

## LINGUISTIC DEVICES IN MEDIA DISCOURSE: A CASE STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** *Language is used creatively to enhance communication and critically evoke deep thoughts. It is a systematic resource which is powerful and active. Sometimes, the intrinsic power of language is often neglected by non linguists. Some are not conscious of the power of language which influences attitudes and promotes critical thinking. Others fail to realize that convictions are shaped by language. The study, therefore, examines the linguistic devices and styles in media discourse which are used to stake claims to knowledge, to influence attitudes and to promote critical thinking. Excerpts culled from different newspaper editorials are used to explore the linguistic devices and styles. Then, with Systemic Functional Linguistics complemented with Van Dijk's theory of media discourse as models of analysis, it is observed that linguistic devices such as modality, evaluative adjectives, adverbs, generic phrases, rhetoric and idioms are used to state opinions, make predictions and influence attitudes. Furthermore, the linguistic devices evoke critical thinking, state different angles of possibilities, portray different shades of attitudes and judgments. The study concludes that the linguistic devices in the newspaper editorials shape and reshape attitudes and assess the potentiality of the state of affairs in the society. Hence, there is an intrinsic power in language to influence attitudes.*

**KEYWORDS:** Linguistic Device, Media, Communication, Language

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## INTRODUCTION

Language is an indispensable means of communication which facilitates the expression of a plethora of ideas. It shapes and models attitudes in the society. It is a system of communication that enables one to evaluate ideas. With the use of language, one can persuade and influence others, play jokes, show admiration and appreciation. Language, indeed, is central to human activities. Thus, Opara (2011:1) asserts that 'language is essentially a way of behaving and making others behave'. Through the use of language one can express a lot of ideas, feelings and attitudes. Furthermore, language evokes different ideas and feelings from those one communicates with.

Finegan (2012:5) states that 'language is a vehicle of thought, a system of expression that mediates the transfer of thoughts from one person to another'. Language plays vital roles in the society for it is a form of social practice. It performs many communicative functions. It conveys factual or propositional information which Brown and Yule (1983:6) call 'primarily transactional language.' The source posits that in primarily transactional language, what the speaker or writer has in mind is the efficient transference of information. Hence, language used in this situation is message oriented while the function involving the expression of social relations and personal attitude is interactional (Brown and Yule, 1983).

Furthermore, Finegan (2012) sees the fundamental function of language as linking meaning to expression. 'Language is a vehicle for verbal expression of thoughts and feelings'. (Finegan,

2012:5). Language, therefore, enhances creativity and the flow of communication. It is an instrument of cohesion in the society.

In media discourse, language is used in expressing succinct ideas and perceptions which transform, indict, persuade and shape people's opinions. From the discourse patterns in the media, language is displayed as an agent of persuasion and empowerment.

Thus, Alder and Rodman (2000:79) assert that "there is an intrinsic power in language to shape opinions and attitudes. 'Language used in the media equally portrays concepts, ideas or reflect attitudes (Malcom, 1997).

Non-experts in the field of language study do not realize the power in language which influences ideologies, shapes or reshapes attitudes or ideas. Furthermore, they do not realise that language can influence public opinion or promote critical thinking and influence actions on critical contemporary issues in the society. Sometimes, the intrinsic power in language is often neglected by many people. The media discourse, therefore, gives people convincing ideas that model opinions.

This study examines the linguistic devices employed in newspapers editorials to express different opinions and attitudes and evoke critical thinking. The study also sets out to examine the way editorial writers employ these devices to assess the potentiality of state of affairs, influence people's opinion and shape their attitudes.

### **Discourse Analysis and Newspaper Editorials**

In the words of Nordquist (2013:1) discourse analysis is 'the study of the ways in which language is used in texts and contexts'. Thus, it a perspective on the nature of language and its relationship to the integral issues in the society. Abrams and Harpham (2005) posit that discourse analysis is the use of language in a running discourse which involves the interaction of a writer and a reader in a specific situational context and within a framework of social and cultural conventions.

Wikipedia sees discourse analysis as a general term for a number of approaches to analyzing written, vocal or sign language use or any significant semiotic event. Discourse analysis focuses on the meaning we give to people's words so as to make ourselves better, more humane people and the world a better place (Norquist, 2013).

Hence, discourse analysis explores and unveils language use and its implicit meaning in texts. Newspaper editorials express ideologies and comment vividly on contemporary social, political, and economic issues.

Weintraut (2013:1) asserts that an editorial is 'an article that presents the newspaper's opinion on an issue. Editorials are meant to influence public opinion, promote critical thinking and cause people to take action on an issue. (Weintraut 2013). For Sheperd (2013:1) an editorial is 'a way a reporter weaves his own personal opinion into a story'.

Bilal et al (2012:746) posit that editorials 'shape and build the ideology of their readers'. They reflect the opinion of a periodical since they are opinion pieces written by the senior editorial staff or publication of newspaper or magazine. (Wikipedia) Editorials come in various forms. Hence, some explain or interpret sensitive or controversial issues. Some constructively criticize actions, decisions or situations and provide solutions to the problems identified. Editorials of

persuasion aim at seeing immediately the solution and not the problem. Lastly, few editorials commend people and organizations for something done well (Weintraut, 2013). Furthermore, well written editorials influence public opinion on current issues in the society.

### **Theoretical Background**

The newspaper editorials analyzed in this study involve linguistic devices used for evaluation of issues, expression of opinions and attitude, and promotion of critical thinking. Therefore, the systemic functional grammar and Van Dijk's theory of media discourse are relevant to the study.

### **Systemic Functional Linguistics**

The major exponent of systemic functional linguistic is M.A.K. Halliday. Language, according to SFG, is a symbolic instrument used for communicative purposes (Malmkjaer and Anderson, 1991) SFG, explains language from the way it is actually used in discourse and not just on the formal relations between linguistic units. Thus, language is a as a system of meaning potentials. Opara (2009:7) notes that 'funtionalists focus on the possible connection between form and function'. Therefore, systemic functional linguistics focuses on what people do with language. This study adopts systemic functional approach of linguistics by depicting how linguistic patterns unravel ideologies, express opinion and attitudes, show persuasion and evoke critical thinking. Furthermore, the study shows how the devices equally reflect opinions, shape or reshape ideas.

Systemic functional linguistics recognizes three meta-functions which are ideational, interpersonal and textual. The ideational function refers to the way language is used in expressing the realities of human experience.

Ajayi (2009:587) stresses that 'the ideational meanings relate to what is going on in the world, that is, how people use language to articulate experiences. They relate to how words are used to express actions, objects, places, events, people, things and ideas'. The interpersonal function gives individuals the opportunity to express their attitudes and establish personal and social relationship. The function equally deals on how people express their judgment and how they use language to influence others. The textual function expresses the structure of information or how language is organized to achieve goals and to produce cohesive text (Opara, 2009).

The ideational and interpersonal meta functions are relevant to the present study because it examines how language is used to express human experiences by the editorials. Furthermore, the study portrays how language conveys attitudes, judgments and opinions in our contemporary world.

### **Van Dijk's Theory of Media Discourse**

The main tenent of this theory is that discourse analysis is an ideological analysis and that language gives meaning and meaning can be analyzed by discourse analysis. Van Dijk (1998) stresses that ideologies are typically expressed and reproduced in discourse and communication.

This theory is relevant to the study since the analyses of the newspaper editorials help to bring out the underlying meaning of the linguistic devices used in the discourse.

Furthermore, Boyd-Barret (1994) states that the theory calls for a thorough analysis not only of textual and structural level of media discourse but also for the analysis at the production or comprehension level.

## METHODOLOGY

Through a purposive sampling method, the researcher selected 20 editorials out of a large pool published daily over a span of time (May-November, 2013). The editorials are culled from 'the Nation', 'the Punch', 'Daily Sun', 'The Leader', 'Daily Independent'. Thus, the data analyzed are excerpts from the editorials which were selected randomly and copied verbatim. The data was subjected to content analysis based on the linguistic devices found in the editorials.

### Linguistic Devices

Different linguistic devices were found in the newspaper editorials. Some of them were geared towards expression of different attitudes, promotion of critical thinking, expression of opinions and ideas to reshape attitudes. Also some devices showed the assessment of the potentiality of state of affairs in the society and statement of different claims.

## ANALYSIS

### Modality

Modality is concerned with the writer's assessment of, or attitude towards the potentiality of a state of affairs. It is a resource writers use when they are staking claims to knowledge. Modality allows them to state different kinds of claims like assertions, opinions, hypothesis speculations. (Cameron, 2001).

In the editorial, modal auxiliary verbs such as 'may', 'can', 'will', 'should', 'would', 'could', were used to express modality. The modal auxiliary verb used in the editorials under study allowed the writers to attach expressions of belief, attitude and obligation to the statements.

The following excerpts depict the use of modal verbs.

1. No doubt, the government should be worried about the increasing theft of crude oil, the mainstay of our economy.
2. It will be shameful if after our common resources are expended, the government returns with stories that we lack the technical competence to manage the infrastructure.
3. Despite government's failure to provide these amenities, the people should also not take this as an excuse to engage in unhygienic practices.
4. The patient may suddenly lose the ability to speak.
5. There may be memory problems, or one side of the body may become paralysed.
6. The Federal Government should take proactive measures to ensure that it is controlled.

7. The public should be advised on the need for periodic medical check-ups and monitoring of their blood pressure.
8. This is cruel, and the offenders must face the wrath of the law.
9. Strengthening the anti-rape laws will encourage more victims to come forward as it has happened in India after the reform of the rape law and the convictions of the gang rapists.
10. Trials must be completed on time.
11. This will at least assure the victims that their attackers are going to face punishment.
12. When lecturer resume under such conditions, the lecturers display low moral and so can hardly give their best to their students.
13. The economy will continue to suffer as long as the people on whom so much have been spent cannot add value to the system.
14. It is only then that they can justifiable implement the 'No work no pay provision of the labour law'

In the excerpts above, the writers while reporting the contemporary issues at stake express their attitudes towards the issues by using modal auxiliaries. They reported the information and provided their attitudes towards the events. In the excerpts, numbers 1, 3, 6, 7 showed that certain courses of action should be taken through the auxiliary modal 'should'. 'Should' was used as a way of expressing necessity.

In numbers 2, 9, 11, 13, the editorial writers expressed predictions of future events. In numbers 4, 5, 12, 14, the writers expressed different angles of possibility through auxiliary modals 'may' and 'can'. Numbers 8 and 10 showed obligations of events.

### **Evaluative Adjectives and Adverbs**

The editorial writers employed some highly evaluative adjectives and adverbs as linguistic devices to express their attitudes towards the pathetic state of affairs in the country.

1. With ghoulish humour, President Goodluck Jonathan challenged critics of his administration to provide the criteria they used to insinuate that he had not performed creditably in the past two years.
2. In this sort of atmosphere of profound disillusionment, circumspection as well as large doses of intellectual humility is required on the part of those in charge.
3. President Goodluck Jonathan, of course did not create the sorry state of modern Nigeria.
4. At mid-term, there is still no urgent sense of crises.
5. The President does not help matters by pretending that everything is normal. For it is demonstrably not so.

6. They know from watching television and reading the newspapers everyday that the seemingly elusive dividends of democracy have been cornered exclusively by a self-serving elite.
7. This means absolutely nothing to those in the majority who subsist on less than N200 a day.
8. Frankly, the political establishment should try and line on the N18,000 per month minimum wage and see how much they can cope with its brutal reality.
9. It is precisely this lack of empathy that it so glaring and profoundly incompatible with the ethos of a democracy.

The editorial writers did not only present some factual information of events in Nigeria but evaluated the events through the adjectives and adverbs. Other evaluative adverbs used in the editorials are justifiably, precisely, famously, absolutely, convincingly, ominously, unfortunately, indefinitely, primarily, promptly, technologically. These evaluative adjectives and adverbs succinctly portrayed different shades of attitudes as judgments by the writers. These attitudes were geared towards influencing opinions and promoting critical thinking.

### **Modality Through The Use of Reporting verbs**

In the data collected, modality was also expressed through the use of certain reporting verbs such as claim, demand, expect, prefer, doubt. The reporting verbs reflected the editorial writers' opinions and attitudes towards the truth value of the content, that is, the extent, to which they considered a proposition as true or false.

Examples found in the editorials were:

1. The Federal Government has claimed that it is exploring the use of electronic pipeline surveillance system to monitor oil theft in Nigeria.
2. We demand to know from the minister how much was spent on potable water provision by this administration and what percentage of the 160 million Nigeria have access to potable water.
3. We expect the people to weigh the serious consequences of cholera so that they can do everything possible to avoid it.
4. The forum seems to have outstayed its usefulness and no longer to champion or foster the interest of the masses.
5. During the year of faith, every devout Christian was expected to understand more and know more about the faith.

### **Generic Phrases of Modality**

1. It is shameful that .....
2. It is equally cheering that.....
3. It is good that.....



4. We recognize that.....
5. It is disheartening, however that.....

The editorial writers revealed their opinions and judgments toward the propositions through this modality as exemplified in the following excerpts.

- It is disheartening, however, that this forum which is supposed to be on independent body of mature, responsible and knowledgeable elected political leaders, who contribute to national development, as a strong progressive body is now facing allegations of external manipulation by the President.
- It is doubtful whether every Christian did derive the benefit that should accrue from the year of faith judging from the number that turned out at the various catechesis organized during the period.
- It is shameful that without an account to the Nigerian public or even an apology for that waste, the government is thinking of another money guzzling enterprises that may yet again become a train pipe.
- It is equally cheering that all Federal health facilities in the country have been directed to provide free services to cholera patients.
- It is perilous for Nigerians not to have access to potable water.
- It is frightening and a shame to this administration that such basic hygiene problems still happen in the country in this age.

The editorial writers employed several linguistic devices to achieve modality to express their attitudes and opinions towards the truth of the proposition expressed the sentences.

To evaluate opinions about the described events, they employed modal auxiliaries, adverbs, adjectives certain reporting verbs and verbs of knowledge and generic phrases.

### **The Use of Rhetorics**

Another linguistic device used in the editorials was rhetorics. The rhetorics promoted critical thinking and produced a sharp effect on readers. The use of this device was more prominent in ecclesiastical editorials.

#### **Examples from the excerpts were:**

1. Why should the country be subjected to such organizing experience with its attendant socio-economic consequences?
2. Is it not a shame that inspite of Nigeria's wealth and loud claims to civility and development, we cannot keep out youths in school for one uninterrupted academic year or more?
3. Why do wealthy Nigerians prefer to send their wards abroad for tertiary education including to less endowed sister countries like Ghana?
4. Is it not because their educational system is stabilized and they do what they to do at every point in time?
5. Where were the Federal Arbitration Panel and other stakeholders before and after the ASUU warning strike?

6. Why did they not intervene promptly to nip the strike in the bud?
7. To what extent have the experience helped Christians who are victims of modern trend of atheism, secularism and syncretism to purge themselves of lack of faith?
8. Have the various catechesis and talks that featured during the year of faith translated to greater conviction in our doctrine and belief in the three persons in one God at times no matter what challenges are being faced?
9. To what extent has the year of faith enabled the various target groups to start performing their roles better than before?
10. What about Christians of various vocations and professions? How far did the past 12 months energize them to place Christ first in the discharge of their daily duties as a manifestation of their faith?
11. What difference has our exposure as the year of faith made in our people as a church or community?
12. Those who used to take bribes, those who resort to divination or occultic means at the slightest challenge, have they stopped such practices? In other words has our faith been deepened?
13. If the governors cannot organize a free and fair election for themselves at their level, what do they expect to see at lower levels of the Nigerian political arena?

Thus, rhetoric were used to influence readers and draw their attention to the situation of affairs being discussed. The use of the device evoked emotional effects to the readers.

### **Idioms**

....Idioms were also used to describe events especially for thought provoking issues.

...Better late than never

... To nip the strike in the bud

...Beating its chest, the Federal Government says that out of the key policy objectives of the Federal government.

....The country has clearly made a wrong turn.

...Speaks volumes of the press worth in the forum in the eyes of the Nigerian Public.

The idioms used in the editorials added colour to the ideas presented. Thus, they have sharp stronger meaning. For instance, ...beating its chest,..... is sharper than 'to show great sadness or guilt.

Therefore Palmer (2002:2) explain that 'idioms are a colourful and fascinating aspect of English'.



## CONCLUSION

The language of editorials is thought provoking, evaluative, persuasive and sophisticated. The editorial writers used different linguistic devices to achieve these. They used different linguistic devices in the form of modality, evaluative adjectives and adverbs, generic phrases, rhetorics, and idioms to express different shades of attitude and opinion, to influence or re shape their readers' attitudes and to promote critical thinking. The writers used these devices to state different kinds of claims like assertions and opinions thereby assessing the potentiality of the state of affairs in the society and making their obvious judgments.

Therefore, language is influential; it indicts, persuades and empowers people. Lastly, language influences ideologies.

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