
Sociocultural Relations: Perspectives from Covid-19 Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic in the world as a terminal disease, different lexical items have been adopted by Nigerian News Editors in rendering news reports on the pandemic. Certainly, power and significance are embedded in these news reports and these headlines help to reveal hidden sociocultural ideologies. Thus, the present study investigates selected Covid-19 newspaper headlines in order to ascertain how newspaper headlines have been used to illuminate hidden sociocultural ideologies. The study adopts Fairclough's (1995) theory of Critical Discourse Analysis as a sociocultural practice where emphasis is made on the three dimensions (3Ds) of discourse analysis namely description, interpretation and explanation. Covid-19 newspaper headlines selected from five Nigerian Newspapers namely the Guardian, Daily Trust, Nation, Tribune and Punch newspapers are analysed thematically in a bid to ascertain how the choice of words by the editors have been used to reveal hidden ideologies. A critical analysis of the headlines reveals a covert underlying social and cultural motivation for the readers' consumption. The study further shows that covid-19 newspaper headlines perform myriads of functions from the perspective of the readers as they have implications on the social, political, economic and religious life of the readers. It can be concluded that these headlines reshape the readers' mind-set.

Keywords: Sociocultural, Newspaper headlines, Covid-19

Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis overtime has been extended to examining the production and consumption of the language of journalism as it triggers some sociological ideologies (Richardson 2007). On the 27th day of February, 2020, Nigeria recorded the first imported case of the novel corona virus disease that shocked the world affecting the economy, social life and the entire wellbeing of the people negatively. In our society, the media plays a very crucial and sensitive role as it keeps the people informed on all that happens in the country. During the period of the novel corona virus pandemic, newspaper editors utilized the opportunity to initiate discourses based on the discussion of how best to contain the virus. The newspaper headlines were a veritable means to portray different discourses on the arising issues on the pandemic. Most times, the editors use certain words to trigger some ideologies and power relations among the readers. These editors no doubt employed certain striking headlines as a way of marketing their newspaper as well as a means of positioning their newspapers amidst other competing newspaper firms.

In this paper, an attempt is made to critically analyze Nigeria newspaper headlines with regards to the depiction of societal ideologies and unequal power relations of different events. This study is necessitated based on the fact that the newspaper being a daily production, shapes the thought process of its readers. Thus, in this paper the newspaper headlines are examined to ascertain the ideologies triggered among readers. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section two goes into the explication of Critical Discourse Analysis, section three presents the methodology while section four presents and analyzes the data. Section five forms the conclusion of the study.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis can be used interchangeably (Wodak and Meyer 2001). Critical Discourse Analysis started from a symposium at Amsterdam University, Amsterdam. Pioneer scholars like Van Leeuwen and Ruth Wodak spent time to discuss Critical Discourse Analysis as a theory. Furthermore, Woofitt 2005 identifies Critical Discourse Analysis as a critical approach to Discourse Analysis. Just as Wodak and Meyer (2001), Woofitt traces critical linguistics to Norman Fairclough, Teun A. Van Dijk and Ruth Wodak. Woofitt simply put it to be how political and social inequalities are manifested in a discourse. Woofitt also emphasizes that there is no one way of carrying out a Critical Discourse Analysis unlike Conversational Analysis. In addition, Woofitt lists texts, ideology, discourse and power as essential tools for a Critical Discourse Analysis. A text according to the author goes beyond a written document or script but could be multi-semiotic in nature as it could be a photography, music, written words and special sounds. He uses an example of a product advertisement done through the television. On the other hand, ideology as the name implies refer to a set of belief system which enhance different views on social inequality in a society. A typical example could be seen in our African Culture where people select words in speaking to people at the helm of affairs (constituted authority). Critical Discourse Analysis entails the construction of power through language in the society.

Van Dijk (1995) defines Critical Discourse Analysis as the study of the way in which social power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and represented in text or talk in a social or political context. Dijk posits that there is no specific way

of carrying out a Critical Discourse Analysis especially in recent times as the field is being researched on and developed. He also notes that previous studies did not highlight the dominant areas. In studying Critical Discourse Analysis, Dijk also identifies the micro and macro level of the social order. As noted by the author, power, dominance and inequality are at the macro level while language use, discourse, verbal intention and communication belong to the micro level. Van Dijk names the political discourse, gender inequality, ethnocentrism, the antisemitism, nationalism and racism research, media discourse and professional and institutional power as dominant areas of carrying out a Critical Discourse Analysis.

In addition, discourse representation in media discourse identifies tendencies in the representation of spoken and written discourses in newspapers and how these tendencies accord with ideologies which are implicit in the practice of news production (Fairclough, 1995).

Critical Discourse Analysis and the Media

Richardson (2007) posits that Critical Discourse Analysis could be a veritable means of looking at newspapers. The author opines that power and significance of news journalism are relevant to contemporary society and that suggests why they reproduce social inequalities and social relation which for him can be studied at three levels namely; the material realities of society in general, the practices of journalism and the character and function of journalistic language more specifically. Richardson further states that these levels are enormous as they tend to attract researchers. Fairclough (1995) identifies tendencies in spoken and written discourses in Newspapers in line with news production. Fairclough prefers the term media representation. The work of Fairclough is a revisit of Volosinov's account of analyzing discourse which are

mode, boundary maintenance, stylisticity, situationality and setting.

One of the foremost researchers in Discourse Analysis, Van Dijk (1998) claims that newspaper headline discourse can be viewed from the position of the headline, the boldness of the headline, the vocabulary adopted in the headline, the use of punctuation marks, the syntax of the headline, the number of occurrence of an event and lastly the presenter's power. Van Dijk (1991), Dilin et al (1988) assert that Critical Discourse Analysis also on how discourse structures influence mental representation. At the global level of discourse, topics may influence what is seen as the most important information of text and at such correspond to the top level of their mental models. For instance, expressing a topic in a headline in news may influence how the event is defined in terms of a preferred mental model.

In a bid to account for language ideology and power relations in Nigerian newspaper headlines Taiwo (2007) investigates six Nigerian newspapers adopting the Critical Discourse Analysis framework. Findings emanating from the study reveal that the ideologies that lie in newspaper headlines instigate sociocultural ideas among the readers. Taiwo (2007) discovers that there are hidden ideological meanings beyond the rhetorical and graphological devices used in the newspaper headlines examined and goes ahead to conclude that the preponderant theme of the headlines during the time of the study were based on politics. Furthermore, Taiwo avers that newspaper editors prefer to use plain headlines than others as people use this opportunity to build ideologies which translate to different opinions about the people. For Taiwo (2007), the headlines are basically emotion inducing.

Sari (2019) studies headline news on detik.com online media using Fairclough theory which was basically aimed at revealing the three dimension of a text which involves text, discourse and social practice. Specifically, the author focuses on the headlines news about Anis Baswedan, the governor of Jakarta, capital city of Indonesia. The study shows that detik.com newspaper headlines on Anis Baswedan painted a negative picture of the governor. Sari (2009) through the study demonstrates that journalists are in a habit of using some figurative language to attract readers' attention. The figurative language discussed by Sari includes sarcasm, metaphor, pleonasm, irony, rhetoric and paradox. The author further notes that such negative words like *siasia*, *mubazir* and *pemborosan* used to comment on the action of the governor buttressed the negative image ascribed to Anis Baswedan.

Tiruneh et al (2020) critically analyze the social discourse of COVID -19 as reflected in the texts, conversations, dialogues, interviews and images from Facebook, YouTube and Facebook Messenger social media platforms. The findings of Tiruneh et al (2020) suggests that social media is a reliable instrument for effective critical analysis of discourses on different issues. In addition, the authors posit that the COVID-19 pandemic situated writers from different fields and institutions to the center of common discussions on the agenda. The analysis further reveals the subjugation of class differences and bringing the plight of other people to the fore. Tiruneh et al (2020) submit that social media users used the platform for reflecting and rethinking the past as well as a means challenging the status quo. The use of social media in this way according to the author is capable of triggering media revolution targeted at transforming the society. From a corpus perspective, Yu et al (2021) investigate the Critical Discourse

Analysis of news reports on the COVID-19 pandemic in China and the United Kingdom. The researchers employ Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model as framework using Antconc software 3.2.4 on self-built corpora. The study reveals that China daily used more objective and neutral words in discussing the pandemic and also showed more active attitudes in the fight against the pandemic while the guardian employed more of negative words in discussing the pandemic breakout and words with weak restricting force when making report on the virus. The conclusion by Yu et al (2021) is that their research gives an insight to analyzing a specific issue in different ways which is as a result of the ideologies built up by news reports.

On Nigerian newspaper discourse, Agbeleoba et al (2020) carry out a corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis of pre-2019 general elections reports in selected Nigerian newspapers. This critical analysis study is aimed at investigating various inherent ideologies that presuppose some selected news report on the 2019 Nigeria's general elections. The researchers discover that the negative ideas of many observers about the election have been predicted by newspaper reports. Hence, they conclude that news reporters do not account for issues concerning the electoral body with the same constructive and destructive dispositions which in turns gives a chance for subjectivity and prejudice. The present study departs from previous studies as it explores Covid19 headlines in selected Nigerian Newspapers. The next section goes into explication of the method adopted in data collection.

Methodology

The source of data for this research is from five (5) Nigerian newspapers. The five newspapers are the Nigerian Tribune, the Punch, the Guardian, the Nation and Daily Trust. Headlines bothering on the Corona virus as reported in these newspapers formed the data. A total of forty (40) headlines were selected. These headlines were selected between March and April, 2020. The period covered what can be described as the early days of the pandemic in the country.

In the analysis of data, the selected headlines were classified thematically and evaluated in a bid to unravel depictions of social ideologies and relations of power. The thematic classifications include medical updates, Political power display, Social life restrictions Education, Immigration and Travel, Religious Worship updates/guidelines, Foreign News and update on politician's health. The headlines are discussed under the relevant theme in subsequent section.

Data Presentation and Analysis

1. Medical update

The following COVID 19 newspaper headlines fall within the domain of medical update.

- a. Health minister, NCDC Chief brief Buhari. *The Nation March 29, 2020*
- b. Eleven states, FCT shun chloroquine clinical trial-NAFDAC. *Saturday punch April 4, 2020*
- c. Lagos to begin trial as M&B produces one million tablets. *Saturday punch April 4, 2020*
- d. FG says it won't release corpses to families. *Saturday punch April 4, 2020*

- e. We want to repair more ventilator to save covid-19 patients. *Saturday punch April 4, 2020*
- f. Lagos discharges four corona virus patient. *The Guardian April 4, 2020*
- g. NMA, Resident Doctors reject move by FG to import Chinese doctors. *Nigeria Tribune Monday 6th April, 2020*
- h. Don't bring Chinese doctors, NMA, Nurses warn FG. *Nigerian Tribune. Monday 6 April, 2020*
- i. Chinese doctors won't have contact with patients, Health Minister says. *Nigerian Tribune. Monday 6 April 2020*
- j. PDP, Labour protest as Chinese doctors arrive. *The Guardian. Thursday, April 9, 2020*
- k. VIPs, hospitals' disregard for NCDC rules worries government. *The punch. April 17, 2020*

A total of eleven headlines fall within the medical update theme. These headlines are as captured in the Punch, The Guardian and Nigerian Tribune. During this period of the deadly virus, the Nigerian government did not find it easy to contain the virus as there were insufficient ventilators. So many ideas were coming up from the medical sector as chloroquines were seemed to work for some people. The Nigerian government on the refusal and objection of the citizens and medical professionals invited the Chinese doctors. This is an example of the veto power bestowed on the government with regards to decision making. This decision brought about verbal protest by the opposition party (PDP) and the Labour Congress.

Also, social placement is always inevitable in the society as the elites, aristocrats or highly placed individuals flouted the

NCDC rules. For them, there should be an exception which means the rules are meant for the low class in the society.

2. Display of political power

The theme on display of political power comprise the following headlines:

- a. FG to release N10billion to Lagos, N1billion to pharmaceutical firms. *Nigeria Tribune. Thursday, 26th March, 2020.*
- b. Buhari shuts down Lagos, Abuja, Ogun for 14 days. *The Nation. Monday, March 30, 2020*
- c. 11 million Nigerians to get palliatives, says FG. *Nigerian Tribune. Wednesday 1, April, 2020*
- d. Lockdown will last as long as necessary, says Buhari. *The Nation. Sunday April 12, 2020*
- e. Covid-19: FG warns private hospitals, encourages production of local face masks. *Nigerian Tribune. Friday, 17th April, 2020*
- f. FG threatens to close private hospitals treating the rich, others. *The Punch, Friday April 17, 2020.*
- g. Presidency bars ministers, other kyaris' burial attendee from villa. *The punch Monday, April 20, 2020*

A total of seven newspaper headlines fit into the thematic classification depicting the display of political power.

Under the democratic system of government, the president is the commander in chief of the Armed Forces and at the helm of affairs. These headlines clearly depict where power lies and power dominance is evident. It is the federal government that makes laws to guide the overall activities of the people during this pandemic period. Buhari using his power shuts down three major cities with

high number of covid-19 cases which brings about mixed reactions from people. The Federal Government sets to release 10 billion to only Lagos State out of the three states which had been shut down on account of corona virus. Some say it is impossible for them to stay without trading or searching for greener pastures. In order to maintain class, the upper class decide to go for their covid-19 medications in private hospitals, on the other hand, the owners of the private hospitals see it as an opportunity to generate more funds.

3. Social Life Restrictions

- a. Closure of Lagos markets, courts, recreation centers takes effect from tomorrow. *The Guardian, Wednesday, March 25, 2020.*
- b. Imo bans religious gatherings, weddings and burials. *The Nation. Sunday March 29, 2020*
- c. Lockdown: Police arrest Funke Akindele over house party. *Nigerian Tribune. April 6, 2020.*

Three headlines fit into the Social Life Restriction theme. The government thought it wise to shut down markets, courts and some social gatherings as a way of preventing the spread of the novel coronavirus. During the lockdown, a renowned actress, Funke Akindele flouted the lockdown rules which made the government to sue her in a bid to punish noncompliance to laid-down COVID 19 guidelines. The news trended on various social media platforms thus Nigerians knew how serious the lockdown rule was. For the government a shutdown was the best and first step to secure the lives of her citizens. This decision to ‘shut down’ was made by the executive thus a demonstration of power.

4. Education

- a. No reopening of schools yet, FG tells Nigerians. *The Punch. Monday, April 13, 2020*
- b. FG, states meet Tuesday to discuss school resumption. *Sunday Punch. July 5, 2020*
- c. Ekiti to teach pupils through radio. *The Nation. Monday, March 30, 2020*
- d. FG approves reopening of varsities. *Daily Trust. September 23, 2020.*

Every child should be entitled to quality education. This is a possible reason behind the introduction of free education at the basic level by some states in the federation. From the four headlines under the Education theme, one discovers that the corona virus pandemic affected the education sector drastically as school children were at home for a long time. Alternative ways of teaching such as would avoid gathering of learners were devised. During this time, most parents frowned at the idea and attest that the virus only affected the adults following from the daily statistics by the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC). This opinion possibly led to deliberations by both federal and state governments on the reopening of school. Some states in the bid to help students and pupils introduced the radio classes to keep the students busy in order not be affected wholly by the pandemic. After some considerations, the government approved the reopening of schools. Between the closure and reopening of schools, the newspaper headlines examined clearly depict that the government both at the federal and state levels have the prerogative to decide what happens in the education sector.

5. Immigration and Travels

- a. More borders shut as states restricts movements. *The Nation. Monday, March 30, 2020*
- b. U.S citizens stranded at Lagos airport as evacuation flight fails to arrive. *Saturday Punch. April 4, 2020*
- c. 91 begin quarantine as more returnees take land borders. *The punch. Thursday, April 9, 2020*
- d. 10 Nigerians awaiting evacuation form Uk test positive. *The punch. April 14, 2020*
- e. Returnee Nigerians to pay for quarantine. *The Nation. Friday, May 15, 2020.*

Immigration and travels were affected by the pandemic as captured by the headlines in 5a-e. Following the restrictions on movement by the federal government, many states adopt the federal government's style of closing boarders with other countries. States governors also close up their land borders with other states to contain the pandemic. This was also a way of ensuring total lockdown in the country. Also, most expatriates in Nigeria were scared of the virus that they started running back to their countries to have a reunion with their families. This includes, those in the embassies, expatriate lecturers in the universities across the country and others. Isolation centre were made available in Nigerian's airports for those from international countries.

6. Religious Worship Ban

- a. No procession, no gaiety. *Sunday Tribune. Sunday, 5 April, 2020*

- b. Unusual Palm Sunday as Christians Celebrate in near-empty churches. *Nigeria Tribune. Monday, 6 April, 2020*
- c. Easter Service: Ondo to prosecute Erring Pastors. *The Nation. Tuesday, April 14, 2020*
- d. Federal Government frowns as states reopen Mosques, Churches. *The Nation. Friday, May 15, 2020.*
- e. Two Imams arrested in Kaduna for conducting service. *The Nation. March 29, 2020.*

From the onset, the Nigerian government shut down all places of religious worship in order to avoid large crowds and physical contact among people. The pandemic broke out weeks to the Easter celebration hence Christians were affected as there was no Easter celebration for them in the year 2020. Most Christians were not happy with the government as markets were open but churches and mosques were shut. Religious heads were also arrested which the people saw as unethical. This was also a reminder to the people that the government controls even the religious institutions in the country.

7. Foreign News

- a. 1,000 Nigerian apply to return from U.S, others. *The Nation. Friday, April 10,2020.*
- b. Boris Johnsons' condition worsens, now in ICU. *Nigerian Tribune. Tuesday, April 7, 2020*

Fear is portrayed here by the editors. Nigerians seeing this will be cautious enough. This made Nigerians believe that the virus is real especially with a high death rate of people in the United States and United Kingdom, to the extent that the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson contracted the virus.

8. Updates on Politician's Health

- a. El-Rufai: I'm still positive. *The Nation Thursday, April 16, 2020.*
- b. Umahi test positive: Ortom's wife, SSG others in Benue. *The Nation. Sunday July 5, 2020.*
- c. I've been working from home, says Kyari. *The Nation. Monday, March 30, 2020.*

The corona virus showed itself not to be a respecter of anyone as politicians were also victims of the virus. The statement from Kyari throws more light to his ill health. He wished to let Nigerians know that he is recuperating. Some Nigerians weighed these reports on politicians' health status on the covid-19 to be false except for the chief of staff. Many Nigerians says it is a way of incurring funds to their state. On the other hand, this was a way of telling Nigerians that the disease could be cured and not a death sentence.

Conclusion

This study has explored how people build ideologies as a socio-cultural practice using headlines of newspaper. Based on the analysis of the newspaper headlines, on one hand, we observe that the covid-19 discourse displays that the Nigerian government has a high power of decision with regards to all events even when people are averse to these decisions. On the other hand, editors write headlines that build hidden ideological mindsets among the consumers who read these headlines. That is to say that the covid-19 newspaper headlines perform myriads of function from the viewpoint of the readers. However, the functions performed have

implications on the social, political, economic and religious life of the readers.

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