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## **“UNIVERSITY LECTURERS ARE NOT CASUAL LABOURERS”: STANCE AND DISCURSIVE FRAMING OF THE 2022 ASUU-FGN INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT IN TV INTERVIEWS**

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**Abstract:** Nigeria’s university system has been plagued by recurring industrial actions arising from conflicts of interest between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), with the 2022 strike constituting the longest such action in the country’s history. The ASUU–FGN tussle has been explored in linguistics, but empirical work has relatively neglected a new and essential dataset—live TV interviews—in which strategic discursive frames that foreground the projected stances of spokespersons for the opposing camps are used in real-time, high-stakes, and mediated interactions. Focusing on the 2022 impasse, this study examines how key social actors construct their stances and take ideological positions within specific discursive frames. Martin and White’s appraisal framework and Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis constitute the study’s theoretical framework. Using a qualitative analytical approach, the authors subject data comprising transcribed interactions from four TV interviews, featuring a key social actor from each camp, to discourse analysis. The findings show that social actors project their stances within the following discursive and argumentative frames: the constitutional/legal basis of the industrial action; the exploitation of ideologies of welfarism and inclusivity; the (de)valuation of Nigerian tertiary education; and the politicisation of the industrial action. These discursive frames are supported by appraisal subsystems (attitude and engagement) and representational strategies, including authority, polarisation, categorisation, actor description, comparison, lexicalisation, and populism, which enable favourable or derogatory representations of both groups’ actions. The study observes that, during TV interviews, social

actors debate the industrial conflict primarily to legitimise and justify their actions rather than to propose effective mechanisms for conflict resolution. It also finds that discursive moves and stance expressions indicate greater confrontation and less diplomacy. The study provides insights into identity politics and the underlying complexities responsible for the persistently strained relationship between ASUU and the FGN.

**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis, appraisal framework, representational strategies, media discourse, Nigerian higher education, labour union discourse.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The fact that the recurrent labour conflict between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU, henceforth) and the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, henceforth) constitutes socio-political, economic, and institutional challenges that have impeded educational development and academic progression in Nigerian public universities cannot be overemphasised. Osuagwu and Chukwuemeka (2024) record that this persistent challenge has significantly resulted in the disruption of academic activities in Nigerian public universities, thereby affecting the quality of Nigeria's education. Since the establishment of the ASUU in 1978, a national academic union that succeeded the Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT) in Nigeria to fight for the welfare and interests of academic staff in Nigerian state and federal universities, there has been a recurring tussle with the FGN as a result of the government's renegeing on agreements concerning the enhancement of Nigerian tertiary education. Adarviele (2015) confirms that ASUU's clash with FGN started over four decades ago, precisely, 1980 to date, leading to a series of strike actions. Nein et al. (2023) record the timeline of these industrial actions over the years: six months in 1992, five months in 1999, six months in 2004, three months in 2007, five months and one week in 2011, six months in 2014 and 2017, and nine weeks in 2019. The union, since its inception, has been saddled with the responsibility of upholding the standard of Nigerian public universities and their academic staff through diligence, transparency, utmost commitment, and objectivity (Okebukola, 2010) and also charging the FGN to restructure the Nigerian university system for substantial output and improved educational system (Chigozie, 2017).

Additionally, ASUU's unfaltering and concentrated positions, exertions, and principles towards challenging the nonchalant attitude of the Federal Government in sustaining the legacy and growth of the Nigerian university system have made the relationship between ASUU and FGN relatively antagonistic. This labour unrest/conflict is, thus, caused by many issues. Some of these issues are underfunding of universities, poor allowances/remuneration, poor service conditions, and lack of university autonomy, among others (Egwu, 2016; Adeyemo & Elegbe, 2021; Nein et al., 2023; Njoku & Igbokwe, 2024). Consequently, this has always culminated in a series of industrial actions and incessant protestations, particularly strike actions (Aidelunuoghene, 2014), as earlier affirmed. Since the ASUU-FGN face-off, ASUU has remained resolute in the pursuit of its goals.

The most recent ASUU-FGN conflict kicked off on 14 February 2022, resulting in an eight-month strike. The conflict was based on FGN's inability to provide improved welfare packages and better working conditions for university lecturers and to implement various labour agreements

signed with the Federal Government between 2009 and 2020 (Edema & Tolu-Kolawole, 2022), which have always been the subject matter of the labour conflict over the years. As a result, the stakeholders of ASUU frequently utilised different media platforms and strategies to create awareness about their struggles and to remind the masses of the essence of their industrial moves towards the advancement of university education in Nigeria, especially because the FGN has sustained its enthusiasm towards undermining the union's age-long requests (Chigozie, 2017; Nein & Peter, 2024). The concerns of ASUU have been aired on different media platforms, sparking diverse reactions, actions, counteractions, stances, and controversial comments from the general populace.

It is worth noting that the ASUU-FGN discourse is not a new subject matter in academic conflict discourse (Nwanyanwu et al., 2023). The investigation of the industrial conflict has been done through the lens of media ideologies and language construction (Akinwotu, 2019; Nwanyanwu et al., 2023). These studies, especially linguistics-oriented ones, play significant roles in enriching readers' perspectives on discursive representation of the ASUU-FGN conflict through their investigation of relevant social issues and themes around the discourse in relation to this study. They also provide specific information and ideas used to reinforce the arguments in this present research, as far as the ASUU-FGN crisis is concerned. However, a linguistic investigation of both stance and discursive framing of the ASUU-FGN conflict provides a fuller understanding of the conflict's complexity beyond reported disagreements in print media. It also helps identify how language is used to mobilise support, assign blame, and sustain or challenge existing narratives in the ASUU-FGN relationship/conflict. In addition, this dual approach helps uncover deeper power dynamics and communication strategies influencing the conflict.

Following the notion that language serves as a veritable tool for constructing realities and articulating ideologies (Ganiyu, Adefemi & Afolabi, 2021; Awoniyi et al., 2024), and the insufficient linguistic research on strategic discursive frames that accentuates the projected stances of specific social actors of the ASUU-FGN disagreement on national TV, this study focuses on the 2022 version of the ASUU-FGN labour conflict by investigating the ideological stance and discursive framing of the conflict during TV interviews, thus advancing research and deepening readers' understanding of the social concern. To realise the research goals, the study revolves around three fundamental research questions: 1) What are the discursive constructs and argumentative frames that inform the projected stances of selected social actors on the labour conflict? 2) How are the social actors' stances projected through appraisal choices and discursive moves? and 3) What are the implications of the discursive framings and the ideological stances projected through them?

## 2. THE ASUU-FGN LABOUR CONFLICT DISCOURSE

The ASUU-FGN conflict is a well-established subject of public and academic discourse in Nigeria. In other words, Nigerians have become used to the ebbs and flows of the conflict, leading to multifarious publications and a myriad of intellectual insights across disciplines globally. Scholars have delved into the consequences of the longstanding ASUU-FGN conflict. Popular among the noticeable challenges related to the conflict is the ASUU strike, which has often led to the disruption of academic activities, poor academic performances of students, an increase in students' anti-social behaviour, and mental health issues (Akah, 2018; Oladejo & Ijimmyowa, 2022; Nwanyanwu et al., 2023). Although the limitations attached to this industrial impasse have instigated some Nigerian academics to initiate positive methods like dialogue to manage the labour conflict, its success is still largely dependent on the desire and readiness of the parties involved in the disagreement to reach a compromise (Agbam, Okocha & Tartsea-Anshase, 2022). Unfortunately, both parties have

refused to budge, consequently exacerbating the effects of the labour unrest. These consequences, in addition to other fallouts, have stirred the reactions of the Nigerian print and electronic media towards the representation of the conflict's narrative, thereby influencing and shaping the perspectives of the masses. Dwelling on the 2013 ASUU-FGN dispute, Aragbuwa (2014) describes how language functions in selected Nigerian newspapers in examining the dispute from the point of view of pragmatics. The study confirms that power, dominance, and resistance are perceived in the presentation of the diverse ideologies of the social actors involved in the labour clash. Similarly, Akinwotu (2019) and Ugwona (2016) investigate the role of discourse constructions in Nigeria's ASUU-FGN labour conflict of 2013, establishing that the labour disagreement was discursively constructed in militant styles and tones as reflected in their degrading choice of words, leading to verbal attacks. From the above studies, it can be inferred that the ASUU-FGN conflict is characterised by social actors' unyieldingness, firmness, and fierceness, which perhaps could have influenced the perception and feedback of the populace.

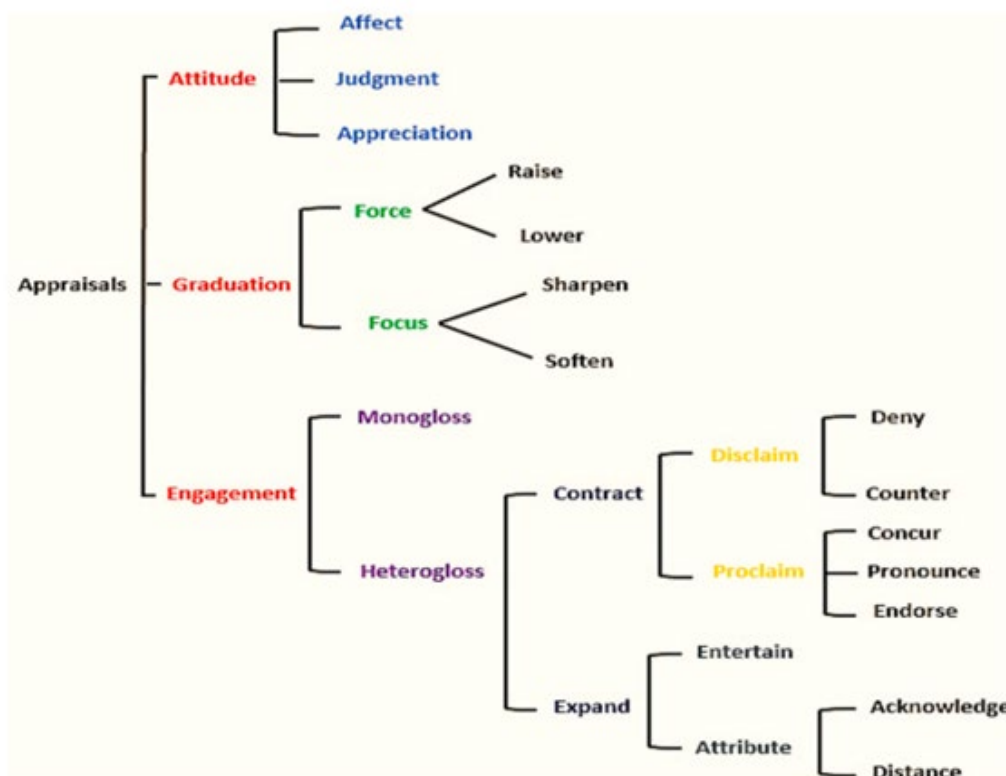
While the 2013 ASUU-FGN conflict has received comparatively limited scholarly attention, the 2022 ASUU-FGN labour conflict has also piqued our curiosity, offering nuanced insights on its complexities through the way it is discursively illustrated by the media. Evidently, ASUU occupies a chief position in the labour conflict, including the 2022 version of the industrial dispute. Thus, in the linguistic and discursive representations of the dispute, Ezirim (2023) discovers that ASUU deploy positive proximation to justify their claims and negative proximation to describe their unpleasant experiences with the Nigerian government. This is partly related to Nsungo and Orabueze (2022), whose findings demonstrate that ASUU, in a bid to solidify its contention, employs strategic discourse techniques to detach itself from the government's negative representation. Apart from these, the intensity of the ASUU-FGN impasse is buttressed through its representation in selected Nigerian newspapers with certain discursive strategies (Ogundeji & Uduk, 2024), providing a slightly different, yet detailed perspective on the dynamics of the labour conflict. Although, Julius (2021) is analogous to this current research in that it underscores the ASUU-FGN crises, detailing the underlying ideologies and discourse strategies that inform the framing patterns of the crises, Julius' emphasis is placed on selected Nigerian newspapers as understudied in previous literature, sidelining other platforms, such as live TV interview sessions that the current study's data derives from, that often spotlight the ASUU-FGN discourse.

Despite these scholarly efforts, the current study's emphasis is a departure from the focus of extant research (even though the foregoing studies have offered valuable insights and reviews on the ASUU-FGN clash) in that it pays attention to a new dataset, TV interviews, where the discursive engagement of the labour conflict is done spontaneously and in real-time. The study also highlights the unpacked underlying discursive and argumentative frames through which the selected key social actors project their stances and ideological positions on the 2022 ASUU-FGN labour conflict, and how these discursive frames are considered instrumental in justifying their actions, activities, and efforts in the impasse. Unlike extant studies, this new linguistic enquiry builds on the fact that the ASUU-FGN labour conflict is a public discourse that not only attracts the attention of Nigerian newspapers; selected national TV channels have also contributed in no little measure to spontaneously airing the debate around the discourse in real-time, exposing their audience to the social and economic dynamics of the conflict. Furthermore, while this subject matter is well-situated within conflict and institutional discourse, it offers insights into identity politics and the underlying complexities responsible for the incessantly strained relationship between ASUU and FGN from the standpoint of critical linguistics and discourse analysis. By investigating the stance and discursive framing of the conflict together, the research helps uncover how ASUU

and the Federal Government use language to construct narratives, influence stakeholders (such as lecturers, students, and the entire public), justify their assertions, perspectives, demands, or rejections, and maintain power.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Framework (AF) and Van Dijk's (2006) representation strategies, an aspect of the socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis. The appraisal framework draws on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994). It is an analytical paradigm for exploring language evaluative functions within the ambit of lexical grammar and discourse semantics (Martin, 2000). AF is a systemic framework that explains how language users mark and express emotions, valuations, judgements, and the various ways of intensifying and mitigating such evaluative expressions (White, 2000). It marks a personal assessment of phenomena or propositions about the phenomena, either in a positive or negative sense (Martin, 2000). AF is a model of stance-taking in discourse analysis and generally shows how speakers/writers express opinions and show attitude and value judgment towards a proposition, and how such attitude signals their stance and orientation (Oteiza, 2017).



**Fig.1.** *The system and subsystems of the appraisal framework*

The appraisal framework has systems and subsystems that combine to show the lexico-grammatical indexation of speakers/writers' standpoint, opinion, and attitude in interpersonal and interactional contexts (Oteiza, 2017). Attitude, the first system of AF, consists of three subsystems: affect, judgement, and appreciation. The subsystems instantiate the various realisations of a speaker's attitude towards a proposition. The second system of AF, Engagement, consists

of some linguistic resources for dialogic positioning. Speakers can contract or expand the dialogic space. While proclaiming and disclaiming can be done to contract a dialogic space, attributing and entertaining mark a dialogic expansion. Graduation, the third system of AF, relates to the degree to which speakers assess and align with a proposition. Speakers can intensify or mitigate their stance through force and can sharpen or soften their evaluative proposition through focus (Martin & White, 2005). AF is relevant to this study because it, through discourse-semantic choices, shows the communication situation and the degree of speaker or writer engagement in an interactive event. In TV interview sessions, speakers are more concerned about upholding their stance and several other stances in such an interactive context (Haddington, 2004), and this can result in the generation of counter-stances (Ajiboye, 2017).

Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is employed in this study. CDA focuses on how linguistic forms project the transparent and vague structural relationships of discrimination, power, dominance, and control (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). CDA concentrates on the analysis of text, discourse features, and socio-cultural practices that underlie the functional and critical use of language (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Essentially, CDA examines social structures and constructs and how language perpetuates and reproduces social beliefs to sustain certain social norms. Such linguistic expressions are ideology-driven. CDA digs into institutional, political, and religious discourses, among others, to unpack the linguistic structures that shape the ideological orientations of social actors. In this study, attention is given to the use of Van Dijk's (2006) representational strategies and discursive moves which include authority, actor description, burden (topos), comparison, counterfactuals, categorisation, consensus, disclaimer, euphemism, example/illustration, evidentiality, generalization, hyperbole, implication, irony, lexicalisation, metaphor, self-glorification, norm expression, number game, polarisation, populism, presupposition, vagueness, and victimisation. These discursive moves are, through linguistic choices, deployed for positive self-representation (in-group favouritism) and negative other-representation (out-group derogation) in every discourse event. These analytical paradigms are combined to tease out the lexico-grammatical indexation and semantic realisations of the discursive frames through which the social actors project their stance and ideological positioning.

#### 4. MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative design, which emphasises the importance of participants' perspectives and how these inform personal meanings (Creswell, 2009). A hybrid of inductive data and top-down analytical approaches was also used. The discursive frames emerged through inductive analysis of data, and the purposively selected excerpts that reflect each of the identified discursive frames were subjected to the top-down analysis using the theoretical tools of the appraisal framework and Van Dijk's representational strategies. The data consist of live TV interaction between key representatives of ASUU and FGN during the 2022 industrial conflict. Data were sourced from four recorded TV interview sessions with the selected social actors: two interviews were granted by the Former Minister of Labour, Senator Chris Ngige (SCN) – a representative of FGN, and two interviews were also granted by the National Chairman of ASUU, Professor Emmanuel Osodeke (PEO). The selected videos were downloaded from the YouTube channels of Arise TV and Channels TV. Three of the TV interviews were conducted during the protracted industrial strike, and one of the interviews was conducted shortly after the industrial action ended. It is noteworthy that several other political actors and institutional figures aired their opinions in several other interviews during the protracted strike. However, this study selected Professor Emmanuel Osodeke (PEO)

and Senator Chris Ngige (SCN) because they are considered the accurate representation of the two conflicting camps, given their significant positions in their respective institutions. Notably, the four selected interviews were the only instances where these actors appeared on live TV to discuss the industrial tussle specifically and exclusively.

We employed thematic coding, which allows conceptually similar incidents to be given the same conceptual label until each theme is fully elaborated (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The four discursive and argumentative frames emerged after the authors engaged in iterative close readings of the video text transcripts and alignment of the coded themes. After the transcript of each interview (INTV) was generated, attention was given to the conversational turns of each actor that reflect their position on the industrial actions. Following the extraction of this large volume of turns and coded themes, the authors purposively selected excerpts that resonated with each of the discursive frames and then compared their results. Out of the sixty-five coded interactional turns extracted from the full transcript, which are considered relevant to the subject matter, twelve excerpts were purposively selected for the analysis. In congruence with qualitative research standards, the selection of 12 analytical excerpts from the large pool of data was guided by a combination of purposeful sampling, analytical depth, and theoretical saturation rather than random inclusion (Patton, 2015). The goal is not to provide exhaustive coverage but to present analytically rich extracts that best exemplify the recurring discursive patterns, tensions, and ideologies central to the ASUU-FGN industrial conflict as captured in televised interviews.

A systematic coding process was first conducted across all 65 excerpts, during which patterns and thematic concerns on the ASUU-FGN impasse were identified. From this broader set, the final twelve excerpts were selected because they represented key themes across both ASUU and FGN narratives, demonstrated the most illustrative use of language, framing, and ideological positioning, and offered the highest potential for interpretive depth in relation to the study's research questions. This approach is consistent with qualitative discourse analysis methodology, which prioritises depth over breadth and emphasises strategic selection over wider representativeness (Fairclough, 2003). Crucially, excerpts were not chosen to support a pre-existing argument but to provide a balanced and critical analysis of how the conflict was discursively constructed in the media space. While the excerpts do not represent the entire content of each turn, some preceding and succeeding parts of the turns were elided to allow for the clipping of the excerpts. Contexts for each of the clipped excerpts were provided in the interpretation and discussion of the excerpts.

While extant studies have subjected the past versions of the industrial conflict to various qualitative analytical approaches, the resurged 2022 version piqued our curiosity because it tops the chart as the most prolonged spell of the tussle in the history of Nigeria's university education. Also, unlike other linguistics-based studies, attention is paid to the opinions aired live and spontaneously on national television by the key representatives of the conflicting camps. The data (selected excerpts) were subjected to discursive analysis with theoretical orientations from Martin and White's (2005) appraisal framework and Van Dijk's (2006) ideological categorisation model of critical discourse analysis. The appraisal theory functions as the micro-level tool for the macro-level explanation of argumentative frames that Van Dijk's representational strategies triggered. While this study is a good reflection of how the key social actors frame and project their stances, the small dataset used for analysis is not broad enough for the generalization of its findings to the entire discourse of the ASUU-FGN conflict. Future research could examine a wider range of media sources and other key political and institutional stakeholders in the industrial conflict.

## 5. ANALYSIS

The study observes four discursive and argumentative frames deployed by the social actors in projecting their stances on the industrial conflict and legitimising their actions. These discursive frames are the constitutional/legal inclination of the industrial action, exploiting the ideologies of welfarism and inclusivity, the (de)valuation of the Nigerian tertiary education, and the politicisation of the industrial action. This section explicates how the linguistic resources of appraisal and representational strategies combine to index and foreground the stances projected along the lines of these discursive and argumentative frames.

### 5.1. The constitutional/legal inclination of the industrial conflict

The discursive framing of the industrial conflict along the lines of constitutional/legal inclination was observed in the dialogic interactions involving the spokespersons of ASUU and the Federal Government. This raises the question of whether the position of both parties on the industrial action is within the ambit of the law. A group makes attempts towards a negative other-representation of the counterpart group's actions, projecting them as constitutionally disinclined, thereby inviting their audience to align with their stance on the industrial conflict. In essence, actors from both camps project their stances based on legal premises. These stances show whether or not their actions/efforts, which inform the industrial conflict, are constitution-inclined or law-guided.

#### Excerpt 1:

I have been discussing with them since January, and suddenly, without any notice as required by the labour laws, they declared a strike. No 21 days' notice, not even 15 days' notice to essential duties workers. They went on strike on February 14. (SCN; INTV 1)

#### Excerpt 2:

At the end of October, we were surprised that for the first time in the history of academics, we were hearing about pro-rata payment. It is against all the rules of all universities, against the conditions of service of universities. (PEO; INTV 4)

#### Excerpt 3:

Pro-rated payment is when you are paying people per day, per working hour, which is against the rule, against the terms of payment. (PEO; INTV 2)

In the texts above, SCN harnesses the discursive move of "authority" to ground the stance that the industrial action is an effort that contradicts the legal prescriptions. One of the ways of showing authority is by making reference to credible sources and established institutions in order to legitimise a particular action and shape the perspective of an audience along such orientation. Authority helps to build credibility and trust in a speaker and is, therefore, employed for taking a stance in interaction (Van Dijk, 2006). A reference to the constitution or legal extracts is a manifestation of the engagement system of AF and an indexation of dialogic contraction, which is weaponised to strengthen the authorial stance. Notably, the use of authority is strengthened in SCN's stance, especially because he was the Minister of Labour at that time, and such a portfolio presents him as one who understands the working mechanisms of the Nigerian labour laws. The expression "as required by the labour laws", a demonstration of a law-informed approach, indexes a deliberate delegitimisation of the industrial action. SCN attempts to educate the public that before an industrial

action can be regarded as constitutionally relevant, the aggrieved party must give “twenty-one days’ notice and fifteen days’ notice to essential workers”. Such an effort towards enlightening the public paints a good image of SCN as one whose actions in the face of the impasse are justified. In this light, SCN criticises the sudden declaration of a temporary halt in educational activities in all member institutions of ASUU and frames it as a deviation from the constitution.

Excerpt 2 explains the law-insensitive terms of payment of public university lecturers’ salaries shortly after the industrial action ended. PEO, the representative of the opposing group, harps on the dialogic contraction of *proclaiming to pronounce* that the payment modalities that Nigerian lecturers are subjected to are “against the rule, against the terms of payment,” as seen in Excerpt 3. It also indexes *judgment of propriety (social sanction)*, explicating that the FGN’s resort to such terms of payment is unethical. PEO further gleans on the discourse strategy of authority, by referring to the “condition of service” of the Nigerian university, a legal document that spells out the terms, rules, and regulations governing the employment relationship between Nigerian university lecturers and their employers – FGN. While the actors express and project their stances on the industrial conflict, pronouns strategically signal polarisation. The pronoun “they” is a polarising and out-grouping expression (Excerpt 1), and “we” is an associative and collectivist label (Excerpt 2).

As both factions attempt to legitimise their decisions, actions, activities, and involvement in the industrial conflict, they draw on the appraisal and discourse strategies highlighted in the foregoing for positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. On the one hand, for a positive portrayal of its group, SCN, the representative of the FGN blames their counterpart for declaring and embarking on industrial action without consulting the constitutional provisions for such an action appropriately and intelligently. On the other hand, PEO points an accusing finger at the FGN for coordinating and executing its dealings with ASUU in a manner that is outside of the provisions of the constitution. Again, this relates to the blame-game tactics, as both parties make cases for blame avoidance and shift the blame to their counterpart for a temporary halt of educational activities in some Nigerian universities.

## 5.2. Exploiting the ideologies of welfarism and inclusivity

The social actors frame their stances on the industrial conflict in relation to the policies of welfarism and inclusivity. The ultimate goal of both groups’ actions is to prove that they are defending the interests of their members and the general public. Welfarism and inclusivity prioritise the common good, the prioritisation of the well-being of individuals and communities, while advocating for policies that address social inequalities and improve living conditions (Haaga & Sasa, 2019). In essence, the more actors can present their actions/efforts as a welfare venture and a plan for the collective good, the greater their likelihood of persuading their audience and presenting their response in a positive light. This discursive framing aligns more with the attitudinal system and strategy of stance-taking, specifically affect, because it tends to play on the emotional sentiments of the audience.

### Excerpt 4:

I am not happy that a professor is earning N500,000. No! I don’t support that. Like I said, I have my relatives and cousins. I want a professor: if he is going home, let him go home with at least something that borders on N1million. If he goes home on something that borders on 1 million, I will be happy. (SCN; INTV 1)

**Excerpt 5:**

What has angered my office is that children are at home for seven months. Seun, if you are not angered, I am angered. (SCN; INTV 2).

Excerpts 4 and 5 are an evaluative realization of the *affect of displeasure* through the contextual labels “angered” and “happy”. In both excerpts, SCN appears to be displeased at the protracted strike. Such emotional outpouring is reinforced by the expression “I don’t support that”, which again is an instance of dialogic disclaiming to shut up the dialogic space (contraction) and maintain an authorial stance. This statement is made within the shared knowledge of the poor remuneration and salary packages that Nigerian university lecturers have always protested. In an actual sense, revisiting the salary scale of Nigerian lecturers to extirpate poor remuneration in the university system constitutes one of the core agendas for industrial strike because “the salary of lecturers is not anything to write home when compared with other sectors of the Nigerian economy” (Aidelun-uoghene, 2014: 15). It is within the context of such an appalling situation that SCN utilises *dialogic contraction to proclaim*, “I am not happy that a professor is earning #500,000” (Excerpt 4), which also is an indexation of *affect of unhappiness*. The public mention of “#500,000”, “#1million”, and “seven months” signals *quantification*, an instance of *force* within the graduation system. The quantified salary of an average Nigerian professor tends to evoke pity in the minds of the audience, especially because the poor remuneration of professors (and by extension, the Nigerian academics) is not commensurate with their investments in the Nigerian tertiary education. As such, Ngige’s publicly specified #1 million as a desired salary benchmark for professors portrays him as a worker-centric and generous leader who prioritises the value of employees. In addition, the quantified “seven months” adds force to Ngige’s rage at the ASUU prolonged strike, especially because it had become the longest spell in history.

While clinging to the notion of welfarism to ideologically project oneself as a true welfarist who feels the pains of the underpaid Nigerian lecturers and ASUU members, SCN weaponises the *affect of displeasure* and condemns ASUU for shutting the gates of some Nigerian universities, disrupting the academic activities, and making Nigerian students idle for seven months (Excerpt 5). It indirectly projects the opposing camp as insensitive and a disruptor of academic progress in Nigerian universities for a somewhat selfish interest.

**Excerpt 6:**

The same in the university system, we have librarians, we have engineers, and we have technologists who prepare the labs. All these people have their own demands for the enhancement of their salaries. You cannot just single out ASUU and do it. No! Once you do it, you’ll collapse the system. If you are doing something for education, you will do it for the university system, polytechnics, and colleges of education. That is tertiary education you’re talking about (SCN; INTV 2).

**Excerpt 7:**

If you recall, it is this Minister of Labour who created this problem that we have. Initially, he took up the process, and instead of renegotiating and solving the problem, he believed the best thing was a “hunger weapon” – stop their salaries. He said “stop their salaries”. He wrote as a minister. Instead of solving the problem, you are looking for how to use a hunger weapon, in this country at this present age (PEO; INTV 3).

Furthermore, SCN, in excerpt 6, leans on the discursive move of “categorization”, bringing in some other groups within the Nigerian tertiary institutions into the discourse. Groups such as “librarians”, “engineers”, and “technologists” are part of the university system and also have their agitations on the improvement of remuneration rates. SCN, therefore, projects ASUU as being self-centred and not having a mind of inclusiveness for the collective good, including other key stakeholders within the university system. SCN argues that salary enhancement and other forms of development should not flow only to universities, but also to polytechnics and colleges of education. SCN signals this stance through dialogic pronouncing “You cannot just single out ASUU and do it”. In essence, ASUU’s actions betray the ideology of collectivism because they dissociate from the collective interest it shares with other social groups within the university.

As a form of counter-stance, PEO, in excerpt 7, conceives the actions of the FGN as an attack on the welfare of the university lecturers. This stance rides on the *judgment of propriety* (how ethical) while also indexing the *affect of displeasure* through expressions such as “hunger weapon” and “stop their salaries”. PEO believes that true welfarists do not weaponise the hunger and lack they have observed in their people for selfish goals. To project the non-welfarist picture of the FGN and its allied groups, PEO deploys dialogic expansion and attributes the expression “stop their salaries” as a quoted decree of SCN – the mouthpiece of the FGN on such matter, which showcases them as a group that finds joy in depriving the Nigerian university lecturers of their reward system instead of listening to their agitations and troubleshooting the problems advanced by ASUU. This appraisal strategy invites the audience into the dialogic space to make their judgement, and by implication, take a negative stance that delineates SCN and FGN as inhumane, afflictors and problem compounders. From the foregoing, SCN presents the FGN’s response as one that seeks to secure the welfare and collective good of the Nigerian academics across the tertiary institutions. It subtly presents the stance of ASUU as a self-seeking agenda. In contrast, ASUU projects its group as a welfare-seeking group and an advocate of the collective good while also portraying the FGN as anti-welfarist.

### 5.3. (De)valuation of the Nigerian tertiary education

Behind every thriving society is a solid educational system. Nigeria’s educational system has, over time, been plagued with a myriad of socio-political malaises that have raised the question of whether or not the educational system produces value. Rampant industrial action caused by unresolved differences between ASUU and FGN on funding, salaries, and working conditions is one of the factors that have brought several operational setbacks to the Nigerian educational system (Chukwudi & Idowu, 2021). Within the context of the ASUU-FGN industrial conflict, the key social actors of both camps attempt to frame their stances in line with the orientation of promoting valuable education in Nigeria. An in-group attempts to negatively brand its out-group counterpart as one whose actions and decisions contribute to the devaluation of Nigeria’s tertiary education.

#### Excerpt 8:

...But this one, that you closed the university, you said you are not being paid well, that the Ghanaian university teachers association (GUTA) are paid the equivalent of dollars. Yes! Those people are attracting dollars and pounds into Ghana, and their universities are open. Nigerian students are paying dollars. So, they use the money they earn there, and they give them their certificate... You don’t demarket your universities and demarket your certificates (SCN; INTV 1).

**Excerpt 9:**

If the government had intervened before the strike or if they had intervened when we started the strike... If they had come to discuss with us and reach an agreement within one or two weeks, there wouldn't be strike. As I speak to you, the University of California is on strike. I can assure you it will not last three days because they value education... (PEO; INTV 4).

The ideological structure of “comparison” is triggered in the interactions through the mention of the Ghanaian University Teachers Association (GUTA) in excerpt 8 and the University of California in excerpt 9. These mentions are to strategically ground divergent stances. SCN places ASUU and GUTA side by side, which is an argumentative strategy to trigger the audience's judgment and alignment with the authorial stance. Similarly, reference to an external agency in excerpt 9 is an indexation of *engagement* strategy for *dialogic expansion*, *acknowledging* GUTA and the University of California as agencies that promote valuable education in their climes. This is meant to bolster the authorial stance that ASUU has not been on par with its foreign equivalent. Through the actor description, SCN subtly brands the Nigerian lecturers as unproductive compared to GUTA. With the valence “demarket” in Excerpt 8, SCN submits that ASUU's incessant strike does not add any value to the Nigerian education system, but rather depreciates the market value of Nigeria's tertiary education within the global milieu. This is an instance of attitudinal evaluation of *affect of dissatisfaction*.

Through an ideological structure of implication, SCN presupposes that the scholarship of most Nigerian university lecturers, evidenced by receipt of international grants, awards, fellowships, etc., compared to GUTA, has not positioned them to earn in foreign currency. While this assertion remains subjective, unverified, and polemical, SCN leverages it to aim a jibe at ASUU for concentrating and channeling their efforts on industrial actions rather than getting immersed in scholarly activities that can give them global visibility and enhance the value of Nigeria's university system.

**Excerpt 10:**

University lecturers are not casual labourers. The civil service works from 8 to 4. That's the working hour, you are aware of that. Academics can work from 6 to 8 at night. So, we are not casual labourers, we are not paid on a daily basis. If you try to casualise the university lecturer, you have killed the system. You can ask anywhere in the world (PEO; INTV 4).

Projecting a divergent stance, PEO castigates FGN and justifies the strike action in excerpts 9 and 10. PEO opens the dialogic space by alluding to a strike action that reportedly took place at the University of California. PEO opines that the United States government would never allow a protracted industrial strike, proclaiming that “they value education”, unlike FGN. Similarly, PEO believes that, in terms of the modalities and conditions of salary payment to Nigerian university lecturers, ASUU has been stripped of its professional dignity and has been reduced to that of casual labourers. In an attempt to re-dignify Nigerian lecturers who, supposedly, have been treated like casual labourers, PEO leans on the appraisal choice of dialogic contracting (disclaiming) indexed by the expression, “university lecturers are not casual labourers”. This proclamation aims to reconfigure the battered identity given to ASUU and its member institutions in the midst of the impasse. In lieu of the foregoing, the varying stances of the two conflicting camps are projected within the discourse of the valuation of the university system in Nigeria.

#### 5.4. Politicisation of the industrial conflict

The ASUU-FGN conflict is a form of political/institutional conflict that involves political and institutional actors such as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the Minister of Education, the Commissioners of Education at the State level, the Chairman of ASUU, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian Universities, and several other key stakeholders, unions and policy makers in Nigeria's education system. With these groups of stakeholders deliberating to make critical decisions, the possible cases of conflicting interests are bound to ensue. It has been observed that the nature of the ASUU-FGN conflict over the years is not devoid of political underpinnings (Nsungo & Orabueze, 2022; Toryuha, 2024), and as such, the conflict has been constructed to have been intertwined with political interests beyond the labour and academic-related issues. Against this backdrop, the key social actors considered in this study frame their stances along the line of the political interests that characterise the industrial conflict. The in-group actors accuse their opposing group of politicising the industrial action and wielding power to peddle various propaganda and achieve an in-group interest. This suggests that the industrial conflict is used as political propaganda against each other.

##### Excerpt 11:

...It is ASUU that is not sincere. They fill their members with lies and at a point, they politicised the entire thing.... Their president, on national television of Arise, AIT, asked them to vote out this government that has kept their children at home for seven months, the APC government, with their children overseas, this government is maltreating you. (SCN; INTV 2).

The stances of the opposing camps are projected through lexicalisation, foregrounded through the use of the lexical items "politicise", "play politics", "vote out". In excerpt 11 above, SCN evaluates the industrial action as a manipulative political ploy and an election campaign strategy against the incumbent political party, the All Progressive Congress (APC). SCN asserts that ASUU simply embarked on the industrial strike for political gains and was, therefore, being manipulated and weaponised by some political cabals. This assertion is made within the context of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, and at the time the ASUU strike reached its peak in 2022, a change of government was imminent. SCN harps on *judgment of veracity*, "It is ASUU that is not sincere..." and negatively evaluates the actions and activities of ASUU, construing the industrial strike as an insincere campaign tainted with political propaganda. In other words, SCN accuses ASUU of ignoring its primary essence of staging the industrial action and drifting into a political campaign against the APC government. SCN foregrounds this accusation through *dialogic contracting* by *entertaining* the quoted statement of the ASUU president, "vote out this government", and invites the audience to share his orientation. Arising from the above, SCN adopts the negative other-representation strategy in accusing the out-group of serving as political stooges, kowtowing to political manoeuvring, extending the period of the strike action to defame the image of the APC government, and thereby manipulating the sentiments of both Nigerian students and the general public. The "seven months" resurfaces again as a form of quantification to intensify SCN's tone of displeasure over the industrial action, especially because no compromise had been reached between the conflicting groups at that time.

In the usual defensive posture, PEO attempts to solidify ASUU's positive stance on the industrial action and negative portrayal of FGN by harping on "populism", as stated by SCN in excerpt 11 above. Populism as an ideological strategy appeals to the popular view about a personality,

action, or phenomenon. Populism is exploited within the context of the popular view held by Nigerians who belong to the middle and poor classes about the attitude of Nigerian politicians towards the formal education of their family members. This belief holds that most Nigerian politicians are blind to the sufferings and plights of the electorate as long as their children are sponsored overseas and exposed to quality education (Agomuo, 2022; Nwabughio, 2022). To substantiate this, the expression marks *affect of dissatisfaction*, expressing the pain of the neglect that Nigerian politicians inflict on the children of the masses who are enrolled in government-owned universities. Such an evaluative attitudinal marker is deployed to arouse the sentiments of many Nigerian parents or students affected by the protracted strike.

**Excerpt 12:**

Well, the process is ongoing. We hope this time that they will not play politics as they did in the last test. In the last test, the program scored 99.3% and they said the program failed, which means it is politics. I hope they will not also play politics this time. (PEO; INTV 3).

Similarly, PEO expresses concern over the usual practice of FGN regarding terms of agreement on the resolution of the industrial conflict. PEO implies that FGN has always reneged on its promises and commitments in improving the general welfare of Nigerian university lecturers, specifically ASUU member institutions. In excerpt 12, PEO accuses FGN of playing politics on some key agreements reached by both conflicting camps during and shortly after the industrial conflict. The statement in excerpt 12 above is a response to the interviewer's question on the payment system, one of the rationales for the industrial action. For proper context, the ASUU-FGN tussle is fraught with disputation over the payment platforms – IPPIS and UTAS – for salary and remuneration payments of Nigerian public university lecturers. Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information Management (IPPIS) is a centralised payroll system created by the FGN in 2006 for a fraud-free, accountable, and transparent monitoring of salary payment, and to track non-existent personnel referred to as “ghost workers” (Abada, Odey & Odey, 2023). However, ASUU heavily criticised this payment system, maintaining that the system undermines the operational structure and autonomy of universities (Hassan, Manu & Ahmed, 2023). Arising from this, ASUU designed another payment platform – University Transparency and Accountability Solution (UTAS), claiming that the peculiarities of universities are not taken cognisance of in IPPIS (Abada, Odey & Odey, 2023).

To maintain a negative stance towards FGN's activities towards the payment platforms, PEO deploys the engagement strategy to *contract* the dialogic space and *pronounces* that “the programme scored 99.3%” after it went through considerable testing by FGN. However, PEO claims that FGN's faulting of the payment platform despite the positive result generated from the conducted test is an act of playing politics – “which means it is politics”. In light of this, PEO projects the stance that FGN is negligent in keeping its commitments towards ASUU, and instead of addressing the issue, it would always politicise its decisions and actions for self-aggrandisement. On the strength of the above explications, both conflicting camps project their stances in accusative frames of politicking, as one party accuses the other of playing politics to the detriment of the victims of the industrial action.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The discursive and argumentative frames highlighted in spokespersons' interactions show no orientation to practical solutions; they rather touch on the need to justify positions and cement already taken stances. These can be matched and compared to the current studies in the ASUU-FGN industrial conflict and the media reporting of the impasse. This view makes it easier to understand the underlying dynamics of the conflict.

As Ellah (2014) points out, discourses of dominance and authority are commonplace with government actors, whereas repertoires of protest and resistance are common with ASUU actors; accusation and counter-accusation are prevalent rhetorical tactics on both sides. The same ideological hostility is reflected in the current study in its recognition of welfare appeals and constitutional claims, which are extrapolations of the broader ideological repertoires outlined by Ellah (2014). However, where Ellah stresses the dichotomy of domination and resistance, the current study provides an additional twist to the argument by demonstrating how constitutional/legal framing has turned into a primary source of argument. Moreover, the context of live broadcasts brings out the orientation of these ideological frames towards external audiences (students, parents, and the general population), thus preempting legitimization instead of negotiated resolution.

Like other literature on the ASUU-FGN industrial conflict, Julius (2021) tends to be more impact-oriented, focusing on the material and educational impacts of strikes: disruptions to academic calendars, graduate stalling, and institutional instability. This is contrary to the current study, which attends to the discursive practices that inform popular understanding of the industrial conflict. Yet, the current study is complementary to Julius (2021). Whereas impact-oriented research reveals the human and institutional cost of a prolonged industrial action, the discourse analytical orientation of the current study provides an understanding of why the conflict does not end. Our findings demonstrate that the process of the public debate is organized not into a deliberative negotiation but into a performance of legitimization. In prioritising constitutional legality, welfare appeals, and politicisation of the conflict over solution-based frames, actors contribute to the cycles of industrial strife that the impact-based literature proposes are harmful to the education sector.

Another pertinent point of comparison is provided by Nsungu and Orabueze (2022), who demonstrate the discursive construction of asymmetries of power within ASUU strike coverage by the Nigerian media. Their discussion highlights the importance of journalistic sourcing and framing in intensifying or delegitimising certain voices. This is supplemented by the current study, which shifts its focus to the performative strategies of the actors themselves rather than journalistic production. Although Nsungu and Orabueze focus on the gatekeeping and framing of media houses, the current study emphasises how spokespersons engage in the active politicisation of the discourse during televised interviews, thus jointly creating the power disparities that media reports would later reproduce. Altogether, the two studies seem to provide reason to believe that media institutionalization with the performance of actors creates a communicative loop that rewards political point-scoring over the ability to solve the problem constructively.

Ogundeji and Uduk (2024) demonstrate that newspapers selectively assign positive and negative values to both parties and form competing discourse representations, which repeat an ideological conflict. Although the current study also concludes that ASUU and FGN spokespersons use legitimization frames, it goes further to show how such mechanisms play out in live televised communications. In contrast to the comparatively stable and editorially mediated semantic framing

of the print media, the interviews broadcast allow instant justifications, emotional appeals, and confrontational interactions, thus highlighting the performative role of legitimization and politicisation.

The synthesis of these findings has some implications. Legitimization and delegitimization appear to be the most prevalent discursive aims across all modalities, including accusations (Ellah, 2014), semantic framing (Uduk & Ogundeji, 2024), and interview performances. Actors tend to focus more on their legitimacy in the presence of an audience. Third, the preeminence of the legitimization rhetoric over the resolution-focused discourse has tangible effects, with the ongoing educational unrest, highlighted in Julius (2021) and similar works, being one of the consequences.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that the representatives of the conflicting camps project and entrench their ideological stances around these discursive frames: the constitutional/legal inclination of the industrial action, exploiting the ideologies of welfarism and inclusivity, the (de)valuation of the Nigerian tertiary education, and the politicisation of the industrial action. These discursive framings are ideologically projected through representational strategies such as authority, polarization, categorisation, actor description, comparison, lexicalisation, and populism for a positive or negative representation of activities and efforts of both camps concerning the industrial conflict. The attitude and engagement systems of the appraisal framework, as well as their sub-systems, are well projected in the expressions and responses of the interviewed social actors and are instrumental in indexing their projected stances on the industrial conflict. As both parties seek to protect their divergent interests, their articulated stances on the industrial conflict were unveiled through discursive strategies and lexico-grammatical elements that constitute the macro-structure of an ideology-laden interaction. The study further observes that the stances expressed through linguistic choices by both camps are an indication of their undauntedly held positions about the labour conflict in the face of pressure.

In consonance with Chigozie's (2017) position, the discursive frames constitute a web of legitimization strategies deployed by the social actors for mobilising public sympathy and justifying their positions on the industrial conflict. Each of the discursive frames is a reflection of the communicative intents of the concerned social actors. The social actors make reference to the constitution, labour laws, and the conditions of service as an authoritative source for delegitimizing their actions concerning the industrial conflict. This discursive frame connects with Van Dijk's (1998) notion of argumentation from authority, which permits speakers to make reference to legal or institutional sources to buttress their argument. Notably, both camps maintain that their counterparts' actions devalue the Nigerian academic system. This mirrors the opinion of Julius (2021) that ASUU frames itself as a watchdog guarding academic integrity and confronting FGN's neglect. Such emotional appeal aims to enlist the victims of the protracted strike, especially Nigerian students, and the public in a shared sense of victimhood. In alignment with the thoughts of Ogundeji and Uduk (2024), the welfarist orientation presents ASUU as a defender of labour rights for the benefit of the people, and FGN as an advocate of fair compensation and equal opportunities.

As Haddington (2004) and Ajiboye (2017) observe, interviewees (in this case, the representatives of the conflicting camps) often desire to shut the dialogic space against counterstances, thereby entrenching and propagating their authorial stance (Akano, 2023), and through this, the ideological orientations of their audience are influenced. The study observes that the key social actors who are representatives of ASUU and FGN debate the industrial conflict during TV interviews

with the primary intention of legitimising and justifying their actions, rather than proposing effective mechanisms for conflict resolution. Although ideological positionings are woven around the efforts of both camps, discursive moves and stance expressions are indications of more confrontation and less diplomacy. Arising from this, this study submits that quick and effective conflict resolution mechanisms should be prioritised.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

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