

Original Research Article

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF LANGUAGE USE IN GOVERNANCE, CRISIS RESPONSE, AND RISK MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION: EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED MARKET WOMEN IN LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract: Language serves as a critical governance instrument, shaping public trust, comprehension, and behavioral compliance during administrative and emergency situations. Despite increasing attention to public communication, limited empirical research addresses the interconnected roles of language across governance, crisis response, and risk management within Nigeria's informal commercial sectors. Grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis and Framing Theory, this study evaluates the linguistic strategies in governance communication and their influence on compliance among market women in Lagos State's Trade Fair Complex and Alaba International Market. Utilizing a descriptive survey design, a structured questionnaire was administered to 384 multi-stage selected respondents. Data were analyzed using simple percentages, mean scores, and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC). Findings reveal that while routine governance relies on persuasive and directive language, crisis communication employs urgent, warning-oriented structures. Crucially, message simplicity, accessibility, and indigenous language adaptation significantly enhanced compliance ($r = 0.618$, $p < 0.05$), whereas technical jargon and delayed dissemination fostered ambiguity and mistrust. The study concludes that language is a strategic asset requiring audience-centered frameworks, recommending that government institutions prioritize plain, multilingual messaging and timely dissemination during emergencies to optimize policy execution and institutional trust.

Keywords: Governance Communication, Crisis Response, Risk Management Communication, Language Strategies & Public Compliance

Introduction

Language constitutes one of the most powerful instruments through which governments communicate policies, mobilize citizens, coordinate public action, and maintain political legitimacy within democratic and administrative systems. Globally, governance extends far beyond the mechanical formulation of policies and structural administration; it fundamentally depends on strategic communication that effectively conveys institutional intentions and facilitates bidirectional interaction between state actors and civil society (Zaimina, 2025). From the public health mandates issued across North America and Europe to socio-economic reform campaigns in developing regions, the success or failure of public policies rests heavily on how governmental messages are linguistically framed, interpreted, and operationalized by diverse populations. In times of crisis and risk ranging from environmental disasters to public safety threats, language serves as the frontline defense mechanism for risk mitigation, public compliance, and panic reduction.

Locally, within the Nigerian socio-political landscape, communication in governance is inherently complex due to extraordinary ethnolinguistic diversity, varying literacy rates, and a large informal economic sector. According to Musa (2026), Nigeria hosts over 500 indigenous languages alongside English as the official language and Nigerian Pidgin as the lingua franca of grassroots commerce. In megacities like Lagos, the commercial nerve center of West African governance communication must traverse heterogeneous social classes and informal trade networks. Market women within major commercial hubs such as the Trade Fair Complex (Ojo/Badagry Expressway) and Alaba International Market represent a vital socio-economic demographic. They drive micro-economic liquidity, manage extensive community clusters, and act as key conduits for information diffusion. However, official state communications often disseminated in formal English or packed with administrative jargon frequently fail to achieve optimal resonance within these informal markets. When state directives regarding taxation, market regulation, sanitation, public health, or emergency response are misaligned with the linguistic reality of the target audience, public compliance drops, institutional trust erodes, and room is created for misinformation.

Language is an essential instrument for governance, crisis response, and risk management because it shapes public understanding, trust, and behavioural responses during routine administrative and emergency situations in the school, market, mosques (Masajid), churches, and so all. According to Lawal et al. (2026), language is an effective tool for resolving conflicts, expressing emotions, reducing tension, and encouraging dialogue in a variety of school settings. Governance extends beyond policy formulation and institutional structures; it fundamentally depends on communication that effectively

conveys governmental intentions and facilitates interaction between public authorities and citizens. Consequently, language occupies a central position in governance because the success or failure of many public policies depends largely on how governmental messages are framed, interpreted, and acted upon by members of society. Lawal et al. (2026), language's function as the main communication medium is an important but little-studied component. By prioritizing message clarity, accessibility, and cultural resonance, government institutions can counter social media misinformation, bridge literacy gaps, enhance public trust, and ensure that both routine policy objectives and emergency directives are successfully understood and adopted by diverse populations.

Despite the recognized importance of strategic communication, a critical empirical gap exists regarding how language functions across routine governance, crisis management, and risk communication within Nigeria's informal commercial sectors, a disconnect driven by jargon, delayed transmission, and elite language reliance that promotes public apathy, fuels misinformation, and undermines policy compliance among market women in Lagos State. This paper directly addresses this problem by evaluating the linguistic strategies of governance communication and measuring their direct influence on understanding, trust, and behavioral compliance among market women in Lagos State.

Objective of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to empirically investigate the linguistic strategies employed in governance, crisis response, and risk management communication and their influence on public understanding and policy compliance among market women in Trade Fair Complex and Alaba International Market, Lagos State, Nigeria.

Research Question

1. What are the dominant linguistic strategies employed by government authorities in governance, crisis response, and risk management communication targeting market women in Lagos State?

Research Hypothesis

H_{01} : There is no significant relationship between the clarity of linguistic strategies used in governance communication and the level of compliance with official directives among market women in Lagos State.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

According to Iyoha (2023), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), developed prominently by Norman Fairclough (1989, 1995) and Teun A. van Dijk (1993, 1998), posits that language is a non-neutral social practice through which power relations, institutional authority, and ideological dominance are established, maintained, and contested. This theory is exceptionally suitable for this study because governance and crisis communication are fundamentally exercises of institutional power where governments use specific lexical

choices, tone, and grammatical modalities to direct public behavior. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study gains the necessary analytical tools to critically evaluate how official directives employ top-down, persuasive, or authoritarian linguistic structures to enforce compliance among market women in Lagos State. Furthermore, the theory provides a precise diagnostic lens to unmask how elite, English-dominant administrative jargon inadvertently marginalizes grassroots traders with varying literacy levels, creating linguistic barriers that exacerbate institutional distance and alienate the subaltern economic sector during critical risk scenarios.

Framing Theory

According to Framing Theory, which was developed by Erving Goffman in 1974 and further developed in communication studies by Robert Entman in 1993 (D'angelo, 2019). This theory is that communicating institutions choose particular elements of a perceived reality and highlight them in a text in order to identify issues, identify causes, form moral conclusions, and offer solutions. This paradigm is particularly appropriate for this study since the way information is organized and presented by state authorities greatly influences how public policy, crisis advisories, and danger warnings are interpreted. Whether a mandate like a market relocation, sanitation order, or public health protocol is presented as an essential civic partnership, an urgent safety measure, or a punitive legal constraint directly affects psychological risk perception and shapes public response in governance and emergency situations. By employing Framing Theory, this study effectively analyzes how the cognitive and linguistic framing of official state messages determines whether market women in Lagos State perceive government directives as collaborative, trustworthy initiatives or as oppressive socio-economic impositions, thereby directly governing their level of voluntary compliance.

Conceptual Framework

Governance Communication

Governance communication refers to the systematic transmission of information, policies, laws, and administrative goals from state authorities to the public to foster transparency, civic engagement, and social alignment (Tufte, 2017). It encompasses informational language (factual descriptions of policies), directive language (laws, mandates, and regulations), and persuasive language (campaigns encouraging voluntary tax compliance or environmental sanitation). Effective governance communication is largely dependent on the alignment of institutional message with the socio-cultural realities of the target audience, even beyond its basic delivery modalities. There will always be a gap between the goal of the government and the public's response when state officials disseminate laws, rules, or civic initiatives without taking into consideration language diversity, different literacy levels, and localized communication channels. Top-down administrative communication frequently fails to foster confidence in complex metropolitan surroundings if it depends on remote digital platforms that separate grassroots communities or opaque legalistic jargon. As a result, governance communication needs to be viewed as a

dynamic, two-way conversation rather than just a one-way transmission of information and directives.

Crisis Response and Risk Management Communication

Crisis response communication involves real-time, high-urgency messaging deployed during unexpected events (e.g., epidemics, fires, market violence, or structural failures) to protect life, property, and public order (Ndlela, 2018). Risk management communication is preemptive, seeking to inform populations about potential hazards, safety protocols, and long-term risk reduction strategies. In informal market environments, both domains require high clarity, immediate operational directives, and minimum ambiguity. Building on these operational imperatives, the effectiveness of both crisis response and risk management communication hinges on institutional agility and psychological alignment with the target population. During emergency events, such as market fires or civil unrest, informal traders experience heightened stress and information overload, making them acutely sensitive to how instructions are delivered. If official advisories are delayed, overly legalistic, or inconsistent across channels, rumor networks and social media misinformation rapidly fill the void, triggering panic and non-compliance. Proactive risk communication, on the other hand, depends on consistent, compassionate involvement that closes the gap between state safety laws and traders' immediate financial survival. State actors must eschew abstract administrative jargon in favor of clear, urgent, and culturally relevant directions conveyed through reliable community channels in order to successfully de-escalate crises and implant long-term safety standards in densely populated commercial contexts like Lagos State.

Building on these practical requirements, institutional flexibility and psychological compatibility with the target audience are critical to the success of risk management and crisis response communications (AlQahtani, 2026). Informal merchants have increased stress and information overload during emergency situations, such as market fires or civil chaos, which makes them extremely sensitive to how orders are given. According to Epps (2020), Fake news networks and false information on social media quickly fill the space left by delayed, legalistic, or conflicting government cautions, which can lead to panic and non-compliance. Conversely, proactive risk communication relies on persistent, caring involvement that bridges the gap between traders' immediate financial survival, health safety and state safety regulations (Bérard & Teyssier, 2017). Therefore, in order to de-escalate crises and establish long-term safety norms in densely populated commercial environments like Lagos State, state actors must forgo abstract administrative jargon in favor of clear, urgent, and culturally appropriate recommendations communicated through dependable community channels.

Linguistic Adaptation and Public Compliance

According to Abdulwahab (2022), public compliance measures the extent to which target citizens align their behaviors with official directives. Linguistic adaptation the intentional alignment of vocabulary, tone, medium, and language choice (e.g., Yoruba, Pidgin, plain English) with the target audience's socio-cultural realities serves as the critical

operational bridge connecting state intentions with public compliance. Ultimately, achieving sustainable public compliance goes beyond mere enforcement or legal mandate; it depends on the cognitive resonance and emotional trust established through linguistic adaptation. When government directives are delivered in a language and tone that feel alien, overly bureaucratic, or dismissive of local realities, citizens particularly grassroots traders tend to view them with skepticism, leading to passive resistance or outright non-compliance. Conversely, by intentionally adapting messages into familiar codes such as Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, or simplified plain English, state institutions dismantle artificial hierarchy and signal empathy for the public's lived experience. This deliberate alignment reduces the friction of interpretation, builds institutional credibility, and transforms top-down mandates into shared civic obligations. In informal economic hubs where daily livelihoods depend on rapid, clear communication, tailored language acts as the indispensable catalyst that translates abstract policy goals into voluntary, collective action.

The direct influence of language choice on policy execution and public compliance is repeatedly highlighted by empirical research conducted in both global and African contexts. Bérard, & Teyssier, (2017). demonstrated that proactive risk communication functions through sustained, empathetic stakeholder engagement, which effectively bridges the tension between state safety compliance and the immediate socio-economic survival of informal traders. Similar to this, Epps (2020) looked at crisis communication after urban market fires in Lagos and showed that state authorities delayed and extremely technical announcements increased public confusion and allowed fake news to take over informal trade groups. Aligning with these functional demands, recent AlQahtani (2026). evidence underscored that institutional flexibility and psychological alignment with the receiving audience are paramount to ensuring message compliance during emergency and risk scenarios. However, much of the existing African literature focuses predominantly on media channels rather than the specific linguistic components such as modality, jargon, and plain framing that dictate audience reception. Furthermore, key trade demographics such as market women in major commercial hubs remain understudied despite their immense economic footprint. This study fills this critical empirical gap by evaluating language use across routine governance, crisis management, and risk contexts specifically among market women in Lagos State

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design was selected because it allows for the systematic collection of quantitative data from a representative sample of a population to describe, analyze, and interpret existing patterns of linguistic strategies and compliance without manipulating variables.

Population of the Study

The target population comprised all registered and unregistered market women operating within two major commercial hubs in Lagos State: the Trade Fair Complex

(Ojo/Badagry Expressway axis) and Alaba International Market (Ojo Local Government Area). These markets house an estimated population of over 45,000 female traders engaged in diverse commercial activities ranging from textiles and cosmetics to household electronics and foodstuffs.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total sample size of 384 respondents was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula for infinite populations, calculated at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error and an assumed population proportion of 50%. To select the participants, a multi-stage sampling technique was employed. Initially, purposive sampling was used to select the Trade Fair Complex and Alaba International Market owing to their high commercial density and linguistic heterogeneity. Subsequently, stratified sampling was applied to divide each market complex into distinct commercial sections, such as Textiles, Electronics, Cosmetics, and Provisions. Finally, simple random sampling was used to select 192 market women from each of the two market complexes, ensuring an equal and balanced representation of 384 respondents across both study locations

Instrument for Data Collection

Data were gathered using a self-constructed structured questionnaire titled the *Language in Governance and Crisis Communication Questionnaire (LGCCQ)*. The instrument contained two main sections: Section A gathered demographic information (age, market location, educational attainment, primary language spoken), while Section B comprised 20 items structured on a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA = 4), Agree (A = 3), Disagree (D = 2), and Strongly Disagree (SD = 1). The instrument was developed following an extensive review of existing literature on Critical Discourse Analysis, Framing Theory, and emergency risk communication models. Items were formulated to directly reflect the research questions, focusing on perceived linguistic clarity, dominant communication styles, channels of message reception, and compliance actions.

Validation of the Instrument

Face and content validity were established by submitting the draft instrument to three experts: two senior lecturers in Applied Linguistics and Discourse Studies and one expert in Measurement and Evaluation from the Faculty of Arts, University of Lagos. Their critiques regarding item ambiguity, language simplicity, and construct alignment were incorporated into the final revision of the questionnaire.

Reliability of the Instrument

To establish the internal consistency of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted using 30 market women at Mile 12 Market, Lagos (a population outside the primary sample). The data obtained were subjected to Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis. The overall scale yielded a reliability coefficient of $r = 0.84$, indicating high internal consistency and suitability for empirical deployment.

Method of Data Collection & Analysis

Data collection was carried out over a period of four weeks by the researcher alongside four trained research assistants fluent in English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Yoruba. Given the varying literacy levels among respondents, an interviewer-administered mode was employed where necessary: the questionnaire items were read aloud and translated into Pidgin or Yoruba in real time, and the respondents' choices were recorded accurately. Out of the 384 questionnaires distributed, 370 were fully completed and successfully retrieved, yielding a 96.4% response rate. Data collected were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 26). Research Question 1 was analyzed using descriptive statistics comprising frequency counts, percentages, mean scores ($\bar{X}$), and standard deviations (SD). A benchmark mean criterion of 2.50 was set for decision-making (where items with $\{X\} \geq 2.50$ were accepted as agreed). The Research Hypothesis was tested using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) at a 0.05 level of significance to determine the relationship between linguistic clarity and public compliance.

Results, Data Analysis, and Decision

Analysis of Research Question

Research Question 1: What are the dominant linguistic strategies employed by government authorities in governance, crisis response, and risk management communication targeting market women in Lagos State?

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Dominant Linguistic Strategies in Governance and Crisis Communication (N = 370)

S/N	Item	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD	Decision
1	The majority of official directives instruct merchants what needs to be done using directive/command language.	180 (48.6%)	135 (36.5%)	35 (9.5%)	20 (5.4%)	3.28	0.84	Agreed
2	Emergency and crisis advisories use urgent, warning-oriented words that demand immediate action.	210 (56.8%)	120 (32.4%)	25 (6.8%)	15 (4.1%)	3.42	0.77	Agreed

3	Government messages often use complex, technical, or legal expressions that are hard to understand.	165 (44.6%)	140 (37.8%)	45 (12.2%)	20 (5.4%)	3.22	0.85	Agreed
4	Persuasive and appealing language is mostly used during public awareness campaigns (e.g., tax, health).	140 (37.8%)	160 (43.2%)	50 (13.5%)	20 (5.4%)	3.14	0.82	Agreed
5	Official messages translated into Nigerian Pidgin or Yoruba are clearer and easier to act upon.	230 (62.2%)	110 (29.7%)	20 (5.4%)	10 (2.7%)	3.51	0.71	Agreed
	Grand Mean / Average					3.31	0.80	Agreed

Field Survey, 2026

Table 1 shows the respondents' ratings of the dominant linguistic strategies used in governance and crisis communication. Item 5 recorded the highest mean score ($X = 3.51$, $SD = 0.71$), indicating strong agreement that official messages translated into Nigerian Pidgin or Yoruba are substantially clearer and easier to execute. Item 2 ($X = 3.42$, $SD = 0.77$) confirms that emergency communication relies heavily on urgent, warning-oriented language. Item 1 ($X = 3.28$) and Item 3 ($X = 3.22$) reveal that routine governance directives lean on directive commands and often suffer from overly technical/legal language. The overall grand mean of **3.31** exceeds the benchmark criterion of 2.50, establishing that governance communication targeting market women is predominantly characterized by urgent-directive tones in emergencies, persuasive framing during public campaigns, and significant linguistic barriers when delivered in formal English.

Table 2: Testing of the Research Hypothesis

Variables	N	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	Std. Deviation (SD)	r-value	p-value (Sig. 2-tailed)	Decision
Linguistic Clarity	370	14.82	2.64	0.618**	0.000	Reject H_{01}
Public Compliance	370	15.34	2.81			

Field Survey (2026).

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Interpretation

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation analysis evaluating the relationship between linguistic clarity in governance communication and public compliance among market women. The calculated correlation coefficient (r) is **0.618**, representing a strong positive relationship between the two variables. The associated significance value (p-value = **0.000**) is less than the chosen alpha level of **0.05** ($p < 0.05$). Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) is **rejected**, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This statistical result demonstrates a statistically significant positive relationship between linguistic clarity and public compliance. When governance communication is clear, simple, consistent, and linguistically accessible, market women are significantly more likely to comply with official directives and risk management protocols.

Discussion of Findings

The empirical results of this study demonstrate that language is an active force governing public compliance, trust, and emergency execution among market women in Lagos State. Addressing Research Question 1, the findings revealed that governance communication in Lagos State relies on a spectrum of linguistic styles, heavily dominated by directive, warning-oriented, and top-down command structures during crises (X) = 3.42), alongside persuasive framing during routine awareness campaigns (X) = 3.14). Importantly, respondents highlighted that technical jargon presents a major cognitive barrier (X)= 3.22), whereas indigenous translation and Nigerian Pidgin maximize comprehension (X) = 3.51). This finding aligns directly with the work of Opara (2018), who asserted that administrative communication in developing economies frequently fails due to linguistic distance the gap between official elite discourse and grassroots operational vernacular and mirrors Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis, which notes that directive institutional language reinforces authoritarian distance, whereas collaborative, plain-language framing encourages democratic participation. Regarding Hypothesis 1, the statistical test yielded a strong, positive correlation ($r = 0.618$, $p < 0.05$), proving that

message clarity directly drives public compliance when directives are free from ambiguity, delivered rapidly, and framed in accessible terms. This outcome is strongly corroborated by Adebayo and Okon (2021), whose study on urban market emergencies in Lagos demonstrated that compliance with safety mandates rose by over 70% when messages were relayed via simplified local radio broadcasts and town criers, while Entman (1993) and Reynolds and Seeger (2005) further support these results through Framing Theory and the CERC model by establishing that clear, consistent framing reduces cognitive overload and minimizes panic. Ultimately, the practical significance of these findings lies in bridging the gap between state communication policy and grassroots compliance in West Africa's vast informal commercial hubs, providing public administrators with an empirical roadmap to enhance regulatory execution, strengthen crisis preparedness, and counter social media misinformation through linguistic simplicity, multilingual translation, and timely dissemination.

Summary of the Study

This study empirically investigated language use across governance, crisis response, and risk management communication among market women in Trade Fair Complex and Alaba International Market, Lagos State. Grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis and Framing Theory, the study utilized a descriptive survey design. A sample of 384 market women was drawn via multi-stage sampling, and data were gathered using the validated *LGCCQ* instrument ($r = 0.84$). Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were used to analyze the research question, while Pearson correlation was used to test the hypothesis.

The findings established that governance communication predominantly uses directive and urgent framing, but suffers from technical jargon. Indigenous and Pidgin translations significantly improve message comprehension. Furthermore, a statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.618$, $p = 0.000$) was identified between linguistic clarity and public compliance.

Conclusion

The study concludes that language is a strategic governance asset whose efficacy depends entirely on audience-centered, culturally attuned communication practices. In multi-ethnic, multi-literate contexts like Lagos State, governance cannot succeed through top-down, legalistic English mandates alone. When government institutions communicate using complex jargon or delayed statements, public trust erodes, compliance drops, and informal channels become vulnerable to misinformation. Conversely, clear, consistent, plain, and multilingual language bridges literacy gaps, fosters institutional trust, and mobilizes rapid compliance during both routine administration and unexpected crises.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Government ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) should establish strict plain-language policies, ensuring all public notices, regulatory mandates, and tax directives are stripped of legalistic jargon before public release.

2. Official governance and emergency communication in Lagos State must be concurrently produced and broadcast in English, Nigerian Pidgin, and primary indigenous languages (notably Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa) to cater to market demographics.
3. State public relations officers should formalize partnerships with *Iyaloja* (market women leaders) and market executive committees, utilizing them as direct linguistic intermediaries to explain and cascade policy details.
4. Emergency response agencies (e.g., LASEMA, NCDC) should deploy localized SMS alerts, voice notes, and dedicated radio broadcasts in Pidgin/indigenous languages to eliminate information lag during risk scenarios.
5. Government communication units must actively monitor social media platforms to quickly detect and counter fake news or distorted policy interpretations with clear, factual updates.
6. Accommodating varying literacy levels among traders, public advisories should integrate infographics, pictorial guides, and short video clips alongside written text.
7. Information institutions should periodically conduct empirical audience research, similar to this study, to assess how public directives are understood by informal market sectors and continuously refine their communication strategies

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