The Language of Glitches: A Metaphor Analysis of System Failure in Nigerian Electoral and Educational Discourse

Adaobi Ngozi Okoye
Department of Linguistics
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka, Nigeria
an.okoye@unizik.edu.ng
&
Ijeoma Sandra Ochiagha
Directorate of General Studies
Federal University of Technology,
Owerri, Nigeria
ijeoma.ochiagha@futo.edu.ng

 Abstract
This paper investigates metaphorical framings of technological and institutional failure in Nigeria, focusing on the 2023 general election and the 2025 Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME). Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), it explores how language particularly metaphor is used by institutions, media, and the public to frame system "glitches" in high-stakes national events. Data were collected from official statements, news articles, and social media posts, analyzed using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). Findings reveal systematic use of metaphors from conceptual domains such as WAR, MACHINE, GAME, and DISEASE. These metaphors function to either legitimize or delegitimize institutions and reveal the cognitive

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and ideological underpinnings of public discourse. Notably, while INEC's failures were framed as battles lost or machines broken, possibly because elections are high stake contested arenas hence a battlefield, JAMB's crisis was couched in medical and game metaphors, portraying JAMB as a body with systemic dysfunction that needs diagnosis and healing. This conceptualization suggests a greater tolerance for technical failure in education than in politics. The study concludes that metaphor is a potent sociolinguistic tool for navigating institutional trust and public accountability in technologically mediated governance.

Keywords: Metaphor, Glitches, Nigerian Election, UTME, Conceptual Metaphor Theory

1.0 Introduction

In recent years, digital technology has become central to the administration of key national functions in Nigeria; from elections to standardized testing. While such digitization is often seen as a solution to inefficiency and corruption, it also brings new vulnerabilities. The 2023 Nigerian general election and the 2025 Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) were both disrupted by technological failures, commonly described as "glitches." The term "glitch" originatd in the mid -20th century with etymology from the Yiddish word "glitsh" meaning "a slip" or "a slide". Glitch was brought to public awareness by Glenn (1962). Despite the similar nature of disruption, institutional responses and public reactions differed significantly. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) upheld the election results amid public outcry, while the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) cancelled and rescheduled affected UTME examinations. These events generated widespread discourse in media, politics, and among citizens; largely mediated through metaphor. People

described the systems as "crashed," "jammed," "hijacked," or "infected," invoking familiar conceptual domains to understand unfamiliar disruptions. These metaphorical expressions are not mere figures of speech rather they reveal how Nigerians conceptualize institutional failure, responsibility, and legitimacy.

This paper seeks to uncover the metaphorical structures that shaped the public and institutional discourse surrounding these glitches. Specifically, it aims to identify dominant metaphors used in describing the technological failures in both events, analyze the conceptual domains these metaphors draw from, compare metaphorical framing across political and educational contexts and then interpret how such metaphors reflect or shape public trust and expectations from Nigerian institutions.

The paper is theoretically grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), and methodologically driven by discourse analysis using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of research on language, politics, and crisis communication in African contexts.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows; section 2.0 goes into the review of related literature on metaphor and discourse, section 3.0 explicates the theoretical approaches adopted in the study while 4.0 is on the methodology. Section 5.0 and succeeding subsections is on data presentation, analysis and discussions while section 6.0forms the conclusion of the study.

2.0 Literature Review

Crises irrespective of its nature (political, economic, or technological) often trigger the need for linguistic simplification and emotional framing. Metaphors, as cognitive and rhetorical devices, play a crucial role in helping individuals and societies navigate such complex and threatening situations (Semino, 2008; Charteris-Black,

2011). By mapping unfamiliar or abstract domains (e.g., a technical failure) onto more familiar ones (e.g., war, illness, or games), metaphors facilitate comprehension while also subtly guiding interpretation and judgment.

In institutional crisis discourse, metaphors often serve ideologically strategic purposes. Charteris-Black, (2005) asserts that metaphor is instrumental in legitimizing authority and policies during institutional breakdown. Crisis metaphors are not neutral; they either uphold or undermine institutional credibility depending on how the failure is framed. For instance, a "war" metaphor may depict institutions as embattled defenders, while a "game" metaphor may trivialize the crisis or shift blame.

Droog, Burgers and Kee(2020) explore how journalists and experts metaphorically frame emerging information technologies for big data. The researchers used a corpus of US news texts and interviews to determine the frames deployed by technology experts in explaining emerging information technology and also accounting for the media infiltration coverage of that technology. The research findings show that considerable differences exist between the frame by journalists and experts in the frame building process. The study contrasts metaphor usage between journalists and experts asserting that whereas journalist employ conventional metaphors (for example, data freeway) to simplify complex technologies, experts use more specialized metaphors reflecting technical understanding.

Mason, (2018) examines the metaphors that structure educational technology discourse in social studies adopting Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1990) conception of metaphor. Data for the study were derived from the last three years of scholarship in the social studies section of the journal contempory issues in technology and teacher education. From the analysis, the discourse author identifies five prominent categories of metaphors namely; manual

labor metaphor, construction building metaphor, mechanistic metaphor, technology as biological life\agent metaphors, and journey metaphors. Further finding of the study reveals the metaphor of technology as the agent or driver of social progress.

Ervas, Salis, Sechi and Fanari (2022) investigate the impact of the use of metaphors in reasoning tasks concerning vaccination. The findings show that defensible reasoning is relevant for the communicative impact of a text.

African political communication, including Nigeria, is deeply metaphorical. Metaphor in this context draws from indigenous epistemologies, oral traditions, and colonial and postcolonial bureaucratic cultures (De Klerk, 2015). In Nigeria, metaphor has been studied in relation to political campaigns (Taiwo, 2007), corruption (Odebunmi, 2011), and health discourse (Ezeifeka, 2013). These studies emphasize how metaphor indexes both power relations and public values.

Notably, there is a research gap in metaphor analysis that juxtaposes political and educational institutions during simultaneous technological crises. This paper fills this gap by providing a comparative metaphor analysis of the 2023 general election and the 2025 Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME). In technologically mediated systems, failure is often attributed to "glitches," a term originally rooted in computing, denoting minor, temporary malfunctions. However, in public discourse, "glitch" often becomes a metaphor for broader systemic issues (Nye, 2013). Metaphors drawn from domains like **MACHINE**, **DISEASE**, and **GAME** allow laypeople to interpret digital collapse in terms of human or mechanical failure. The metaphorical rendering of glitches can either mystify institutional accountability or expose it, depending on how the source domain is constructed (Koller, 2003).

3. Theoretical Frameworks

This study adopts **Conceptual Metaphor Theory henceforth (CMT)** as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who argue that metaphor is not simply a linguistic device but a fundamental mode of human thought. According to CMT, people understand abstract or unfamiliar concepts (target domains) by mapping them onto concrete, familiar experiences (source domains). For instance, when technological failure is described using terms like "crash" or "jam," the mental model is that of a machine malfunctioning.

CMT enables this study to investigate the deeper cognitive patterns that underlie metaphorical expressions in institutional discourse. It further helps to reveal how public understanding of institutional failure is shaped not just by facts, but how those facts are *framed* through language. This is especially pertinent in analyzing crisis discourse, where emotions run high and metaphors carry significant persuasive power.

Additionally, this study integrates insights from **Critical Metaphor Analysis, henceforth (CMA)** (Charteris-Black, 2004), which links metaphor use to ideology and power. CMA allows the researcher to examine how metaphorical framings either challenge or reinforce institutional legitimacy and public trust. When JAMB speaks of "isolated disruptions" being "treated", it does not only report events rather it subtly implies curability and control, thus preserving institutional credibility. Both CMT and CMA will no doubt provide a robust framework for decoding how language, thought, and power intersect in the metaphorical construction of institutional failures.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in discourse analysis, particularly metaphor analysis. The

goal is not only to identify metaphorical expressions used in the public framing of systemic failures in Nigeria's 2023 election and the 2025 UTME, but also to analyze their cognitive and ideological implications. The approach is comparative, drawing parallels and contrasts between political and educational institutional contexts to understand how metaphor reflects or constructs institutional legitimacy and public trust.

Three major types of texts were sampled:

1. **Official Institutional Communications**

Press releases and social media posts from INEC and JAMB between February–June 2023 and March–May 2025, respectively.

2. **Media Reports**

News articles and editorials from leading Nigerian media outlets (*The Punch*, *Premium Times of 16th May, 2025*, *Vanguard of 18th May*, *Guardian of 14th and 15th May*, *Channels TV*, etc.). Only reports with substantial narrative framing and metaphorical language were selected.

3. **Public Discourse on Social Media**

Data were extracted from public discourse (Twitter (now X), Facebook, and blogs containing public commentary) using search-based keyword filtering; posts were selected using hashtags such as #INECFailed, #INECElection2023, #UTME2025, #UTMEGlitch, and #JAMBResit.

Inclusion criteria required that texts addressed the glitches or failures of INEC or JAMB systems, included metaphorical or figurative language, were publicly accessible and contextually relevant and had significant engagement (for social media posts, a minimum of 50 likes/retweets/comments.Texts that used strictly technical, literal language without metaphorical framing were excluded to maintain analytical focus.

Metaphor identification followed the **Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP)** developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). This involved reading each text for general understanding, identifying lexical units potentially used metaphorically, determining their contextual meaning, comparing with their more basic, concrete meaning and marking metaphorical use if a contrast existed and if meaning could be understood via comparison with a different conceptual domain.Once identified, metaphors were classified according to source domains (e.g., MACHINE, WAR, GAME, DISEASE, THEATRE). Analysis then proceeded in two dimensions namely the **cognitive function** which reveals the kind of thinking the metaphor enables and the **ideological function** which borders on the institutional image or narrative the metaphor promotes or challenges.

Data were triangulated across media types (institutional, journalistic, public commentary) to enhance trustworthiness. While the study analyzes data available to the public, ethical procedures such as anonymization of social media usernames and paraphrasing of direct quotes were employed where necessary to protect individual privacy. The data analysis and discussion is structured to highlight key metaphorical framings, compare domains across INEC and JAMB contexts, and provide interpretive commentary in line with Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion
This section presents the metaphorical domains identified in the analysis and discusses their cognitive and ideological implications. The dominant metaphors used to frame system failures in both the 2023 Nigerian elections and the 2025 UTME examinations were drawn from five primary source domains: **MACHINE, WAR,**

DISEASE, GAME, and **THEATRE**. Each domain is discussed below with illustrative examples and comparative insights.

5.1 MACHINE Metaphor: The System Crashed

In both INEC and JAMB crises, the most dominant metaphor was from the **MACHINE** domain. Metaphors such as "system crash," "jammed network," "broken server," "faulty upload," and "technical hitch" were pervasive.

INEC example 1a: "The IReV portal jammed at the most critical time. It was like a car engine that stopped in the middle of a highway."

JAMB example 1b: "Candidates could not log in. The biometric system crashed again. It's a total system failure."

Cognitive Implication: The MACHINE metaphor frames both events as **mechanical failures**, implying that the issues are technical rather than intentional. It abstracts human agency and shifts the focus to systems and software.

Ideological Implication: In INEC's case, the MACHINE metaphor was often criticized as a **deflection** strategy. Many Nigerians questioned how a multi-billion naira digital infrastructure could conveniently "malfunction" during transmission. In JAMB's case, however, the MACHINE metaphor appears to be more accepted, possibly due to the perception that glitches in education are less politically motivated.

5.2 WAR Metaphor: "INEC Lost the Battle"

War metaphors were more common in the 2023 election discourse, framing the electoral process as a **battlefield**:

Example 2a. INEC went to war without ammunition.

b. The BVAS was hijacked.

c. The fight for transparency was lost.

d. Democracy was ambushed at the upload stage.

Cognitive Implication: WAR metaphors dramatize the crisis, painting it as a **conflict** between opposing forces (e.g., the people vs. the institution, or truth vs. fraud).

Ideological Implication: This metaphor delegitimizes INEC by implying **defeat, betrayal, or sabotage**. It also places the public in the role of the wronged party, fighting for justice.

Such metaphors were largely absent from the UTME discourse possibly because the context does not warrant contest as background or a winner as a climax or truth in a state fed up with overwhelming lies. In addition, it seems that UTME does not have history of rigging, bad governance and denial and so does not stand on the same platform with INEC.

5.3 DISEASE Metaphor: "The Glitch is Infectious"

The UTME crisis generated several metaphors from the **DISEASE** domain:

Example 3aThe CBT system is infected with failure.

       b. The glitch spread from centre to centre.

       c. JAMB's network problem is a virus

With regard to the cognitive Implication, the DISEASE metaphor portrays the problem as **contagious but diagnosable**, suggesting the possibility of treatment and recovery.

5.4 GAME Metaphor: "UTME Was a Rigged Match"

GAME metaphors were more frequent in UTME-related public discourse:

Example 4 a.It's like we were set up to fail the test.

       b. The exam turned into a chess game we weren't prepared for.

       c. They moved the goalpost mid-game."

Cognitive Implication: GAME metaphors highlight the **unfairness** and **manipulation** of procedures.

Ideological Implication: These metaphors critique JAMB's competence, and may have likely contributed to the decision to reschedule the examinations.

5.5 THEATRE Metaphor: "It Was All a Script"

Especially in reactions to the 2023 election, the THEATRE metaphor gained traction:

> Example 5a It was all scripted; INEC just played their part.
> b.A drama of deception on a national stage
> c.This was political theatre, not democracy.

Cognitive Implication: THEATRE metaphors suggest **pretense and orchestration**, framing the process as **performance** rather than real governance.

Ideologically, the metaphor undermines INEC's credibility by portraying the electoral process as a **sham**. The public is positioned as an audience deceived into believing they had agency.

This metaphor was virtually absent in JAMB discourse, suggesting that theatricality is associated more with **political betrayal** than **technical incompetence**.

5.6 Discussion

The analysis reveals a significant metaphorical divergence between the framing of the 2023 election and the 2025 UTME. While both crises were technological in nature, the metaphors used by the media and public positioned INEC's failure as **unforgivable**, **politically loaded**, and **morally treacherous**, whereas JAMB's failure was seen as **unfortunate but manageable**.

Metaphors not only reflected but shaped public trust and response. INEC, through metaphors of WAR and THEATRE, was cast as

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oppressive or **complicit**, leading to calls for institutional overhaul. JAMB, framed through DISEASE and GAME metaphors, maintained a degree of **institutional legitimacy**, aided by its responsiveness especially in rescheduling examinations.

These findings reinforce the claim that **metaphor is an ideological currency** in institutional crisis communication. They suggest that institutions must be mindful of the metaphorical frameworks their communications enable or fail to counter in times of crisis.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how metaphorical framing shaped the public discourse around institutional failures in Nigeria's 2023 general elections and the 2025 UTME examinations. Employing Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis, the research identified dominant metaphorical domains; MACHINE, WAR, DISEASE, GAME, and THEATRE that offered cognitive access and ideological positioning to two major national events characterized by technological breakdown.

While both crises involved digital system failures, the metaphors used in their respective discourses diverged significantly. INEC's failure was framed using metaphors of WAR and THEATRE, suggesting betrayal, conflict, and performance, which severely undermined the institution's credibility. In contrast, JAMB's failure attracted metaphors from DISEASE and GAME, which humanized the institution and allowed for the possibility of recovery and fairness.

These metaphorical framings influenced public perception, institutional responses, and media narratives. The decision by INEC to uphold the election results, despite visible systemic failures, clashed with metaphorical frames of conflict and deception. Conversely, JAMB's willingness to reschedule examinations

aligned with metaphors of illness and gamesmanship, projecting institutional care and fairness.

The study underscores the power of metaphor not just as a linguistic or cognitive tool, but as an ideological force that shapes how institutional trust, blame, and recovery are socially negotiated. It recommends that public institutions and their communication arms become more critically aware of the metaphorical frameworks they evoke or ignore in crisis narratives. Future research can expand this investigation into comparative regional or international institutional crises to explore whether similar metaphorical patterns emerge across cultural and political contexts.

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