

# Nigerian Media's Perception of the "One Belt, One Road" Initiative--A Corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract:** As the largest economy and a major energy country in Africa, Nigeria formally joined the "the Belt and Road" initiative in 2018, and the cooperation between China and Nigeria based on the initiative has achieved fruitful results. However, there is no research on Nigeria's real understanding of the initiative. Using Transitivity System and the Appraisal Theory as the analysis framework and AntConc and UAM Corps Tool as analysis tools, this paper studies the reports on the "the Belt and Road" by three mainstream media in Nigeria: the National Daily, the Guardian and the Leadership. The study found that most Nigerian media reports showed a positive attitude, but a few reports reflected their misinterpretation of the "the Belt and Road" initiative, which may be affected by the malicious advocacy of western countries.

**Key words:** Nigeria, the Belt and Road Initiative, Appraisal Theory, Africa.

## 1. Introduction

Since China put forward the "Belt and Road" initiative in 2013, African countries have actively responded to and participated in it, and of the 53 African countries that have diplomatic relations with China, 52 countries and the African Union Commission (AUC) have signed the "Belt and Road" cooperation documents with China.[1] Among many African countries, Nigeria surpassed South Africa to become the largest economy in Africa in 2013, and has maintained its leading position until now. [2-3] As Africa's most populous country and Africa's largest energy country, Nigeria formally joined the "Belt and Road" initiative in 2018, and the total import and export volume between China and Nigeria has increased from \$15.2 billion in 2018 to \$25.6 billion in 2021.[4] As the relationship between China and Nigeria is getting closer and closer, it is of great significance to study the real attitude of Nigerian domestic mainstream media towards the "Belt and Road" initiative.

The study used the three major online media in Nigeria, The Nation, The Guardian and The Leadership as the corpus source, and the keywords "the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", "the Silk Road", "One Belt and One Road", "Silk Road Economic Belt", "the Silk Road Economic Belt" and "the Silk Road Economic Belt" to search for reports published from 2017 to 2022 that are highly relevant to China's Belt and Road Initiative (with keywords in the title of the reports, reports interpreting the strategy or indicating the attitudes of Nigeria or other countries). The attitudes and perceptions of Nigerian mainstream media and the social factors behind them towards the Belt and Road Initiative were analyzed from the perspective of critical discourse analysis. The paper consists of four parts, of which the third part is a corpus-based critical discourse analysis, which is developed at three levels - corpus tool analysis, critical discourse analysis and social context analysis. The study reveals that the Nigerian media have ambivalent attitudes towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), recognizing that the BRI has brought development and progress to the country on the one hand, and fearing that Chinese investment and aid in Nigeria will evolve into a "hegemonic" strategy on the other. They are on the other hand worried that China's investment and construction support in Nigeria will become a means of "hegemony". Analysis of social background suggests that the negative perception of the initiative of the Nigerian media may be fueled by some Western media.

## 2. Literature review

The theory of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) originates from Critical Linguistics (CL) proposed by Fowler et al. and was formalized by Fairclough [5] in his book *Language and Power*. Through the analysis of discourse in social contexts, critical discourse analysis aims to find out the relationship between language, power, and ideology, revealing how these three reflect and influence each other.[6] In terms of methodology, the theory draws on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. Systemic-Functional Grammar focuses on the study of the grammatical level of clauses and ignores the function of words themselves. So based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, Martin proposed the Appraisal Theory, which consists of "attitude", "engagement" and "graduation" three subsystems.[7] The "attitude" system includes "affect", "judgment" and "appreciation", indicating the speaker's evaluation, liking or disliking of things. The "engagement" system includes "monogloss" and "heterogloss", indicating the source of information conveyed by the speaker, the former indicating that the information comes from the speaker himself, while the latter comes from others. The system of "graduation" refers to the degree of the speaker's entry into the discourse, including the enhancement and weakening of the discourse attitude.

Critical Discourse Analysis provides a new methodology for analyzing discourse, especially political discourse, but it is too subjective to analyze only a few personal speeches or news reports to conclude their underlying ideologies. With the rise of corpus linguistics, the corpus approach has been introduced into critical discourse analysis as a way to compensate for the shortcomings of critical discourse analysis of being too subjective. In recent years, the combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods has been used by more and more scholars at home and abroad. Yekeen [8] analyzed the Nigerian presidential news broadcasts; Griebel and Vollmann[9], and Samaie and Malmir[10] studied the construction of the image of a particular group in the mainstream media of Western countries. There are also foreign scholars who study the discourse highly related to China in local mainstream media, Afzaal et al[11] study the discourse analysis of Pakistani media on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and find that Pakistani media construct friendly and positive discourse about China, but the study at the level of word choice finds that there are a large quantity of complex and sensitive words in the reports about CPEC and BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). Sangeen [12] analyzes the image of China constructed by Afghan media discourse and finds that China has a positive image in the Afghan media, and the local media believe that good Sino-Afghan interaction will bring economic development and a more secure environment to Afghanistan. Domestic scholars' corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis research is abundant, covering a wide range of topics including politics, economy, military, literature and so on. Scholars such as Liu Dingjia[13], Lian Shaoying and Mi Ruoyu[14] study the reports on China's fight against COVID-19 in the American media, and find that the reports have a variety of themes, but the anti-China tone remains unchanged, and the Western media are often unable to maintain a neutral and objective stance. Some scholars have also studied articles related to the U.S.-China trade war as well as China-related military reports in the U.S. media, revealing the negative attitude of the Western media towards China in the military context and analyzing how the U.S. uses discursive tactics to legitimize the wars that it has waged (Yang Min & Shih Yijun[15]; Hu Jiang[16]; Lin Yiting & Miao Xingwei[17]). On the theme of "Belt and Road", scholars have studied many target countries, but mainly Western countries, including the image of China and Chinese enterprises, local people's attitudes towards Chinese products, and changes in their perceptions of China (Wang Jie[18]; Zhong Xin[19]; Wang Qi[20]; Zhang Wei[21]; Liu Man[22]; Li Shasha[23]). However, there are only a few studies on the media coverage of African countries on the theme of "Belt and Road", and there are no studies related to Nigerian countries.

The corpus of the study is drawn from the coverage of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by the three major Nigerian online media during the period 2017-2022, using the keywords "the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", "the Silk Road", "One Belt and One Road", "Silk Road Economic Belt", "Belt and Road corridor", etc. as search terms to build the target corpus of "Belt and Road". At the same time, the same keywords were used in China Daily to retrieve reports from 2017-2022 to build

the “Belt and Road-China” reference corpus. The discourse analysis is divided into three steps: firstly, the corpus tool was used to analyze the topic words and collocations; secondly, the Appraisal Theory was applied to analyze the news headlines; and finally, the results of the above analysis are incorporated into the socio-historical context analysis in order to study the real cognition of the Nigerian mainstream media on the “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

### 3. Corpus based Critical Discourse Analysis

#### 3.1 Corpus tools helped analysis

The target corpus contains a total of 38,418 characters and the reference corpus contains a total of 178,668 characters. The target corpus and the reference corpus were put into Ant Conc.(4.0.11) for comparative analysis, and the following top 20 subject words were obtained:

Table 1-Top 20 subject words (content words)

Word	Freq.	Keyness	No.	Word	Freq.	Keyness
China	582	2023.077	11	development	204	707.455
road	404	1402.779	12	international	159	551.245
cooperation	393	1364.491	13	we	158	547.774
BRI	309	1072.284	14	world	143	495.724
belt	300	1040.994	15	economic	140	485.315
Nigeria	269	933.245	16	new	131	454.091
countries	251	870.7	17	people	129	447.622
Africa	236	818.59	18	trade	126	436.746
Chinese	221	766.49	19	said	120	415.933
initiative	218	756.071	20	president	117	405.627

As seen in Table 1, the main keywords associated with the Belt and Road Initiative include: “BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)”, “trade”, “cooperation”, “development”, indicating that the Nigerian media perceive the Belt and Road Initiative as an international cooperation centered on trade in pursuit of development. Key words like “China”, “Nigeria”, “Africa”, “countries”, “world”, and “president” indicate the subjects involved in the initiative and the people who play a key role in it. High-frequency words such as “our”, “international”, “economic” and “new” reflect to some extent the attitude of the Nigerian domestic media towards the initiative: it is a new, economically based program of cooperation that concerns the people of the world.

Keywords can reflect the theme and core content of the text to a certain extent, while the ideology implied by the discourse can be reflected by the words that co-occur with the keywords or the words that go with them. Firth, one of the representatives of the London School of Linguistics, emphasized the role of context in his study of the meaning of language, pointing out that the meaning of a discourse is inextricably linked to the situation or context in which it appears.

Collocations are generally shown as Z-score or T-score. When the Z-score is greater than 2, then we consider the collocated word to be significant. In this study, we set the left-right span of word collocation to 5 in AntConc, entered the keywords used in retrieving news, and calculated their respective Z-scores. The results show that the keywords “BRI” and “the Belt and Road Initiative” have the most collocations and the strongest collocations (Z-score > 2). Table 2 shows the collocations of the keywords “BRI” and “the Belt and Road Initiative” (with Z-score >5 and function words excluded). As can be seen from the table, the Z-scores of “generate”, “cooperation”, “already”, “endorsement”, and “strengthened” are all greater than 7, indicating that the Nigerian media are extremely concerned about the economic, infrastructural, and developmental opportunities brought about by the Belt and Road Initiative in their coverage of the strategy, and they either cite leaders/media from abroad, or quote Chinese and Nigerian leaders to show their support for the Belt and Road Initiative.

Table 2 - Collocational words					
No.	Collocates	FreqLR	FreqL	FreqR	Z-score
1	cooperation	73	28	45	7.185
2	quality	12	10	2	5.628
3	need	12	4	8	6.06
4	already	11	2	9	7.047
5	endorsement	5	0	5	7.148
6	strengthened	4	3	1	7.566
7	generate	3	0	3	9.247

The following are some sentences with collocates.

- (1) ...BRI **cooperation** has strengthened economic ties and people-to-people exchanges between them.
- (2) Promoting **High-quality** BRI Cooperation Between China and Nigeria.
- (3) The BRI has won wide international **endorsement** since President Xi put forward it in 2013.
- (4) the closer connectivity in policy, infrastructure... **strengthened** industrial capacity cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative and...

As shown in above sentences, the tone of the reports published by the Nigerian media on China's Belt and Road Initiative is mainly complimentary and affirmative. For example, they believe that Nigeria can use China's "One Belt, One Road" as a strong driving force for its own development; they fully agree with China's proposal to build a China-Nigeria economic belt, and believe that the "One Belt, One Road" initiative will bring great benefits to all participating countries.

An analysis of the extracted keywords and collocations shows that Nigeria recognizes the Belt and Road Initiative and believes that cooperation with China can help it break away from poverty and embark on the road to prosperity, and praises the changes brought about by the Belt and Road Initiative.

### 3.2 Critical discourse analysis

Corpus tools analyze texts quantitatively from a statistical point of view, while critical discourse analysis can make up for the shortcomings of corpus tool analysis through qualitative analysis. In the appraisal system proposed by Martin, the attitude system is its core.[24] Therefore, this study chooses the attitude system to analyze news headlines.

From 2017 to 2022, the total number of news reports on "the Belt and Road" in the three major mainstream media in Nigeria is 38, whose attitude-related keywords are listed in Table 3 below:

Table 3 - Attitude-related keywords in headlines		
Time (year)	Qty.	Attitude-related keywords in headlines
2017	8	Positive words: new opportunities, cooperation, major role
		Negative words: rift
2018	7	Positive words: boost, endorses, robusts engagement, promoting togetherness
		Negative words: debt peonage, warns against 'hegemony'
2019	19	Positive words: high-quality, opportunities, accomplish, transform, fresh impetus, prosperity
		Negative words: disquiet
2020	1	Neutral words: affects
2021	1	No attitude-related words
2022	2	Negative words: rival

As shown in Table 3, in 2019, the three major newspapers publish the largest number of news reports about "Belt and Road", and the number of articles in 2018 and 2017 is more or less the same. From 2017 to 2019, the number of positive words used in the headlines of the news is relatively high, but there are still negative words in them. From the year of 2020 to 2022, the number of Belt and Road related reports decreases significantly, and there are no positive words.

The following results were obtained from the analysis of headlines with UAM Corpus Tool.

Table 4 – Analysis of attitude system

ATTITUDE-TYPE	N	%
- affect	1	4.0
- judgement	10	40.0
- appreciation	14	56.0
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Table 5 – Analysis of judgement

JUDGEMENT-TYPE	N	%
- normality	2	8.0
- capacity	5	20.0
- tenacity	0	0.0
- propriety	2	8.0
- veracity	0	0.0
- unclear	1	4.0
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>40.0%</b>

As shown in Table 4, among the three sub-systems of the attitude system, the affect resource is used only once, indicating that news reports do not directly express the emotional attitudes of the editors or the press. Nevertheless, they indirectly convey their attitudes to the readers through a large number of judgmental and appreciative resources. People use judgmental resources to express their assessment of individual or group behavior, of which there are five subcategories. Of the 38 news headlines, there are five assessments of capacity, and all of them are positive, such as “China-Nigeria Belt, Road Initiative will Transform Nation's Economy” and “China: Celebrating 40 Years of Robust Engagement with the World-Part IV: the Belt and Road Initiative.” These reflect the Nigerian media’s recognition of the Belt and Road Initiative’s ability to bring about positive change in Nigeria and Africa. There are two assessments each of normality and propriety, and of the two assessments of propriety, one was quoted by others and one by the news editor: “Chinese Silk Road: debt peonage for Nigeria?” and “Macron endorses China’s Silk Road but warns against ‘hegemony’.” The news quotes indirectly convey the message that Nigeria is questioning the legitimacy of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

Appreciative resources express the speaker’s/writer’s opinion and appreciation of something, and can be categorized into reaction, composition, and social-valuation. Among the three subcategories, social-value evaluation is the most frequently used. Except for “affect”, other words indicating appreciation include “opportunity”, “high-quality”, and “fresh impetus”. This shows that the Nigerian media believe that the Belt and Road Initiative has great energy and drives the society forward.

Table 6 – Analysis of appreciation

APPRECIATION-TYPE	N	%
- reaction	2	8.0
- composition	0	0.0
- social-valuation	12	48.0
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>56.0%</b>

Critical discourse analysis yielded different results compared to corpus tool analysis. While the Nigerian media reported that the Belt and Road Initiative has brought about development and

progress in the region, it also showed a certain degree of negativity as a result of malicious advocacy by other media.

### 3.3 Social background analysis

Critical discourse analysis aims to reveal the ideologies as well as power relations implicit in discourses, mainly personal and public discourses, by analyzing them. Discourse analysis is a means to an end, and ultimately placing the results of the analysis in a socio-historical context to guide social practice is the goal.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1971, and especially since the signing of the Strategic Partnership in 2005, China and Nigeria have built a long and fruitful international relationship. In September 2018, at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing, the President of Nigeria signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), making Nigeria the ninth country in Africa to join the initiative.[25] Previously, Nigerian media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative had been mostly positive or neutral, although one article, which used the negative word “rift” in its headline, reported on a dispute between China and South Korea over U.S. missiles deployed in South Korea. 2018 saw an increase in negative content in Nigerian media reports, which questioned the purpose of the Belt and Road Initiative by citing statements or experiences of other countries. One article quoted Macron as being “wary of hegemony”. A Nigerian media report in the same year cited Pakistan’s debt over the Belt and Road project as a sign of concern over the debt problems brought about by the Belt and Road project. Where does the term “debt trap diplomacy” come from? An article on China’s Belt and Road Network [26] shows that in 2017, China’s “debt-trap diplomacy” claim emerged in India and was deepened in a paper by two Harvard graduate students, which was then quoted and reprinted by major Western media outlets. This bias in the West reflects how they view China’s role in Africa. When China invested a lot of money and manpower to aid Africa, the West did not pay attention to projects in Africa. When China’s projects in Africa achieved fruitful results and won the praise of local countries, the West began to notice all this and stigmatized China’s aid projects.

In 2019, one year after joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Nigerian media coverage of the initiative has increased significantly, and is overwhelmingly positive. There is only one article that used the negative word “disquiet” to report on President Xi Jinping’s visit to Europe. According to China’s Ministry of Commerce [27], bilateral trade between China and Nigeria rose by 20.2% year-on-year to \$5.42 billion in the first quarter of 2019 alone. The fruitful cooperation between China and Nigeria on the Belt and Road has been well praised by all walks of life in Nigeria. However, after 2020, the number of Nigerian media reports on the Belt and Road Initiative has plummeted, with only four articles in the web search, one summarizing the positive impacts of China’s Belt and Road Initiative on Nigeria, and two articles objectively reporting on China’s efforts in the Belt and Road Initiative. One article in 2022 reported on France’s decision to invest €300 billion in infrastructure projects globally by 2027, mostly in direct or indirect quotes, aiming to compete with China’s “Belt and Road” strategy. In early 2020, China experienced an outbreak of COVID-19 pneumonia, which has since spread globally. While China was gradually controlling the spread of the epidemic, many countries around the world suffered mass outbreaks of neo-coronavirus due to poor epidemic prevention. And in the same year, even though China donated a large amount of epidemic prevention materials to Nigeria, Ezekwesili, the former director of the Nigerian Department of Education and a former vice president of the World Bank, posted an article in the Washington Daily News, blatantly demanding that China reimburse countries such as Nigeria for the cost of damages brought about by the neo-coronavirus. [28] In the same year, the prosecutor of Nigeria’s “Legal Practitioners Union”, Mr. Azinger, also issued a statement demanding that China pay compensation of 200 billion dollars. [29] Although the Nigerian domestic media has criticized this approach, [30] both claimants are local public figures, with Azinger currently holding an elected position on the Commonwealth Arbitration Tribunal, representing Nigeria and Africa as a whole [31] and Ezekwesili, a former director of the

Department of Education and a former vice-president of the World Bank, and there seems to be a local market for the “claim theory” [32] and to some extent represents the official position.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the coverage on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the three major mainstream media in Nigeria through a combination of critical discourse analysis and corpus tools, and draws the following conclusions: 1) Nigerian domestic media fully recognize the positive changes brought by the “Belt and Road” project to the local community, and see the huge development potential contained therein; 2) At the same time, they are also ambivalent, worrying that China’s investment and construction assistance will become a means of hegemonic domination by China; and 3) Nigeria’s negative perceptions of the “Belt and Road” initiative may be originated from the malicious distortion and dissemination of the initiative by the Western media. Misunderstandings often stem from a lack of understanding. In addition to clarifying these misunderstandings at the official level, each of Chinese should be creators to spread more Chinese stories overseas.

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