



PRAGMATICS OF MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF 'GREENER PASTURES' SEEKERS IN AFRICA

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Abstract:

This article investigates the pragmatic functions of the term "greener pastures" in African media discourse on migration. While widely used, this pastoral metaphor carries significant presuppositional and implicational weight that shapes public perception and policy debates. Drawing on a multi-layered theoretical framework integrating pragmatic theory, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and media framing theory, this study examines how the "greener pastures" narrative operates as a dominant frame in migration coverage. Through a qualitative analysis of media texts from diverse African contexts, the article argues that this discourse naturalizes global inequality, individualizes structural problems, and depoliticizes migration by emphasizing economic determinism. The study finds that while some media outlets use the term to critique domestic conditions, its overarching effect is to reinforce center-periphery worldviews and obscure the complex realities of African mobility. The article concludes by analyzing emerging counter-narratives that seek to reframe migration as a driver of development and human flourishing, contributing to a more nuanced and empowering public discourse.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Media Framing, Migration Narratives, African Media, Greener Pastures

1. Introduction

The discourse surrounding migration in and from Africa is a complex tapestry of narratives, stereotypes, and political contestations. Within this landscape, the term "greener pastures" has emerged as a pervasive and powerful metaphor, frequently invoked by media outlets, policymakers, and the public to describe the motivations of Africans who move in search of better opportunities. While seemingly innocuous, this pastoral imagery is laden with pragmatic and ideological implications that profoundly shape how migration is understood and addressed across the continent. This article investigates the pragmatic functions of the "greener pastures" narrative in African media, exploring how it frames public perception, influences policy discourse, and contributes to the construction of migrant identities.

The phenomenon of human mobility is a central feature of the African experience, with a rich history predating colonial boundaries. Contrary to dominant narratives in the Global North that portray African

migration as a recent crisis of exodus towards Europe, empirical data reveals a different reality. Approximately 80% of African migration occurs within the continent, driven by a complex interplay of economic, social, political, and environmental factors [1]. However, media coverage, both within and outside Africa, often oversimplifies these complexities, relying on resonant but reductive frames to tell the story of migration. The "greener pastures" metaphor, with its connotations of instinctive, resource-driven movement, has become a central trope in this simplified narrative.

This study argues that a pragmatic analysis of the "greener pastures" discourse is crucial for understanding its ideological effects. Pragmatics, as the study of language in context, allows us to move beyond the literal meaning of words to examine what speakers *do* with them—the speech acts they perform, the presuppositions they activate, and the implicatures they generate [2]. By applying the tools of pragmatics, combined with critical discourse analysis (CDA) and media framing theory, this article dissects how the "greener pastures" narrative functions to naturalize global inequality, individualize structural problems, and depoliticize the act of migration. It examines how this discourse, while sometimes used to critique domestic governance, ultimately reinforces a center-periphery worldview that positions Africa as a space of lack and the Global North as the locus of opportunity.

The research problem at the heart of this article is the disconnect between the complex reality of African migration and its simplified, often distorting, media portrayal. The dominance of the "greener pastures" frame obscures the agency and diverse motivations of migrants, while also marginalizing intra-continental mobility and the positive contributions of migration to development. This study seeks to address this problem by providing a theoretically grounded, linguistically detailed analysis of how this specific discursive formation operates. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more critical understanding of media's role in the politics of migration and to support ongoing efforts, such as the Move Africa initiative, to foster more balanced, human-centered, and empowering migration narratives [3].

This article proceeds as follows. First, it outlines a multi-layered theoretical framework that integrates pragmatics, CDA, and media framing theory. Second, it presents a qualitative analysis of selected media texts, identifying the key pragmatic functions and ideological effects of the "greener pastures" discourse. Third, it discusses the implications of these findings for our understanding of migration discourse and media responsibility. Finally, it concludes by reflecting on the potential for counter-narratives to reshape public perception and policy, moving beyond the limiting frame of "greener pastures" to a more holistic and just representation of African mobility.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-layered theoretical framework that integrates insights from pragmatics, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and media framing theory to provide a comprehensive analysis of the "greener pastures" discourse in African media. This integrated approach allows for a nuanced examination of not only the linguistic features of the discourse but also its social, political, and ideological functions.

2.1 Pragmatic Dimensions of Migration Discourse

Pragmatics, the study of language in context, provides the foundational tools for analyzing how the "greener pastures" metaphor functions beyond its literal meaning. Following the distinction articulated in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, our analysis considers both near-side and far-side pragmatics [2].

Near-side pragmatics focuses on how the term "greener pastures" contributes to the propositional content of an utterance. This includes its presuppositional base—the unstated assumptions that must be accepted for the utterance to be coherent. The metaphor carries a powerful presupposition of comparison,

positioning the migrant's destination as inherently superior to their origin. This presupposition often goes unchallenged, subtly shaping the audience's perception of the migration issue before any explicit argument is made.

Far-side pragmatics examines the actions performed and meanings generated *by* the use of the "greener pastures" narrative. This involves analyzing the **speech acts** (e.g., warning, criticizing, persuading) that media outlets perform when they frame migration in this way [4]. It also involves identifying the **conversational implicatures**—the unstated meanings—that arise from this framing. For instance, by repeatedly linking "greener pastures" to stories of perilous journeys, media outlets may implicate that such aspirations are naive or dangerous, without explicitly stating so.

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis: Power and Ideology

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides the tools to connect the pragmatic features of the "greener pastures" discourse to broader social and political structures. Drawing on the work of Teun A. van Dijk, this study utilizes a sociocognitive approach that links discourse structures, social cognition, and societal power relations [5]. Van Dijk's framework allows us to understand how media discourse mediates between macro-level phenomena (like global economic inequality) and micro-level cognitive processes (like an individual's perception of migration).

Norman Fairclough's distinction between "power in discourse" and "power behind discourse" is also central to our analysis [6]. **Power in discourse** is evident in the specific linguistic choices made in media texts—how migrants are labeled, what agency they are afforded, and the evaluative language used to describe their actions. **Power behind discourse** refers to the institutional and societal structures that determine who has access to the media and whose narratives are amplified. In the context of migration, this involves questioning which voices—migrants, policymakers, NGOs, or local communities—are privileged in the media's portrayal of the "greener pastures" phenomenon.

2.3 Media Framing Theory

Media framing theory, as articulated by Robert Entman, provides a systematic way to analyze how the "greener pastures" narrative is constructed and presented to the public [7]. Entman identifies four key functions of frames:

- 1 **Problem Definition:** Is migration framed as a crisis, an opportunity, a threat, or a natural process?
- 2 **Causal Interpretation:** What are the attributed causes of migration (e.g., individual choice, economic hardship, political instability)?
- 3 **Moral Evaluation:** What moral judgments are attached to migrants and the act of migration?
- 4 **Treatment Recommendation:** What solutions or policy responses are implicitly or explicitly suggested?

The "greener pastures" metaphor itself acts as a powerful frame, one that emphasizes economic motivations and often obscures other drivers of migration, such as conflict, climate change, or the pursuit of education and personal freedom. By analyzing how this frame is deployed across different media contexts, we can identify its ideological effects and its role in shaping public opinion and policy debates. This study aims to provide a holistic analysis of the "greener pastures" discourse, moving from the micro-level of linguistic choice to the macro-level of social and political power structures. This framework allows us to not only describe *how* the media talks about migration but also to understand the real-world consequences of that discourse.

3. Methodology

To investigate the pragmatic functions and ideological underpinnings of the "greener pastures" discourse, this study adopts a qualitative, text-oriented approach grounded in the theoretical framework outlined above. The methodology is designed to facilitate a deep, contextualized analysis of media texts, combining systematic corpus-informed techniques with in-depth qualitative interpretation.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a descriptive and interpretive research design. The primary goal is not to quantify the frequency of the "greener pastures" metaphor but to qualitatively analyze its function and meaning in different media contexts. The design is multi-scalar, examining the micro-level of linguistic choices, the meso-level of discursive strategies within individual texts, and the macro-level of ideological frames circulating in the wider media landscape. By triangulating insights from pragmatics, critical discourse analysis, and framing theory, the design aims to produce a rich and robust interpretation of the phenomenon.

3.2 Data Collection and Corpus

The data for this study consists of a purposively sampled corpus of media texts from a diverse range of African sources. The corpus includes news articles, opinion pieces, feature stories, and editorials published between 2020 and 2025. This time-frame was selected to capture contemporary discourse, including narratives shaped by recent global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing policy debates around migration in Africa and Europe.

The selection criteria for the corpus were as follows:

1. **Geographic Diversity:** The corpus includes texts from major media outlets in West, East, and Southern Africa to ensure a range of regional perspectives. This includes sources from Nigeria and South Africa, countries identified in the literature as key nodes in African migration discourse [8, 9].
2. **Media Type:** A mix of state-owned and private media, as well as print and digital-native publications, were included to account for variations in editorial lines and audience engagement.
3. **Explicit Mention:** All texts in the primary corpus explicitly use the phrase "greener pastures" or a direct variant in the context of migration.
4. **Thematic Relevance:** Texts were selected for their focus on migration from, to, or within Africa.

A secondary corpus of texts that discuss African migration without using the specific "greener pastures" phrase was also collected to provide a baseline for comparative analysis, allowing for an examination of alternative framing strategies.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in three overlapping stages, guided by the integrated theoretical framework:

Stage 1: Frame Analysis

In the first stage, each text was analyzed using the principles of media framing theory [7]. The analysis identified the dominant frames used to present the "greener pastures" narrative. For each text, we asked:

- How is the problem of migration defined?
- What are the identified causes of the move toward "greener pastures"?
- What moral evaluations are associated with the migrants and their quest?

- What policy solutions or societal responses are implicitly or explicitly recommended?

This stage involved coding the texts for these framing functions, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, such as the prevalence of "crisis," "economic determinism," or "human tragedy" frames.

Stage 2: Pragmatic and Discursive Analysis

The second stage involved a close linguistic reading of the texts, focusing on the pragmatic and discursive strategies used to construct the "greener pastures" narrative. Guided by the principles of CDA and pragmatics [2, 5], this stage examined:

- **Lexical Choices:** The specific words used to describe migrants (e.g., "seekers," "adventurers," "victims") and their destinations.
- **Presupposition and Implicature:** The unstated assumptions embedded in the text (e.g., the presupposition that life in the destination is inherently better) and the meanings implied but not explicitly stated.
- **Speech Acts:** The actions being performed through the text (e.g., warning, advising, criticizing, celebrating).
- **Metaphor and Othering:** The function of the pastoral metaphor itself and other discursive strategies, such as the use of pronouns ("us" vs. "them"), that construct social distance between the audience and the migrants [9].

Stage 3: Ideological Analysis

In the final stage, the findings from the frame and pragmatic analyses were synthesized to interpret the broader ideological functions of the "greener pastures" discourse. Drawing on Fairclough's model of CDA [6], this stage connected the discursive patterns to the social context, asking:

- How does the discourse reproduce or challenge existing power relations (e.g., between the Global North and South, between governments and citizens)?
- What ideologies (e.g., neoliberalism, nationalism, humanitarianism) are promoted or naturalized through this discourse?
- Whose interests are served by framing migration in this particular way?

This three-stage process, moving from the descriptive to the interpretive and finally to the explanatory, allows for a systematic and theoretically grounded analysis of the complex and multi-faceted role of the "greener pastures" narrative in shaping the public understanding of migration in Africa.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the media corpus reveals that the "greener pastures" discourse operates as a powerful and multifaceted framing device with significant pragmatic and ideological effects. This section discusses the key findings, organized around the dominant discursive patterns and their functions.

4.1 The Pragmatics of the "Greener Pastures" Metaphor

The term "greener pastures" is not a neutral descriptor; it is a metaphorical frame that carries a heavy load of presuppositions and implicatures. Its pastoral origin, evoking images of livestock moving to more fertile land, subtly dehumanizes the act of migration. When applied to humans, it reduces complex, calculated decisions to a seemingly natural, almost instinctual, quest for resources. This framing has several pragmatic consequences.

First, it activates a **comparative presupposition** that is rarely challenged. The very use of the comparative adjective "greener" presupposes a scale of value where the destination is axiomatically better than the origin. This sets up a cognitive framework where the migrant's home country is pre-judged as deficient. For example, opinion pieces in Nigerian newspapers commonly use the metaphor to critique domestic governance, expressing sentiments that youth seek greener pastures because opportunities at home have been neglected [10]. Here, the metaphor is used to critique domestic governance, but it does so by accepting the underlying presupposition that the "pastures" elsewhere are, in fact, "greener."

Second, the metaphor generates a range of **conversational implicatures**. When a news report states that "thousands of young Africans risk their lives for greener pastures," it may implicate that these youths are naive, desperate, or even irrational. The implicature is not in the literal words but arises from the juxtaposition of the idyllic metaphor with the harsh reality of the journey. This aligns with Retta's (2023) work on how discourse can construct migrants as objects of pity or scorn rather than as rational actors [11].

4.2 Dominant Media Frames

Our analysis confirms the prevalence of several dominant frames in which the "greener pastures" narrative is embedded, consistent with the findings of Chawila (2025) and Ojebuyi (2020) [8, 9].

The Economic Determinism Frame is the most common. In this frame, migration is presented almost exclusively as a response to poverty and unemployment. Similarly, feature articles on West African migration often explain that the search for greener pastures is a direct consequence of economic stagnation and a lack of opportunities at home [12]. While economic factors are undeniably significant, this frame systematically marginalizes other drivers of migration, such as the pursuit of education, political freedom, family reunification, or personal growth. This reductionist framing aligns with the ideological function of individualizing structural problems, shifting the focus from global economic systems or political failures to the individual's economic quest.

The Crisis and Threat Frame is particularly prominent in coverage of migration into more economically developed African nations, such as South Africa. Here, the "greener pastures" seekers are often framed as a threat to local resources and jobs. As Chawila (2025) found, they are constructed as "foreigners" and "others" who disrupt the social order [9]. In a more inflammatory manner, South African tabloids have published headlines questioning whether migrants are seeking "greener pastures" or are a threat to local jobs [13]. This framing employs what van Dijk (1993) calls a strategy of negative other-presentation, reinforcing a dichotomy between a deserving "us" and an encroaching "them" [5].

The Human Tragedy Frame focuses on the perils of the journey. Reports often highlight the suffering, exploitation, and death of migrants in the Sahara Desert or the Mediterranean Sea. While this frame can evoke sympathy, it also functions to portray migrants as helpless victims. As noted in the Move Africa initiative, this narrative of suffering, while real, is not the full picture and often overshadows stories of migrant resilience, agency, and success [1]. The pragmatic effect is to position the audience as passive spectators of a tragedy, rather than as citizens who might advocate for safer migration routes or more just policies.

4.3 Geographic Bias and the Erasure of Intra-Continental Migration

A critical finding of this study is the pervasive geographic bias in the media's deployment of the "greener pastures" narrative. Despite the fact that 80% of African migration is intra-continental, the "greener pastures" metaphor is overwhelmingly used to describe migration to Europe and North America. This discursive choice has the effect of erasing the reality of migration within Africa.

This Euro-centric framing reinforces a neocolonial worldview where development, opportunity, and progress are located exclusively in the Global North. It implicitly devalues African destinations, suggesting that "greener pastures" cannot be found in Nairobi, Accra, or Johannesburg, but only in London, Paris, or New York. This not only distorts the reality of African mobility but also undermines efforts towards continental integration and the promotion of intra-African trade and labor mobility, as championed by the African Union [3].

4.4 Ideological Functions of the Discourse

Beyond its immediate pragmatic effects, the "greener pastures" discourse serves several broader ideological functions. Following Fairclough (2015), we can see how the discourse works to maintain and naturalize existing power relations [6].

First, it **naturalizes global inequality**. By framing migration as a natural movement towards better resources, like animals seeking fertile land, the discourse obscures the historical and political processes that have produced global economic disparities. The inequality between the "brown pastures" of the origin and the "green pastures" of the destination is presented as a fact of nature rather than a product of history, colonialism, and ongoing unequal economic relations.

Second, it **depoliticizes migration**. By focusing on economic motivations, the discourse often sidelines political drivers such as conflict, persecution, and human rights abuses. A person fleeing political violence is not merely a "seeker of greener pastures"; they are a refugee seeking safety. The dominance of the economic metaphor can thus dilute the legal and moral obligations owed to those fleeing persecution.

Finally, the discourse **promotes a neoliberal ideology** that individualizes success and failure. The migrant is constructed as an entrepreneurial individual on a personal quest for economic betterment. If they succeed, it is due to their personal drive; if they fail, it is a personal tragedy. This narrative conveniently ignores the structural barriers, restrictive visa policies, and systemic racism that shape migration outcomes.

In conclusion, the seemingly simple metaphor of "greener pastures" is a site of intense pragmatic and ideological work. It is a discursive tool that, while sometimes used for critique, largely functions to frame migration in ways that are reductive, depoliticizing, and ultimately supportive of the global status quo. The next section will explore the implications of these findings and the potential for counter-narratives to challenge this dominant frame.

5. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the "greener pastures" metaphor is far more than a simple descriptor in African media discourse on migration. It is a potent and ideologically charged frame that shapes public understanding, reinforces global inequalities, and often obscures the complex realities of African mobility. Through an integrated analysis drawing on pragmatics, critical discourse analysis, and media framing theory, we have shown how this seemingly innocuous phrase functions to naturalize economic disparity, depoliticize migration, and individualize structural problems.

The key findings of this study are threefold. First, the pragmatic analysis of the "greener pastures" metaphor reveals its powerful presuppositional and implicational content. The term subtly dehumanizes migrants by framing their movement as an instinctual search for resources, while presupposing a hierarchy of places that leaves African nations in a position of inherent deficiency. Second, our analysis of media frames shows how this metaphor is embedded within dominant narratives of economic determinism, crisis,

and human tragedy, often at the expense of more nuanced and empowering stories of migrant agency and success. Third, the pervasive geographic bias in the use of the metaphor, overwhelmingly pointing towards the Global North, serves to erase the reality of intra-continental migration and reinforce neocolonial worldviews.

The ideological consequences of this discourse are significant. By framing migration as an individual economic quest, the "greener pastures" narrative diverts attention from the historical and political structures that produce migration pressures. It promotes a neoliberal worldview that places the burden of success or failure on the individual migrant, while leaving the unequal global system intact. In doing so, it can inadvertently support restrictive and securitized migration policies that treat migrants as problems to be managed rather than as rights-holders and agents of development.

However, the discourse is not monolithic. As the analysis has also shown, there are emerging counter-narratives, exemplified by initiatives like Move Africa, that actively work to challenge these dominant frames. These counter-narratives seek to humanize migrants, highlight the positive contributions of migration, and correct the factual distortions in mainstream coverage. They do so by shifting the frame from one of crisis and tragedy to one of resilience, innovation, and development. The future of migration discourse in Africa will be shaped by the contestation between the entrenched "greener pastures" frame and these emergent, more empowering narratives.

This study contributes to the literature on media and migration by providing a detailed, linguistically-grounded analysis of a key discursive formation. It highlights the importance of applying pragmatic and critical discourse analysis to understand the subtle ways in which language shapes our social and political worlds. For journalists, policymakers, and civil society actors, this research underscores the need for a more critical and conscious approach to the language used to describe migration. Moving beyond the seductive simplicity of the "greener pastures" metaphor is a crucial step towards fostering a public discourse that is more accurate, just, and conducive to the well-being of migrants and their communities.

Future research could expand on this study by conducting a large-scale quantitative corpus analysis to map the frequency and distribution of the "greener pastures" metaphor across different national and linguistic contexts in Africa. Comparative studies with migration discourse in other regions of the Global South could also yield valuable insights. Ultimately, the goal of such research should be to contribute to a global media environment where the stories of migration are told with the complexity, dignity, and nuance that they deserve.

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