

Social Constructions of Migration in Nigeria and Zimbabwe

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON CREATING A FAIRER SOCIETY

A fair society is one that is just, inclusive and embracing of all without any barriers to participation based on sex, sexual orientation, religion or belief, ethnicity, age, class, ability or any other social difference. One where there is access to healthcare and education, technology, justice, strong institutions, peace and security, social protection, decent work and housing. But how can research truly contribute to creating global equity and diversity without showcasing diverse voices that are underrepresented in academia or paying specific attention to the Global South?

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Social Constructions of Migration in Nigeria and Zimbabwe: Discourse, Rhetoric, and Identity

BY

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2024

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83549-169-0 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83549-168-3 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83549-170-6 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

About the Authors	<i>ix</i>
Chapter 1 Introduction	<i>1</i>
Chapter 2 Contemporary Global Discourses of Migration and Migrants	<i>11</i>
Chapter 3 Frequency of Migration Discourse in Nigerian Everyday Contexts	<i>29</i>
Chapter 4 Social Media Narratives and Counternarratives of Migration in Zimbabwe: The Case of Hopewell Chin'ono's Facebook Page Post-August 2023 Elections	<i>45</i>
Chapter 5 Discourse of Politics and Security in Migration	<i>65</i>
Chapter 6 Co-existence of Power and Powerlessness in Nigerian Migration Discourse	<i>83</i>
Chapter 7 Discourse, Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa and the Politics of Viscerality: The Case of the Zimbabwe Exemption Permit (ZEP)	<i>101</i>
Chapter 8 Post-Migration Discourse and Identity Crisis: The Case of Nigeria	<i>123</i>
Chapter 9 Further Thoughts: The Figure of the Migrant in Contemporary Discourse: Reflections and Lived Experiences	<i>141</i>

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This book examines discourses of migration in Nigeria and Zimbabwe with a particular focus on how citizens in both countries imagine and narrate experiences of migration. For the purpose of this book, we perceive migration in the same view as [Kok \(1999, p. 20\)](#) who defines the concept in general terms as the crossing of a spatial boundary by one or more persons involved in a change of residence. In essence, migration involves the departure from one's place of residence to another. In this context, we discuss how conversations around migration are constructed vis-à-vis the realities of migrancy in contemporary Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

While Nigeria and Zimbabwe are two countries with diverse ethnicities and cultures, they share similar socio-political and economic realities. Both countries are former British colonies which gained independence 20 years apart – Nigeria in 1960 and Zimbabwe in 1980. Since independence, the two countries have witnessed and continue to witness heightened socio-political tensions and harsh economic realities that have led to continual migration. Nigeria, like Zimbabwe, has experienced many economic challenges associated with what has come to be known as 'the resource curse' in Africa. These challenges have been worsened by political instability which dates to the military coups of the 1970s and 1980s and the rise of terrorist Islamic groups that continue to wreak havoc in the northern parts of the country. A combination of these challenges, among others, has seen many Nigerians migrating to other countries inside and outside of Africa in search of better economic opportunities.

Zimbabwe, for its part, has a long history of migration which dates back to the precolonial era. Before the advent of colonialism, people migrated from one place to another in search of grazing pastures, fertile land and to break away from natural disasters such as droughts. The advent of colonialism saw new forms of migration, particularly from rural to urban areas in search of employment opportunities. For many years, Zimbabwe has been both a sending and receiving country. In the 1950s and 1960s, during the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Zimbabwe received migrants mainly from its neighbouring countries while it also exported migrant labours to South Africa. Patterns of migration in Zimbabwe

2 *Social Constructions of Migration in Nigeria and Zimbabwe*

have changed drastically in recent years, particularly after the land reform of 2000 which led to an unprecedented political and economic crisis. The post-2000 period has seen many Zimbabweans flocking out of the country to seek better economic opportunities around the world.

What unites Nigeria and Zimbabwe in this book is not only the historical trajectories of both countries but also their politics and economics which play a significant role in shaping migration trends and narratives. Like Nigeria, Zimbabwe has a highly educated population with over 98% literacy rates. However, the ongoing economic crisis has created a situation where young people graduating from various institutions of learning cannot find employment and end up seeking employment opportunities outside the country. Although Zimbabwe has enjoyed relative political stability since independence, it has, in recent years, taken a leaf from Nigeria's political playbook of the early years of independence characterised by cycles of contested elections, politically motivated violence and widespread state-sanctioned corruption. The coup of November 2017, which saw the end of Robert Mugabe's 37-year rule, has, arguably, taken Zimbabwe back to the era of military coups in Africa, which Nigeria has experienced with dire economic consequences.

Most citizens in both countries desire out-migration due to unfavourable conditions in politics, economics, governance, and security. Migration has thus become exceedingly prevalent in recent years contributing significantly to the migration of able-bodied and skilled citizens of both countries. Central to this book is the notion of discourse and how it is constructed in everyday communication. We explore *what* Nigerians and Zimbabweans say about migration as well as *how* they say it. According to [Walsh \(2023\)](#), migration has dominated media discourse because of its significance for society's character, future, and identity. Walsh further notes that the advent of digital platforms and technologies has broadened opportunities to produce, share, and access content online and ignited debates about migration and its discursive construction.

We discuss real-time migration discourses gleaned from social media interactions in the two countries under study. The novelty of this book lies in the fact that it explores uncharted territory in the study of migration and discourse in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. From an academic standpoint, the book has a broad focus that encompasses sociolinguistics (discourse analysis), narratology, and border/migration studies and partly involves the sociology of migration. We thus enrich these different fields with novel information that will serve as seminal work for future studies of a similar nature. Disciplines that use discourse analysis as an analytical framework such as sociolinguistics, migration studies, sociology and cultural studies, interact in this book as we discuss the practical discursive realities of migration in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. It should be noted that the major focus of the book is discourse (communication in use) in the context of migration. Priority is given to discourse while migration is only the milieu in which the discourse is studied.

Migration as a practice is as old as humankind. People have always migrated or changed environments for different reasons among which are material needs, national security, and climate changes. As [Schewel and Debray \(2024, p. 153\)](#) note, 'migration is a feature of every society. Most people migrate internally, or within

countries, but a smaller share moves internationally, or across country borders'. There has been a recent surge in migration patterns from countries in the Global South to countries in the Global North. Other reasons include the search for greener pastures, human security, and career goals. Communication (discourse) is also as old as human existence. This book interrogates the intertwined current realities of communication and migration. Discourse plays a significant role in shaping and influencing the real world, and migration, being a popular occurrence especially in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, is bound to produce interesting discourses that shape/influence not only the people from these countries, but also the socio-economic conditions of the two nations. As reflected in the book, while intercontinental migration (outside of Africa) is highly popular, intracontinental migration (within Africa) is also a common practice amongst Nigerians and Zimbabweans although not as widely reflected on social media as the former. This is a point entrenched by [Yaro and Setrana \(2024\)](#) that intra-migration is prominent with many African migrants crossing from one country on the continent to another country, unlike the misconceived narratives that portray African migrants as persons moving irregularly through the Mediterranean to the Global North.

Migration-motivated discourses in the two countries can be viewed from intercontinental and intracontinental perspectives. The nature of the book and its contents demand concurrent analyses of migration and popular discourse. As these concepts are the major focus of the book, they are therefore intertwined in a way that renders it challenging to discuss one without the other. This is also perhaps why the book is likely to appeal to different readers from different disciplines: discourse and migration are multi-pronged. Besides its specific focus on discourse and migration, the book also reflects on aspects of culture, identity, history, professions/careers, politics, governance, and security in relation to how they interact with migrants, discourse, and migration. In this book, we argue that one way to understand migration is to explore stories, narratives, and conversations about migration. How do stories about migration and migrants shape perceptions in society and influence policies that govern migration and migrants? Hence, the book does not discuss the phenomenon of migration itself but what is said about it. Among the questions we hope to answer are: What is the common social media rhetoric surrounding migration in Nigeria and Zimbabwe? How does this rhetoric reflect on the socio-economic conditions of the two countries? What are the motivating factors for migration in the two countries? How are these factors reflected on social media?

Our understanding is that to fully comprehend migration from an African perspective (Nigeria and Zimbabwe), the different views and opinions of the people in and from these countries are valuable. In the age of digital technology, social media is probably the most appropriate site to access information about migration trends and discourses of migration from the migrants themselves and others who have migration stories to tell. A point conceded by [Dekker et al. \(2018\)](#) is that digital social networks are becoming common in a way that enables potential migrants to understand better migration options and destinations for settlement. The discourses of migration produced and shared on social media are important records of lived experiences which may not be captured in any other way. [Van Leeuwen](#)

4 *Social Constructions of Migration in Nigeria and Zimbabwe*

(2009, p. 144) opines that the term discourse is an 'extended stretch of connected speech or writing – a text', while Foucault (2013) describes discourse as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. Blommaert (2005) explains that discourse 'comprises all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural and historical patterns and developments of use'. In the same vein, Cameron and Panovic (2014, p. 3) view discourse as language in use; a form of social practice in which language plays a central role.

The fundamental connection between all the views above is that discourses are socially constructed forms of social practice from which interpretations are drawn in relation to their inherent roles within the larger community. The discipline of discourse analysis can be divided into critical discourse analysis (CDA) and multi-modal discourse analysis (MDA), otherwise known as multimodality. While CDA dwells heavily on the critical deconstruction of discourses, MDA emphasises the multiple modes used by discourse participants to produce meaning. Hence, this book is premised on the assumption that discourses of migration reveal important insights on both migration and discourse as the different chapters in this book will reveal, spotlighting the everyday realities of Nigerians and Zimbabweans, and by extension Africans, in their quest to relocate for different purposes.

Since discourse plays a central role in everyday communication, discourses of migration have also proliferated with rising migration across the entire world. In several parts of the world, different motivations prompt people to migrate from one area to another. The frequency with which migration occurs makes it part of daily conversations on and off social media in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. It is, however, surprising that very few scholars have done extensive work that focuses on discourses of migration in and about these countries. Although there are several studies on migration especially in the Global North, few addressed it from a discursive perspective let alone compare migration discourses in two African countries. This book contributes to new literature on the concept of migration and its accompanying human realities in Nigeria and Zimbabwe from a linguistic point of view.

Guccione (2022) notes that if the importance of immigration in human affairs cannot be ignored, neither can the countless sociolinguistic consequences of migration. Migration discourse is an umbrella term that covers all the communication practices related to migration as a social and political phenomenon. In the view of Guillem (2015, p. 1):

Migration discourses are the specific and distinct communicative practices that accompany the phenomenon of migration. They include lay discourses generated among migrant and host communities as they interact with each other in everyday contexts, as well as elite discourses about migration, often situated in institutional contexts, that frame it in particular ways and for different kinds of purposes. The study of migration discourse in everyday contexts has offered in-depth descriptions of the experiences of western-based migrants that reveal their struggles and strategies as they try to successfully adapt to their new environments. The discourses also emphasise the difficulties faced by migrants as they

strive to construct meaningful identities away from home, as well as the ways in which members of host societies discursively negotiate what is often perceived as a threatening immigrant presence.

What is important for our purposes is how discourses ‘frame’ migration, influencing perceptions and shaping attitudes towards migrants and migration. It is through discourse that migrants and citizens of host nations narrate their experiences of living in foreign lands and living with others respectively. Van Dijk (2018, p. 228) has provided a more extensive definition of discourse and its permutations:

- Discourse is a form and unit of language use.
- Discourse is an ordered sequence of words, sentences or turns – each with its own structures.
- These sequences express coherent sequences of local and global meanings.
- Discourse is a form of communication.
- Discourse is a multimodal message (spoken, written, images, sounds, music, gestures).
- Discourse is a form of social interaction.
- Discourse may instantiate a social relation, such as power, domination, or resistance.
- Discourse may be a political action, such as a speech in parliament or party propaganda.
- Discourse is a cultural phenomenon, such as a conference paper or editorial.
- Discourse is an economic commodity or resource (it may be bought or sold, e.g. as newspaper or book or represent a form of power).

What we regard as a discourse in this study relates holistically to Van Dijk’s descriptions of the term. The texts selected for the purposes of this study draw significantly on the scholar’s propositions. Van Dijk’s (2018) description of discourse lends credence to our argument that any textual data relating to migration can be perceived as migration discourse. To have a nuanced understanding of discourse, Van Dijk (2018) recommends that the communicative situation or context must be examined by focusing on *Who*, *When*, *Where*, *for Whom*, and *How* the discourse is used, as well as its style and meanings.

According to Van Dijk (2018, p. 230):

[...] migration discourse not only may be about migration or its many aspects, but also be a constituent part of migration as a phenomenon, as would be the stories of migrants, as well as immigration policies. Thus, migration as a social phenomenon not only consists of (groups of) participants, institutions, many types of social and political (inter)action, but also, quite prominently, of many genres of migration discourse as social and political acts and interaction.

For us, current conversations about migration do not only reflect discourse as a form of language use but also a form of social and political (inter) action.

Van Dijk (2018) provides several case studies of migration discourse through what he refers to as 'genres' of migration discourse among which are:

- Media discourse: news reports (press, TV, radio, internet), editorials, interviews, reportages, cartoons
- Political discourse: parliamentary debates, bills, policy documents, party programmes, speeches of politicians
- Legal discourse: bills/laws, international agreements, treaties, police discourse, crime reports, interrogations, trials
- Educational discourse: textbooks/lessons, classroom interactions, teacher–student interactions
- Administrative discourse: interactions with officials, forms, applications
- Social movement discourse: official declarations, meetings, protests, slogans, conversations among members
- Internet discourse: websites, blogs
- Artistic discourse: novels, poetry, theatre, TV shows, and soaps
- Personal discourse: everyday face-to-face conversations, letters, e-mail messages, internet participation (Facebook, Twitter, Chats)

Van Dijk (2018) emphasises that the explicit understanding of the genres above derives from their communicative situations, because discourse genres are, first, a type of social activity. As such, the communicative situations may be characterised by the following:

- Time/Period
- Place/Space/Environment/Institution
- Participants
- Social identities, e.g. ethnic identities, origin, etc.
- Communicative roles: speaker, recipient, etc.
- Social roles, e.g. politician, teacher, police officer, judge, etc.
- Social relations, e.g. of domination (power abuse), cooperation, resistance
- On-going (Inter)Action
- On-going discourse
- Speech acts (e.g. assertion, question, promise, accusation)
- Other social acts (e.g. cooperation, protests, etc.)
- Personal and social cognition
- Goals of the current interaction
- Shared and mutual generic knowledge (common ground) of participants
- Shared social attitudes and ideologies about migration

According to Van Dijk (2018), the analysis of these genres can be approached from different perspectives. An analyst might identify themes and topics, schematic superstructures, local meanings, modalities, implications, presuppositions, as well as actor and action descriptions depending on their relevance to the investigations on migration discourse. For this study, we focus our analysis on themes and topics as well as on local meanings. The analysis of the themes and topics

demystify the overall meaning of the discourse. Van Dijk (2018) maintains that topics are fundamental because they subsume the local meanings of discourse, i.e. through topics or themes one can develop an interest in the deeper meanings of issues. Although such summaries do not provide all the details, they at least provide a global idea of the meaning of a larger corpus of text or talk (Van Dijk, 2018). The common themes used in everyday discourse to refer to migration in Nigeria and Zimbabwe are reflected and analysed in this book. Besides the study of the overall meanings (topics, themes) of migration, the study of 'local' meanings, which are the meanings of words, sentences, or sequences of sentences is important in discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 2018). Local meanings are ensembles of semantic associations embedded in specific social groups (Basov et al., 2021); how meanings are negotiated and restricted in a particular society. This study focuses on how Zimbabweans and Nigerians debate migration discourse.

Van Dijk (2018) genre of *personal discourse*, particularly internet participation (Facebook, Twitter, Chats), is the nucleus of this study which reflects on data produced through social media. In the current reality of migration, social media plays an important role. As pointed out by De Fina and Baynham (2012), the construction and negotiation of meanings by immigrants are not confined to narratives in interviews but extend to many other kinds of communication. So, if we must carefully study migration, we cannot ignore discourses produced on social media which is one of the 'many other kinds' that De Fina and Baynham encouraged researchers to also consider. We consequently examine personal and social cognition, the goals of current interactions, the shared and mutual generic knowledge (common ground) of the participants, shared social attitudes and ideologies about migration plus social relations, roles, and identities in our analysis of discourses produced in Zimbabwe and Nigeria.

People of similar and diverse societies exchange views and information on social platforms and although discourse analysts have researched the human realities of social media, the authors of this book are unaware of studies which address migration discourse either distinctly or jointly in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. We juxtapose data from the two countries to assist in deepening comparisons across other countries in Africa. In this sense, our book could be used as source material for global readers, researchers, and scholars in similar fields. Discourse analysis offers a wide scope when it comes to the scrutinisation of texts. Several studies have shown that discourse is invested and ideological and it is through the analysis of discourses that the invested meanings are brought to the fore. Similarly, migration discourses in everyday context are heavily invested with substances that interpret and shape the current realities of migration, especially on the African continent. The intertextual nature of migration discourse in Nigeria and Zimbabwe, where the citizens of the two countries use many forms of written and visual texts to discuss migration issues, makes discourse analysis a significant part of this book.

This book adopts a qualitative approach using netnography method to identify and gather relevant data. Netnography is a method that involves listening-in to and/or following online conversations or discussions without actively participating. Some scholars have defined netnography as the application of

ethnographic methods of collecting and analysing data such as observation and document analysis to virtual platforms. Bainbridge (2000, p. 57) defines netnography as ‘a relatively passive examination of websites, without full interaction with the people who created them’. For Makombe (2022, p. 160), netnography is a research method that seeks to transfer ethnographic research methods such as observation and document analysis to the online platform. Dekker et al. (2018) note that there are barriers and hazards to the use of social media by migrants on a dangerous journey, suggesting that there is a state of data precariousness regarding access to and trustworthiness of social media content. As such, they argue that social media data involves untested and instrumentally relevant statements that can be identified as rumours (Dekker et al., 2018). Notwithstanding this limitation, we believe that netnography offers us a unique exploration of Nigerian and Zimbabwean migration discourses on social media platforms. Our view is that social media produces rich data since many social media platforms reflect the emotional and immediate feelings of users – very often as they occur (Benski & Fisher, 2013, p. 6).

We purposively selected online media data on migration discourse with the main criteria being that they must address migration and relate to Nigeria or Zimbabwe. Certain measures were employed to ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the data collection so that it would be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable. Specific keywords were used in searching for relevant data which ensured that the social media posts addressed migration. The frequency of usage of these keywords in the context of migration already suggests that they are important discursive elements for the purpose of this study. The frequency of the posts, as well as the impressions and perceptions they reflect also determine the popularity of such views and opinions. The data collected was analysed and juxtaposed to make comparisons and identify patterns and similarities.

According to De Fina and Baynham (2012):

Discourse perspectives on migration start from very different theoretical and methodological premises. On the one hand, they emphasize the need to analyse what migrants themselves say about their experience in order to understand the processes that change their lives. On the other hand, they argue for the constitutive nature of discourse in the construction of identities, stances, and worldviews. It should not come as a surprise then that many of the studies that take as their object the discourse of immigrants, that is, the way they construct and represent their experiences, have focused on narratives.

The data emanated from several sources including X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube as well as other online sources such as mainstream online newspapers and blogs in order to have nuanced and balanced perspectives. In each chapter, specific details regarding sourced data are discussed in order to enhance clarity. The collected data was examined through discourse analysis taking into account the context of the data as well as the social worldviews reflected in the data.