

Investigating the Stylistic Enablers of Structural Ambiguity in Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract

Linguistic ambiguity constitutes a fundamental challenge to the comprehension process. It often tasks the comprehension faculties of the decoder leaving him torn between two or more possible interpretations for the same expression. Linguistic ambiguity is intensified in the headline genre thus; the patterning of the grammatical elements employed in the crafting of headlines could lead to structural ambiguity. This paper investigates the genre-specific features of newspaper headlines that create an enabling environment for the occurrence of structural ambiguity in newspaper headlines. Fifteen ambiguous newspaper headlines drawn from the November 2013 issues of four Nigerian dailies using purposive sampling formed the sample. The data were subjected to qualitative textual analysis to identify and describe the specific manifestations of style that expose newspaper headlines to structural ambiguity. The findings reveal that these stylistic features are complex noun phrases, compound noun phrases, nominalisation, punctuation and ellipsis. Such considerations as the discourse goals of the writers and the unique structure of headlines are shown to outweigh the ambiguity potential of the structural patterns embraced. Based on the findings, we argue that leaving the task of headline interpretation totally to the encoded semantics while relegating contextual parameters to the background is superficial.

Keywords: Stylistics, Enablers, Structural Ambiguity, Newspaper, Headlines, Grammar, Semantics.