

Speech Act Analysis of Daily Trust and The Nation Newspapers Headline Reports on ‘Boko Haram’ Attacks

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ABSTRACT

This research studies newspaper headline reports on Boko Haram attacks in Daily Trust and The Nation, with a view to identifying the types of speech acts used in the headlines, the predominant speech act used as well as their implication to language use. Thirty six and Thirty five headlines are selected from the Daily Trust and The Nation newspapers respectively and each is assigned a corresponding speech act category. The findings reveal that out of the five speech act categories of J.R. Searle which is used as the theoretical framework of the research, only three categories are used in all the headlines in both newspapers with the assertive as the dominant speech act type and the predominant speech act type used is the same for both newspapers. Therefore, this study concludes that the headline reports of the two newspapers are not aimed at threatening, frightening or advising as wrongly perceived by readers and that the ideological positions of the papers are not portrayed in their headlines.

Keywords: *Speech Acts, Pragmatic implications, Boko Haram Attacks, Newspaper Headlines*

INTRODUCTION

The role headlines play as precursors to the news make them to be constructed in such a way that they are usually linguistically manipulated to influence the readership. Most editors ensure that the choice of expressions in headlines reflects the feelings, opinions and attitudes of people about issues in the news. Newspaper editors through their headlines play a crucial role in shaping issues in the society and setting the boundaries of what is talked about and how it is talked about (Henry and Tator, 2002). According to Williams (2003), newspapers are particularly known to initiate discourse on key national issues by quoting statements and ‘dramatizing’ actions of prominent national figures, celebrities and happenings around the nation and exposing them to their readership. The initiation, advancement and sustenance of discourse by newspapers are not often devoid of some embellishments determined by their own angle of the story. These stories have a viewpoint and structure which can linguistically be analysed. This study investigates language use in the reports on Boko Haram Crisis within the framework of Speech Act Theory. The speech act theory provides us with a tool to analyse use of language in context. The theory states that, in any given communicative event, whether spoken or written, the speaker/writer makes use of

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certain verbs referred to as performatives or constatives to perform a speech act. Agbedo (2008) asserts that “in a discourse situation, the analyst seeks to ascertain the felicity or otherwise of a given speech act by using retrievable information from memory stored in the form of structures referred variously to as frames, scripts, scenarios, schemata and mental models”. The Boko Haram movement came to light in the form of resurgence in 2009. It is essentially an anti-establishment group that is against government institutions like the police and other agencies. It is also a radical Islamic sect opposed to Western education. While the group is widely referred to as Boko Haram, it calls itself “Jama’atu Ahlas-Sunna Li Daawati wal Jihad” (Followers of Sunna for propagation and waging war in the course of Islam). There were series of debates and dialogues between the insurgents and Islamic Scholars to resolve the misunderstanding amicably but the sittings failed to avert the disastrous consequences of the crisis that followed. The insurgent group (Boko Haram) caused the disruption of peaceful life to numerous families, and destruction of property which include burning of shops and houses, and killing and maiming of millions of people across the Northern States (Mohammed, 2010). The Boko Haram crisis has no doubt become a national as well as an international issue. This work explores how language is being used in news tabloids, particularly in headlines with a view to finding out the link between the meanings embedded in the headlines and their linguistic functions. It analyses the texts in the headlines which are taken as utterances within the framework of speech act theory. Since this is a study of language in use, the research falls within the field of pragmatics.

Pragmatics is a comprehensive level of linguistic analysis, perhaps the most comprehensive today. It is a new field of study compared to others like anthropology, phonology, semantics etc. However, it has established itself as a field of linguistic enquiry. Mey (2001) asserts: “It has come on its own and it is here to stay”. Pragmatics is now popular among scholars because it affords a more in-depth study of language used in human interactions. Not only that it deals with language users, pragmatics also takes cognizance of the contexts of utterances. That is why Brown and Yule (1983) argue that “any analytical approach to linguistics which involves contextual considerations necessarily belongs to that area of language study called pragmatics”. Pragmatics studies language from the users’ point of view, in this case, the newspaper editors. The following questions are formulated as a guide for the study:

1. Which speech acts are used in Daily Trust newspaper headlines on Boko Haram attacks?
2. Which speech act is predominant in the newspaper headlines reportage on Boko Haram attacks?
3. What are the pragmatics implications of such speech acts?

As concluded by Khamahani and Tahirov (2013), that certain features of editorial headlines and also their important role in monitoring and directing readers’ attention have made the interface between the linguistic analysis of newspaper editorial headlines and teaching of English as a Foreign Language as a relevant issue in language teaching, the outcomes of this study therefore could be useful for all English as Foreign Language learners and trainers

Functions of Headlines in the Media

A news headline is the title of news story that summarizes the entire story. The main headline is usually on the front page of a magazine or newspaper. Usually printed in bold letters, headlines summarize the main points of the story. They occupy more space than the texts they refer to and where more significant words or coinages exist. As an opening section to their relevant main text, headlines have been ascribed different functions. Headlines and leads have been referred by Van Dijk (1988), as categories forming “the summary” of the news reports. There is a distinction between headlines functioning as the abstract of the main event of the story and headlines promoting one of the details of the story.

Although in most cases headlines do bear such functions in news reports, some newspaper headlines present their readers with fairly complex riddles which neither summarize nor present the detail of the news reports. This means that Newspaper editorials as a kind of opinion texts are different from the other types of news discourse such as service information in that they are supposed to present evaluations and comments about the news events already reported in the newspapers thus the unique features of the editorial headlines such as encapsulating the content of the editorials arousing the readers’ curiosity and also their important role in monitoring readers’ attention, perception and reading process. Hobbs (1998) claims that it is thought that the textual genre of newspaper headlines including syntax, semantics and stylistics is a hurdle to understanding leading to misinterpretations.

Pragmatics and the Study of Meaning

The study of linguistic meaning belongs in the fields of semantics and pragmatics. Semantics is seen as ‘the study of meaning as communicated through language (Saeed 2003); it studies the meanings of words and sentences (Lyons 1977). Semantics uses many theories like meaning postulates, componential analysis etc. in the study of meaning in language. However, some linguists such as Searle (1979) and Bach and Harnish (1979) still argue that semantic and other “old” theories are not enough to account for meaning communicated in language; their search for a better approach has culminated into what is today called pragmatics. Scholars, such as Lyons (1981), have conceptualized pragmatics from various perspectives. This is why he says that it is variously defined as the study of actual utterance; the study of use rather than meaning, the study of that part of meaning which is not purely truth-conditioned; the study of performance rather than competence. Mey (2001) posits that it ‘studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society.’ In other words, the meaning of an utterance cannot be divorced from its context of usage because the same utterance can have different meanings in different contexts of usage. Leech and Short (1987) affirm this when they assert that “the pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not from the formal properties of words and constructions but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered”. An understanding of grammar, morphology, semantics and phonology of a text does not necessarily constitute understanding of the text. The rhetoric intent, the coherence and the world view that the author and receptor bring to the text are equally essential

(Kaplan, 1990). Language therefore is no longer seen as merely reflecting our reality but as central to creating reality. Our words are never neutral, they carry the power that reflects the interests of those who speak or write (Fowler, 1991). The theoretical framework for this work is the Speech Act Theory of Searle (1969). The theory states that 'the basic unit of linguistic communication is the performance of a speech acts (Austin 1962) That is, whenever we make an utterance, we perform an intended function with it. As mentioned earlier, this theory was originally developed by Austin (1962) but further modified by other scholars that followed him.

Classification of Speech Acts and Ideology in the Mass Media

Austin (1962) originally classifies speech acts into five basic categories as cited by Hare (1970) as follows: (i) verdictives (ii) exercitives (iii) commissives (iv) behabitive (v) expositives. Sequel to this development, many scholars like Kempson (1976), Searle (1969), Allan (1986), Bach and Harnish (1979) have come out with their own categories of speech acts each. However, only Searle's categories will be considered here. Following his criticisms of Austin's (1962) criteria and classification, Searle (1969) sets his own criteria for a better classification of speech acts as follows:

i. Assertives: The point or purpose of the members of the assertive class is to commit the speaker to something's being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition' (Searle 1979). The speech acts here make assertions about the world. They carry the values of 'true' 'false' as their 'point'. Their 'fit' is that they have to match the world in order to be true.

ii. Directives: This category has speech acts which depict the attempt of the speaker to get the hearer to do something. This is their illocutionary point. Their 'fit' is that the speaker seeks to change the world to match his or her words or utterance.

iii. Commissives: This category is almost the same with that of Austin (1962) under the same name. Commissives are identical with directives in that they also change the world to match words. However, rather than making an obligation in the hearer like directives, commissives create it in the speaker. They commit the speaker to some future course of action. For example, we can compare between an obligation and a request: the first a commissive and the second a directive. Their 'direction of fit' is the same - the world is adapted to words; there is a difference in the way each creates the obligation: while an offer creates obligation in the speaker, a request does so in the 'requiree'.

iv. Expressives: As the name indicates, the speech act here expresses the psychological or inner state of the speaker. It does not say anything about the world. It is subjective at times. However, it expresses one's disposition or feelings about the occurrence.

v. Declarations: This category causes a change in the state of affairs. The speech acts in this category rely on legal institutions in order to be felicitous. Declarations bring about some alternation in the world or condition of the referred to object or objects solely by virtue of the fact that the declaration has been successfully performed (Searle, 1969). Most of the previous works reviewed (Taiwo 2007, Cohen and Carvalho, 2005; Nastri

and Hancock, 2006 Chilwa, 2007 and Agbedo, 2008) have focused on cartoons, email classification, applying speech act theory on texts of cartoons. However, those who used news headlines applied other linguistic framework like Critical Discourse Analysis. The work most closely related to this study is the work of Abdulkareem (2012). He studies some Nigerian newspaper cartoons with a view to finding out the various linguistic functions being performed through this medium of communication. The results established, among others, that cartoonists use a lot of indirect speech act as a defence mechanism. Therefore, this study investigates how social crises and political scandals in Nigeria are constructed in the newspaper headlines of the Nigerian press and how the illocutionary functions of these news headlines translate to social criticism.

Considering the definition of ideology given by Taiwo (2007) that it simply refers to attitudes, set of beliefs, values and doctrines with reference to religious, political, social and economic life which shape the individual's and group's perception and through which reality is constructed and interpreted; one can conclude that no news report is ideologically neutral, transparent or innocent. Van Dijk (1988) further expresses that...the ideologies of journalists somehow influence their opinions which in turn influence the discourse structures of the opinion articles. The uncertainty of whether the news media is actually ideologically biased still remains open and that newspaper news reports convey the interest and ideologies of both those in power and those that are governed of both the writer and the reader.

METHOD

The population of the data which is all the editions of the two newspapers in 2013 is too large to handle. As a result, using purposive random sampling, a sample of 36 and 35 headlines are sourced respectively from; Daily Trust and The Nation Newspapers published in 2013. Within Content Analysis, which is seen as the research method employed to verify the presence of some particular concepts in a text or a set of texts (Sanusi 2009), each headline is assigned a corresponding Searle's speech act category and a form (whether direct or indirect) act. Where a headline contains two or more clauses, connected by a conjunction, each clause of the headlines indicated from the first: C1, C2, C3 etc., is separately assigned a speech act and a form. In a situation where a clause has two speech acts i.e. direct and indirect acts, the acts of such clause are designated C1a and C1b or C2a and C2b etc. with their separate act and form. A simple frequency and percentage is used to find the number of instances of each speech act category.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the presentation of the thirty six headlines in Daily Trust as shown on table 1 above, 45 clauses have been identified, and each has been assigned a speech act separately. The analysis shows 44 clauses in the Assertive category, representing 97.78%, which are all in the direct acts. Only 1 clause at 2.22% in H17 falls in the Directive category while the other categories: Declaration, Commissive and Expressive are not used in the headlines. From the presentation of 35 headlines in The Nation Newspaper, 44 clauses have been

identified and a speech act has been assigned to each. In this Newspaper too, the assertive speech act category has the highest occurrence with 40 in the direct act and 3 in the indirect act, at 90.90% and 9.10%, respectively, making 43 assertive, representing 97.73%. However, there is only 1 speech act in the directive category at 2.27% and 1 declaration, also at 2.27% while there is none in the other two categories. In the light of the analysis presented, it is found that only three of the Searle's five categories of speech acts: Assertive, Directive and Declaration are used in headlines on Boko Haram attacks in the two Nigeria's newspapers. By this, the research met its first objective: that is to identify speech act types used in the headlines and answered the first research question: which speech act types are used in the headlines. In addition, the assertive having the highest instances of occurrence, the research also met the second objective and the second research question: to identify the predominant speech act type and which speech act type is predominant respectively. It is observed that the more frequent use of the assertive speech act by both newspapers is done deliberately having the function of giving information to readers.

It is shown that the informing speech acts report facts and recount what was said and done and give descriptions. Significantly, that is why almost all the speech acts are in direct acts and with illocutionary force of informing within the assertive speech act. This means that writers of headlines of certain genres in newspapers, such as news service, rely on facts and figures, from a source, since by using the assertive speech act, statements are subject to truth or falsity conditions (Searle, 1979). Searle also argues that the use of directives and declaration expresses figurative statements. In line with this assertion, the few directives and declaration in the indirect acts in some headlines such as H17 in Daily Trust H17 in The Nation and H19 is done to indirectly show that the newspapers believe the seriousness of the issue may be out of control which invariably creates a strong impact of fear and uncertainty in the mind of readers. By the use of the illocutionary forces; confessing, boasting and threatening in the headlines above, the writer creates a strong impact on the reader that the situation of the menace of Boko Haram may likely be beyond control. In H17 for instance, the leader of the sect while directly threatening government officials in Borno that they should resign as civil servants or be killed by the Boko Haram, he is also indirectly boasting that not only have they become untouchable but also controlling affairs, as well as passing information to the public with the illocutionary force of steering panic among the general public.

In addition, the use of illocutionary force of boasting in H19 and H29 in The Nation Newspaper reveals how inhumane these people are, to assert that they are responsible for the killings. The headline H19, in the same paper with the headline; "WE LOST 15 TROOPS TO BOKO HARAM", also uses first person plural account to state a fact that the defence headquarters is indirectly admitting to the public that they cannot contain the Boko Haram sect, and possibly implying that the insurgents have more powerful weapons than the Nigerian Army, which also creates a strong impact of fear and uncertainty in the mind of readers. At the same time the headquarters is directly informing the editors what exactly happened in the encounter between them and the sect. As earlier stated, all the other headlines or the speech acts have the assertive category. The speech acts here

make assertion about the world. They ‘commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition’ (Searle, 1979). More importantly with this category of speech acts, the newspaper headlines serve as a means of giving information to the public, thereby generating discussion in which the public are made to deny, oppose, agree and take decisions on facts reported on the Boko Haram’s activities. To sum it up, the two analysed newspapers headlines are compared to show if there is any difference between the types of speech acts with reference to their illocutionary forces, their speech act forms, and in their ideologies. It is found that there is no difference between both newspapers in terms of speech act types and speech act forms.

However, the lack of difference here can be attributed to the fact that they are dealing with a National crisis, as well as writing within the same genre: news services. Therefore, the aim of each newspaper is to reflect reality by passing accurate and healthy information, relying on facts and figures from a reliable source to the public. That is why, as shown on table 3 almost all the headlines are in the assertive category, direct act form, and with informing illocutionary force. However, the distribution of the newspapers to the socio-political zones has not yielded any difference in terms of representation of certain ideological interest. They give general information which may not incite the public about the realities of the activities of the insurgents.

It is found that almost all the headlines used direct act forms. Indeed, the prevalence of the direct act in the two newspapers implies that the writers wish to report the truth as plain as possible to the readers. It also suggests that dissemination of information remains the most critical function of the newspapers, as argued by Tuchman (1978) that informing via official sources provides journalistic legitimacy. Each headline begins by reporting a fact, demonstrating the importance of presenting an authoritative, non- speculative voice early by using the direct act. Hall (2010) observes that words stating a date, time, place, or event – or usually some combinations of these – are the most common and easily identifiable techniques in place that are used to inform. It is these features that constitute the informing speech act, which is the most widespread across all the two newspapers studied. The use of indirect acts in few headlines has the implication of bringing out the hidden or implied meanings in the particular headlines to the readers.

The use of the indirect acts also serves to vindicate the writers, as most are quoted speeches directly from the source: one of the members of the sect, the leader of the sect, and the army headquarters. This gives a newspaper report its authority (Ezeife, 2010). The consequence is that the writers want the readers to believe what they see and read”. In contrast, the direct acts are used to express explicit statements, while the indirect acts are used to state implicit statements, as in: H19 (C1b), and H11 (C1b). This is why the indirect acts are realised where the headlines have two or more speech acts. Another implication is that meanings should not be ascribed to or derived from, only the set of words used in an utterance or a text. There are underlying meanings embedded and implied in the intention of the speaker/writer. It is suggested that this situation is what accounts for the use of the indirect acts in the newspaper headlines of these papers. Lastly, the informing speech act is always constituted by descriptions of what was said and done (Ezeife, 2010)

and as earlier stated, the intention of the news services is to project realities to the readers thus the use of few indirect acts so that only actual events are reported. It is difficult to draw significant conclusions from the informing speech act. However, in some rare occasions they differ in their distribution of the speech acts and their ideologies in the headlines, newspaper headlines may not hold any prejudices (at least as seen in this study) when it comes to serious national issues because they have to rely on same sources of information; security reports and internet sources, in order to reflect realities of the issue at stake as Fauzan (2014) asserts the media is supposed to be neutral and provides adequate information to the public.

Table 1: Number of speech act types identified in Daily Trust newspaper.

S/No.	Speech act categories	Direct acts	Indirect acts	Total
1	Assertive	44	—	44
2	Directive	1	—	1
3	Declaration	—	—	—
4	Commissive	—	—	—
5	Expressive	—	—	—
	Total	45	—	45

Source: Newspaper Analysis, 2013

Table 2: Number of speech act types identified in The Nation newspaper:

S/No.	Speech acts	Direct acts	Indirect acts	Total
1	Assertive	40	3	43
2	Directive	1	—	1
3	Declaration	—	—	—
4	Commissive	—	—	—
5	Expressive	—	—	—
	Total	41	3	44

Source: Newspaper Analysis, 2013

Table 3: The cumulative number of speech acts types identified.

		Assertives	Directives	Declarations	Commissives	Expressives	Total
Daily Trust (36 H.L)	D.A.	44	1	—	—	—	45
	I.D.A.	—	—	—	—	—	—
The Nation (35 H.L.)	D.A.	41	—	1	—	—	44
	I.D.A.	1	1	—	—	—	2
Total		86	2	1	—	—	89

(DA = Direct Act, I. D. A = Indirect Act, H. L = Headlines)

Source: Newspaper Analysis, 2013

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explores the speech acts used in two national dailies - Daily Trust and The Nation Newspapers on Boko Haram attacks. Based on what has being analysed, the study concludes that headlines on news services aim at largely giving information to the public. Such embellishments, under and over statements that are typical in other types of news items like cartoons (Abdulkareem, 2012), advertisements (Jeong, Chin-Yew and

Gary, 2009) are very rare in headlines on news services. Again, extreme tendencies which leave no room for objectivity in reporting of situations, as found in headlines on politics and religion (Agbedo, 2008) are conclusively not formidable in these newspaper headlines. The two newspapers, in respect of their possible socio-political differences having established in different zones, have chosen to consider national interest of paramount and put their ideologies at the background. Therefore, it is also inferred that either the two newspapers shared the same ideological stance for national interest or they do not express any ideological position, be it political, religious or social. Nonetheless, definitive generalisations cannot be made from such a small sample and only one research methodology. Clearly, improvements can immediately be made in these respects by enlarging the sample and widening the research techniques. While hoping that the findings of this study can lay the foundations for future academic inquiry into speech acts in newspaper discourse, it is recommended that similar analysis of speech acts in newspaper on other genres such as headlines on advertisement be carried out. Especially, since adverts are mostly persuasive and sometimes sound to be deceptive and tricky. Furthermore, a study on the relationship between speech act and other linguistic communication devices such as rhetoric, logic, and oratory would give us an analysis of concepts that are interesting in themselves, and also the comparison of different analysis would deepen our understanding of the whole field of language use. Lastly, Since, as stated by Hare (1970) every meaningful sentence in virtue of its meaning is used to perform a particular speech act (or range of speech acts)”, teachers of English are advised to include pragmatic elements in dealing with meaning of sentences or clauses especially in teaching reading or listening comprehensions to their students.

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