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Investigating the Meaning of Newspaper Headlines: The Issue of Ambiguity

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Abstract

One of the major reasons why newspaper readers cannot effectively interpret the actual messages of writers by glancing at the headlines is because the headlines are almost often ambiguous. This makes newspaper readers to struggle in trying to give possible interpretations to the headlines which undeniably have more than one conceivable meaning. The paper investigated data collected from three Nigerian newspapers (Vanguard, Guardian and Punch) and qualitatively analysed them, identifying linguistic features which make the headlines ambiguous. The analyses revealed that newspaper headline is a type of in-house journalistic market strategy, which puts costumers on suspense with the sole aim of promoting readership and merchandise, and that interpretation of newspaper headlines should be hesitated until the entire text has been read. It is only through this that the exact operational and contextual interpretation of a headline can be precisely and accurately achieved.

Key Words: Ambiguity, newspaper, headline, strategy, meaning, punchy, catchy

Introduction

It is almost impossible to overstate the significant role headlines play in newspapers. When carefully studied, it is observed that headlines play different conventional and pragmatic roles in language. Within the confines of syntax and semantics, there are certain barriers to interpreting newspaper headlines (Hobbs, 1998). This is because when a headline is not properly structured, it leads to misinterpretation of the intended message. To avoid such cases of misinterpretation, it is therefore important to structure newspaper headlines appropriately, so as to convey the intended meanings. To achieve this point, this paper investigates the semantic irregularities of newspaper headlines, since it has been established that headlines in most cases read differently from their actual messages

Headlines are often what the readers come across in newspapers. They are usually written on the top of newspaper articles with characteristic attributes like being punchy, concise, eye-catching and journalistic as they tend to recapitulate the essential aspects of the stories in the papers. In reporting the news, the editors have freedom to use words phrases and sentences in their own way to create headlines that express their idea of the news item.

A critical look at the headlines of newspapers show they are quite often grammatically and characteristically presented in the present tense and are also full of structural ambiguities both at the lexical and sentential levels. The word *ambiguity* has been given several definitions by scholars. For example, Leech (1981, p. 30) described ambiguity as 'an expression that has more than one interpretation assigned to it'. Ndimele also goes further to establish the fact that ambiguity entails an expression with more than one possible interpretable meaning (1997).

In language, ambiguity suggests the receptiveness of a construction to double or multiple interpretations, which can occur as a result of the presence of a word (lexical ambiguity), or by a phrase in the sentence (structural ambiguity). This paper investigated ambiguous constructions in newspaper headlines, as well as analyzed their syntactic components. This is with view to identifying the semantic or communicative effects of such ambiguous constructions in newspaper headlines and their possible journalistic highlights.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Several theories abound to describe the concept of meaning. This research work however adoptd the *Use Theory of Meaning* propounded by Wittgenstein. This theory has been suggested as the characterization of what we mean with relation to the meaning of a word and a sentence. It holds that the meaning of a word is its use in a text. That is to say that the meaning of a word or a sentence is understood from the context in which it is used. In this vein, Ndimele (1999, p.20) quoted Wittengenstein by saying that "it is a serious mistake to regard meanings as entities; rather, the meaning of any linguistic expression is determined by the context in which it is used." According to Wittgenstein, to determine the meaning of a word, it is pertinent to understand the role played by such a word in the text as well as the condition under which it is appropriate to use it. Thus, we resorted to this theoretical framework because it allows

us to suggest that the context of a text should be considered before any interpretation is assigned to such text.

The Concept of Semantics

The term 'semantics' in English, adopted from the French term *semantique* which was coined from Greek to mean 'Divination', is generally referred to as the study of meaning. It deals with all linguistics aspects of words, phrases, and sentences in language. Various scholars have tried to describe the concept of semantics from their own views. One of such is Hornby (1972, p.789) who defined semantics as 'the branch of linguistics concerned with studying the meaning of words and sentences.' Katz (1972, p.1) also said that semantics is 'the study of meaning that is concerned with what sentences and other linguistics objects express, not with the arrangement of their syntactic parts or their pronunciation.'

Other scholars such as Palmer (1976), Lyons (1977), Ndimele (1997), Saeed (2009), Bach (2009), Nwala (2015) among others in their different but related opinions, alluded to the fact that semantics is generally concerned with the study of meaning communicated through language. From the foregoing, it is clear that semantics is a linguistic or language concept which is at the centre of human relationship; it is a study which gives interpretation and meaning to human utterances and social behaviours.

Meaning

Meaning is the kernel and nexus of communication. It is what makes the exchange of any form of discourse, phatic communion and social contract possible. Communication cannot exist without meaning; this is because meaning enormously plays a great role in language use. Linguists and philosophers who in one way or the other have dealt with semantics have tried to give possible explanations to meaning. Leech (1981, p.23) suggested three aspects of meaning to include:

1. Meaning involves the speaker's intention to convey a certain meaning which may not be from the message itself.

2. Meaning involves the interpretation by hearer to depend on the context.

3.   Meaning is also something which is formal rather than something that exist in a static way. It involves action (the speaker produces effect on the hearer) and interaction (the meaning being negotiated between speaker and hearer on the basis of their mutual knowledge).

Wierzbicka (1996, p.3) argueds that "language is an instrument for conveying meaning, hence, to study language without reference to meaning is like studying road signs from the point of view of their physical properties, or like studying the structure of the eye without any reference to seeing." To further buttress the concept of meaning, Lyons (1977, p. 138) said, "it is a word of the ordinary everyday vocabulary of English".

The foregoing opinions of scholars attest to the importance of meaning in communication and also suggest the undeniable fact that when language (oral or written) is misrepresented or misinterpreted as a result of the ambiguity of words or phrases used, there is bound to be communication problems.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is an attention-grabbing linguistic trend which has received a lot of attention and will continue to receive such as long as human communication remains viable. In language, ambiguity simply means double or multiple interpretations. This may be as a result of the presence of a word with polysemous meanings in a sentence (lexical ambiguity) or a group of words in the sentence (structural ambiguity).

Various scholars have viewed ambiguity in diverse ways. Clare (1993) for example described ambiguity as that which is understood in two or more possible senses or ways. Rusche (1980) proposed that ambiguity should be extended to any verbal nuance, which gives room to alternative reactions to the same linguistic element. Hoefler (2003) in a related pattern contended that ambiguity means there is more than one meaning assigned to the same single expression. The scholars mentioned and those not mentioned here have a common opinion about ambiguity, all alluded to the fact that ambiguous expressions give two or more possible interpretations.

Ambiguity may undercut the intended value of the information of a discourse. It may also assign the reader with the task of having to comprehend multiple possible interpretations as he struggles to derive meanings from the texts. It is at this level that meaning is said to be personal (Nwala, 2015). Thus, Crystal and Davy are not wrong when they advocated that writers should anticipate the problem that can arise from having their texts read and interpreted by many recipients in a diversity of settings because, written discourse lacks immediacy of feedback which serves to clarify the adequacy of the interpretation assigned to the message conveyed (1993). From the foregoing, there are two types of ambiguities: lexical and structural ambiguity.

Akmajian et al (2008, p.1) posited that lexical ambiguity is a semantic property attributable to a word. In the same vein, Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2011) noted that lexical ambiguity arises when a lexical item in a phrase carries more than one meaning. Structural ambiguity on the other hand arises when a group of word or phrase gives two conceivable meaning.

Ndimele (1997, p.75) alluded to the foregoing by stating that "structural ambiguity results from the way an entire sentence is organized to produce several interpretations." We add here that the interpretations of phrases into two or more possible conceivable meanings may not be because of how the entire sentence is organized as Ndimele's opinion would want us to believe especially when taken literarily, but because of the syntactic structuring of words or phrases in the sentences. This is exactly what is obtainable in newspaper headlines

Newspaper Headlines

Headlines are often first thing the readers come across in newspapers. It is generally agreed that the headlines possess one of the striking features of modern day newspapers, and that journalistic language, in particular, headlines, has its own characteristics that can clearly be distinguished from the ordinary or everyday language.

The newspaper headline is a unique type of text. It has a range of functions that specifically dictate its shape, content and structure; and it operates within a range of restrictions that limits the freedom of the writer. All newspapers use the largest headline

on their front page to present the biggest news of the day. A headline is sometimes followed by a smaller or secondary headline called "subhead" or "deckhed" which gives more information (Canyook, 1995).

According to Reah (2002), the headline carries key information and attracts the attention of the readers. It delivers some details on what happened, who was involved, where it happened, and other facts. This can be simplified into these Wh-words: what, who, where, and how. The aim is to present a report of action in simple, easy-to-understand language (Emerry et al. 1971, pp.154-255; ctd. in Thanomsak, 1998).

Methodology

This paper useds the *Vanguard, Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers (all domicile in Nigeria) as its sources of data. A total of eleven (11) headlines were got from the three newspapers and analysed. The study also adopted the qualitative method of analysis. In the course of the analysis, the ambiguous expressions were identified and their possible meanings stated.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for the analysis consist of 11 headlines collected from *Guardian, Vanguard* and *the Punch* newspapers published within December 2016 and February 2017. For easy analysis and with regard to the two types of ambiguity, the data are grouped into two: (a) Lexical Ambiguity and (b) Structural Ambiguity.

A. Lexical Ambiguity

The following headlines consist of lexical ambiguous expressions:

The Guardian Newspaper Headlines

1. 'Gov Fayose may <u>dump</u> PDP in 2018' (Thurs. Dec. 1st, 2016).

The ambiguous nature of the above headline is in the use of the underlined lexical item 'dump' which can lead to multiple interpretations by various readers. The word could mean: leave, jettison; disregard or ignore.

The word 'dump' is generally regarded as a place where waste or unwanted items are left, but from the context as used in the headline, readers could interpret the headline as:

   a. Gov Fayose may <u>leave</u> PDP in 2018.

   b. Gov Fayose may <u>ignore</u> PDP in 2018.

   c. Gov Fayose may <u>jettison</u> PDP in 2018.

   d. Gov Fayose may <u>disregard</u> PDP in 2018.

The different possible interpretations will affect the general interpretation of the headline thereby making the meaning imprecise and personal. Thus, while reader **A** gets the meaning of the headline as Gov Fayose may leave PDP probably for another party, reader **B** may derive his own interpretation that Gov Fayose may not leave PDP but may decide to ignore PDP in 2018. Another speaker as the examples shown may as well interpret the expression as Gov Fayose may remain in PDP, but will disregard her activities'.

2. 'Mamora, Bugaje, 10 others <u>dropped</u> as presidency submits fresh nominees' (Friday. Jan. 13th, 2017).

The underlined lexical item 'dropped' is ambiguous. 'Dropped' could mean 'stopped', 'sacked' or 'left'. Thus, various interpretations can also be deduced from the headline, such as:

a. Mamora, Bugaje, 10 others <u>sacked</u> as presidency submits fresh nominees.

b. Mamora, Bugaje, 10 others <u>left</u> as presidency submits fresh nominees.

c. Mamora, Bugaje, 10 others <u>stopped</u> as presidency submits fresh nominees.

Looking at the headline, one cannot say whether Mamora, Bugaje, and the other 10, were formerly members of the president's cabinet who could not be re-nominated or that they were among the list of the nominees the president first considered and later changed his mind and excluded them. The use of the *fresh* also compounded the ambiguity of the sentence

3. 'Soyinka <u>flays</u> Buhari, El-Rufai over southern Kaduna killings' (Friday. Jan. 13th, 2017).

The possible interpretations of the sentence are:

a. Soyinka <u>accuses</u> Buhari, El-Rufai over southern Kaduna killings.

b. Soyinka <u>frightens</u> Buhari, El-Rufai over southern Kaduna killings.

c. Soyinka <u>strips</u> Buhari, El-Rufai over southern Kaduna killings.

d. Soyinka <u>blames</u> Buhari, El-Rufai over southern Kaduna killings.

As seen from the multiple interpretations of the sentence above, the word *flays* is semantically confusing, there is no way one can give a correct and precise interpretation to the sentence without a fore knowledge of the background of the contest. The headline is such that the interpretation will be delayed until the entire text is read.

The Vanguard Newspaper Headlines

4. 'He <u>shunned</u> invitation to clear his name' (Sunday. Dec. 18th, 2016).

The ambiguity in the above headline lies in the use of the polysemous word 'shunned'. This makes the meaning of the headline obscure. The word shunned could mean 'ignored', 'failed', 'screened out', 'avoided'. The possible interpretations of the expression include:

a. He <u>ignored</u> invitation to clear his name.

b. He <u>screened out</u> invitation to clear his name.

c. He <u>avoided</u> invitation to clear his name.

d. He <u>hid</u> invitation to clear his name.

5. 'Ex Niger Delta Militants <u>back</u> protest' (Friday, Feb. 3rd, 2017).

The linguistic item 'back' has both positive and negative inferences. It could mean:

a. Ex Niger Delta Militants <u>ignores</u> protest.

b. Ex Niger Delta Militants <u>supports</u> protest.

6. 'We'll <u>call</u> their bluff – Ebun-olu Adegboruwa' (Friday, Feb. 3rd, 2017).

Again, the headline is ambiguous because of the use of the lexical item 'call'. Generally, the word 'call' is understood as 'beckon on or to contact', however, from the context where it appears, it could generate other possible meanings such as 'address', 'predict', 'disclose', 'arouse' and "reject". Thus, the headline could be interpreted as:

a. We'll <u>address</u> their bluff.

b. We'll <u>rouse</u> their bluff.

c. We'll <u>predict</u> their bluff.

d. We'll <u>reject</u> their bluff.

The Punch Newspaper Headlines

7. 'How Govt <u>Checked</u> Spread of Water Borne Disease – Tilije (Thursday, Dec. 1st, 2016).

The headline is ambiguous because of the word 'checked'. Thus, the headline can be interpreted as:

a. How Govt <u>controlled</u> Spread of Water Borne Disease.

b. How Govt <u>inspected</u> Spread of Water Borne Disease.

c. How Govt <u>examined</u> Spread of Water Borne Disease.

d. How Govt <u>stopped</u> Spread of Water Borne Disease.

8. '<u>Ban</u> Land Border Vehicles Importation, <u>Face</u> severe Consequences' (Sunday, Dec. 18th, 2016).

The lexical ambiguity lies is the words 'ban and face'. The words could be described in various ways such as

a. <u>Stop</u> Land Border Vehicles Importation, <u>Confront</u> Severe Consequences.
b. <u>Prohibit</u> Land Border Vehicles Importation, <u>Cause</u> Severe Consequences.

B. Structural Ambiguity

The Guardian Newspaper Headlines

9. 'Reps move to ban acting president, gov from second term' (Thursday, Dec. 1st, 2016).

The headline is structurally ambiguous because there are two possible interpretations to it. Thus, the reader could understand it as:

a. Reps move to ban acting president and acting governor from second term.

b. Reps move to ban acting president and incumbent governor from second term.

The ambiguous nature of the headline is as a result of the use of the modifier or qualifier, 'acting'. Opinion may be divided here, whether the qualifier stands for both

the president and the gov. and has been deleted in line with the transformational rule of *deletion under identity*, or that the modifier pre-qualifies the president alone.

10. 'HIV patients lament high user fees, treatment failure' (Thursday, Dec. 1st, 2016).

The above headline is structurally ambiguous because it can generate two possible interpretations:

a. HIV patients lament high user fees and high treatment failure

b. HIV patients lament over treatment failure and high user fees.

From the structural analysis of the headline, it could be deduced that the HIV patients are lamenting over treatment failure due to their inability to afford user fees or that the HIV patients are lamenting over high fees they allegedly pay and still experience rising cases of treatment failure.

The Vanguard Newspaper Headlines

11. 'N-Delta youth urge leaders to support FG for development' (Thursday, Dec. 1st, 2016).

The possible meanings of the sentence are among others:

a. N-Delta youths urge N-delta leaders to support FG for N-Delta development

b. N-delta youths urge leaders in the country to support FG for FG development

c. N-Delta youths urge leaders both religious and political to support FG for federal development.

The ambiguity in the headline is the failure to specify the leaders talked about as well as the place to be developed. This makes the meaning of the sentence to remain open, where anybody can give their own interpretation.

The headlines of the newspapers as presented thus far are generally ambiguous because each can be given at least two meanings, this situation will lead to diverse interpretations and even misinterpretation of some of them. The essence of language is communication and for discourses to be successful or reach illocutionary uptake, infelicitous expressions caused by at times the flouting of the cooperative principles or maxim, wrong choice of words and the inappropriate consideration of the context must always be avoided. However, in the context of this paper, the ambiguity of the headlines can be claimed in some quarters to be the product of the journalistic in-house language, which newspaper script writers and editors are known for. But this claim as one may readily point out cannot over-shadow the fact that when once an expression is given different interpretation from its targeted interpretation, the core of the message or discourse intent has been defeated.

The essence of our use of the Use theory or the Operational theory as our theoretical framework is to provide a way out of the whole confusion. Going by this theory, expressions are not to be interpreted based on the conventional and primary meanings of the lexical items used or even the phrases, rather, their roles, uses and the contexts must be strictly considered. The theory observes that words of human language have many discernible meanings, and therefore insists that every meaning of every sentence

must be interpreted within the context of usage, this will to a large extent make meaning precise and predictable.

The fallout of this theory is the fact that the interpretation of newspaper headlines should be hesitated until the entire text has been read. It is only through this that the exact operational and contextual interpretation of a headline can be precisely and accurately achieved. The punchy and catchy nature of newspaper headlines, is a market strategy, which puts costumers on suspense with the sole aim of promoting readership and merchandise

Conclusion

This paper has established that words, phrases, sentences can be interpreted in various ways which could blur the intended meaning of the writer using the newspaper headlines as a case study. With the frequent use of ambiguous newspaper headlines it may not be out of place to suggest that, editors and script writers should always use secondary headlines called "subhead" or "deckhed". This paper has shown the unquantifiable role of the context in the interpretation of newspaper headlines, a quest which confirms the importance of pragmatics in interpretation and also adds to the aged-longed rejection of the traditional semanticist's postulation that pragmatics is the waste basket of semantics.

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