



The Dynamics of The Language of Newspaper Headlines in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper has looked at the dynamics of the structures of headlines. Related literature was reviewed on functions and influence of the print media, mass media and language development, and studies in headlines, to give the work the necessary theoretical foundation. The study employed survey approach to look at reportage of headlines of some newspapers in Nigeria. Three questions guided this study: What are the types of headlines cast for the stories? What is the syntactic structure of the headlines? What is the level of social responsibility displayed by the editors, in casting the headlines? A total of 24 headlines were purposively collected as data, and analyzed. The analysis has revealed that 'plain', 'headlines with pointers', and 'speech as headlines' characterized our data. Also, most of the headlines are cast in simple sentence structures. This result is significant for mass media teachers as they apply principles and theories of language, in their business of teaching mass media courses, daily.

Keywords: Language development; mass media; English in Nigeria; headlines

1. Introduction

The field of applied linguistics is somehow popular among educationists, partly because most scholars treat its substance as language teaching and learning situations. However, this may not be totally true because the proponents of this interdisciplinary field have a larger perspective of its nature and scope.

Any study that involves the application of principles and theories of language to any domain of human life, such as the mass media, is in the realm of applied linguistics. This is a justification for this examination of the dynamics of language of newspaper headlines, on some important issues in Nigeria, at this point in time.

Some naturally interactive social and linguistic factors explain the functions that languages perform in multilingual contexts. These factors include the status or prestige of the languages concerned, the different levels of development of the languages, the historical and political profiles of the languages and their speakers, institutional policies, numerical strengths of speakers and the multilingual/multicultural contexts in which the languages are spoken (Adegbija, 2001).

In Nigeria, English remains the national and official language despite the presence of over 450 indigenous languages, with Kaduna State of Nigeria alone having 57 languages spoken as the first language. This position has been copiously discussed from various perspectives (Ayodabo, 2008; Babatunde, 2003; Banjo, 1982; Oyeleye, 1994).

It is worthy to note that one of the major organs of spreading and technicalizing a language is through the Mass Media. For instance, the impact of globalised English in Nigeria is particularly seen in the daily influx of foreign influences into our English usage; a trend that is attributable to the roles of cable television networks (e.g. CNN, BBC, Sky News, VOA), video tapes, movies, foreign music, etc. (Oyeleye, 2005). Today, English continues to be the main lingua franca of information technology, especially the internet, Global System Mobile Technology (GSM) social networks (face book, twitter, blackberry messenger, net log, blog etc.). There is no hiding the fact that the mastery of certain grammatical structures by learners and users of English as a second language (ESL) is very crucial. This is so because grammatical competence is a very crucial aspect of communicative competence, which according to Yule (1996), is a "broad concept which subsumes the grammatical competence, the sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence" (p.191). Also, linguistic competence entails the knowledge of linguistic forms (phonology, lexis, grammar) and usage. With that competence, the language user can produce well-formed utterances and sentences on the basis of the knowledge of linguistic conventions of usage and acquisition of English Communicative Skills (Adedeji Omolara, 2005).

Effective language use therefore can become a great tool for national development in the areas of information management, education and research, manpower development, economic growth and scientific discoveries.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Functions and Influence of the Print Media

Newspapers have certain fundamental functions which consist of both primary and secondary roles in the society. The primary roles as reproduced by Shodipe (2004) include:

- a) To inform readers objectively about what is happening in the community, country or world as well as to announce what possible events are to be expected on the local, national and international levels and in all sectors of the country;
- b) To comment on the news in order to bring these developments into focus; and

- c) To provide the means whereby persons with goods and services to sell can advertise their wares. (p. 191)

The secondary roles of the print media, as stated in Shodiye (2004), include:

- a) Campaigning for desirable civil projects and helping to eliminate undesirable conditions;
- b) Providing readers a portion of entertainment through such devices as comic strips, cartoons and special features; and
- c) Serving as the readers' friendly counsellor, information bureau and champion of their rights. (p. 192)

When the print media perform these functions, such become essential parts of their communal social responsibility; and the public repose much confidence in them. Thus, a writer in the newspaper industry holds a position of social responsibility, and is often required to bring his professional judgement to bear on the quality of information being disseminated to the public. As a result of the significant role of the print media in national affairs, Shodiye (2004:210) has expressed the belief that knowledge about virtually all facets of the socio-economic and political realm is made accessible to a large sector of society.

By creating awareness and drawing public attention to crucial local and international issues, the print media writer assists the public to filter and assess facts and figures. The writer is aware of these enormous responsibilities, and thus strives to create the most effective means of conveying his message.

Shodiye (2004) has done her work on the morpho-semantics of lexical creativity in the discourse of political reporting and commentaries, in which she reported that by virtue of its permanence, the written word is a documentation of history as seen through the eyes of a newspaper or magazine writer. Words or lexis are the major tools of the writer in the task of capturing the essence of life, by focusing on virtually all aspects of living. It is this centrality of the written word, according to Shodiye (2004:199), which imposes on the newspaper writer the need to continually explore the possibilities of language by making socially relevant statements through creative use of words. I believe that is one of the interests of applied linguistics.

2.2 *The Mass Media and Language Development*

The mass media have penetrated so deeply into our society, and they exert much influence on individuals within the society. One can say that in most cities, today, much learning occurs outside the classroom. The sheer quantity of information conveyed by press – magazines, film, TV, radio far exceeds the quantity of information conveyed by school instruction and texts. This challenge has destroyed the monopoly of books as a teaching aid, and cracked the very walls of the classroom so suddenly. The influence is observable in the linguistic, psychological and social spheres.

One can identify many forms of mass media such as: the English language, books, magazines, newspapers, comics, advertising, records, film, radio and television. Many of these forms are inter-related. For instance, advertising permeates many forms of mass media.

It should be noted, however, that with the mass media we are still using exactly the same means of communication. A newspaper still uses words, and a television screen still uses pictures and the spoken word for titles and subtitles. The mass media solicit our attention, incessantly with messages addressed to the eye and ear, or both, using the printed or spoken word, still and moving pictures, and various combinations of these. Words remain the basis of the communication process, whatever the medium.

Just as we cannot wish away the fact that history has made English and French languages to be global and connecting linguistic modes, we should see the potentials that our indigenous languages too have in promoting national consciousness. It is cheering news to note therefore that information technologies are being adapted to fit into the world of some African languages. Salawu (2006) has reported revelations about attempts to make computers meet certain African languages' needs. In the article made available on the web, it is disclosed that:

across the continent, linguists are working with experts in information technology to make computers more accessible to Africans who happen not to know English, French or the other major languages that have been programmed into the world's desktops (p. 3).

Arising from above, much responsibility is placed on applied linguists, here, particularly programmers, who are expected to provide computer based frameworks for end users.

There is a symbiotic relationship between media and the society. As the society impacts on the media, in terms of nature and content, so do the media reflect the society and impact on it. Whenever the mass media engage any language (foreign or indigenous), the purpose is for information dissemination, social mobilization and human continuity. In other words, the language in which a development message would be disseminated is a very important aspect of the message treatment.

New lexicons have permeated the variety of English we use in Nigeria, and one of the main routes is the mass media. As new events, situations and happenings occur and are reported, daily, our vocabularies become further increased and enriched. Some national and global events have now brought some new words (some of which have been in existence for a long time) closer to our use. Examples are *tsunami*, *facebook*, *twitter*, *yahoo*, *annulment*, *step aside*, *economic recession*, *niger delta*, *state of emergency*, etc.

2.3 *Studies in Mass Media and the Dynamics of Headlines*

Several scholars have worked in the area of language use in the mass media. The thrusts of some of these studies vary from the general characteristics of the language of the media to the specific linguistic nature of some sub-genres of the media. Crystal and Davy (1969) in one of their chapters in an earlier study on the language of the media identified some general stylistic features of newspaper language. The focus of Osisanwo's (2001) work is textual analysis of newspaper editorials, while Taiwo's (2001) study examined the thematic structure of news reports. He followed that with another study (2004) on 'speech as headlines in Nigerian newspapers.' Ayodabo and Popoola (2008) have also examined the forms and functions of newspaper headlines. All these studies can be situated within the domain of applied linguistics, since applied linguistics involves the use of knowledge of how different languages are structured and processed to solve real-life problems that involve language. Mass Media thus remains one important domain where language teaching and learning can be enhanced.

Newspapers headlines are titles of stories reported in newspapers. According to Crystal and Davy's (1969) old but relevant view:

...they contain a clear succinct and if possible, intriguing message to kindle a spark of interest in the potential reader who on the average is a person whose eyes move swiftly down a page and stops when something catches his attention (p. 175).

They are tersely worded, but the words are carefully chosen to catch the eyes and draw the attention of potential readers to the news. An editor will do everything possible to use very catchy headlines, since headlines act as forerunners to the story, and it is also the emotion inducing strategy in the hands of the editor.

Taiwo (2004) has presented some glaring grammatical features of headlines. These are:

- a) Grammatical words like articles and auxiliary verbs are often left out.
- b) A simple form of verb is used.
- c) The infinitive is used to express that something is going to happen in the future.
- d) Headlines often make use of abbreviations in order to maximize space. Such abbreviations used are always the ones whose meanings readers can understand.
- e) Headlines contain a lot of distinctive vocabulary, usually shorter and generally sounding more dramatic than the ordinary everyday English usage. (pp 324 - 325).

Sometimes, the very briefness of headline makes them ambiguous. Issues addressed in headlines are considered to be usually current ones still generating controversies in society. However, despite the fact that some headlines may degenerate into ambiguity, most good headlines can be read in only one sense and understood.

3. Methodology

What I have done in this paper is to randomly look at few newspaper headlines, in Nigeria, particularly *Nigerian Tribune*, and one or two editions of *The Nation* and *Saturday Punch* to examine reportage of three topical issues that are of national interest. These are the *Boko Haram insurgency*, the *DANA Airline Crash* of 3rd June 2012, and the *Hon Farouk Lawan/Femi Otedola bribe scandal*. I consider these three issues to be of national interest, and the structures of the language use quite worthy of study.

The *Boko Haram* insurgency began some six to seven years ago, when some Northern politicians used some political touts to rig election. Shortly after, the touts were dropped and the touts transformed into ethno-religious terrorists to make life intolerable for people living in the North. There are several other angles to their evolution process, however. Essentially, the *Boko Haram* insurgence has spread across the North, particularly Niger State (Suleija) the FCT, Kaduna, Kano, Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states; and the crises are being reported daily by both the print and broadcast media. All newspapers, radio stations and television houses report incidents of the sectarian attacks anytime the group strikes.

Corruption has been one of the problems confronting Nigeria as a nation since independence. Nigeria, in the last fourteen years, has been suffering from integrity crises, resulting from deep rooted low and high level corruption cases. Some of these are the Halliburton case, the NITEL privatization scam, the stock exchange probe bribery allegation, the Nigeria Police Pension Fund scam, and, of recent, the petroleum subsidy scam. All these were adequately reported in all segments of the Nigerian mass media.

Lastly, the *DANA Air Crash* which occurred on 3rd June 2012 claimed lives of over 153 Nigerians and non-Nigerians. It was not the first major air crash in Nigeria. On Sunday 3rd June, 2012, the ill-fated aircraft left Abuja for Lagos with 153 passengers and crew. Shortly before its time for landing, it crashed at Iju Ishaga axis of Lagos, Nigeria, killing all the passengers and crew as well as unconfirmed number of some other occupants of buildings it crashed into.

In essence, this study is a survey research, which takes a synchronic view of newspaper reportage of socio-economic and ethno-religious situations in Nigeria. Data are purposively observed and collected, through the personal library of the researcher, to suit the focus of this paper.

The three research questions that guided this study are:

- 1) What are the types of headlines cast for the stories?
- 2) What is the syntactic structure of the headlines?
- 3) What is the level of social responsibility displayed by the editors, in casting the headlines?

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The syntax of each headline is examined, and the quantity of information provided is discussed along the lines of bias or neutrality of proprietorship/editorship. Random data is used here to look at only the captions of the headlines:

4.1 Boko Haram Insurgency

Headlines from three newspapers on Boko Haram are presented below:

Date	Newspaper	Caption
20 th April, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	Book Haram detention facility in Lagos? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As Jonathan seeks Germany's help to fight sect.
2 nd May, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	Book Haram: Nigeria is on Fire – Gen. T.Y. Danjuma
2 nd May, 2012	The Nation	Book Haram threatens to attack <i>The Nation</i> , others in video.
9 th June, 2012	Saturday Punch	Suicide Bombers Kill 5 at Borno Police Headquarters
11 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	Explosion rocks Jos again
11 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	'Nigerian Army ill-equipped to fight terrorism, Boko Haram
12 th June, 2012	The Nation	Gunmen kill policeman, 26 others in Zamfara village
13 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	Gunmen strike in Borno, Yobe, Gombe, Kano <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25 killed, 3 churches bombed in Kaduna
18 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	Kaduna Violence: Doctors confirm 66 dead, 140 hospitalized <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslims in Onitsha live in fear

The structures of the headlines above display some of the features earlier mentioned in the literature: simple form of verbs is used, and an instance of the use of pastness manifests in a passive construction headline. Semantically, hardly can one ‘smell’ or ‘feel’ any proprietorship influence in any of the headlines. Perhaps the brutal nature of the sect’s attack pattern is enough caution to any newspaper house to show any form of slant. We are all aware of the fate that befell The Nation publishers, when their premises were attacked with grenades, recently.

The feeling of loss and sense of danger is collective, in Nigeria, anytime *Boko Haram* is mentioned, much so when their targets are government institutions, law enforcement agencies and agents, hotels and Christian religions houses. The places mentioned here are not exclusive to particular races, a political group, a particular ethnic group or sex. Any attack on a place is seen as a collective loss on the psyche of the nation.

Still on *Boko Haram*, the most frightening headline was that of 11th June 2012, the main story of which was reported on page 7 of the Nigerian Tribune that:

Participants at the Commanding Officers’ Workshop 2012 have identified ill-equipped and lack of adequately trained personnel for counter terrorism as reasons terrorist acts and *Boko Haram* insurgency continue unabated in the country.

If this can come from a communiqué at the end of a 5-day Army workshop, then national security is at risk. We should remember that the participants at the conference were drawn from the Nigerian Army formations across the country, and the five-day workshop had the theme: ‘Enhancing the capacity of unit commanders to meet contemporary challenges to the Nigerian Army’.

We can say, therefore, that the three headlines have exhibited similarity of language structure in the casting process, as presented above.

4.2 *Hon Farouk Lawan Versus Mr. Femi Otedola’s bribery scandal*

Headlines of two newspapers on the Lawan- Otedola bribery case are presented below:

Date	Newspaper	Caption
11 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	Bribe collected at 4.00am
12 th June, 2012	The Nation	Police to Lawan: Surrender \$600,000 bribe cash <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rep vows not to release ‘evidence of bribe’
12 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	Lawan releases police memos
13 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	\$3m bribery scandal: Otedola makes statement to police, tenders video <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reps weigh options over Lawan
14 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	\$3m bribery scandal forces Reps to end holiday
15 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	\$3m bribe: Police quiz Lawan, Emenalu <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As Reps meet today • Leave us out of scandal
16 th June, 2012	The Nation	Police comb Farouk Lawan’s house for \$620,000 bribe cash
18 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	Police demand for call log between Otedola and Lawan

Three different types of headlines can be seen here; they are the plain, headlines with pointers, and speech as headlines. Lexical items that reflect national institutions are ‘Rep’, ‘Police’, hence the subject matter is of serious national interest. Structurally, as the reportage of the bribery scandal progresses on a daily basis, the Nigerian Tribune (and I guess some other newspapers) become quite economical in its use of words. Except for headlines of 12th, 15th, 16th and 18th June, Lawan’s name is not mentioned any more. The assumption is that once \$3m bribe scandal is mentioned, every Nigerian and even non-Nigerian would know that the story refers to Hon Farouk Lawan and Femi Otedola’s bribery scandal. None of the headlines shows either apathy or hostility to the accused. This seeming neutrality is commendable, however the body of the stories and news may say otherwise. The headlines are not biased.

4.3 *DANA Airline Crash*

Headlines from two newspapers on Dana Airline crash are presented below:

Date	Newspaper	Caption/headline
4 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	Lagos Plane Crash: family of 7, 3 Generals, NNPC spokesman, 142 others dead. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jonathan declares 3 days of mourning
5 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	137 bodies recovered, DNA test to be conducted <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 corpses retrieved from building • Jonathan, Fashola, Amosun, IGP visit scene. • President promises thorough investigations Crashed plane still serviceable, operational despite age – DANA Airline.
6 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	FG suspends Dana Air’s licence
7 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	FG sets up probe panel – US, France, India demand release of victim’s corpses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families furious over delay in release of corpses • CBN, ICAN release names of staff victims • Queen Elizabeth, EU condole Jonathan

8 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victims' relations to get ₦6.88bn in 30 days Crashed plane not faulty – Dana Air
9 th June, 2012	Saturday Punch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laments loss of N50m daily to suspension • Sampling of relatives for DANA begins Victim's families shown health minister
13 th June, 2012	Nigerian Tribune	2 families fight over corpse at LASUTH mortuary

From the headlines presented above, it is obvious that most of the headlines are cast in simple sentence structures, and each expresses singularity of idea in the predicate. In many of the headlines, the simple verbs are active – ‘declares’, ‘visit’, ‘promises’, ‘suspends’, ‘release’, ‘condone’, etc. only passive constructions contain simple past forms, e.g. ‘retrieved’. Of national and international significance are words like ‘Jonathan’, ‘IGP’, ‘Generals’, ‘President’, ‘US’, ‘France’, ‘Queen Elizabeth’, ‘EU’, and so on.

Also, all the headlines aptly capture the essence of the news, except, a caption on 5th June, 2012 “Crashed Plane Still serviceable, operational despite age – DANA Airline” which is ambiguous. In an attempt to be economical, headlines are often ambiguous semantically; we all know that a crashed plane cannot still be serviceable and operational. The intention of the newspaper is however known.

From the analysis of data carried out above in 4.1 – 4.3, it is instructive to note that all the headlines display similarities in terms of thematic focusing and syntax, and this has a pedagogical implication. Scholars in the field of communication studies may see the need to pay more attention to the issue of headline casting, with a view to introducing some novelty to this age-long tradition, given the challenges of news reporting in this modern time.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to look at the structures of headlines in some newspapers in Nigeria, with a view to identifying the types of headlines cast; examining the syntactic structures of the headlines; and evaluating the level of social responsibility of the editors. Results have shown that plain, headlines with pointers, and speech as headlines characterized the headlines. Also, most of the headlines are cast in the simple sentence structures. with each expressing singularity of ideas. Again, all the editors appeared to have demonstrated professional competence in their style of reportage.

This is a demonstration of how language is used in different contexts. The essence of this study therefore is to reveal how choice of lexical items and particular use reveal the system of practice, in one domain such as the mass media. Scholars in this field, therefore, should pay serious attention to the dynamics of the study of the relationship between language as a system and language use.

Finally, as Ayodabo (2007) has stated, the purview of applied linguistics is the intricate interaction between language and the web of human social, economic, educational, religious and political activities. Hence, the principles, insight and theories of linguistic theories are applicable in almost all domains of human life; and the mass media domain is not an exception.

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