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Naming, Power, and Occupational Identity: A Discourse-Semantic Reassessment of the Nomenclature "Civil Servant" in Nigeria

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Abstract
Language plays a significant role in shaping social identities, institutional perceptions, and power relations within society. In Nigeria, the designation *civil servant* has long been used to describe employees of the public service. However, the semantic and ideological implications of this nomenclature have received little scholarly attention despite persistent concerns about the social status, welfare, and public perception of workers in the sector. This study investigates the relationship between naming, power, and occupational identity through a discourse-semantic appraisal of the term *civil servant* in the Nigerian context. Drawing on insights from discourse semantics, critical discourse studies, and theories of linguistic relativity, the study examines how the lexical components *civil* and *servant* construct meanings that may influence the conceptualization and treatment of public-sector employees. Data for the study comprise official documents, policy texts, media reports, public commentaries, and selected interviews with public servants. Through qualitative discourse-semantic analysis, the study explores the ideological assumptions embedded in the nomenclature and contrasts them with titles assigned to political office holders, military personnel, and other state actors. Findings suggest that the term *civil servant* evokes discourses of subordination, compliance, and service, which may contribute to the symbolic devaluation of public-sector workers within the broader socio-political hierarchy. The study argues that occupational nomenclature is not merely descriptive but also constitutive of social realities and institutional relations. It concludes by advocating a critical reassessment of the designation *civil servant* by considering alternative nomenclatures that more accurately reflect the professional contributions, expertise, and societal importance of public-sector employees in Nigeria.
Keywords: Nomenclature, Discourse semantics, Civil servant, Occupational identity, Language and power, Nigeria

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Introduction

Language is not merely a neutral medium of communication; it is a powerful instrument for constructing social realities, negotiating identities, and maintaining systems of power. Through naming practices, societies classify individuals, institutions, professions, and social groups, thereby assigning meanings that often extend beyond literal descriptions. Names and titles do more than identify; they communicate social expectations, define relationships, and position individuals within systems of authority and hierarchy. Occupational nomenclatures are particularly significant because they shape perceptions of status, expertise, legitimacy, and social value. Consequently, the language used to describe professional groups may influence not only how such groups are perceived by others but also how they understand and construct their own identities.

The relationship between language and social identity has attracted considerable scholarly attention in linguistics, discourse studies, sociology, and social psychology. Researchers have consistently argued that labels and titles function as symbolic resources through which social actors are represented, categorized, and evaluated. Occupational designations such as Professor, Justice, Commander, Director, Commissioner, and President are often associated with competence, authority, prestige, and influence. Such titles do not merely describe occupational roles; they also confer symbolic recognition and social status. Conversely, occupational labels containing lexical elements associated with dependency, obedience, or subordination may project identities that attract less prestige and social recognition. This suggests that occupational naming is not an ideologically neutral practice but one that participates in the construction and reproduction of social meanings and power relations.

Within the Nigerian context, the term *civil servant* remains the official designation for career public-sector employees working in government ministries, departments, and agencies. The nomenclature has its roots in the British colonial administrative tradition and was originally intended to distinguish non-military government employees from military personnel and political office holders. Since independence, the Nigerian civil service has remained a vital institution within the machinery of government. Civil servants constitute the permanent administrative workforce responsible for implementing public policies, maintaining institutional memory, ensuring continuity in governance, and providing essential public services irrespective of changes in political leadership. As such, the civil service has frequently been described as the engine room of government and an indispensable instrument for national development.

Despite this strategic role, the Nigerian civil service occupies a paradoxical position within the state structure. On the one hand, civil servants perform critical functions necessary for the effective operation of government and the delivery of public services. On the other hand, they are often perceived as subordinate actors whose status is considerably lower than that of political office holders, military officers, judicial officers, and other elite categories. Public discourse frequently portrays civil servants as implementers rather than decision-makers, thereby positioning them at the lower end of institutional hierarchies. This perception becomes particularly evident when the designation *civil servant* is contrasted with the titles assigned to other state actors, many of which convey authority, prestige, leadership, and professional distinction.

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Existing scholarship on the Nigerian civil service has largely focused on issues such as political interference, inadequate remuneration, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, declining morale, poor working conditions, and ineffective reform programmes (Adebayo, 2004; Adamolekun, 2002; Olaopa, 2008; Salisu, 2001). These studies have generated valuable insights into the structural and administrative challenges confronting the institution.
However, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the linguistic dimension of the issue, particularly the implications of the nomenclature *civil servant*. While researchers have explored the political, economic, and organizational factors influencing the performance and public perception of the civil service, the role of language in shaping occupational identity and status remains largely underexplored.

The observed neglect of the nomenclature *civil servant* is significant because language not only reflects social reality but also serves as a powerful vehicle for the production, transmission, and legitimization of ideology (Fairclough, 1989; Halliday, 1978). From a semantic perspective, the lexical item *servant* conventionally refers to a person who serves another and occupies a subordinate position within a hierarchical relationship. Historically, the lexical and socio-cultural meanings associated with the term *servant* have frequently evoked notions of obedience, dependency, and subordination to a superior authority (Williams, 1983). Furthermore, from a linguistic standpoint, the designation **civil servant** is more than an occupational label; it is a lexical construction whose semantic components contribute to the social construction of professional identity. As Halliday (1978) argues, language functions as a social semiotic through which meanings and social relationships are encoded, while Fairclough (1989) maintains that lexical choices are ideologically significant because they shape and reproduce particular ways of perceiving social reality. Consequently, the nomenclature *civil servant* may be understood not merely as an administrative designation but also as a discursive resource capable of indexing values such as service, institutional loyalty, hierarchy, and authority. Although the term has long been institutionalized within government discourse, its semantic implications raise important questions about the ways in which occupational identities are represented and understood. These implications become even more striking when compared with the honorific and prestige-laden titles accorded to politicians, military officers, judges, and other public actors whose designations frequently emphasize authority, leadership, and professional accomplishment.

The possibility that occupational nomenclature may contribute to perceptions of status and professional identity invites further scholarly investigation. Names are not merely descriptive labels; they are symbolic resources that can reinforce, legitimize, or challenge existing social arrangements. Consequently, the designation *civil servant* may participate in broader discursive processes through which public-sector employees are positioned within institutional power structures. This does not imply that nomenclature alone determines the material conditions of employment, remuneration, or career progression. Rather, it suggests that language may contribute to the symbolic construction of occupational identities and influence how professions are valued within society.

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The absence of sustained scholarly inquiry into the ideological implications of the nomenclature *civil servant* therefore creates an important gap in knowledge regarding the relationship between language, occupational identity, and power relations in Nigeria. Addressing this gap is particularly relevant in a period characterized by ongoing debates about public-sector reform, professionalization, and institutional effectiveness. Understanding how occupational labels shape perceptions may provide insights into the symbolic dimensions of workplace status that are often overlooked in discussions of administrative reform.

To investigate these issues, the study adopts a qualitative research design situated within the interpretive paradigm and employs discourse-semantic analysis as its principal analytical approach. The data are drawn from official documents relating to the Nigerian civil service, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Public Service Rules and Civil Service Handbooks, newspaper reports and public commentaries, relevant scholarly literature, and occupational titles associated with political, military, judicial, and administrative institutions in Nigeria. Guided by insights from Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study examines the semantic meanings, discursive representations, and ideological assumptions embedded in the nomenclature *civil servant* through lexical, comparative, and contextual analysis

Against this background, the study examines the relationship between nomenclature, power, and occupational identity in the Nigerian civil service. Specifically, it investigates the semantic meanings embedded in the designation *civil servant*, explores the ideological assumptions associated with the term, compares it with the nomenclatures assigned to political office holders, military officers, judicial officers, and other state actors, and assesses its implications for perceptions of status and professional identity. The study further evaluates the suitability of alternative nomenclatures that may more accurately reflect the expertise, responsibilities, and professional functions of public-sector employees in Nigeria. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship in discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, semantics, public administration, and occupational studies, while also providing a basis for policy discussions concerning the symbolic representation of government employees and the possible need for terminological reforms capable of enhancing professional identity and public perception.

Language, Naming and Social Reality

The relationship between language and social reality has been a major concern in linguistics, philosophy, sociology, and discourse studies. Scholars have long argued that language does not merely reflect reality but actively participates in its construction. For instance, Berger & Luckmann, (1966, pp. 35–36, 49–51) argues that reality is socially constructed through human interaction, with language serving as the principal medium through which meanings are objectified, institutionalized, and transmitted. Through linguistic choices, speakers categorize experiences, assign meanings, and establish social relationships. Naming is one of the most powerful linguistic mechanisms through which individuals, groups, and institutions are represented within society.

Scholars have long maintained that names are not merely arbitrary labels but meaningful linguistic resources that embody cultural values, social identities, ideological orientations, and

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power relations. In his theory of language as a social semiotic, Halliday (1978) argues that language constructs experience through systems of meaning, implying that lexical choices, including names, participate in shaping social reality. Similarly, van Dijk (1998) maintains that discourse and naming practices play a significant role in expressing and perpetuating social ideologies. From a sociological perspective, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that language objectifies human experience and institutionalizes shared meanings, thereby making naming an important mechanism through which social realities become normalized and sustained.
Within onomastic studies—the scholarly study of names—scholars have equally emphasized the social significance of naming. Nicolaisen (1978) observes that names function as social and cultural symbols rather than mere identifiers, reflecting the history, beliefs, and values of the communities that use them. Likewise, Room (1996) argues that names encode historical, cultural, and semantic information that shapes people's perceptions of individuals, places, and institutions. Consequently, naming is increasingly understood as a discursive practice through which identities are constructed, maintained, and negotiated within specific socio-cultural contexts.

Viewed from these perspectives, institutional nomenclatures cannot be regarded as neutral lexical choices. Rather, they constitute discursive resources capable of indexing particular social roles, expectations, and ideological assumptions. It is within this theoretical understanding that the designation "civil servant" becomes worthy of linguistic investigation, as its semantic and ideological implications may extend beyond its administrative function to influence how public officials perceive themselves and are perceived within society.

In sociolinguistics, naming practices are regarded as important indicators of social values and power relations. Personal names, occupational titles, institutional designations, and honorifics often encode assumptions regarding status, authority, competence, and social worth. Bourdieu (1991) argues that linguistic forms possess symbolic power because they influence how social actors are perceived and valued within a given social field. Names therefore function as instruments through which social hierarchies are maintained or challenged.

Within African societies, names frequently carry cultural, historical, and ideological meanings. Studies of naming practices in Nigeria have demonstrated that names often communicate social expectations, religious beliefs, ethnic identities, and power relations. Although much of this research has focused on personal names, the same principle applies to occupational nomenclature. Occupational titles contribute to how professions are understood both by their members and by society at large.

The significance of naming becomes particularly evident when occupational labels evoke unequal relationships. Terms such as *chief executive officer*, *director*, *governor*, *commander*, and *justice* project authority, leadership, and expertise. Conversely, titles associated with service, dependency, or subordination may reinforce perceptions of lower status. Consequently, occupational nomenclature may influence public attitudes toward particular professions and affect how members of those professions perceive themselves.

Language, Power and Ideology

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The nexus between language and power constitutes one of the central concerns of discourse studies. Rather than functioning merely as a neutral medium of communication, language performs ideological functions through which social institutions construct, negotiate, and reproduce systems of authority, dominance, inequality, and social order (Halliday, 1978, pp. 21–27; Fairclough, 1989, pp. 2–5). From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics, Halliday (1978) conceives language as a social semiotic that organizes human experience and social relationships through meaning-making resources. Similarly, Fairclough (1989) argues that discourse is both socially constituted and socially constitutive; it not only reflects existing social structures but also contributes to their production and maintenance by shaping how reality is represented and interpreted (pp. 22–27). Consequently, language influences what societies come to regard as legitimate, desirable, natural, or authoritative, while occupational identities, institutional roles, and hierarchical relationships are continually constituted and reinforced through discursive practices (Fairclough, 1995, pp. 54–56). Complementing this position, van Dijk (2008, pp. 30–37) contends that ideologies are embedded within linguistic structures and communicative practices, such that words, labels, and institutional designations become powerful vehicles for transmitting beliefs concerning superiority, inferiority, competence, authority, and legitimacy. Through repeated use, these ideological meanings gradually become naturalized and accepted as common sense, thereby influencing both individual consciousness and institutional behaviour.

Within governmental and bureaucratic institutions, language frequently reflects and reinforces hierarchical relations through systems of naming and official designation. Institutional titles assigned to different categories of personnel communicate distinctions in authority, prestige, status, and professional identity. The use of honorifics such as *His Excellency*, *Distinguished Senator*, *Honourable Minister*, *Lord Justice*, *Professor*, and *Chief Executive Officer* illustrates how lexical choices elevate particular office holders by attaching symbolic prestige and institutional legitimacy to their positions. Such titles perform ideological functions by legitimizing authority, reinforcing social distance between office holders and the public, and shaping perceptions of competence, influence, and status (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 43–47; van Dijk, 2008, pp. 115–119). This observation aligns with Berger and Luckmann's (1966, pp. 49–51) argument that language serves as the objective repository of socially shared meanings through which institutional realities are objectified, legitimized, and transmitted across generations. Likewise, Bourdieu (1991, pp. 105–117) argues that linguistic expressions derive much of their effectiveness from the institutional authority that sanctions them, making language a medium through which symbolic distinctions are created, maintained, and socially recognized. Consequently, institutional nomenclatures cannot be regarded as neutral descriptors; rather, they are discursive resources capable of shaping organizational culture, influencing social expectations, and constructing professional identities.

The foregoing discussion foregrounds the concept of symbolic power, which provides an important theoretical lens for understanding the ideological implications of occupational nomenclature. Bourdieu (1991) defines symbolic power as "the power to constitute the given through utterances, to make people see and believe, to confirm or transform the vision of the world and, thereby, action upon the world" (p. 170). In a related formulation, Thompson (1991), in describes symbolic power as the capacity to intervene in the course of social events by

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influencing the beliefs, perceptions, and actions of others through symbolic forms (pp. 13–16). Both conceptualizations emphasize that power is exercised not only through coercion or material resources but also through language, symbols, and socially recognized systems of meaning. Drawing on these perspectives, this study conceives symbolic power as the capacity of institutional language, particularly occupational nomenclature, to shape perceptions, construct professional identities, legitimize social hierarchies, and influence how individuals understand both their institutional roles and their place within the broader social order. Within this framework, the designation "civil servant" is viewed not merely as an administrative label but as a discursive resource whose semantic and ideological associations may influence how public employees perceive themselves, are valued by society, and perform their institutional responsibilities.

Occupational Identity and Professional Status

Occupational identity refers to how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others within their professional environments. It encompasses the beliefs, values, roles, and expectations associated with a particular occupation. Scholars have shown that occupational identities are partly constructed through language, as professional titles communicate competence, authority, expertise, and social recognition (Halliday, 1978, pp. 21–27; Fairclough, 1989, pp. 43–47). Ashforth and Mael (1989) further argue that occupational identity is rooted in social categorization, whereby individuals derive part of their self-concept from the professions and organizations to which they belong. Consequently, occupational titles contribute significantly to workers' perceptions of their professional worth and societal relevance.

Studies in public administration likewise emphasize the importance of professional recognition for employee motivation and organizational commitment. Perry and Wise (1990, pp. 368–370) argue that employees who perceive their work as socially valued demonstrate stronger commitment and higher motivation, while Rainey and Steinbauer (1999, pp. 10–15) maintain that organizational recognition and a shared sense of purpose enhance employee morale and institutional performance. Conversely, occupations associated with limited prestige or weak professional recognition are more likely to experience reduced motivation, identity conflicts, and lower organizational commitment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, pp. 23–27).

In the Nigerian context, occupational titles carry significant symbolic value. Designations such as *Professor, Doctor, Engineer, Barrister,* and *Architect* are commonly associated with expertise and prestige, while ranks such as *General, Commander, Governor, President,* and *Senator* evoke authority and influence. Against this backdrop, the designation *civil servant* appears distinctive because it foregrounds the notion of *service* rather than expertise, authority, or professional status. From a discourse-semantic perspective, this raises important questions about how the nomenclature may shape occupational identity, professional self-concept, and public perceptions of employees within the Nigerian civil service.

Occupational Nomenclature and Symbolic Hierarchies

Language often reveals the symbolic hierarchies embedded within social institutions. Occupational nomenclatures are especially revealing because they indicate how societies classify

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and evaluate professional roles. A comparison of official titles within the Nigerian state reveals notable differences in semantic orientation:

Category	**Common Designation**	**Semantic Orientation**
President	Commander-in-Chief	Authority
Governors	Chief Executive	Leadership
Senators	Distinguished Senator	Prestige
Judges	Lord Justice	Judicial Authority
Military Personnel	Officers	Command
Academics	Professors	Expertise
Civil Service Workers	Civil Servants	Service/Subordination

This pattern suggests that while many public actors are designated through titles emphasizing authority, expertise, or prestige, civil service personnel are designated through a title emphasizing service. From a discourse-semantic perspective, such differences are not trivial. They reflect underlying assumptions regarding social roles and institutional relationships. The term *servant* constructs a relational identity in which one party serves another. The semantic structure presupposes hierarchy and dependence. By contrast, titles such as *officer*, *executive*, *director*, and *commander* foreground authority and agency. The contrast becomes particularly striking when political office holders frequently describe themselves as "public servants" while simultaneously occupying positions associated with significantly higher remuneration, authority, and prestige. This apparent contradiction highlights the complexity of naming practices within governmental institutions and raises questions regarding the ideological implications of occupational nomenclatures.

The Nigerian Civil Service

The Nigerian civil service traces its origins to the colonial administrative system established by British authorities. During the colonial period, administrative personnel were employed primarily to facilitate governance and implement colonial policies. The distinction between military and civilian officials gave rise to the designation *civil servant*, which was inherited by post-independence Nigeria. Following independence in 1960, the civil service became a central institution within the Nigerian state. It was expected to provide continuity, expertise, and administrative support for successive governments. Scholars such as Adamolekun (2002), Adebayo (2001), and Olaopa (2008) describe the civil service as the permanent machinery of government responsible for policy implementation and institutional stability.

Despite its importance, the Nigerian civil service has experienced numerous challenges. These include political interference, inadequate remuneration, bureaucratic inefficiency, corruption, poor infrastructure, and recurrent reform programmes. Studies by Olaopa (2008), Anazodo et al. (2012), and Eme and Ugwu (2011) have documented the declining prestige of the civil service and the growing perception that public servants occupy a relatively subordinate position within the governance structure. Most analyses of these challenges have focused on economic and political factors. However, few studies have examined the role of language in shaping perceptions of civil servants. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in understanding how

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occupational nomenclature contributes to the symbolic construction of the civil service within Nigerian society.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, documentary research design situated within the discourse-semantic tradition. The data consist primarily of the institutional nomenclature "civil servant", supplemented by relevant literature from linguistics, discourse studies, public administration, and sociology. Data were purposively selected from scholarly books, journal articles, government documents, and other credible secondary sources that address language, occupational identity, ideology, and the Nigerian civil service. The analysis is interpretive rather than statistical, employing discourse-semantic analysis to examine the lexical meaning, ideological assumptions, and socio-professional implications embedded in the designation *civil servant*. Particular attention is paid to how the nomenclature constructs occupational identity, legitimizes institutional relationships, and potentially influences public perceptions of civil service employees.

The study is principally anchored on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly Norman Fairclough's model of discourse and power. Emerging from the broader field of Critical Linguistics developed in the late 1970s, CDA was subsequently advanced by scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, and Gunther Kress as an interdisciplinary approach for investigating the relationship between language, power, ideology, and society (Fairclough, 1989; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; van Dijk, 2008). CDA views discourse as a form of social practice through which power relations are produced, reproduced, negotiated, and sometimes resisted (Fairclough, 1995, pp. 54–56). Central to the theory is the assumption that linguistic choices are never ideologically neutral; rather, lexical selections, naming practices, metaphors, classifications, and institutional labels contribute to the construction of social identities, authority relations, and systems of inequality (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 2–5). Fairclough's three-dimensional model—which examines the relationship among textual features, discursive practice, and wider social practice—provides an appropriate framework for interrogating how occupational nomenclatures embody ideological meanings and reinforce institutional realities.

The choice of CDA is particularly appropriate because the present study is concerned not merely with the lexical meaning of the expression *civil servant* but also with its ideological implications and its potential influence on occupational identity and professional status. From a critical discourse perspective, institutional nomenclatures function as discursive resources through which organizations classify, position, and represent social actors (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 2008). Accordingly, the designation *civil servant* is examined as an institutional discourse capable of shaping perceptions of service, authority, dependency, professionalism, and social value within the Nigerian public service. This perspective enables the study to move beyond dictionary definitions to interrogate the wider social meanings and power relations embedded in the nomenclature.

Although CDA serves as the principal theoretical framework, the analysis is enriched by insights from two complementary linguistic perspectives. The first is Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly the ideational metafunction, which explains how language

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represents human experience and constructs categories, relationships, and identities through lexical choices (Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, pp. 30–33). This perspective assists in explaining how the lexical components of the expression *civil servant* encode particular assumptions about occupational roles and institutional relationships. The second complementary perspective is Linguistic Relativity Theory, associated with Sapir and Whorf, which proposes that linguistic categories influence patterns of thought and social perception (Whorf, 1956; Lucy, 1992). While contemporary scholarship rejects the strong deterministic interpretation of the hypothesis, it generally accepts that recurrent linguistic forms can shape how individuals conceptualize social reality. Within the context of this study, this perspective supports the proposition that repeated exposure to the designation *civil servant* may influence both employees' professional self-concept and society's perception of public-sector workers. Together, these complementary perspectives strengthen the discourse-semantic analysis while remaining fully subsumed within the broader explanatory framework of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Discourse-Semantic Analysis of the Nomenclature *Civil Servant*

The adjective *civil* derives from the Latin *civilis*, meaning "relating to citizens" or "pertaining to civic life." In contemporary English, the term generally denotes matters relating to ordinary citizens, government administration, non-military affairs, civility, and public life. Within the expression *civil servant*, however, its dominant meaning is the distinction between civilian and military personnel. Historically, this usage emerged in Britain to distinguish government officials from members of the armed forces, making the original designation primarily classificatory rather than evaluative (Williams, 1983). Nevertheless, from a discourse-semantic perspective, the meaning of a lexical item extends beyond its etymology and evolves through social usage, institutional practice, and contextual interpretation (Halliday, 1978, pp. 21–27; Fairclough, 1989, pp. 22–27).

Scholars of discourse analysis argue that words acquire ideological meanings through their repeated use within particular social and institutional contexts (Fairclough, 1989, pp. 22–27; van Dijk, 2008, pp. 30–37). In Nigeria, where military governments dominated political leadership for nearly three decades after independence, the adjective *civil* frequently functions as the semantic opposite of *military*. Consequently, the designation *civil servant* may evoke associations of non-command, administrative support, and bureaucratic compliance rather than institutional authority. From a critical discourse perspective, therefore, *civil* does more than indicate occupational location; it also constructs an occupational identity distinguished from command structures and political leadership, potentially positioning civil servants as support actors rather than central actors within governance processes.

Semantic Analysis of the term "Servant"

The second component of the nomenclature warrants closer semantic examination. Webster's 1828 Dictionary defines a servant as "a person... employed by another... and is subject to his command. The word is correlative to master". Central to these definitions are the semantic features of service, dependency, hierarchy, and subordination. The lexical meaning of *servant* presupposes a relational structure involving one who serves and another who exercises authority. In Hallidayan terms, the word encodes a participant role that is largely reactive rather than

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agentive, thereby construing its referent as one whose primary function is to respond to, rather than initiate, institutional action (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

Historically, the concept of *servant* has been associated with domestic service, feudal dependency, master–servant relations, and the hierarchical administrative structures of the British colonial state, where public officials were commonly regarded as servants of the Crown and subject to institutional authority (Northcote & Trevelyan, 1854; Lugard, 1922; Williams, 1983). Although contemporary usage has become less pejorative, many of these historical associations remain embedded within public consciousness. From a discourse-semantic perspective, the lexical item *servant* foregrounds service, obedience, and institutional subordination rather than professional expertise or authority. Unlike occupational designations such as *Officer*, *Executive*, *Administrator*, *Director*, or *Commissioner*, the nomenclature *civil servant* emphasizes a service relationship, which may inadvertently diminish the perceived professional status and symbolic authority of individuals who perform highly specialized governmental functions (Fairclough, 1989; Bourdieu, 1991).

The Semantic Configuration of "Civil Servant"

When the two lexical items are combined, the resulting expression creates a complex identity structure. The semantic configuration may be represented as follows:

Lexeme	**Dominant Semantic Feature**
Civil	Non-military, civic, administrative
Servant	Service, dependence, subordination
Civil Servant	Administrative subordinate in state service

The analysis above suggests that the nomenclature foregrounds service and compliance rather than expertise, professionalism, or leadership. This observation becomes particularly significant when compared with the actual responsibilities of civil servants, which include but not limited to: Policy implementation, Budget administration, Project supervision, Strategic planning, Technical advisory services, Institutional continuity etc. These responsibilities require substantial expertise, discretion, and professional competence. The nomenclature therefore appears to underrepresent the complexity of the role.

Naming and the Construction of Occupational Identity

Occupational identities are socially constructed and negotiated through discourse, as language provides the symbolic resources through which individuals and institutions construct, represent, and legitimize social roles (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 49–51; Fairclough, 1989, pp. 22–27). Consequently, repeated exposure to particular occupational labels influences how individuals understand themselves and how they are perceived by others.

According to Social Identity Theory, originally developed by Henri Tajfel (1978) and later refined by Tajfel and Turner (1979), individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups and the symbolic meanings attached to those groups. Occupational titles therefore contribute to professional pride, occupational esteem, public perception, and institutional legitimacy because they serve as important markers of identity and social status (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, pp. 20–24).

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Within Nigerian society, occupational titles frequently function as markers of prestige. Examples include: Professor, Engineer, Architect, Justice, General, Senator etc, such titles communicate competence, expertise, and authority. By contrast, the designation *civil servant* communicates service. This distinction may appear subtle but possesses important symbolic implications. Whereas military officers are linguistically represented as commanders and political office holders as leaders, civil servants are represented as servants. The discourse consequently constructs unequal symbolic identities among actors who collectively participate in governance.

Comparative Analysis of State Occupational Nomenclatures

A comparative examination of state occupational nomenclatures reveals striking contrasts between political office holders, military (and paramilitary) personnel, judicial officers, academics and civil servants.

Political Office Holders	**Military Personnel**	**Judicial Officers**	**Academics**	**Civil Servants**
-Excellency -Honourable -Distinguished Senator -Right Honourable etc	-General -Colonel -Major -Commander	-Lord Justice -Honourable Justice -Chief Judge	-Professor -Doctor -Scholar	CIVIL SERVANTS

Political Office Holders

Political leaders are frequently addressed through honorific titles such as Excellency, Honourable, Distinguished Senator, Right Honourable etc. These designations emphasize prestige and authority. The titles rarely foreground service despite constitutional claims that elected officials are servants of the people.

Military Personnel

Military personnel are designated through ranks such as General, Colonel, Major, Commander, etc. These titles foreground command, leadership, and power. The semantic emphasis is on authority rather than obedience.

Judicial Officers

Similarly, Judicial officers bear titles such as Lord Justice, Honourable Justice, Chief Judge
Again, authority and institutional prestige are foregrounded.

Academics

Academic nomenclature includes: Professor, Doctor, Scholar, etc. These titles emphasize expertise and intellectual achievement.

Civil Servants

By contrast, the title *civil servant* foregrounds service and subordination. Unlike political office holders, military personnel, judicial officers etc. whose official designations foreground authority, leadership, rank, or professional prestige, the civil service presents a distinctive pattern of occupational nomenclature. Although the service comprises professional cadres such as Permanent Secretary, Director, Deputy Director, Administrative Officer, Executive Officer, and

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Clerk, these offices remain institutionally subsumed under the broader designation civil servant. A discourse-semantic reading suggests that while titles such as *Director* and *Administrator* convey managerial responsibility, the overarching institutional label *civil servant* foregrounds service rather than authority or professional autonomy. Even the designation Permanent Secretary, the highest career office in the civil service, is linguistically revealing. The lexical item *secretary* conventionally denotes one who assists, records, or acts on behalf of another, while the modifier *permanent* merely distinguishes the office from politically appointed officials without altering its semantic orientation toward service and support. Thus, even at the apex of the bureaucracy, the nomenclature continues to emphasize service to political authority rather than institutional leadership.

This semantic orientation mirrors the traditional bureaucratic philosophy inherited from the Weberian and colonial administrative systems, where hierarchy, rule compliance, loyalty, and obedience constitute the defining values of public administration (Weber, 1947; Riggs, 1964; Olaopa, 2008). Within such bureaucracies, public officials are primarily expected to implement government policies faithfully rather than independently formulate them. Initiative and innovation are often constrained by rigid procedures, chains of command, and administrative conventions, creating a culture in which compliance is rewarded more readily than creative deviation. Consequently, the designation *civil servant*, when viewed alongside the bureaucratic practices it represents, may reinforce an occupational identity centred on service, administrative support, and institutional obedience rather than authority, innovation, or professional agency. By contrast, titles such as Governor, President, General, Justice, or Commissioner linguistically project leadership, command, adjudicative authority, and institutional power. The comparison therefore reveals an asymmetrical pattern of official nomenclature in which political, military, and judicial office holders are discursively elevated through titles that foreground power and decision-making, whereas the overarching designation ‘civil servant’ continues to foreground service, implementation, and subordination within the machinery of government.

Nomenclature and Occupational Marginalisation in Nigeria

The study does not argue that nomenclature alone causes the challenges faced by Nigerian civil servants. Other factors such as economic constraints, political patronage, institutional corruption, administrative inefficiencies, policy inconsistencies remain primary determinants of working conditions. However, discourse analysis suggests that nomenclature may contribute to symbolic marginalization. Symbolic marginalization occurs when language normalizes unequal status relations. The persistent representation of public-sector professionals as servants may subtly reinforce assumptions that they should obey rather than lead; receive directives rather than formulate them, support governance rather than shape it, accept subordinate treatment within governmental hierarchies. Over time, such representations can become institutionalized and normalized. The result is a discourse environment in which occupational devaluation appears natural and unquestionable.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that occupational nomenclature is not merely a descriptive linguistic device but also a symbolic mechanism through which social identities and institutional relationships are constructed. The discourse-semantic analysis of the nomenclature

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civil servant reveals that the lexical components *civil* and *servant* jointly construct an occupational identity associated with administration, compliance, and service. While these meanings are not inherently negative, they stand in sharp contrast to the nomenclatures assigned to other actors within the Nigerian state, many of which foreground authority, prestige, leadership, expertise, and command.

The analysis further indicates that the designation *civil servant* may contribute to what Bourdieu (1991) describes as symbolic domination. Symbolic domination occurs when linguistic and cultural practices normalize unequal relationships and make them appear natural. Through repeated institutional and societal usage, the nomenclature *civil servant* potentially reinforces perceptions of subordination within the governance structure. This finding aligns with Fairclough's (1995) argument that discourse contributes to the reproduction of social relations. The title does not merely identify a category of workers; it simultaneously positions them within a hierarchy in which political office holders, military officers, and judicial authorities occupy more prestigious symbolic locations.

The findings also support Halliday's (1994) assertion that language is a resource for construing reality. By foregrounding service rather than expertise, the nomenclature obscures the highly professional and technical functions performed by public-sector employees. Contemporary civil servants engage in policy analysis, public finance management, planning, monitoring and evaluation, procurement administration, diplomatic coordination, and numerous specialized functions requiring advanced training and professional competence. The study therefore suggests that there exists a mismatch between occupational reality and occupational representation. While civil servants perform sophisticated administrative and technical functions crucial to national development, the nomenclature through which they are publicly represented emphasizes service rather than professionalism.

A further observation emerging from the analysis concerns the paradoxical language of governance in Nigeria. Political office holders frequently describe themselves as "public servants" during election campaigns and official ceremonies. Yet, once elected, they retain titles that foreground authority and prestige, while career government employees continue to bear the designation *servants*. This contradiction highlights the ideological dimensions of naming practices within state institutions. The findings thus suggest that occupational nomenclature may contribute to broader discourses that influence how public-sector workers are perceived, valued, and treated within Nigerian society.

Towards Alternative Nomenclatures for Public-Sector Employees

One of the implications of this study is the need to reconsider the appropriateness of the designation *civil servant* in contemporary Nigeria. The term emerged within a colonial administrative context characterized by rigid hierarchies and command structures. However, twenty-first-century public administration increasingly emphasizes professionalism, expertise, innovation, accountability, and strategic governance. Consequently, nomenclatures that more accurately reflect these realities may be more desirable. Therefore, the following alternatives are proposed for consideration:

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Public/Government Service Officer
This designation emphasizes service to the public while simultaneously foregrounding professional responsibility and institutional authority. Unlike *servant*, the term *officer* connotes competence, accountability, and organizational status.

Public Administration Professional
This nomenclature highlights expertise and professional specialization. It better reflects the technical responsibilities undertaken by government employees.

Public Sector Professional
This title aligns with contemporary management discourse and emphasizes professional identity rather than dependency.

State Administrative Officer
This nomenclature foregrounds administrative functions and institutional significance. It also aligns with titles commonly used in many modern bureaucracies.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between naming, power, and occupational identity through a discourse-semantic appraisal of the nomenclature *civil servant* in Nigeria. Drawing on insights from Critical Discourse Analysis, the study investigated the semantic and ideological implications of the designation and explored its potential role in shaping perceptions of public-sector employees. The analysis revealed that the lexical components *civil* and *servant* construct meanings associated with administration, service, compliance, and subordination. While these meanings originated within specific historical contexts, their continued use may contribute to symbolic forms of occupational marginalization when contrasted with the prestige-oriented nomenclatures assigned to political leaders, military officers, judicial authorities, and other state actors. The study does not claim that the nomenclature *civil servant* directly causes the economic and institutional challenges faced by public-sector employees in Nigeria. Rather, it argues that language participates in the construction of social realities and that occupational titles may influence perceptions, attitudes, and institutional relationships. Consequently, the designation *civil servant* may function as part of a broader discourse that normalizes subordinate positioning within governmental structures.

The paper concludes that nomenclature matters because names are not merely labels; they are instruments of representation, identity formation, and symbolic power. Given the increasingly professional and technical nature of public administration in contemporary Nigeria, there is a compelling case for re-evaluating the designation *civil servant* and considering alternative nomenclatures that better reflect the expertise, responsibilities, and societal contributions of public-sector employees. Ultimately, the study reaffirms the proposition that language does not simply describe social reality—it also helps create it. In this sense, the reassessment of occupational nomenclature constitutes not merely a linguistic exercise but a broader intervention in questions of identity, dignity, and institutional recognition within the Nigerian state.

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