

FROM ELOQUENT SILENCE TO ACTIONABLE DIRECTIVE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF UPTAKE FAILURE IN POLICY BRIEFS

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Abstract

While sophisticated policy research too often remains unused by public administrators, a critical failure for evidence-informed governance, this paper argues that a key, overlooked reason lies not only in political constraints but in the very language of the recommendations themselves. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of elite policy briefs, using Nigeria's National Blue Economy Strategy as a paradigmatic case, this study identifies a pervasive discourse of technocratic abstraction. The analysis reveals how grammatical choices, turning processes into static objects, omitting clear agents, and softening urgency, serve to assert authority while ironically constructing significant cognitive and practical barriers for time-pressed executives. By dissecting how this language erases human agency and dilutes imperative force, the paper concludes by proposing a linguistically grounded framework for Actionable Drafting, advocating a discursive shift to restore accountability, sequence tangible actions, and ultimately facilitate the social practice of implementation.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Systemic Functional Grammar; Research–Policy Gap; Policy Briefs; Nominalisation; Transitivity; Modality; Implementation

Introduction

In the quiet archives of governance, one can find shelves lined with eloquent testaments to problems solved, or so they were intended. These are the policy briefs produced by prestigious institutions, born

from intensive deliberations of expert minds. Yet, for all their analytical rigour and expert consensus, these documents too often meet a dispiriting fate: they are received with polite acknowledgement, then filed away, their recommendations fading into what this paper terms an eloquent silence. This silence is not merely an administrative oversight; it represents a profound failure in the vital artery of democratic governance, the translation of knowledge into action, with tangible human and societal costs (Cairney, 2016).

The persistence of this research-policy gap is one of the most vexing puzzles in public administration. Conventionally, scholars and practitioners point to external barriers: a lack of political will, competing budgetary priorities, or the inertia of bureaucratic machinery. While these factors are undeniably real, this explanatory framework externalises the problem, locating the obstacle entirely outside the realm of knowledge production. It implies that if the evidence is sound, the failure must lie elsewhere. This paper challenges that assumption. It posits that a critical and under-examined barrier is intrinsic to the knowledge product itself. Specifically, it argues that the very language and discursive architecture of elite policy briefs, designed to convey authority and rigour, may systematically undermine their fundamental purpose. Our intervention, therefore, is to offer a complementary, linguistically grounded critique that reveals an internal, textual barrier to uptake, one that operates in concert with—and often reinforces—the external political and institutional obstacles already well documented in the literature.

Policy briefs are crafted to be unimpeachable as documents of analysis, but they are often fragile as tools for decision-making. This communicative failure occurs at a moment of acute need. Policymakers today face wicked problems, complex, interconnected challenges such as economic transformation and environmental sustainability, that demand evidence-informed agility. When a senior executive, overwhelmed by a deluge of information and competing crises, encounters a brief dense with technical jargon, passive constructions, and abstract recommendations, the cognitive burden required to

translate that document into action may itself become the decisive barrier leading to deferral.

This study advances the central hypothesis that the institutional discourse of formal policy briefs, characterised by a pursuit of technical legitimacy, constructs a rhetorical and grammatical wall between expert analysis and executive action. It prioritises the performance of expertise over the facilitation of implementation. To interrogate this claim, the paper employs a linguistic Critical Discourse Analysis grounded in Systemic Functional Grammar to examine a paradigmatic case: the National Blue Economy Strategy emerging from Nigeria's Senior Executive Course 47.

This paper makes three interrelated contributions. Analytically, it reframes policy uptake failure not merely as a political or institutional problem, but as a linguistically mediated one embedded in the grammatical organisation of policy advice. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of integrating Critical Discourse Analysis with Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar to expose the micro-linguistic mechanisms through which abstraction, depersonalisation, and weakened obligation are produced in elite policy texts. Practically, it advances a linguistically grounded framework for Actionable Drafting that translates discourse critique into concrete principles for executive-oriented policy communication.

The inquiry is guided by three research questions:

RQ1: What specific linguistic features, grammatical, lexical, and rhetorical, characterise the discourse of elite policy briefs?

RQ2: How do these features, drawing on systemic functional linguistics, construct social relations and agency between producers and users of policy?

RQ3: How do these discursive constructions pragmatically impede the pathway from recommendation to administrative action?

Literature Review: Bridging Theory and the Communicative Gap The Persistent Research–Policy Divide

A substantial body of literature addresses the well-documented chasm between research evidence and policymaking. This divide is not merely logistical but epistemological, caught between linear-rational models of knowledge transfer and more complex, politically mediated models in which evidence is contested, selectively mobilised, or symbolically deployed (Oliver & Cairney, 2019). Within these latter accounts, evidence rarely speaks for itself; rather, it competes with institutional interests, political incentives, and entrenched administrative routines.

Policymakers operate under conditions of time scarcity and cognitive overload, relying heavily on trusted advisors, heuristics, and institutional cues. As a result, perceived credibility, clarity, and usability often outweigh methodological sophistication in shaping evidence uptake. Yet, much of the literature treats these dynamics as external to the research artefact itself, locating failure primarily in political will or bureaucratic resistance. While indispensable, such explanations risk under-theorising the role of the form in which evidence is communicated in conditioning uptake.

Policy Briefs as a Proposed Bridge

Within this context, policy briefs are championed as a primary instrument for bridging the research–policy divide. Best-practice literature emphasises concision, actionable recommendations, and audience-centred design tailored to executive time constraints. In principle, the policy brief functions as a translational genre, mediating between the epistemic norms of research and the pragmatic demands of governance.

Despite the diffusion of these guidelines, evidence of consistent policy uptake remains uneven. This suggests that adherence to structural design principles alone is insufficient. Much of the existing literature implicitly treats language as a neutral conduit, assuming that clarity of intent will naturally translate into clarity of reception. This

assumption leaves largely unexamined the possibility that the grammatical and discursive construction of policy advice may actively shape how recommendations are interpreted, prioritised, or deferred.

The Critical Gap: Language as Constitutive Practice

This unresolved tension points to a critical gap in the literature. While policy studies have richly theorised institutional behaviour and political context, they have paid comparatively little attention to language as a constitutive element of policy practice. Where language is examined, analysis often remains at the level of framing or rhetoric, without sustained engagement with the grammatical mechanisms through which agency, obligation, and action are encoded. Existing policy scholarship, for all its sophistication, has largely failed to examine how the *grammatical* constitution of policy problems actively shapes the horizon of possible administrative responses.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a corrective by conceptualising language as a form of social practice through which power and ideology are enacted (Fairclough, 1992). From this perspective, policy documents do not merely describe reality; they actively construct it by defining problems, allocating responsibility, and delimiting the horizon of legitimate action. Technical and abstract language, while performing authority and neutrality, may simultaneously obscure agency, depoliticise contested decisions, and exclude non-specialist readers.

Although CDA has been applied extensively to public-facing policy texts, media discourse, and legislative debates, its systematic application to internal, elite policy instruments, particularly through detailed linguistic frameworks, remains limited. Consequently, existing research often demonstrates that language matters, yet it rarely specifies how particular grammatical choices shape pragmatic outcomes. This study addresses that gap. It does not claim that language alone determines policy outcomes; rather, it argues that linguistic form constitutes a critical mediating layer through which political, institutional, and administrative factors are operationalised. By moving

beyond the observation that framing matters to a precise account of *how grammar matters*, this paper positions itself as a corrective that reveals the textual mechanisms underpinning implementation failure.

Theoretical Framework: The Linguistic Foundations of a Technocratic Discourse

This analysis is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis, which treats language as a form of social practice constitutive of power and institutional rationality (Fairclough, 1992). CDA provides the critical orientation, the commitment to uncovering how discourse sustains and reproduces unequal power relations. To anchor critique in demonstrable linguistic mechanisms, rather than impressionistic commentary, the study integrates Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). SFG provides the analytical precision necessary to trace how ideology is encoded in the most mundane grammatical choices.

Three SFG concepts are central to this study:

Grammatical Metaphor and Nominalisation: the transformation of processes into abstract nouns, enabling technical condensation while deleting agency, temporality, and evaluative stance (Halliday, 1998). Nominalisation allows writers to package complex activities as things, creating an impression of objectivity and stability. However, as this study will demonstrate, this comes at the cost of obscuring who did what to whom, and when.

Transitivity and Agency: the grammatical encoding of who does what to whom, where passive and agentless constructions obscure accountability. The transitivity system of a clause reveals how events are represented and how responsibility is assigned or avoided. Patterns of agent deletion are rarely accidental; they reflect and reproduce institutional cultures of risk management and blame avoidance.

Modality: the encoding of obligation and certainty, where low-value modals (should, could) attenuate directive force. Modality positions writers and readers in relations of authority and compliance. The

systematic preference for low-value obligation in policy texts constructs recommendations as negotiable suggestions rather than binding directives.

Together, these tools allow for precise analysis of how policy discourse constructs depersonalised action and negotiable obligation, revealing the grammatical architecture of what this paper terms the discourse of technocratic abstraction.

4. Methodology: A Linguistic Discourse Analytic Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, instrumental case-study design employing linguistic CDA. The corpus consists of twelve priority recommendations and fifty-four enumerated implementation strategies from Nigeria's Senior Executive Course 47 National Blue Economy Strategy (National Institute, 2024). The case is treated as paradigmatic of elite, consensus-driven policy advice produced within legitimacy-seeking institutional environments. It represents the kind of high-stakes, multi-sectoral policy document produced by senior public officials and intended for executive action, making it ideally suited to investigating the research questions.

The analysis proceeded in three phases:

Systematic Functional Deconstruction: identifying patterns of nominalisation, transitivity, and modality across the corpus. Each clause was analysed for its process type, participant roles, and modal value, allowing for the quantification of recurring grammatical preferences.

Discursive Interpretation: analysing how these grammatical choices construct agency, obligation, and reader positioning. This phase moved from description to interpretation, asking what social relations and cognitive effects these patterns produce.

Social Practice Explanation: linking linguistic patterns to institutional practices of risk aversion and implementation deferral. This final phase situated the grammatical findings within the broader institutional

context, explaining how the discourse serves organisational functions beyond the communication of information.

For example, the clause the establishment of a unified revenue framework was coded as a nominalised material process in which agency and temporality are suppressed; no human Actor is present, and obligation is encoded indirectly through surrounding modal environments. This three-phase approach ensures that the analysis remains empirically grounded while engaging with the broader social and institutional significance of the findings.

Analysis: The Grammar of Inaction in a Blue Economy Strategy Nominalisation and the Reification of Process

The corpus exhibits dense nominalisation, reconstructing dynamic political processes as static objects. This pattern is not merely a stylistic preference but a systematic grammatical choice with profound consequences for how policy problems and solutions are conceptualised. For instance:

The establishment of a National Blue Revenue Expansion Framework.

This construction deletes actors, obscures contestation, and transforms action into possession. The process of establishing, which inherently requires human agents making decisions over time, becomes an object that can be possessed, referenced, and circulated. While facilitating comprehensive planning, this reification renders implementation opaque and cognitively burdensome. The reader must mentally unpack the nominalisation, inferring who should do what and when, a task that becomes exponentially more difficult under conditions of time pressure. More critically, the reification of processes constructs a world of policy objects that appear self-evident and beyond contestation. When a recommendation is framed as a thing, the framework, it becomes more difficult to question the political choices, trade-offs, and conflicts that its establishment would entail. Debate is subtly closed, not through argument, but through grammar.

Transitivity and the Erasure of Human Agency

Agency is systematically assigned to institutional acronyms rather than human actors. The corpus is replete with constructions such as: “FMF in collaboration with FMMBE to design...”

This acronymic agency constructs bureaucracy, not people, as the primary actor, diffusing accountability across institutional entities rather than concentrating it in identifiable individuals. The grammar creates a world in which ministries collaborate, frameworks establish themselves, and systems operationalise, all without the messy involvement of actual human decision-makers. When no human subject is grammatically responsible for an action, no human can be held accountable for its non-performance. The discourse thus insulates authors and intended implementers alike from the consequences of inaction. Responsibility is so thoroughly distributed across the institutional landscape that no single actor is grammatically positioned as answerable for results.

Modality and the Attenuation of Imperative Force

Low-value modal verbs dominate the corpus. Recommendations framed with *should* encode negotiability even when paired with deadlines, producing a pragmatic contradiction: time-bound suggestions. For example: “The Federal Government *should* establish a comprehensive monitoring framework within six months.”

The *should* construct the action as advisable rather than required, while the six-month timeframe constructs it as urgent. The clause thus sends conflicting pragmatic signals: this matters, but compliance is optional. When such constructions accumulate across dozens of recommendations, the cumulative effect is the systematic erosion of directive force. Each individual recommendation may be reasonable, but the modal environment as a whole positions implementation as a matter of discretion rather than obligation. The discourse negotiates away the very urgency the policy context demands, transforming what might have been binding directives into a menu of

optional initiatives from which busy executives may select according to convenience.

Discussion: From Grammatical Design to the Social Practice of Inaction

The linguistic patterns identified in this study are not stylistic oversights or incidental features of technical writing. Rather, they constitute a coherent and institutionalised discourse of technocratic abstraction. This discourse is exquisitely suited to the needs of the producing institutions: it demonstrates intellectual mastery, signals analytical rigour, claims comprehensive foresight, and mitigates professional and political risk through grammatical depersonalisation. In this sense, the discourse performs legitimacy and authority precisely as elite policy environments demand (Fairclough, 1992; Hajer, 1995). The institutions that produce such documents are rewarded for appearing expert, comprehensive, and politically neutral, regardless of whether their recommendations are ever implemented.

However, as the analysis demonstrates, this discourse is pragmatically mismatched to the needs of the administrative user for whom implementation decisions must be made under conditions of urgency, uncertainty, and constraint. The very features that make the document authoritative within expert communities render it opaque and unactionable within executive settings. This is not an accident but a systematic effect of grammatical choices that serve institutional functions other than facilitating implementation.

One of the most immediate consequences of this mismatch is cognitive. The dense clustering of nominalisations and abstract noun phrases imposes a substantial processing burden on the reader. Executives are required to mentally unpack reified processes, reconstruct suppressed agents, and infer temporal sequencing that is not grammatically encoded. This cognitive load, though rarely acknowledged in policy studies, aligns closely with research on bounded rationality, which shows that decision-makers operating under time pressure are more likely to defer propositions that demand extensive

interpretive work before action can even be conceptualised (Jones, 2003). In this sense, linguistic abstraction does not merely obscure meaning; it actively shapes patterns of administrative attention and prioritisation.

More critically, the policy brief's grammar constructs what can be described as a logic, or grammar, of inaction. A document whose clauses routinely lack human actors, whose key actions are encoded through low-obligation modality (such as *should*), and whose substance consists of interlocking abstract entities (frameworks, systems, networks) presents implementation as the activation of a monolithic, self-operating machine rather than as a sequence of human decisions and accountable acts. As a result, responsibility is diffused, urgency is softened, and action is rendered perpetually deferrable. The discourse actively enables the very bureaucratic inertia it is ostensibly designed to overcome.

Faced with such a text, the most rational bureaucratic response is rarely decisive action. Instead, it is a further process: commissioning a technical committee to review the framework, mandating consultations to operationalise the system, or requesting additional studies to strengthen the evidence base. These responses are not signs of failure or bad faith; they are institutionally rational reactions to a discourse that grammatically encodes negotiability and depersonalisation. As Hood (2011) observes, contemporary bureaucracies are structured around risk management and blame avoidance, and the linguistic displacement of agency identified here serves as a subtle yet powerful mechanism for sustaining those dynamics. The grammar provides officials with an impeccable rationale for inaction: the document itself, in its very construction, suggests that further elaboration is required before action becomes possible.

From a broader policy studies perspective, these findings resonate with classic accounts of research utilisation. Weiss (1979) and Nutley, Walter, and Davies (2007) demonstrate that policy-relevant research is often used symbolically or conceptually rather than instrumentally. This study adds a linguistic explanation of how such

outcomes are facilitated at the textual level. When recommendations are grammatically constructed as abstract objects rather than as human obligations, they become particularly amenable to endorsement without execution. Agreement can be expressed, documents can be cited, and legitimacy can be claimed, without any actor being grammatically compelled to act. The discourse enables symbolic utilisation while systematically disabling instrumental utilisation.

Importantly, this analysis does not suggest that abstraction, institutional reference, or cautious modality are inherently inappropriate in policy communication. These features serve real, often necessary functions within consensus-driven, politically sensitive environments. The problem is not their presence but their dominance. When abstraction becomes the default mode of policy communication, unreflective and unexamined, it produces a discourse that privileges design over decision-making and process over performance. In effect, the brief's language triggers the very bureaucratic rituals it is intended to circumvent, thereby perpetuating what this paper has termed eloquent silence.

A critic might reasonably object that these linguistic features are unavoidable given the complexity of modern governance and the need for multi-stakeholder coordination. Indeed, some degree of abstraction and institutional reference is necessary when addressing system-wide challenges. However, the analysis reveals that the corpus goes well beyond what is functionally necessary, systematically erasing agency and attenuating obligation even where individual accountability and clear direction are both possible and desirable. The dominance of these features reflects institutional habit rather than functional requirement, and it is this unreflective dominance that our critique seeks to expose and challenge.

By foregrounding grammar as a constitutive dimension of policy practice, this discussion contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to integrate discourse analysis into mainstream policy scholarship (Shore & Wright, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). More specifically, it demonstrates how Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar provides

a precise analytical toolkit for explaining implementation failure in ways that complement, rather than replace, political and institutional explanations. Uptake failure, on this account, is not simply a matter of unwilling actors or hostile contexts, but also of texts whose grammatical architecture quietly but powerfully redirects action into postponement. The eloquent silence of the archives is not merely a record of opportunities missed; it is a monument to grammatical choices that made inaction the path of least resistance.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Principles for Actionable Drafting

This paper has argued that policy uptake failure is sustained, in part, by a linguistic gap embedded in the grammar of policy advice. The discourse of technocratic abstraction, while serving institutional needs for authority and risk management, systematically undermines the implementability of recommendations by erasing agency, attenuating obligation, and reifying processes into static objects. To address this, the paper proposes Actionable Drafting as a linguistically informed framework for redesigning policy briefs to function as executive directives rather than technocratic artefacts. This framework is not merely a set of stylistic recommendations but a critical intervention that challenges the institutionalised habits of policy writing, demanding a conscious shift from a culture of expert performance to one of implementation facilitation.

Table 1: Applying Principles of Actionable Drafting

Linguistic Principle	Problem in Source Text	Actionable Redraft Example	Linguistic Justification & Impact
Demetaphorise / Verbalise	Establishment of a National Blue Revenue	Consolidate maritime revenue streams into a	Restores material process verbs, reducing abstraction and

Linguistic Principle	Problem in Source Text	Actionable Redraft Example	Linguistic Justification & Impact
	Expansion Framework	single, transparent rulebook.	cognitive load. Action becomes something someone does.
Restore Human Agency	FMF in collaboration with FMMBE to design...	The Minister of Finance is accountable for publishing draft regulations...	Replaces institutional Actors with human agents, clarifying responsibility and enabling accountability.
Strengthen Modality	FGN should establish...	Council is asked to approve..., requiring the Minister to...	Shifts from weak obligation to decision-triggered requirement, transforming suggestions into binding directives.
Sequence Action	Monolithic objectives lacking temporal logic	First..., then..., by [date]...	Builds temporal logic and executable pathways, transforming aspirations into projects with identifiable next steps.

These principles are mutually reinforcing. Verbalising nominalisations creates space for human agents; restoring agency enables stronger modality; sequencing action transforms abstract objectives into

concrete pathways. The goal is not to eliminate complexity but to distribute it appropriately, placing analytical complexity in annexes and grammatical clarity in directives.

Implementation Strategy for Producing Institutions

Translating these principles into practice requires institutional change, not merely individual stylistic adjustment. Producing institutions should adopt a Layered Brief model: a one-page Executive Decision Memo structured around actionable drafting principles, supported by a technical annexe containing the analytical depth expected of expert institutions. This separation honours both the executive's need for clarity and the institution's need for rigour, preventing the grammar of one from contaminating the other.

Training programmes for researchers and executives should incorporate linguistic awareness, sensitising policy professionals to the consequences of grammatical choices that have become habitual. Such programmes should move beyond generic advice about clarity to specific guidance on nominalisation, agency, and modality, equipping writers with the tools to diagnose and revise their own prose. Over time, this training can shift institutional culture from writing *about* systems to writing *for* action, embedding the principles of Actionable Drafting in organisational routines and expectations.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on a single, though paradigmatic, case. Future research should extend this analysis to other policy domains, institutional contexts, and national settings to test the generalisability of the findings. Comparative studies examining whether different institutional cultures produce systematically different grammatical patterns would be particularly valuable. Experimental research testing whether briefs revised according to Actionable Drafting principles achieve higher rates of uptake would provide empirical validation for the framework proposed here. Finally, research examining how policy professionals themselves perceive and respond to

these grammatical features would add an important reception dimension to the textual analysis offered here.

By realigning grammar with the pragmatics of execution, policy advice can shift from eloquent silence to actionable directive, ensuring that rigorous analysis serves as the foundation for effective governance. The stakes are high: every policy brief that fades into silence represents not only wasted analytical effort but a missed opportunity to address the pressing challenges that brought it into being. Closing the linguistic gap will not guarantee uptake, but it will remove a barrier that has been largely invisible and entirely unnecessary. In doing so, it honours the purpose for which policy advice is produced: not to adorn archives, but to inform action.

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