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A Lexico-Grammatical Interpretation of Ambiguity and Communicative Effectiveness of Media Headlines of Print Media (Pp. 122-139)

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Abstract

This paper analyses semantic ambiguous headlines stating their communicative effectiveness with regards to print media. The concentration of this paper is on the multiple meaning of headlines. Hence, we have realized that multiple meanings of a word or sentence can be analysed semantically based on the syntactic structure. Therefore, the research revolves on the mass media with emphasis on the print media who distort meaning by means of manipulating the sentence clarity to that of vagueness. Some print media have made possible the success of examining critically such headlines which have being selected randomly with regard to there communicative effectiveness.

Key Words: ambiguity, pragmatics, semantics, communicative effectiveness

Introduction

Sapir (1977) defines languages as “a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntary produced symbols”. Block and Trager (1986) define language as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates” while Hall (1978) sees language as “the institution where human beings communicate and interact with each other”, Gimson (1984) sees language as “a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community.”

Language, therefore, is a universal phenomenon which aims at promoting social and peaceful co-operation and existence amongst the numerous people of the different speech communities that constitute the world. Language has thus become an enormously powerful tool, especially in its universal range of application, because language has become and will continue to be the most subtle and powerful device man has and will ever have for controlling his environment including other people. However, language is not used to communicate meaning only but to mask it and such is the motive behind the analysis of this study, which is the “Semantic Ambiguity and Communicative Effectiveness of Media Headlines of print media”.

Generally, though language is used to influence attitude, behaviour or perception of certain things, person or events in the society, this analysis would be incomplete if the different levels of linguistic description are not mentioned. The study of sounds which a language has and how these sounds combine to form words is termed as phonology. Syntax on the other hand is the study of how words can be combined into sentences while semantics is the study of the meaning of words and sentences. The division into levels of analysis has made the understanding of language easier in the sense that if one is expected to learn a foreign language he/she might learn a word from a book, know what it means but not know how to pronounce it, or one might hear a word, pronounce it perfectly but might not know what it means. Then on the other hand one might know the pronunciation and meaning of a word but might not know how its plural is formed or what its genitive case looks like. As earlier mentioned the division into levels of analysis of descriptive linguistic has aided the study of language.

Semantics as a branch of linguistics studies meaning of words and sentences in language. The term, semantics is said to be in popular use since the first

half of the 20th century. Different scholars have tried to investigate the nature of meaning and how it differs from other disciplines because semantics studies meaning in a systematic and objective way. Pragmatics is another branch of linguistics which studies the way humans use their language in communication. Pragmatics and semantics according to Leech (1983:6) complements each other, based on the fact that semantics and pragmatics are both concerned with language.. Discourse analysis is the analysis of language in use or it could be defined as the examination of the organizational structure of a language and how it can be accounted for and studied. This is why this paper focuses on these three linguistic fields: semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis as they are concerned with language in use and its meaning.

Language has consequently become significantly functional in the lives of people and in the society because it serves as a tool that enables man to deal with the changes in his environment. Groups of people all over the world are identified by their various languages and as a result of how language is often used and made to adjust to and convey all purposes, language has continuously and will continue to be the live-wire of the society. Thus, this makes language to be an important tool in media communication. Thus communication entails the process whereby a message is passed from the encoder to the decoder and the decoder's ability to comprehend the message sent from the encoder. In other words communication is a situation that occurs where there is commonality or shared background experience between the sender and the receiver of the message. This is why Crystal (1997:72) sees communication as the transmission and reception of informational message between source and a receiver, using a signaling system. In linguistic contents, source and receiver are interpreted in human terms, the system involved is language, and the notion of response to (or acknowledgement of) the message becomes of crucial importance.

On the other hand, Dominick (1990:15-b) defines mass communication as ...the process by which a complex organization with the aid of one or more machine produces and transmits public messages that are directed at large, heterogeneous and scattered audiences.

From the above definition, mass communication is a process of transmitting message through a mass media like newspaper magazine, books, radio, and television to large population over long distance. Mass communication often

involves simultaneous contact between one sender and many receivers, allowing an immediate and extensive influence and an immediate response by many at a time (Mc Quail, 1987:32).

The crux of this paper is on semantic ambiguity as it affects communication effectiveness of media headlines of print media. Semantic ambiguity is concerned with meaning relations at sentence level which is a sub-field in the study of semantics that deals with the influence of one word upon another in a sentence. Other such terms are tautology, redundancy, paraphrase, anomaly etc. Ambiguity is defined as a grammatical phenomenon in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation. Ambiguity could either be as a result of syntax or semantics. Semantic ambiguity is a situation in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation based on the meaning of a word or words which in themselves can be misinterpreted. Semantic ambiguity is further divided into two:

- The lexical ambiguity is the construction of a sentence that has several meaning due to the presence of a particular word.
- The structural ambiguity is a situation in which a particular word or phrase can modify more than one constituent or can be involved in more than one relational association.

Syntactic ambiguity which was earlier mentioned is referred to the grammatical construction of the phrase or sentence which brings about misinterpretation e.g.

“I know a man with a dog who has fleas”

The meaning of the above example is unclear and as such can be misinterpreted based on its ambiguous nature. In other words one is not clear whether it is the man or the dog that has fleas. The construction has therefore distorted a direct translation of the sentence. Hence, the study is geared at considering some selected headlines of some print media. The newspapers which serve as a category of print media have been the most prolific media, especially in the western world. The invention of printing in the middle of the 15th century represents one of the greatest landmarks in human history. The printing press made possible the following.

- The wide dissemination of knowledge
- The rapid flow of ideas from one country to another
- The popularization of learning

The print media which are published on daily basis are among the leading newspapers in Nigeria today, and as such it is no surprise that these newspapers have developed a rich heritage in areas of entertainment, refreshment, authoritative etc.

Some of the basic functions of these national dailies to the Nigerian society are to:

- Project equity and fairness among the people
- Preserve integrity
- Center their attention towards the people
- To aim at nothing lesser than excellence

Thus this paper considered sentence from the point of view of its semantic structure which are ambiguous as regards to media headlines of print media. Typical examples captioned from the print media are:

‘INEC list illegal, dangerous’

‘OBASANJO loses grip’

‘Power Probe Contractor absconds with N4.5bn’.

The newspaper headlines in their ambiguous state could be misinterpreted by members of the society based on the construction of phrases or sentences. Taking a close look at the second headline ‘OBASANJO loses Grip’ could be understood as OBASANJO has lost a hold of something or that OBASANJO has lost someone called ‘Grip’. It is clearly understood that ambiguous statements in themselves are incomplete though they make sense but could be analyzed differently by people. In this study we have discussed communication and have also seen that mass communication involves one sender and several receivers. Semantic ambiguity on media headlines is the basis of this paper and it is clearly understood that syntax as a grammatical phenomenon is the backbone of such ambiguous headlines because it is responsible for the grammatical construction and reconstruction of the word order in a sentence or phrase. Therefore this paper wishes to create awareness that the media headlines of some newspapers are ambiguous. It is based on

this that the paper intends to do an x-ray of media headlines of print media that are sentences in nature. Also, the paper hopes to find out if reasons exist on why the newspapers choose to be ambiguous in their headlines.

An Overview of Rules of Communication

There are several multiple rules associated with effectiveness of communication in language. Four sets of rules are relevant to our study. Semantic rules, syntactic rules, pragmatic rules and discourse analysis.

Semantics is the study of the way humans use language to evoke meaning in others. Semantics focuses on individual words and meaning. Semanticist are people who study semantics and are interested in how language and its meaning change over time. Syntax on the other hand is the way in which words are arranged to form phrases and sentences. The meaning of an expression or statement can change its meaning either from declarative statement to interrogative statement or vice-versa e.g.

“Simbi is going home tomorrow”

The above statement uses syntax to indicate that someone is leaving for a place the next day, but if a change in the word arrangement, the initial statement now becomes a question and takes a different form e.g Is Simbi going home?.

Pragmatics is the study of language as it is used in a social context. This is why The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy says “pragmatics deals with utterances by which we mean specific events, the intentional acts of speakers at times and places which typically involve language”. It goes on to say that pragmatics deals with the effects of content which is equivalent to saying that the study of pragmatics simply deals with utterances. According to The Free Encyclopedia Wikepeidia, pragmatics as a linguistic field contrast with the study of semantics which is the study of linguistic meaning, since pragmatic is the study of how contextual factors interact with linguistic meaning in the interpretation of utterances and its effect on the communicators. In many ways, pragmatics can simply be defined as the study of invisible meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn't actually said (or written) in order for such to happen, speakers and writers must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions based on ingenuity.

Discourse analysis studies the organization of language above the sentence or the clause such as conversational exchanges or written text (Stubbs, 1985). It also follows that discourse analysis is also concerned with language in use in social contexts, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers.

Ambiguity

Kempson 1977 defines ambiguity “as the state of having two possible interpretations from an expression”, that is an expression in general terms is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning. When a word e.g ‘bank’ has multiple meanings, we have lexical ambiguity, while a sentence can be ambiguous even if none of its words is ambiguous, because sometimes the ambiguity is considered syntactic as a result of an alternative meaning that correspond to an alternative syntactic configuration e.g ‘Mary saw John with a telescope’ there are two possible interpretations from this sentence by two separate listeners. Listener ‘A’ may assume or understand that Mary saw John holding a telescope while listener ‘B’ would deduce that Mary saw John with the aid of an instrument called a telescope.

Ndimele (1999) defines ambiguity “as a grammatical phenomenon in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation.” He likens it to polysemy in the sense that one stretch of utterance is given more than one meaning. Ambiguity is thus divided into two types namely: lexical and structural ambiguity.

The lexical ambiguity is a type of ambiguity which is realized when a construction has more than one meaning due to the presence of a particular word in that construction. Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, is a type of ambiguity which is realized when a particular word or phrase can modify more than one constituent or can be involved in more than one relational association.

Based on the above descriptions, we are made to understand that an expression might just be limited to two separate expressions before it is termed as being ambiguous. It is said to be the multiple meanings associated with an expression.

Ambiguity according to Mayfield (2002) refers to “the openness of a word or claim to more than one interpretation; the quality of possessing more than one meaning”

According to Palmer (1981), ambiguity could be defined as “the uncertainty of meaning, usually caused by word or phrases that convey more than one meaning”. For instance, “Joshua is cool” can refer both to Joshua’s body temperature and to his enviable social behaviour.

Why ambiguity in the language of the media?

It is the basic responsibility of the newspapers as well as other mass media to inform people about the various happenings or events that take place around them and the media must also decide which news is most important and suitable for publication. They must be sure that such information is accurate to influence people’s thoughts and attitudes through their editorial opinions. This brings to mind the relevance of the relationship between language and culture. Culture may be defined “as all of the socially transmitted behavioural patterns, beliefs, attitudes and values of a particular period, class, community or culture” (Pearson, et al 2003). Culture is a tool that binds the general public and the mass media as a whole thereby creating the lens through which we perceive the world. Language thus develops in response to the needs of the culture or to the perceptions of the world. European scholars like Derrida (1974), Foucault (1980), Habermas (1984) and Lucan (1981) assume that language creates reality, in the sense that language in whatever way or manner used, shapes our perception of reality, just as Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf were among the first to discuss the relationship between language and perception.

Ambiguity is the state of having two possible interpretation (Kempson 1977) while vagueness allows for more than interpretations. For example, there is an element of vagueness in the sentence.

“People takes over as head of service” *Vanguard* (June 17).

Here we realize the linguistic term ‘head’ is the same identical lexeme but is polysemous in nature thereby changing the denotative meaning that can easily be deduced to a connotative one.

Structural ambiguity is a type of ambiguity that is realized when a particular word or phrase can modify more than one constituent or can be involved in more than one relational association e.g

'I know of a girl with a dog who has fleas'

This example explains to us that the meaning of the above sentence is not easily deducible because one is not clear as to who has fleas whether the dog or the girl. This sentence expresses an idea in such a way that more than one meaning is possible. These several expression lays emphasis on the fact that ambiguity as a linguistic phenomenon has a relationship with vagueness in the sense that the expression is not clear as to the exact information that the speaker is trying to pass across to the hearer, communication is thus said to be a failure if the intended meaning or intention by the speaker is it not fully understood by the hearer or audience as the case may be in relationship between the mass media and the entire public.

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OBAMA: A RACE to win (Vanguard June 17)

Depending on the different interpretations of race:

- A competition between people, animals, vehicles etc,
- One of the main groups that humans can be divided into their physical differences,
- A group of people who share the same language, history, culture etc.

'Race' is determined as the same identical lexeme but it is polysemous. Ambiguity and vagueness arise from the device of the language itself, in terms of the syntactical structure that was earlier mentioned, that syntactic ambiguity means that the grammatical construction of the phrase or sentence brings about the misinterpretation e.g.

"I know a girl with a dog who has fleas" the utterance or sentence is unclear, thereby stating the fact that ambiguous meanings implies non-specificity grammatical situation where by the word or grammatical unit does not have a

specific meaning which is rather synonymous to the act of indeterminacy of words or utterances because one is not convinced of the meaning which someone can deduce from the headline which is central to the main information. All media headlines that are analyzed shall be analysed based on the multiple meaning that could easily be deduced.

Semantic Interpretation of Some Lexically Ambiguous Media Headlines

‘NITEL Board Ratifies Iseghohi’s Appointment. *Thisday* (August 18).

The ambiguous headline here is as a result of the word ‘board’ thereby blurring the clarity of such a statement because the term ‘board’ could be interpreted as:

- To board a plane
- A group of people (e.g Board of Directors)
- Black board or hard material
- Piece of wood.

Different audience or readers could deduce several meanings from the ambiguous headlines as in:

- NITEL ‘as a group of people’ Ratifies Iseghohi’s Appointment.
- NITEL ‘black board’ Ratifies Iseghohi’s Appointment
- NITEL ‘board a plane’ to Ratifies Iseghohi’s Appointment

‘FCTA sets up land use Allocation Committee’. *Vanguard* (June 17th)

The ambiguity is both lexical and structural in the sense that looking at the lexical unit ‘land’ one could understand the expression in several ways such as:

- Surface of the earth that is not a sea
- The area of grounds that somebody owns.
- Country or region in an emotional or imaginative way (e.g she longed to return to her native land).

To understand this headline clearly, the audience or readers would interpret it differently by different individual, base on the diverse knowledge they have about the word ‘land’.

“I’ve no Hand in Harry, Dikibo’s Killings-Odili”

(*Vanguard*, June 19th)

The linguistic term 'hand' refers to

- Part of body
- Help in doing something
- A person who does physical work on a farm

A reader might interpret these headlines as

- "I've no help (Accomplice) in Harry, Dikibo's Killings-Odili or
- "I've no hand (physical part of the body) in Harry Dikibo's Killings – Odili".

"Convergence'll Drive Market for information providers – experts"

Thisday (August 7)

The term 'drive' could distort the literal meaning of this expression because it is said to have several interpretation which are used in different context.

- To operate a vehicle
- To provide the power that a machine use in work
- Make somebody do something
- To move something or someone
- To hit something with force most especially in sports

Based on the several interpretations, the features of non-specificity and indeterminacy are present here, that is to say that it is not sufficiently specified so as to enable readers to have one general interpretation to the context which it is being used. The meanings of the greater part of the ambiguous sentences used in conversation are worked out by referring to the context of the speech act. In terms of truth-conditional semantics, ambiguous sentence is removed by verifying the sentence and relating it to the conditions that guarantee its truth.

Semantic Interpretation of Some Structurally Ambiguous Media Headlines

'Feeding on The Public's Innocence' *Thisday* (August 9th)

As it was earlier noted structural ambiguity comes about as a result of modification of a word or phrase upon the entire constituent of the sentence.

These several meanings of an expression although is said to have a relationship with vagueness could be distinguished as the meanings with unclear boundaries of application and indetermination which has to do with the failure to fully specify a meaning. It is usually assumed that resolving ambiguity is a pragmatic process, which involves the meaning or the situation or the condition which is itself a semantic condition, the expressions are therefore masked so as to blur the literal or denotative meanings that can be interpreted from the expressions.

In analyzing the structural ambiguous media headlines it is therefore worthy of note that structural ambiguity are said to have only one syntactic configuration.

‘Feeding on the Public’s Innocence’

Depending on whatever angle that this headline is looked at, there is always a different meaning attached to it. e.g if the readers are said to be categorized into three separate groups, each person is going to have his/her interpretation.

- Reader ‘A’ might understand the expression as someone is taking advantage of the public’s innocence.
- Reader ‘B’ would assumed that ‘the public’s innocence is on feeding.
- Reader ‘C’ would assumed or refer that ‘public’ feeding is on innocence’.

‘Ebong Advocates Efficient Export Financing System’

Thisday (August 7th)

Structurally, the media headline can also be re-structured as “Efficient Export Financing System Advocate Ebong”. We notice that the initial meaning has indeed being distorted although ambiguous media headlines have multiple meanings due to the context in which it is used.

“Virgin Nigeria lacks valid legal claim say FG”

Thisday (August 18th)

Another interpretation of the above ambiguous headline can be seen as

- ‘Valid legal claim say FG lacks virgin Nigeria’

According to Akwanya (2007)

...the differences mentioned here concerning the nature of sentence meaning are deeply rooted in the different methodologies and operating principles making the various grammars. There is a basic disagreement about the nature of sentence meaning, which has to do with the different conceptions of the nature of the sentence itself in the various grammars. Traditional grammar also stresses the compositional nature of the sentence.

- “Virgin Nigeria lacks valid legal claim says FG”
- “Valid legal claim says FG lacks virgin Nigeria ”

By pairing these two ambiguous sentences, we observe that identical words are used, but the order varies. Here, the difference in meaning is by reason of word order, which is itself a function of composition that structural ambiguity comes about as a result syntax or better still we could say that the act or situation of having structural ambiguity is the same as syntactical ambiguity.

“Pride and patriotism as China Hosts World’s Biggest Olympics”

Thisday (August 9th)

In having a re-arrangement of the word order of the above statement we can say that

- “China Hosts World’s Biggest Olympics As pride and patriotism”

From the first ambiguous headline, the readers might decode the first structure as “the emotional exhibition or expression of pride and patriotism on individuals as China host World’s Biggest Olympics”

While another reader might understand this same structure in the second form as the fact that China Hosts World’s Biggest Olympics is the dispensation of pride ad patriotism.

“Immigration, Customs to use common Hangar”

Thisday (August 18th)

Customs to use common Hangar, Immigration ambiguous sentences or utterances that the meanings indeterminacy is simply based on word order which definitely implies that it is the failure to fully specify a meaning. One is not sure or rather it is unclear “whether the customs of using common hangar is immigration or immigration as a field of occupancy employs customs to use common Hangar”

“Galvanizing Anti-corruption Volunteer Corps” *Thisday* (August 13th)

Based on the several meanings encoded in the above ambiguous headlines of the media, it can be interpreted as “the mobilization of Anti-corruption volunteer Corps” while another meaning based on the re-arrangement of the initial word order, would give the sentence another interpretation. e.g.

“Volunteer Corps Galvanizing Anti-corruption”

Here it can be interpreted that a group of people known as the Volunteer Corps Galvanized or mobilized Anti-Corruption.

“Millionaire Athletes Snub Olympic Village Life”

Thisday (August 9th)

In re-structuring the initial form or the ambiguous state of the headline:

‘Olympic Village Life Snubs Millionaire Athletes.

Therefore, indicating that the difference in meaning is as a result of word order.

“EFCC closes in on House Members” *Thisday* (August 18th)

A change in the word order goes thus:

“House Members Closes in on EFCC”

Here instead of the initial meaning that one can interpret from the headline that EFCC has put a check on house members” one, on the other hand it could be interpret the same statement as “the House Members have put a close check on EFCC”.

“Ribadu’s Demotion Unsettles NIPSS. *Thisday* (August 7th)

NIPSS Unsettles Ribadu’s Demotion.

From the second construction it could be interpreted that NIPSS (the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies) criticizes Ribadu’s Demotion, while the first construction or composition in which the second construction was extracted from could be interpreted as Ribadu’s Demotion causes tension, unease, thereby creating excitement in NIPSS.

“One Survivor, Five Corpses Recovered” *Vanguard*, (August, 1)

The meaning of the sentence is interpreted in several ways. First as “one survivor and five corpses were recovered”. The structure of the word order could be re-structured such that it reads.

‘Five Corpses recovered, one survivor’

Here we analyze the sentence differently in terms of meaning because the word order has being re-arranged.

Another restructuring is this:

One survivor recovered five corpses.

The meaning of the initial statement is completely vague because one is not certain as to which structure and meaning can best explain the above media headline.

‘Craze for Dual Citizenship’ *Thisday* (August 2nd)

Citizenship for Dual Craze.

The initial headline ‘Craze for Dual Citizenship is said to have several meanings as to the certainty of the precise meaning which the media as the encoder is said to pass across. The syntactic aspect of language has to do with word reformation in a sentence or utterance. Reader ‘A’ might deduce or assume that the initial headline refers to “a feeding of excitement towards two parts of citizenship”, while another reader might assumed that “citizenship entails two aspects or different kinds of mental disorder”.

NDLEA ‘My boss ordered me to free Suspended drug Baron’
Vanguard (August 2)

The above media headline could be restructured as “Suspected drug Baron ordered me to free my boss”.

It is apparently clear that a sentence could be ambiguous even if it does not have the tendency to do so. The media headline appears to be simple but one is not certain of the message which the media is trying to pass across, unless one reads the newspaper in between lines before he knows the exact information that the media are trying to express.

Conclusion

In this paper, semantic ambiguous media headlines have been looked at from the two levels in which ambiguity is broken down. The approach which was employed in this analysis is called the lexico-grammar which is concerned with the syntactic organization of words into utterances, using the systemic functional grammar or linguistics theory. Through this method we could distinguish factors between lexical and structural ambiguous headlines of print media.

When analyzing ambiguous sentences, we observed that ambiguity is not just limited to the meaning of sentences or utterances alone as in the case of semantic ambiguity but also on the order of word which is thus defined or called the syntactic ambiguity. Syntactic ambiguity comes about as a result of syntax which has to do with the patterns by which morphemes and grammatical categories such as noun, adjective, verbs, proposition and conjunction that are organized into sentences. To fully understand the syntax of a language one needs to have access to grammatical judgments.

The distortion based on syntax of the media headline is that which journalists of print media employ mostly so as to mask the denotative meaning of headlines, thereby making it structurally ambiguous. It is thus worthy of note that the print media have not limited their headline to a particular type of ambiguity but are seen to have encompassed the two types of ambiguity as a medium of disseminating information. Ambiguity as a linguistic term is said to be synonymous to polysemy at word level and has a relationship with vagueness, non-specificity and that the term ambiguity cannot be fully elaborated without making mention to syntax.

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