illness while concurrently constructing the nation as a vulnerable body.

Following CDA dimension of this study (Fairclough, 1995, 2003), the analysis extended to interpreting the metaphors’ ideological functions within the broader socio-historical and media context of Kenya. Headlines were treated as sites where hegemonic meanings are constructed, contested, or reproduced, with particular attention to how metaphors position social actors, normalize public suffering, and frame citizen agency. This CDA perspective ensured that metaphor analysis remained critically grounded in the power relations shaping Kenyan media discourse.

4. Results and Analysis

The analysis of over 600 headlines revealed several dominant metaphorical framings that structured public perceptions of politics, governance, and protest in 2024. Table 1 captures them as war, illness/burden, crisis/natural disaster, protest as natural force, and personification. Each metaphor carried cognitive resonance while also serving ideological functions that privileged elite spectacle and backgrounded civic agency. This distribution shows that WAR metaphors were the most frequent, as the account for nearly one-third of all identified headlines. This prevalence emphasizes how adversarial framings dominate Kenyan political reporting, dramatizing elite rivalries as battles while sidelining alternative models of dialogue and consensus. In contrast, PERSONIFICATION metaphors were least frequent, yet their impact is significant because they concentrate agency in individual leaders, often reducing complex governance processes to personal struggles. The mid-range categories (ILLNESS/BURDEN, CRISIS/DISASTER, and PROTEST AS FORCE) further reveal a tendency to naturalize economic hardship, portray governance as fragile, and dramatize civic action as volatile. Collectively, these distributions highlight the prominence of conflict-driven and spectacle-oriented framings in Kenya’s 2024 headline discourse.

Table 1: Distribution of Metaphorical Framings in 2024 Kenyan Newspaper Headlines

Conceptual Metaphor	Number of Headlines (n)	Percent-age (%)	Example Headlines
POLITICS IS WAR	185	31	“Ruto’s warning shot” (DN, 2/6/24); “Battle lines drawn” (DN, 29/9/24)
ECONOMY IS ILLNESS/ BURDEN	140	23	“IMF’s bitter pill for taxpayers” (DN, 2/6/24); “Anatomy of a sick nation” (DN, 2/6/24)
GOVERNANCE AS CRISIS/ NATURAL DISASTER	120	20	“Storm over Housing Levy” (DN, 1/2/24); “Deluge of death” (ST, 30/4/24)
PROTEST AS NATURAL FORCE	95	16	“Youth revolt” (DN, 21/6/24); “In eye of the storm” (ST, 15/7/24)
PERSONIFICATION	60	10	“Ruto faces hard truths” (DN, 6/7/24); “Ruto’s olive branch” (DN, 27/6/24)
Total	600	100	—

Note. Data are based on 600 headlines sampled from *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard* (Jan–Dec 2024).

1.1 POLITICS IS WAR

POLITICS IS WAR conceptualization is the most prominent metaphorical pattern. This framing is seen in headlines like *DN/2/6/26/ Ruto's warning shot*, *ST/2/6/24/Ruto's warning shot*, *DN/ 4/1/24 Ruto courts storm*, *ST/ 13/1/24 Ruto's judiciary war backlash*, *ST 27/1/24 Triple blow for Ruto*. Metaphors such as 'war backlash', 'Triple blow', 'On a war path', 'Attack', 'Battle lines drawn', and 'Pandemonium' 'bruising battle' employ the semantic field of military conflict to describe political processes, interactions, and struggles.

Such metaphors construct politics as a domain of combat between adversaries, where aggression is normalized and conflict is portrayed as inevitable. The use of war imagery dramatizes political events and legitimizes confrontational tactics and rhetoric. This narrative foregrounds elite political competition and political spectacle, where certain figures are portrayed as either victors or victims, heroes and villains in a continuous battle. The prevalence of war metaphors marginalizes alternative views of politics as a sober, deliberate, collaborative, or consensus-making process. Negotiation, compromise, and inclusive governance are not conceptualized as political possibilities. This construction contributes to a polarized public discourse where opposition is depicted as an enemy of progress and governance, and values like dialogue are framed as weaknesses.

The POLITICS IS WAR metaphor operates not merely as a rhetorical device but as an ideological tool that reinforces adversarial modes of political engagement in the Kenyan media landscape. Elite competition and dramatization of political conflict are emphasized, leading to a hegemonic discourse that reinforces combative leadership styles. In the context of Kenya's commercial media environment, sensationalism and spectacle often drive coverage. The use of these metaphors aligns with the media environment where conflict-driven narratives are preferred to consultative democratic engagement (Fairclough, 1995, 2003).

Findings from a study by Mulonzi, Ngumo & Omoke (2023) can be paralleled to the findings of this study as:

- COVID as WAR → Politics as WAR
- COVID as BONDAGE → Economy as BURDEN
- COVID as DEATH → Crisis as NATIONAL TRAGEDY
- COVID as PERSON → Politicians as HERO/SAVIOR or VILLAIN/ENEMY

As in the metaphorical construction of COVID-19, where metaphors of war, bondage, and death shaped public understanding of the pandemic, the 2024 political headlines examined here similarly employ metaphors that dramatize governance as battle, frame citizens as passive victims of state actions, and personalize political actors as either saviors or aggressors. Such framing legitimizes certain power relations while obscuring alternative citizen engagements (Van Dijk, 2009).

4.2 ECONOMY IS BURDEN/ILLNESS

Another dominant metaphorical framing evident in the headlines is the conceptualization of the economy as both a burden and an ailing body. Headlines such as *"IMF's bitter pill for taxpayers"*, *"Budget's bitter pill"*, *"DN/2/6/24 Anatomy of a sick nation"*, *"ST/ 22/3/24 Pain points for striking doctors"*, *"DN/8/1/24 Cash crunch as schools reopen"*, and *"DN/19/5/24 Starved of cash"* *ST/12/9/24 Paralysis as Adani wars cut off Kenya* consistently personify economic conditions through imagery of illness, bodily suffering, and weight or pressure. Metaphors such as 'pain', 'bitter pill', 'cash crunch' construct the economy as a ravaged and sick body that requires treatment or cure, or as a heavy burden that citizens have no choice but to carry. Using terms like bitter pills, pain points, sickness, paralysis, and starvation suggests a pervasive sense of deterioration and helplessness. Economic hardship is framed as an unavoidable affliction, naturalizing the experience of sacrifice and pain as part of the national situation. In this framing, citizens are portrayed as passive patients or overburdened subjects enduring prescribed hardships, while economic reforms are presented as difficult but necessary remedies to be administered, just like a patient must endure suffering during treatment to get well. It is also worth noting that this metaphorical framing tends to depoliticize and individualize economic struggles. The portrayal of economic crises as natural ailments or unavoidable burdens obscures the political and structural dimensions of hardship. They seem to be suggesting that suffering is natural and unavoidable rather than the outcome of specific policy decisions or systemic inequalities. This discursive strategy takes attention away from accountability and

governance and reinforces a narrative in which endurance and resilience are constructed as heroism.

Using the dialectical relational approach by Fairclough (2023), the analysis reinforces the view that illness and burden metaphors serve a broader ideological function. They contribute to the naturalization of suffering among citizens due to hard economic conditions. They also weaken public pursuit of accountability in governance. Such metaphors align with institutional narratives that frame austerity, inequality, and public hardship as unavoidable features of contemporary governance rather than as contestable outcomes of the decision-making of the prevailing regime.

4.3 Governance as Crisis/Natural Disaster

A further salient pattern in the headline corpus is the framing of governance, economic turbulence, and public affairs through metaphors of crisis, conflict, and natural disaster.

Headlines such as “DN/1/2/24 *Storm over Housing Levy*”), “ ST/24/3/24 *Ruto’s brewing storm*”, “ST/23/6/24 *The storm in Ruto’s paradise*”, “ST/7/7/24 *Shutdown*”, “ST/5/9/24 *Proposed revenue law raises a storm*”, “ST/11/9/24 *Make or break for Ruto in cash crisis*”, “DN/26/6/24/ *Pandemonium*”, “DN/4/5/24 *A nation in crisis*”, “DN 29/9/24 *On the war path*”, “DN/30/4/24 *Black Monday*” “ST/30/4/24 *Deluge of death*” and “DN/ 14/5/24 *Back to school chaos*” refer to the semantic fields associated with natural disasters and a systemic breakdown. This discursive strategy operates through what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) conceptualize as conceptual metaphors; in this case, GOVERNANCE IS NATURAL DISASTER. Such metaphors represent political developments and governance failures as violent, uncontrollable, and overwhelming forces, just as natural calamities. The imagery of *storms*, *shutdowns*, *pandemonium*, and *deluges* constructs governance as fragile and reactive, while evoking public fear, instability, and a sense of impending collapse.

There is a repeated use of these metaphors, which naturalizes governance crises by constructing them as external or inevitable phenomena. Remember, these happenings are outcomes of concrete policy choices, structural inequalities, or elite-driven agendas. By framing state dysfunction in terms of environmental or uncontrollable forces, such language obscures the political agency and accountability of the actors responsible for governing. This is consistent with what Fairclough (2003) terms the ideological erasure of agency. This discursive strategy positions citizens as passive and helpless at a time of crisis rather than as active agents capable of reforming political practices.

Moreover, from a CDA perspective, these metaphors help sustain an ideological view of politics in which the government is portrayed as constantly unstable, trapped in recurring crises, and incapable of effective or lasting solutions. This repeated framing shapes public perceptions of governance as inherently dysfunctional, reinforcing a sense of hopelessness about the possibility of meaningful reform. Kenyans have witnessed blame games where the prevailing regimes lay blame on past regimes for the recurrent crises. We, therefore, experience fear-based discourse that reinforces public cynicism and limits the perceived space for civic engagement. This pervasive use of crisis and disaster metaphors in the 2024 headline corpus exemplifies how linguistic choices function to ideologically shape public perceptions of governance and agency. This finding aligns with Ngumo and Omoke (2020) in their observation that the headlines personalize and depoliticize important political processes. This discourse marginalizes citizens’ participation and emphasizes the political spectacle by the elite, who are engaged in perpetual conflict and emergency.

4.4 PROTEST AND YOUTH REVOLT IS A NATURAL FORCE

During the heated period surrounding the passage of the 2024 Finance Bill and the ensuing Gen Z-led protests, Kenyan newspaper headlines frequently employed metaphors that conceptualized the protests as a natural force. Imagery of natural disasters and societal upheaval is evident in headlines like “DN/21/6/24 *A youth revolt*”, “ST/23/6/24 *The storm in Ruto’s paradise*”, “ST/24/6/24 *The revolt continues*”, “DN/26/6/24 *Pandemonium*”, “ST/7/7/24 *Shutdown*”, “DN/24/7/24 *Day of defiance*”, “DN/29/6/24 *14 14 hours of terror*”, “ST/7/6/24 *Grounded president*”, and “ST/15/7/24 *In eye of the storm*” DN/30/6/24 *Under siege*, ST/12/7/24 *People power*. This kind of framing portrayed the Gen-Z led protests as ‘organic’, ‘spontaneous’, and ‘uncontrollable’ as they are likened to storms, floods, or seismic events. This metaphorical construction serves two purposes: The first is to legitimate the protests by portraying them as powerful and authentic expressions of collective dissent arising from what was considered punitive taxation. The phrase “people power” suggests an unstoppable popular wave

beyond government control. Secondly, this framing carries significant ideological effects. It emphasizes the natural and impersonal character of the protests, these metaphors tend to depersonalize and depoliticize the agency of the protestors. The protestors are denied a voice while elite persons and their actions are given prominence. This construction ended up portraying the protestors as disorganized, anonymous, and a volatile mass rather than as a legitimate, strategic civil movement. The underlying political vision, organizational structures, and explicit demands articulated by Gen-Z activists and allied civil society actors were largely backgrounded in favour of a spectacle-driven narrative focused on disruption and disorder; the government reaction was foregrounded. Furthermore, the discursive strategy of foregrounding the volatility and destabilizing effects of protest using labels such as “*shutdown*”, “*pandemonium*”, “*paralysis*”, and “*under siege*” shifts public attention away from the legitimacy of the protestors’ political critiques to the spectacle of social instability. This strategy aligns with the broader media practice of sensationalism (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017) where drama is privileged over analytical coverage of governance structures.

This metaphorical framing functions as a key site of hegemonic contestation. While it implicitly validates the power of popular mobilization, it also serves to contain and neutralize discontent by diminishing the protest of its agency. As Fairclough (2003) and Koller (2004) argue, such metaphors can reproduce dominant ideological narratives by portraying civic-led action as chaotic or destabilizing, thereby discouraging broader solidarities and limiting the perceived legitimacy of systemic transformation. In the context of the 2024 Kenyan protests, this natural force framing ultimately contributed to a discursive narrowing of how political agency and civic resistance were represented in the public sphere.

4.5 PERSONIFICATION

Another prominent metaphorical strategy in the 2024 headlines is the use of **personification**. This is where political processes and governance struggles are represented through the actions and moral qualities of individual leaders (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Van Leeuwen, 2008; Fairclough, 2003).

Headlines from the newspapers, such as “DN/6/7/24 *Ruto faces hard truths*,” “ST/6/7/24 *Ruto climbs down*,” DN/27 /6/24/ *Ruto’s olive branch* “*Ruto fights inflation*,” and “*Raila defies government*,” demonstrate a trend in political discourse that reduces complex processes to personal narratives that are concentrated on prominent political figures. This personification simplifies governance and shifts the focus to the actions and character of individual leaders rather than the broader systemic issues at play. It is important to note that in the Kenyan governance structure, there are individuals in charge of dockets such as security, finance, and health, but their roles are all constructed as belonging to one person- the president. He is constructed as a superhuman capable of performing all government functions, and the others are constructed as having no active role. In Kenya, this trend is evident in the portrayal of leadership responses to the Finance Bill crisis and Gen Z-led protests as personal victories, escape, or ethical dilemmas for figures like President Ruto and opposition leaders. Van Leeuwen’s (2008) notion of activation is at play here. Individual leaders are highlighted as the main agents in political events, while larger structures and collective actors are often denied agency. For instance, headlines such as “*Ruto faces hard truths*” frame governance challenges as personal struggles rather than institutional responsibilities. This narrative suggests that political change depends on the choices and character of individual leaders, and this diminishes the role of public participation and accountability. It is important to note that public outcry significantly influenced elite actions, including the removal of the deputy president and cooperation with opposition leaders.

This framing, further, aligns with Ngumo and Omoke’s (2020) view that focusing on personalities diverts attention from the underlying structural causes of political conflict. By reducing politics to a contest between individuals, collective agency is marginalized, and important discussions about governance are obscured. Therefore, the headlines of 2024 reinforced a view of power as predominantly personal, concentrated in a few elite figures, rather than as a product of a democratic citizen engagement. The noun phrase ‘*same old faces*’ signifies that politics in Kenya is centred on the same individuals, as demonstrated by the headlines all year round. Ngumo and Omoke (2020) made a similar observation in their work, where they indicated that the changing political alliances involved the same personalities over various political regimes.

In addition to personification, the use of religious metaphors in political narratives further personalizes leadership struggles. Phrases like “*Kings without crowns*,” “*Ruto’s olive branch*,” “*Masters of doublespeak*,”

and “Things fall apart” draw from biblical, literary, and mythic traditions that resonate with Kenyan political discourse. These metaphors frame political conflicts as moral struggles embedded within grand narratives of corruption, redemption, and legitimacy. For example, “Kings without crowns” evokes images of fallen rulers, while “Things fall apart” reflects societal disintegration. “Ruto’s olive branch” symbolizes peace and reconciliation, constructing leadership gestures as acts of redemption and goodwill.

This construction of political events invites the audience to interpret governance through narratives of good conduct, betrayal, and mercy from the political figures rather than structural critiques. This aligns with Fairclough’s (2003) idea of the moralization of public discourse, where political agency is concentrated in a few moral figures considered as heroes and villains. Structural and collective actions are backgrounded. In Kenya, where religious and mythic imagery are deeply rooted in political culture, this framing reinforces narratives centered on elite individuals and highlights personal drama over collective responsibility. This approach engages the public emotionally while limiting the space for alternative civic voices and critiques of governance styles. A summary of these metaphors is captured in Table 2.

Table 2: Metaphors, Example Headlines, and Ideological Functions

Conceptual Metaphor	Example Headline(s)	Mapping (Source → Target)	Ideological Function
POLITICS IS WAR	“ <i>Ruto’s warning shot</i> ” (DN, 2/6/24); “ <i>Battle lines drawn</i> ” (DN, 29/9/24)	War → Politics	Normalizes adversarial leadership; dramatizes elite rivalry; sidelines consensus-building.
ECONOMY IS ILLNESS/BURDEN	“ <i>IMF’s bitter pill</i> ” (DN, 2/6/24); “ <i>Anatomy of a sick nation</i> ” (DN, 2/6/24)	Illness/Burden → Economy	Naturalizes suffering as unavoidable; depoliticizes hardship; obscures structural accountability.
GOVERNANCE AS CRISIS/NATURAL DISASTER	“ <i>Storm over Housing Levy</i> ” (DN, 1/2/24); “ <i>Deluge of death</i> ” (ST, 30/4/24)	Disaster → Governance	Frames governance breakdown as external, uncontrollable forces; erases political agency; induces fear/cynicism.
PROTEST AS NATURAL FORCE	“ <i>Youth revolt</i> ” (DN, 21/6/24); “ <i>In eye of the storm</i> ” (ST, 15/7/24)	Natural force → Protest	Highlights power and spontaneity of protests; but depoliticizes organized activism; foregrounds disruption over demands.
PERSONIFICATION	“ <i>Ruto faces hard truths</i> ” (DN, 6/7/24); “ <i>Ruto’s olive branch</i> ” (DN, 27/6/24)	Individual leader → Governance process	Concentrates agency in elite individuals; moralizes politics; marginalizes collective civic action.

This demonstrates how headline metaphors systematically mapped concrete source domains onto political realities in Kenya. Across categories, these framings performed consistent ideological work: they reinforced elite-centered narratives, dramatized politics as conflict and crisis, and minimized the visibility of collective civic agency. Importantly, while metaphors of protest occasionally empowered citizen action by depicting it as elemental and unstoppable, they simultaneously depoliticized protesters by rendering them as chaotic forces rather than organized actors. This dual function highlights how metaphor operates both to legitimate and to constrain civic resistance in Kenyan media discourse.

Discussion

The analysis presented highlights the important role that metaphorical language in Kenyan newspaper headlines plays in shaping public perceptions of power, governance, protest, and civic engagement. In this section, I will

explore how these metaphorical patterns contribute to the reinforcement of dominant narratives, drawing on insights from Critical Metaphor Analysis, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis to place the findings within the wider context of Kenya's media and politics.

The findings indicate that metaphors are important in the ideological framework of Kenyan political discourse, particularly as expressed through newspaper headlines. Rather than being neutral tools of language, the metaphors identified in this study influence how political events, figures, and processes are understood by the public on both cognitive and emotional levels. Metaphors related to war and crisis such as "Ruto's warning shot," "battle lines drawn," and "storm over Housing Levy" create a political narrative that emphasizes division, spectacle, and conflict among elites. These metaphors portray politics as a battleground where opposition is prevalent, sidelining the possibility of dialogue and inclusive governance. This framing normalizes confrontational leadership styles and reinforces the view that political life is fundamentally adversarial.

The analysis also reveals that certain metaphorical framings, particularly those related to illness and the body, function as interconnected conceptual maps. This dual nature presents governance as unhealthy and the nation as a suffering body. They demonstrate the thin line between critiquing institutions and representing the nation. "Anatomy of a sick nation," "IMF's bitter pill," and "floods nightmare" highlight the failures and crises within the country and they also tend to normalize public suffering. They frame economic woes and institutional collapse as inevitable rather than the result of specific political decisions. This perspective diminishes public expectations for accountability and diverts attention from critical analysis of underlying structures.

Protest related metaphors, particularly those reflecting the Gen Z-led movements, offer a more complex perspective. Phrases like "youth revolt," "the storm in Ruto's paradise," and "day of defiance" empower civic action by depicting it as a powerful collective force, yet they also deny the protester agency. These metaphors focus on the spectacle of unrest while downplaying the organized, strategic, and informed nature of protest movements.

Overall, the patterns identified in this study suggest that Kenyan newspaper headlines both mirror and perpetuate a sensationalized and confrontational political culture. The prevailing metaphorical frameworks favor spectacle, conflict, and crisis over constructive civic dialogue at the expense of alternative political actions. In this context, metaphor serves not just as a cognitive tool but also as a significant ideological force that influences public discourse and political understanding in contemporary Kenya.

The analysis shows that Kenyan headline metaphorization performs a dual ideological function: it simultaneously amplifies the power of protest as an unstoppable force and depoliticizes protesters by constructing them as faceless and chaotic. This movement extends CMT/CMA accounts by demonstrating how the same metaphor family can both confer legitimacy and diminish agency. This pattern is enabled by headline economy and commercial news values. CDA clarifies how this tension sustains elite-centered narratives despite moments of citizenry reawakening.

Conclusion

The power of metaphor has served as a discursive resource in the construction of Kenyan political discourse, especially as it is mediated through newspaper headlines. This analysis sheds light on how metaphor influences public perception concerning governance, leadership, protest, and national crisis within the highly contested media space of Kenya by synthesizing insights of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Critical Metaphor Analysis, and Critical Discourse Analysis. Headlines in the 2024 corpus prominently featured war, crisis, illness, natural disaster metaphors among others that politically polarized and centered elite spectacles while framing political events. Certain metaphorical representations, especially those about the Gen Z-led protests, enabled the coexistence of narratives of resistance. However, the dominating patterns rested upon politics of adversity and spectacle. And in so doing, these patterns diminished opportunities for civic engagement and critical voices of the citizens.

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Competing Interest

The author declares no competing interests.

Data availability statement:

The data that support the findings of this study consist of publicly available newspaper headlines published in Kenyan print and online media outlets during the period January to December 2024. The headlines were sourced from *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*. All materials are part of the public record and are accessible through the respective publishers' archives, physical newspaper collections, or online news databases. Extracts and coded examples used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, in line with fair use and copyright limitations for academic research.

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Appendix A: Sample Coding of Headlines

Headline	Source & Date	Conceptual Metaphor	Ideological Function
“Ruto courts storm”	DN, 4/1/24	GOVERNANCE AS CRISIS	Constructs governance as unstable and reactive; dramatizes elite politics.
“Triple blow for Ruto”	ST, 27/1/24	POLITICS IS WAR	Frames leadership as combat; highlights elite competition.
“Budget’s bitter pill”	DN, 2/6/24	ECONOMY IS ILL-NESS	Normalizes austerity as medical necessity; minimizes contestability.
“Shutdown”	ST, 7/7/24	PROTEST AS FORCE	Frames protest as disruptive paralysis; back-grounding protester agency.
“Ruto climbs down”	ST, 6/7/24	PERSONIFICATION	Reduces governance to leader’s action; obscures institutional processes.
“People power”	ST, 12/7/24	PROTEST AS FORCE	Suggests legitimacy of civic uprising but also mass anonymity.