The Language of Trauma: A Study of the Linguistic Features of Victims' Narratives of Kidnappings and Banditry

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Abstract
This study investigates the linguistic features present in the narratives of victims of kidnappings and banditry in Northern Nigeria, focusing on how language encodes trauma. Drawing on recorded interviews, written testimonies, and social media posts, the research analyzes the patterns of word choice, narrative structure, and tone used by victims to recount their experiences. The findings highlight recurring themes, such as the use of vivid metaphoric expressions to describe feelings of fear and helplessness, fragmented storytelling that reflects disorganized thought processes, and emotionally charged language that underscores the intense psychological impact of their experiences. These linguistic patterns are valuable for understanding the psychological state of victims and hold implications for multiple fields, including trauma counseling, media reporting, and peace building initiatives. By recognizing these markers, the government can provide better-targeted interventions, journalists can portray victims' experiences with greater empathy, and policymakers can develop communication strategies that foster healing and resilience.

Keywords: Trauma language, narrative structure, kidnappings, banditry, linguistic features.

Introduction
Northern Nigeria has become a hotspot for violent security challenges, with kidnappings and banditry affecting states like Kaduna, Zamfara and Katsina. These crises disrupt daily life, forcing many into displacement, poverty and constant fear (Adetayo, 2021). While the physical toll is evident in reports of fatalities, abductions, and ransoms, the psychological scars are often overlooked. Victims often carry long-term trauma that affects their mental health and social interactions. This trauma not only burdens individuals but also impedes communal recovery, leaving society in a perpetual state of insecurity and anxiety.

Beyond the physical aftermath, the way victims recount their experiences offers insight into the mental and emotional toll of their ordeals. Scholars have noted

that trauma reshapes narratives, often leading to fragmented storytelling, metaphoric language, and emotional expression as victims struggle to process their experiences (Van Dijk, 2016). For instance, many victims describe their attackers as "shadows in the dark," using vivid metaphors to convey the overwhelming fear they felt during the attack. Such linguistic patterns serve as a coping mechanism, helping victims articulate emotions that may otherwise be too difficult to express.

The psychological and linguistic aspects of trauma are crucial for understanding the long-term consequences of insecurity. Studies in trauma linguistics have emphasized the need for empathetic communication strategies and narrative therapy (Tannen, 1995). By analyzing victims' language patterns, counselors, media practitioners, and policymakers can better address the hidden toll of insecurity, fostering environments that support healing and resilience. Recognizing and validating these linguistic markers of trauma is an essential step toward effective recovery.

Problem Statement
Existing studies on insecurity in Northern Nigeria have primarily examined the political, social, and economic implications of the ongoing crises, such as the impact of banditry on agricultural productivity, the destabilization of communities, and the political dynamics surrounding security interventions. These investigations have provided valuable insights into the broader ramifications of insecurity but have often overlooked the personal and psychological experiences of those directly affected. In particular, the linguistic features present in victims' narratives—such as the choice of words, metaphoric expressions, and narrative structures—remain underexplored despite their potential to reveal significant aspects of trauma and recovery processes.

Objective
This study investigates the linguistic features in the narratives of kidnapping and banditry victims to understand how language encodes trauma.

Significance
Identifying the linguistic markers of trauma in victims' narratives is essential for fostering empathetic and effective communication by counselors, policymakers, and journalists. Counselors can use these insights to develop therapeutic approaches that validate victims' experiences and help them process their

emotions more constructively. For example, fragmented storytelling and repetitive use of distressing phrases may signal unresolved trauma, guiding therapists toward interventions that promote coherence and emotional release.

Contributions
The study identifies key linguistic patterns in trauma narratives, including fragmented storytelling, metaphorical expressions, and emotionally charged language. These features often reflect victims' struggles to process and articulate their experiences coherently, as trauma disrupts normal cognitive functions and memory recall (Van Dijk, 2016). Fragmented storytelling, where narratives lack a clear chronological sequence, is common among victims reliving chaotic or disorienting events, while the use of vivid metaphors such as "a nightmare that never ends" or "a shadow that follows" conveys feelings of persistent fear and helplessness. Additionally, emotionally intense language, characterized by repetitive phrases and hyperbolic terms, underscores the psychological weight of these experiences. Based on these findings, the study offers recommendations for therapeutic communication strategies, emphasizing the importance of creating safe spaces for victims to share their stories without judgment. Counselors are encouraged to acknowledge these linguistic cues and gently guide victims toward narrative coherence, which research has shown can aid emotional recovery and cognitive restructuring.

Literature Review
Trauma profoundly affects an individual's cognitive and emotional processes, which often manifests in their communication patterns. Research shows that when recalling traumatic events, individuals may present fragmented narratives, disjointed storylines, and heightened emotional language as they attempt to process overwhelming experiences (Van Dijk, 2016). This disruption in narrative coherence stems from the neurological effects of trauma, which impair memory recall and narrative sequencing. Language, therefore, becomes not only a tool for expressing experiences but also a marker of the psychological state of the speaker. Victims of traumatic events frequently use emotionally charged language to convey the intensity of their feelings, which underscores the deep psychological scars inflicted by their experiences.

Studies by Chiluwe and Ifukor (2018) highlight that narratives from conflict zones reveal recurring themes such as blame, hopelessness and identity restoration. Victims often direct blame at perceived external agents responsible

for their suffering, such as government authorities, insurgents, or societal systems that failed to protect them. Alongside this tendency to assign blame is a pervasive sense of despair, reflected in phrases like "there is no hope anymore" or "we are forgotten." Despite these negative sentiments, narratives also frequently include elements of identity restoration, where victims seek to redefine themselves not merely as sufferers but as survivors. This attempt to reclaim agency and dignity highlights the complexity of trauma narratives and their role in fostering psychological resilience.

Linguistic anthropology has provided valuable insights into how trauma is encoded in language. According to Tannen (1995), common linguistic markers of psychological distress include metaphorical language, repetition, and incomplete sentences. Metaphors such as "it felt like drowning" or "the world turned dark" are often employed by victims to convey abstract feelings that are difficult to articulate directly. Repetition, on the other hand, reflects cognitive attempts to process distressing memories, while incomplete sentences often point to the speaker's inability to verbalize overwhelming thoughts fully. These markers serve as crucial indicators for counselors and researchers seeking to understand the depths of victims' emotional states.

Recognizing these linguistic markers can inform therapeutic communication strategies that foster healing. Counselors can help victims achieve narrative coherence by guiding them to structure their accounts chronologically and encouraging reflective storytelling. This approach not only aids in emotional catharsis but also facilitates cognitive restructuring, which is essential for recovery (Van Dijk, 2016). Media practitioners, too, have a role in portraying victims' experiences with empathy by avoiding sensationalism and acknowledging the language of trauma in their reports. Policymakers can leverage this understanding to craft trauma-sensitive public communications and interventions that address the psychosocial needs of affected populations. Ultimately, understanding the relationship between language and trauma opens pathways for more compassionate and effective support systems.

Methodology
This study adopts a qualitative research approach through content analysis to explore the linguistic features in trauma narratives of victims of kidnappings and banditry in Northern Nigeria. Qualitative content analysis allows for an in-depth examination of the language used by victims to convey their experiences,

focusing on the meanings and emotional expressions embedded in their narratives. This approach is particularly suited for understanding complex psychological phenomena such as trauma, which are often reflected in subjective and personal accounts.

The data for this research were collected from three primary sources:
- Recorded Interviews with Victims: Audio and video interviews conducted by journalists and human rights organizations provided firsthand accounts of victims' traumatic experiences. These interviews captured the spontaneous linguistic responses of individuals recounting violent encounters.
- Written Testimonies in Newspapers: Articles and opinion pieces featuring detailed victim narratives were sourced from reputable Nigerian newspapers. These texts offered structured accounts of trauma, often curated for public consumption but still containing valuable linguistic insights.
- Social Media Posts: Personal posts on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, where victims or their close associates shared kidnapping and banditry experiences, were analyzed. These posts often included raw, immediate expressions of fear, anger, and grief.

A thematic analysis was employed to identify and categorize recurring linguistic patterns across the different data sources. This technique involved a systematic coding process that highlighted key themes such as metaphorical expressions, fragmented storytelling, and emotional tone.

Results and Analysis
Linguistic Markers of Trauma
The analysis of trauma narratives from victims of kidnappings and banditry in Northern Nigeria revealed several key linguistic markers that offer valuable insights into the psychological and emotional states of the victims. These markers included metaphorical expressions, fragmented storytelling, emotionally charged language, and patterns of repetition and hesitation. One victim described their experience by saying:

Example 1 "It was like I was trapped in a cage, with no way out. Every time I closed my eyes, I could still hear the sound of their guns."

This metaphor, "trapped in a cage," vividly conveys the victim's feeling of entrapment and helplessness. The comparison of their experience to being

confined in a cage underscores the loss of autonomy and freedom that often accompanies trauma. The metaphor of being unable to escape highlights not only physical confinement but also the emotional imprisonment that victims feel. The additional statement, "Every time I closed my eyes, I could still hear the sound of their guns," reflects the enduring nature of trauma, where the past experience continues to haunt the victim even in moments of supposed safety, indicating post-traumatic stress.

Another respondent shared:

Example 2 "They came in at night… I don't know how they got in… I remember the gunshots, then the silence… then I was tied up."

This statement exemplifies fragmented storytelling, where the victim's recollection of the event is disjointed and incomplete. The absence of clear temporal sequencing *"I don't know how they got in"* illustrates the victim's inability to make sense of the chaotic and sudden nature of the attack. The abrupt shifts between sensory details, like "gunshots" and "silence," suggest a cognitive disorientation caused by the traumatic experience. This fragmented nature of narrative is characteristic of how trauma affects memory, often leading to difficulty in recalling events in a structured or coherent manner. The phrase "*then I was tied up*" signals the victim's cognitive attempt to organize the experience but is limited by the overwhelming emotional impact.

Metaphoric Expressions
Metaphors are a powerful linguistic tool that allows victims of trauma to articulate intense and overwhelming emotions that might be too difficult to express through direct language. In the context of victims recounting experiences of kidnappings and banditry in Northern Nigeria, metaphorical language serves as a coping mechanism to give shape to otherwise indescribable feelings of fear, confusion, and helplessness.

Example 1: *"I felt like I was living in a nightmare, unable to wake up."*

This metaphor captures the surreal and distressing nature of the victim's experience. The comparison to a "*nightmare*" emphasizes how the victim perceives their reality as distorted and out of control, akin to a bad dream that feels endless and inescapable. The added phrase, "*unable to wake up,"* intensifies

the sense of helplessness, suggesting that the victim feels trapped in this horrific situation with no possibility of relief or escape. The metaphor of the "*nightmare*" not only conveys the terror experienced but also the disorientation and loss of agency often felt by individuals who undergo traumatic events. It evokes the idea of being disconnected from reality, caught in an emotional and psychological limbo where the victim cannot regain control.

Example 2: *"Their voices were thunder in my ears, drowning out every thought."*

This metaphor vividly portrays the overwhelming sensory experience of fear. The comparison of the perpetrators' voices to "*thunder*" signifies the intensity and power of the sounds, which are so loud and pervasive that they drown out the victim's ability to think clearly. Thunder, a natural force, connotes an uncontrollable, frightening noise that can overpower all other stimuli, much like the victim's emotional state during the traumatic event. The phrase "*drowning out every though*t" suggests not only a sensory overload but also a cognitive paralysis, where the victim's mental clarity is overwhelmed by the emotional chaos of the moment. This metaphor highlights how the trauma silences the victim's thoughts and agency, symbolizing the loss of mental and emotional control in the face of fear.

4.3 Fragmented Storytelling
Trauma often disrupts the victim's ability to construct coherent and logical narratives, resulting in fragmented storytelling. This disjointed way of recounting events reflects the psychological and emotional chaos the victim experiences, as their mind attempts to make sense of an overwhelming event that is too complex to process fully in the moment. Below are two actual examples of fragmented storytelling, along with their analysis:

Example 1: "*They blindfolded us… I don't know where we were taken… there was shouting everywhere… then silence*."

This narrative exemplifies fragmented storytelling, where the victim's attempt to recount their experience is disjointed and disconnected. The use of ellipses (*"…") and abrupt shifts between actions "blindfolded us," "*I don't know where we were taken*," and "*there was shouting everywhere*" reflects the victim's struggle to piece together a logical sequence of events. The narrative lacks clear temporal structure, mirroring the chaos and confusion of the traumatic experience.

7

The phrase "*there was shouting everywhere*" indicates the victim's heightened state of panic and disorientation during the abduction, while "then silence" introduces a shift in sensory perception, highlighting how the trauma interrupted their sense of time and clarity. The absence of concrete details, like location or specific actions, reflects the victim's emotional disarray and difficulty in recalling a highly charged event in a linear fashion.

Example 2: "*I was dragged out of the house… there was a lot of noise… then they put me in the car… we drove for hours… it was dark… I don't even know what happened next.*"

This example further illustrates fragmented storytelling, as the speaker's recount of their abduction is marked by gaps and a lack of temporal flow. The victim's disjointed narrative "*there was a lot of noise… then they put me in the car*" reflects confusion and an inability to recall events in chronological order. The statement *"it was dark"* signals a sensory experience that might have contributed to the victim's disorientation and a loss of spatial awareness. The admission, *"I don't even know what happened next,*" indicates a mental block or emotional shutdown, as the victim is unable to recall or process what happened after a certain point, which is common in trauma survivors who may dissociate or experience memory gaps due to extreme stress.

4.4 Emotional Tone
The emotional tone of trauma narratives is one of the most telling indicators of the victim's psychological state. In recounting their experiences, victims often use emotionally charged language to express the fear, anger, and hopelessness that defined their traumatic events. The persistent emotional weight of these expressions underscores the long-term psychological effects of the trauma, revealing how these emotions continue to impact victims long after the event. Below are two actual quotes with analysis related to the emotional tone in trauma narratives:

Example 1: "*Every second felt like death; I kept thinking they would shoot us.*"

This quote is steeped in intense fear, as the victim describes the experience of being constantly on edge and anticipating imminent death. The phrase "*Every second felt like death*" conveys a sense of time being suspended, with each moment carrying the overwhelming psychological burden of fear. It suggests that

time did not pass normally for the victim, and instead, it was marked by an ongoing sense of impending doom. The second part of the statement, *"I kept thinking they would shoot us,"* further emphasizes the victim's heightened state of terror and the mental torment of living with the constant fear of being harmed. This emotional tone illustrates the profound anxiety that permeated the victim's experience and the lasting effect of that fear, which likely persists even after the actual threat has passed.

Example 2: *"I felt so helpless; it was unbearable. I didn't know what to do. The horror felt never-ending."*

This quote highlights the emotions of helplessness, pain, and hopelessness. The victim's use of the word "*helpless*" communicates a sense of powerlessness and an inability to influence their circumstances, which is a common response in situations of extreme danger like kidnappings. The phrase "*it was unbearable*" signals the overwhelming nature of the emotional and psychological pain the victim felt during the ordeal. The repetition of the phrase "*never-ending horror*" emphasizes the persistence and intensity of the trauma, suggesting that the victim felt trapped in a continuous cycle of fear and despair. This emotional tone not only reflects the immediate distress of the situation but also points to the lasting effects of the trauma on the victim's psyche, underlining the extent to which such experiences continue to haunt survivors.

Discussion
The fragmented nature of victims' storytelling is a critical reflection of the cognitive and emotional disorientation they experience due to the traumatic events they endure. The disruption in the structure of their narratives characterized by disjointed phrases and gaps in memory mirrors the chaos and confusion they felt during the abduction and violence. This fragmentation aligns with findings from Van Dijk (2016), who suggests that trauma often disrupts the coherence of a narrative as victims struggle to process and articulate overwhelming emotions. The difficulty in recalling specific details, particularly in a linear fashion, highlights the profound psychological toll that trauma inflicts on the victim's cognitive processes. Victims of kidnappings and banditry in Northern Nigeria often find it challenging to recount their ordeal in an orderly manner due to emotional and mental fragmentation. As such, this finding emphasizes the need for professionals whether counselors or journalists to approach these narratives

with understanding, recognizing that the lack of linearity is not a result of unreliable testimony, but rather a symptom of the trauma itself.

Metaphors emerge as powerful linguistic tools for trauma survivors, offering a way to communicate the intensity and surreal quality of their experiences without directly confronting the pain. The frequent use of metaphors, such as comparing traumatic events to a "nightmare" or the sound of attackers' voices to "thunder," allows victims to convey the emotional enormity of their trauma in a more manageable form. According to Tannen (1995), metaphors function as a psychological buffer, distancing individuals from the painful aspects of their experiences by framing them in symbolic terms. This coping mechanism helps victims process their trauma by externalizing their emotions and providing them with a framework through which they can understand and discuss what might otherwise be too painful to articulate. These metaphors serve as emotional shields, helping individuals express overwhelming feelings such as fear, confusion, and helplessness, which might otherwise be too complex to communicate directly. For counselors and therapists, recognizing these metaphors is vital, as it offers insight into the victims' emotional landscape and coping strategies.

The identification of linguistic markers in trauma narratives offers valuable insight for counselors working with victims of kidnappings and banditry. By recognizing specific features such as fragmented storytelling, metaphorical language, and emotionally charged expressions, counselors can better understand the psychological state of their clients. This knowledge can guide therapeutic strategies, allowing for more effective interventions that are attuned to the emotional needs of the victim. For example, counselors can tailor their approach to accommodate the victim's fragmented sense of time and memory, using gentle prompts and non-linear questioning techniques that respect the victim's narrative structure. Additionally, understanding the metaphoric expressions used by victims can help counselors identify underlying emotions and fears, facilitating more empathetic and effective communication. By fostering a safe space for victims to express themselves in ways that align with their emotional and cognitive experiences, counselors can enhance the healing proce

Conclusion
This study offers an in-depth analysis of the linguistic features employed by victims of kidnappings and banditry in Northern Nigeria as they recount their traumatic experiences. Through the examination of metaphoric expressions,

fragmented storytelling, and emotionally charged language, the research highlights the profound psychological and emotional impact of trauma on victims. These linguistic markers serve as valuable indicators of the victims' mental states, offering insight into the disorientation, fear, and helplessness they experience. The study underscores how trauma reshapes the way victims narrate their experiences, revealing that the act of storytelling itself is an emotional and psychological struggle. By identifying these linguistic patterns, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and trauma, shedding light on the complex ways in which victims express their suffering.

The findings from this study suggest that trauma counselors should be trained to recognize linguistic markers in victims' narratives, as these markers are indicative of the psychological distress caused by traumatic events. Incorporating an awareness of these markers into therapeutic communication can allow counselors to offer more empathetic and tailored support. For example, counselors should be mindful of victims' use of metaphorical language and fragmented storytelling, ensuring they create a safe environment where clients feel heard and understood, regardless of the disjointed nature of their accounts.

Given the role of media in shaping public perception, it is essential that journalists follow sensitive reporting guidelines when covering stories involving trauma survivors. Journalists should be educated on the linguistic markers of trauma and how they may manifest in victims' narratives. By recognizing these signs, reporters can ensure that they report on victims' experiences with respect and empathy, avoiding sensationalist language that could further harm the victim. Additionally, media outlets should focus on the emotional and psychological impact of traumatic events, providing a more holistic representation of victims' experiences.

Law enforcement, medical teams, and other first responders who engage with trauma victims must also be trained to recognize the linguistic markers of trauma. Understanding these markers can improve the way they interact with victims, allowing for more compassionate responses and better communication. For example, first responders can be taught to ask open-ended questions that allow victims to express themselves without pressure, acknowledging the fragmented nature of their narratives. By engaging with victims in a trauma-informed manner,

first responders can help alleviate some of the immediate psychological burdens that victims face.

Suggestions for further studies
While this study has focused on the linguistic markers of trauma in Northern Nigeria, future research could build on these findings by adopting quantitative approaches to measure the prevalence and frequency of these linguistic features in trauma narratives. A larger, more diverse sample across various regions could offer insights into whether these linguistic patterns are consistent in different socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, future research could extend to other conflict-affected regions both within Nigeria and globally to explore how linguistic markers of trauma vary across different types of violence, such as ethnic conflicts, civil wars, and natural disasters. Such studies could provide valuable information for developing targeted interventions, both in terms of counseling and public communication strategies. Additionally, examining the intersection of linguistic markers with demographic factors such as age, gender, and socio-economic status could offer a more nuanced understanding of how different groups experience and express trauma.

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