

Investigating the Stylistic Enablers of Structural Ambiguity in Newspaper Headlines

EZEKULIE, Chino J., Ph.D.
Division of General Studies,
NTA Television College, Jos, Nigeria

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.

Introduction

Ambiguity as a linguistic concept is a common phenomenon in natural languages. It refers to the susceptibility of an utterance to have double or multiple meanings. Linguistic ambiguity is usually traced to a fragment of text which has the potential to yield two or more distinct semantic interpretations to the reader/hearer (Fromkin & Rodman, 2011; Hurford & Heasley, 2001; Senet, 2011; MacDonald, Pearlmutter & Seidenberg, 1994; Lobner, 2002). Thus, before a sentence is adjudged ambiguous, it must have two or more distinct paraphrases. According to the basic assumptions of

Parallel Distributed Processing (PDP) models in psycholinguistics, semantic ambiguity should slow the process of meaning activation in that ambiguous words have one-to-many mappings between orthography and semantics (Pexman, Hino & Lupker, 2004). Therefore, ambiguity unarguably poses a barrier to effective communication which demands that both the writer and the reader recognise the same meaning for each linguistic construction. Wasow, Perfors, and Beaver (2012) present this problem aptly:

Communication involves (at least) two participants, one that produces a signal and another that interprets it. Communication is successful to the extent that the interpreter assigns to the signal the denotation intended by its producer. If the language assigns a unique denotation to each signal, then the interpreter's task is relatively simple. If signals may have multiple denotations, then interpreters must try to disambiguate, so as to infer the producer's intention. This entails extra effort on the part of the interpreter. Moreover, if the methods of disambiguation are fallible, then ambiguity increases the chances of miscommunication (p. 6).

As observed by Sennet (2011), “Ambiguity has been the source of much frustration, bemusement, and amusement for philosophers, lexicographers, linguists, cognitive scientists, literary theorists and critics, authors, poets, orators and just about everyone who considers the interpretation(s) of linguistic signs”(p.1). Similarly, the undesirability of ambiguity in communication is captured by the fourth maxim of the Gricean Cooperative Principle (CP), the Maxim of Manner, which advocates, among others, the avoidance of ambiguity in communication (Mey, 2001; Saeed, 2003).

Studies have shown that ambiguity occurs preponderantly in newspaper headlines, inducing humour as well as posing some obstacles to interpretation (Bucaria, 2004; Brône & Coulson, 2010; Ifechelobi, 2011; Khamahani & Tahirov, 2013; Osunnuga, 2013; Yusufu, 2014; Ramadani, 2015; Sewall, n.d.; among others). Thus, some of these scholars have recommended that ambiguity should be avoided in newspaper headlines. However, this tendency of headlines to ambiguity emanates from the quest for brevity, which is another sub-maxim of Manner. In other words, some instances of ambiguity in headlines could have been averted if headlines are not sensitive to brevity. Thus, with these two sub-maxims of manner (be brief and avoid ambiguity) in direct conflict, the imperative of a trade-off relationship between the two is heightened: ambiguity in favour of brevity and vice versa. This corroborates Leech's (1983) view that some situations require that a maxim should take a back seat and give precedence to another more crucial maxim, thereby yielding a complementarity relation.

Similarly, the avoidance of ambiguity in a text is also propagated in Leech's Principles of Textual Rhetoric, precisely, the Clarity Principle. Leech (1983) argues that the danger with ambiguity does not just stem from misleading the hearer but also from the interpretation delay it constitutes. Fredsted (1998) also advises that ambiguity should be avoided unless where it is intentional. Fredsted's advice suggests

that ambiguity can be deliberately employed in a text to achieve a rhetorical effect. This implies that the occurrence of ambiguity in a social context may be deliberate or otherwise depending on the purpose of the discourse.

Journalists are encouraged to avoid ambiguity in newspaper headlines (Dor, 2003) and in newspaper reporting (Crystal & Davy, 1969). Despite this ambiguity caution, the preponderance of ambiguity in newspaper headlines, as demonstrated in studies, shows that the phenomenon seems to be inescapable in the genre. This observation suggests that there are apparently some stylistic features in the crafting of headlines that create an enabling environment for different forms of ambiguity to thrive either deliberately or otherwise. Bucaria (2004) and Crystal and Davy (1969) acknowledged this stylistic propensity in headlines but did not delve into such analysis.

The relevance of this paper is derived from the fact that it does not consist in prescribing the avoidance of ambiguity in headlines as done in other studies, but in analysing critically the whys and wherefores of the proliferation of ambiguity in the headline genre. The study attempts to address the problem of unravelling the specific stylistic features that expose newspaper headlines to structural ambiguity - that is, those systemic, grammatical choices characteristic of headlines that lead to ambiguity. It explores ambiguity in newspaper headlines as a product of editors' deliberate grammatical choices often targeted at some pragmatic goals and designed to produce certain stylistic effects on the reader. This analytical approach is underscored by the aim of stylistics, which is "... to analyse language habits with the main purpose of identifying, from the general mass of linguistic features common to English as used on every conceivable occasion, those features which are restricted to certain kinds of social context; to explain where possible, why such features have been used, as opposed to other alternative" (Crystal & Davy, 1969, p.10). Thus, the focus of this paper is to isolate and describe those structural peculiarities of headlines that enable ambiguity to flourish and to account for why such syntactic structures are preferred to other unambiguous alternatives that potentially fit into the context. Butt and Lukin (2009) thrust the interest of this study in the meaning implications of headline structural patterns into sharper focus: "Stylistic analysis is defined by its concern for the semantic consequences of linguistic patterns" (p.211).

Stylistics is the branch of linguistics that studies the manifest features of style apparent in a text. Simpson (2006) believes that "to do stylistics is to explore language, and more specifically, to explore creativity in language use" (p.3). Cluett and Kampeas, cited in Dada (2012), posit that the object of stylistics is to study, criticise and expose the "tangible manifestations of style through bare facts (descriptive) and interpretative judgment" (p.88). It is therefore the duty of a stylistician to examine and critically analyse objectively apparent features of style noticed in a text and account for their occurrence – that is the semantic consequences of the patterns – in the context. This study, therefore, strives to identify and tease out the genre-specific features of newspaper headlines that pave the way for the

occurrence of ambiguity.

Ambiguity is usually classified according to its source and nature – that is whether it emanates from a lexical item (lexical ambiguity), or from the linear ordering of constituents (syntactic/structural ambiguity) or from the illocutionary force of the utterance (pragmatic ambiguity). This paper is limited to structural or syntactic ambiguity in newspaper headlines and is further narrowed to syntactic ambiguity engendered by the peculiar grammatical features of headlines. By implication therefore, the study is not concerned with syntactic ambiguity caused by other general grammatical features of the English language such as prepositional phrase attachment, overlapping modifiers, among others. A syntactic analysis is focused on how “words relate to each other, without taking into account the world outside: it ... does not consider who said it, to whom, where, when and why” (Cutting, 2002, p.1). Therefore, the analysis of structural ambiguity done in this paper is concerned with how the grammatical relations that hold among the elements in a clause structure give rise to two or more meanings without regard to the world outside the headlines (context). However, the stylistic approach adopted in this paper further investigates the functional and pragmatic considerations that license editors' syntactic preferences.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to examine the followings:

1. The stylistic features of newspaper headlines that pave the way for structural ambiguity.
2. The meaning consequences of editors' grammatical choices in newspaper headlines.
3. The pragmatic and functional considerations that underlie the occurrence of structural ambiguity in newspaper headlines.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which originated from M.A.K. Halliday, with emphasis on exploring the 'meaning-making' potential of language. There are two key terms in this theory: systemic and functional. Systemic means that “language is a resource for making meaning, and meaning resides in systemic patterns of choices” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.23).

The second key term in the theory is functional. SFL recognises functionality as the essence of language. Language is language because it performs certain social functions which in turn affect its structure. In essence, the linguistic units which make up a language blend with the functional characteristics of language in the expression of the vistas of meaning in human endeavours. SFL thus acknowledges that the entire architecture of language revolves around its functionality, thus making functionality intrinsic to language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.31).

This theory is relevant to the study in that editors are open to a plethora of

linguistic choices to serve their socio-semantic needs. Thus, the linguistic choices that create ambiguity in headlines are made from a vast pool of linguistic resources that are syntagmatically and paradigmatically organised and open to choices. The theory provides a key to understanding headline texts as intentional acts of meaning. It underscores the fact that headlines are manifest features of the system of wording permissible in that social context. Therefore, a writer may choose an ambiguous syntactic structure over other potential unambiguous alternatives presumably to fulfil the structural demands of the social context or to achieve other stylistic effects such as drawing attention to the message, arousing curiosity, and foregrounding the headline.

The Language of Newspaper Headlines

Simply defined, the headline is the title of a news story which presents the salient points of the story in a condensed form (Anaeto, Solo-Anaeto & Tejumaiye, 2009). Headlines as used in this study refer to captions of news stories regardless of whether they are hard news or soft news. They play the dual functions of informing the reader succinctly and advertising the story. Thus, they are often aimed at drawing the reader's attention and sparking off his interest in reading the full story. Evidently, headlines are decisive baits that largely determine which articles people read and in which newspapers to read them. Wheeler (2005) renders the essence of news headlines thus: "Headlines are shop-window advertising to entice the reader into a story The point of a headline is to tell the story and sell the story both accurately and succinctly" (p. 112).

In terms of readership appeal, Crystal and Davy (1969) spell out the function of headlining in newspaper. "The function of headlining is complex: headlines have to contain a clear, succinct and if possible intriguing message, to kindle a spark of interest in the potential reader, who, on the average, is a person whose eye moves swiftly down a page and stops when something catches his attention" (p.174). This being the case, it is obvious that the language of headline is not perfunctory but carefully contrived to bait readers even as it is geared to informing them.

However, maintaining a balance between these two crucial tasks has its challenges. Hakobian and Krunkyan (2009) state that besides the informative, sensational, and evaluative functions of newspaper headlines, other peculiar features of newspaper headlines such as brevity make headlines sometimes tricky or ambiguous and deciphering them requires a special reader competence. The need for brevity and at the same time for the headlines to be informative, sensational and evaluative constrains the headline writers to employ a number of grammatical and rhetorical devices in their art. This scripting style therefore disposes headlines to complexities in meaning, as words are used in unusual ways and the normal rules of grammar are often bungled in favour of some kind of special rules of grammar. It could therefore be hypothesised that the style permissible in headline creates an enabling environment for ambiguity to thrive and underscores the clarity/ambiguity

Consequently, the language of newspaper headlines is distinct owing not only to its unique functions in appealing to readership but also the constraint of economy imposed on the genre. In addressing the constraint of economy of space, Quirk and Biber (1999) identify the type of language used in headline as block language which is characterised by omission of closed-class items of low information value in the clause structure. Grammatical words that do not carry substantial meaning are mostly omitted. Such words include determiners, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions and auxiliary verbs. McCarthy and O'Dell (1994) underscore this point: "Headlines usually contain as few words as possible and that is why grammatical words like articles or auxiliary verbs are often left out, simple present tense is used and infinitive is applied to express the future event" (p.21). The omission of auxiliary verb in the ensuing headline is insightful: BAUCHI POLICE WORRIED OVER CASES OF MISSING PERSONS (NM 30/11/13:50). Time reference is downplayed as verbs are often used non-finitely. Non-finite use admits a verb into a noun phrase by way of class-shifting or nominalisation.

Consequently, headlines are very "rich" on a lexical level and reduced on a syntactic level. Noun stacking is another feature that characterises headlines. Nouns are usually preferred as modifiers instead of adjectives because they are shorter. As a result, it is possible to get four or five nouns in a string pre-modifying another noun as seen in this headline: FURNITURE FACTORY PAY CUT RIOT (Hakobian & Krunkyan, 2009, p.19). All the nouns above except for the last one *riot* function as adjective in the headline. This can cause ambiguity. So, in order to achieve the rich lexis and reduced syntax, some unusual grammatical choices are inevitable. These grammatical features have serious implication for the occurrence of ambiguity in headlines.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was employed for this study. As Osuala (2005) puts it, a qualitative research design recognises the importance of the subjective 'Lifeworld' of human beings and is interested in meanings rather than in behavioural statistics (pp.171-172). The population of the study is comprised of headlines featured in the November 2013 issues of four Nigerian newspapers published in English: *The Daily Trust (DT)*, *The Nation (TN)*, *National Mirror (NM)*, and *This Day (TD)*. The abbreviations are used subsequently for succinctness. Two sampling techniques were used: simple random sampling was used to select 20 newspaper editions, five from each of the dailies; the chosen newspaper editions were then subjected to purposive sampling to deliberately select 15 typical examples of genre-induced structural ambiguity. The data were subjected to textual analysis. In qualitative textual analysis, "researchers are more interested in the meanings associated with messages than with the number of times message variables occur" (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999, n. p.).

Data Presentation and Analysis

A. Complex Noun Phrases

The English syntax allows for pre-modification and post-modification of the head of the noun phrase. Thus we may have a univariate structure, one which is generated by the iteration of the same functional relationship, or a multivariate, a configuration of elements with each having a distinct function with respect to the whole.

1. EXPERT TIPS TO GROW INSURANCE BUSINESS *NM* 19/11/13:38
2. BREAKING PLATEAU'S 30-YEAR STADIUM JINX *TN* 29/11/13:37

Headline (1), H1 for short, is ambiguous between the class of *tips* as a noun and as a verb. The whole headline can just be seen as a complex noun phrase in which *tips* is the head of the noun phrase (NP) pre-modified by *Expert* and post modified by the prepositional phrase (PP) *to grow insurance business*. Or the headline can be read as a simple sentence in which *expert* is the NP and *tips* is the finite verb that agrees with it. In the first reading, the headline talks about certain expert suggestions that will enable an insurance business to grow while in the second instance *expert* refers to a person who gives a tip (money) to enable the growth of an insurance business. It should be noted that this syntactic ambiguity is enabled by the polysemous nature of the lexical item *tip* which permits two meanings in this context. However, background knowledge enables the reader to know that the latter interpretation, though syntactically acceptable, is pragmatically unlikely.

In (H2) we find a string of four nouns preceded by the gerund breaking. Plateau's 30-Year Stadium Jinx. *Plateau* is the head of the NP in the genitive (possessive case), followed by the complement NP '30-year stadium jinx', in which the structural ambiguity is localised. *30-year* may modify only *stadium* or can form a constituent together with *stadium* to modify *jinx*, making the headline ambiguous. Thus, we can have the following interpretations:

- i. Breaking the jinx associated with Plateau's 30-year stadium: in this case the jinx is not as old as the stadium.
- ii. Breaking the Plateau stadium jinx that has lasted for thirty years: in this case '30-year' applies strictly to 'jinx'.

The above analysis is predicated on the encoded semantics of the headline regardless of our world knowledge of the stadium in question, which the writer has anticipated. Thus, only the background knowledge of the reader can obviate the observed ambiguity.

B. Compound Noun Phrases

Apart from the complexity occasioned by modification in the NP structure, headlines also occur as compound noun phrases. The means of achieving a compound noun phrase structure in headlines is through co-ordination. The result is that any modifier in the first part of two conjoined phrases has the potential to also modify the noun in the second co-ordinate phrase. This can engender structural ambiguity, as in H3 and H4.

- (3) SOMALI WOMAN AND JOURNALIST ARRESTED FOR REPORTING RAPE (NM 22/11/13:49)
- (4) IYAYI'S DEATH AND CONVOY RECKLESSNESS (NM 22/11/13:49)
- (5) PUPILS GET SESSION WITH AUTHOR, *THE NATION* COLUMNIST TN (27/11/13:39)

In H3, *Somali* can modify both *woman* and *journalist* to refer to the same person (A Somalian woman who is a journalist). The NP can also have double referents in which case *woman* and *journalist* refer to two different persons, as in A Somalian woman and a Somalian journalist. Even a third meaning emerges: A Somalian woman and a journalist who may not hail from Somali. In normal usage, the use of articles before the nouns could have averted the ambiguity, but the style of headline, which is characterised by omission of function words, created the ambiguity as the reader is left to wonder whether the articles are just omitted by way of style, or are not meant to be there to show that a single referent is meant.

Similarly, in H4, *Iyayi* can modify only *death* or both *death* and *recklessness* to read IYAYI'S DEATH AND IYAYI'S CONVOY RECKLESSNESS. Why this reading is not possible for most readers is because Iyayi's death was a topical issue in the country and almost everybody in that social context knows that he was not the agent of convoy recklessness, but a victim of convoy recklessness. The analysis meshes well with Engelhardt and Ferreira's (2010) observation that "Conjoined structures may be globally or temporarily ambiguous because it is grammatically permissible to conjoin any type of constituent as long as the conjuncts are from the same syntactic category" (p.495).

In the style of headlining, the coordinating conjunction *and* is often replaced by a comma in the noun phrase to achieve succinctness as seen in H5 above. When such is the case, ambiguity may arise owing to the structural similarity between this use of comma as a conjunct and its use to mark off an appositive. Thus, two readings of the headline emerge: the same person may be the author and *The Nation* columnist (in which case the comma marks off an appositive) or both may refer to two different persons (in which case the comma replaces the conjunction *and*). The occurrence of the comma in the headline makes '*The Nation* columnist' seem like a non-restrictive appositive. However, if apposition is what is intended here, the comma should have been removed so that '*The Nation* columnist' will assume a defining (restrictive) role, which it ought to be playing.

Despite the ambiguity potential of coordinate structures, the stylistic effects they create tend to override the ambiguity tension. The use of compound noun phrases in a headline creates balance and symmetry in the message. The juxtaposition of two co-ordinate noun phrases makes them parallel to each other and accords the message equal attention. These considerations arguably outweigh the susceptibility of the structural patterns to ambiguity. Thus, the style of headlining is underpinned by calculations of its cost and benefit to the recipients.

C. Nominalisation

In headlines, other word classes especially verbs can be class-shifted to do duty for nouns with implication for a two-way reading. This process is known as nominalisation. Nominalisation “refers to the process of forming a noun from some other word-class ... or the derivation of a noun phrase from an underlying clause” (Crystal, 1989,p.328). A general feature of a nominalised headline is that it is targeted at reducing the headline structurally to a mere noun phrase rather than leaving the clause structure as a simple sentence with a finite verb. The semantic implication is that the process indicated in the verb is downplayed, having been subsumed under the noun. This practice is common in English syntax for as Fowler (1974) observes “English is a 'nominalising' language' and 'it is structurally possible, and actually common, for predicates (verbs and adjectives) to be realized syntactically as nouns: these are called derived nominals” (p.79). The two examples presented below are insightful.

(6) FRUSTRATING PHCN (*NM* 22/11/13:34)

(7) MILKING DEMOCRACY (*DT* 30/11/13:57)

Headline 6 captures an ambiguity which stems from the structural similarity between the present participle and the gerund (nominal). The ambiguity results from a shift in the grammatical category of the verb *frustrate* making it capable of functioning as a gerund and also as a present participle in the same headline. Thus, the possible readings of the headline are

- (a) The act of frustrating PHCN (gerund reading)
- (b) PHCN that frustrates (participial reading)

In the two readings, the thematic roles assigned to the constituent PHCN vary. In (a) PHCN (Power Holding Company of Nigeria) is the patient while in (b) it is the actor. However, armed with background knowledge, any Nigerian familiar with the poor and epileptic power supply in the country will not think twice before selecting reading (b). Similarly, the proposed privatisation of PHCN at that time can make a reader to surmise reading (a). Thus, in (a), the focus is shifted from the process (to frustrate) to the nominal *frustrating*, making the action only implied.

Similarly, H (7) MILKING DEMOCRACY is ambiguous between its potential as a gerund phrase and a participial phrase. Two meanings are apparent here:

- i. The act of milking (draining) the country under the guise of democracy (gerund).
- ii. Democracy that exploits the people it is presumably meant to protect (participle).

Meaning (ii) is metaphorically seen as democracy that is exploiting the country rather than yielding her “dividends”. Background knowledge of the political scenario in the country licenses both meanings.

The editor's choice of the *-ing* form in H6-7 has stylistic effects. The present

participle reading makes the actions seem appallingly continuous while the gerund interpretation dislocates the actions by making them non-finite and thus leaving the reader in suspense as to who did what. Being non-finite, the actions are not tied to any timeframe, which seems to suggest to the reader their timelessness or even persistence. The equivocation allows the readers to form their own judgment from the potential options, thereby fostering active reading. This claim is supported by Fredsted (1998) thus: “When communication is ambiguous, the focus is moved from the message proper to the recipient”. This move, he believes, “underlines the recipient's active freedom to 'choose' his own interpretation” (p.539).

D. Punctuation

The comma enjoys the widest use in headlines among the other punctuation marks. This variety of uses causes confusion and ambiguity as the reader often has to rely on the context to infer the value of the comma from the double or multiple possibilities as shown in the examples below. However, before we show the examples, we argue here that the existence of context does not rule out ambiguity as a linguistic phenomenon. Language operates at different levels, among which are lexis, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Context only belongs to the pragmatic layer. Thus, a syntactic analysis as pursued in this paper is only concerned with how the structural relations that hold among the elements in a clause structure affect meaning without regard to the world outside the sentence (context). However, the position of this paper is to argue with corpus evidence that though the structural patterns engender ambiguity, the style of the headline genre allows that based on calculations of contextual enrichment, which further reading provides. The examples are now presented below:

- (8) NIGERIAN POPULATION, POTENTIAL FOR PROSPERITY, DISASTER
(*NM* 20/11/13:7)
- (9) SANITATION DAY, RELAXATION DAY IN KADUNA (*DT* 20/11/13:44)
- (10) HER EXCELLENCY, THE GOVERNOR'S SLAVE (*DT* 10/11/13:26)
- (11) WHEN ORITSEJAFOR UPLIFTED THE BLIND, INDIGENT STUDENTS
(*TN* 22/11/13:32)
- (12) FoI NEEDS NO DOCUMENTATION, COURT RULES (*TD* 18/11/13:64)

(H8) has two potential paraphrases and is thus structurally ambiguous: (a) Nigerian population (*and its*) potential for prosperity and disaster or Nigerian population (*which has*) potential for prosperity and disaster (b) Nigerian population and Nigerian potential for prosperity and disaster. In (a) the first comma marks off an elliptic non-restrictive clause while in (b) the same comma replaces the coordinating conjunction *and* making it possible for the adjective *Nigerian* to modify both *population* and *potential*. However, the value of the second comma in the headline (which is *and*) is unambiguous.

(H9) SANITATION DAY, RELAXATION DAY IN KADUNA may be read as: (i) Sanitation day which has been turned into a relaxation day in Kaduna (the same

day). Thus the comma is non-restrictive. (ii) Sanitation Day and Relaxation Day in Kaduna (two distinct days). In this case the comma replaces the conjunction *and*. Although semantics enables both readings, encyclopedic knowledge rules out the latter in favour of the former because it is common knowledge that people use the sanitation day for resting at home rather than for cleaning up their surroundings as the day is intended. The writer presumably relies on this background calculation.

In (H10) HER EXCELLENCY, THE GOVERNOR'S SLAVE, the readings are torn between whether 'Her Excellency' and 'the governor's slave' have two distinct referents or just one. The ambiguity here lies between the use of comma to mark off a non-defining noun phrase in apposition, to mean one referent, and its use as a substitute for *and*, to mean two referents.

H11, WHEN ORITSEJAFOR UPLIFTED THE BLIND, INDIGENT STUDENTS is ambiguous between the two uses of comma to mark off adjectives used attributively in a string and the use of comma to replace the conjunction *and*. In the first case both *blind* and *indigent* are adjectives modifying the noun *students*, meaning that the students who are blind are also indigent. In a second interpretation, the headline could be fleshed out to read *the blind and indigent students*, in which case *the blind* is a nominal rather than an adjective while *indigent* subsists as the adjective modifying *students*. The implication for meaning is that *the blind* are different from the indigent students. It could be argued here that the presence of the definite article in the headline despite the economy principle driving the genre shows that the writer intends that *the blind* be viewed as a nominal.

In a similar vein, the comma in (H12) FoI NEEDS NO DOCUMENTATION, COURT RULES is equivocal. It can be interpreted as marking off the actual subject of an inverted complex sentence: COURT RULES THAT FoI NEEDS NO DOCUMENTATION. Alternatively, the comma can be read as *and*, in which case *rules* is a noun. In the latter, 'court rules' forms a coordinate noun phrase with 'no documentation': FoI NEEDS NO DOCUMENTATION AND COURT RULES. Both readings are semantically acceptable. Surprisingly, the operative meaning of the headline is the first interpretation. However, the ambiguity could have been averted if the headline had read 'rules court', verb followed by noun to signal an inversion; instead of 'court rules,' noun followed by verb.

The analyses show that punctuation-induced ambiguity is stylistically salient in headlines. Some of the punctuation ambiguity will certainly not arise in normal language use where substitution of *and* with a comma is not the norm. The function and style of headlines are thus identified as the predisposing factors for punctuation ambiguity. The stylistic use of comma in headlines to conjoin similar structures creates parallelism, symmetry and balance in the exposition and consequently attracts attention. Thus, the potential ambiguity is traded off in favour of sensationalism, evaluative judgment and attention appeal.

E. Ellipsis

Some headlines that would have been unambiguous in normal usage can become ambiguous in newspaper headlines owing to the elliptical nature of the style. Ellipsis is defined as “the omission of elements which are precisely recoverable from the linguistic or situational context” (Quirk & Biber, 1999, p.156). Let us consider the headlines below:

13. DAY DOCTORS CLOSE HOLES IN THEIR PATIENTS' HEART (DT 22/11/13:26)
14. ONE KILLED, NINE INJURED IN GUINEA AFTER JOURNALIST TARGETED (DT 19/11/13:27)
15. RIBADU APPOINTED VC OF JIGAWA VARSITY (DT 25/11/13:13)

(H13) DAY DOCTORS CLOSE HOLES IN THEIR PATIENTS' HEART is syntactically ambiguous. *Day Doctors* can form a constituent as the subject of a simple sentence in which *day* is an adjective (a classifier) modifying the head of the NP *doctors* while *close* is the head of the predicate. On the other hand, owing to the ellipsis which is typical of headlines, the whole headline can be read as a noun phrase post modified by trailing constituents in form of a *-that* clause. In this regard, *day* forms the head of a phrasal constituent (NP) pre-modified by an omitted definite article as rephrased thus: (THE) DAY (THAT) DOCTORS CLOSE HOLES IN THEIR PATIENTS' HEART.

In this second interpretation, the NP *The Day* is post modified by a restrictive (defining) relative clause *that doctors close holes in their patients' heart*. This makes the headline a complex noun phrase in which the VP is 'down ranked' (Simpson, 2006, p.61) to an embedded clause to fit into the complex noun phrase structure. This second reading sounds more reasonable as the writer-meaning because background knowledge tells us that *Day Doctors* though written as a constituent is pragmatically odd as a constituent. It is unusual to classify doctors in terms of *day* and *night*. It is therefore based on the principle of pragmatic relevance that the omitted definite article (*The*) preceding *Day* and the omitted *that* introducing the relative clause are recovered. This ambiguity will not be noticed in speech. However, in written discourse the writer expects the reader to decode the meaning on the basis of highly activated encyclopedic information associated with the concept *doctor*. Such pragmatic adjustments of lexical and syntactic meanings play a central role in the resolution of ambiguity.

When the likely omitted words are inserted in H14, the headline has two surface readings: (i) One person killed and nine persons injured in Guinea after a journalist (was) targeted. (ii) One person killed and nine persons injured in Guinea after a journalist targeted (somebody or something). The contention here lies in the thematic relations: whether *journalist* is the patient or the agent of the process *targeted* in the subordinate clause. Had *was* been used before *targeted* (passive voice), this ambiguity would not have occurred.

Similarly, in H15, RIBADU APPOINTED VC OF JIGAWA VARSITY, *appointed* is ambiguous between the simple past tense and the past participle form. If

the former is preserved, the headline is in active voice in which *Ribadu* is the agent that caused the process while *VC* is the beneficiary (object). In the alternative meaning, the headline is in passive voice in which the auxiliary verb preceding *appointed* is deliberately omitted to reduce the headline to a non-finite phrase. In this latter case *Ribadu* becomes the beneficiary of the process rather than the agent. When the omitted word is supplied, the headline is transformed to a passive sentence that reads: RIBADU (IS/WAS) APPOINTED VC OF JIGAWA VARSITY. According to Bateman (1997), the use of active voice foregrounds the agent while the passive voice backgrounds the agent (p.9). The stylistic choice lies with whether the writer accords the agent with greater importance or otherwise. However, it should not escape attention that the writer has relied on some shared knowledge between him and the reader regarding the identity of *Ribadu* and the fact that the person who makes the appointment (agent) does not make as much news as the recipient of the appointment (beneficiary), which licenses the passive voice reading.

Discussion of Findings

The findings show that the stylistic features that expose newspaper headlines to structural ambiguity are complex noun phrases, compound noun phrases, nominalisation, punctuation and ellipsis. These stylistic features are drawn from a vast pool of syntagmatically and paradigmatically organised language resources open to choice. “The choice of a particular item may mean one thing, its place in the syntagm another, its combination with something else another, and its internal organisation yet another” (Halliday, 1994, p. F46).

The analyses have demonstrated copiously the truism of the above view and underpinned the fact that the deliberate choice of a symbolisation over another within an approximate domain of meaning in headlines is one of the factors that create ambiguity in headlines. However, the findings show that some instances of ambiguity and textual imprecision in headlines go unnoticed as readers supplement what they read with their knowledge of the world, which enables them to reason that some of the potential interpretations are unlikely or even too trivial to make headlines. But this does not take away the ambiguity outright. As Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, Harnish (2010) put it, “Still even though one meaning is currently more salient because of real-world conditions, the expression itself is structurally (lexically) fully ambiguous” (p. 373).

The findings also reveal that the ambiguity potential of some of the editors' syntactic choices is mostly relegated to the background where ambiguity clashes with functionality. This validates the SFL theory, which stipulates that the entire architecture of language revolves around its functionality thereby making functionality intrinsic to language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Thus, ambiguity is easily traded off in favour of brevity, sensationalism, evaluative judgment and attention appeal, which serve the discourse goals of the writers better in conformity with the demands of the genre. It therefore seems that the delayed interpretation, which Leech (1983) accuses ambiguity of, is potentially a stylistic strategy to lure the

reader into the news story and involve him more actively in decoding the message. In agreement with Wales (2009), the reader is not simply the decoder of a given or a single eternal truth encoded by the writer but is expected to construct the meaning of the headlines in their interactive discourse contexts.

Furthermore, Structural ambiguity in headlines is often downplayed due to the writers' anticipation of contextual enrichment. The reader is expected to flesh out the ambiguous headline by drawing from the discourse context the most relevant input that fulfils the writer's communicative intention. Fredsted's (1998) view of context sums up the foregoing: "Context delimits our interpretation, so as to obviate the possibility of semantic ambiguity" (p.534). Contextualization constitutes a fundamental part of text interpretation in a stylistic analysis. According to Wales (2009), "The parameters of the situational context contribute to a text's meaning, and that therefore contextualization needs to be part of the (stylistic) theory or model" (p. 1049). Widdowson (1973) supports these findings thus:

The communicative import of an utterance will not only depend on the formal syntactic and semantic properties of the sentence with which it corresponds but also on such contextual features as the relationship of the addresser and addressee, the social situation in which the utterance is made, and so on. Contextualization in this case involves a consideration of what sentences count as when they are used in the actual business of social interaction (p. 74).

Conclusion

The study therefore concludes that the pervasive occurrence of structural ambiguity in newspaper headlines is underpinned by calculations of its cost versus benefit to the recipients and anticipation of contextual enrichment. In terms of the cost-benefit criterion, the equivocation is preserved if the stylistic effect (benefit) it evokes outweighs the potential interpretation difficulty (cost). Equivocation often provokes inquisitiveness in the reader and goads him to seek resolution of the bait expression in the news story. Oftentimes, allowing two or more interpretations to run concurrently in headlines fosters active reading and induces the reader to think deeper and analogously.

Furthermore, the reader is expected to flesh out the equivocal headline by drawing from the pragmatic system the most relevant input that fulfils the writer's communicative intention in the discourse context. Such pragmatic adjustments help the reader to modulate the meaning possibilities, enabling the writer-meaning to emerge. This observation agrees with Simpson's (2006) postulation that "extra-textual parameters are inextricably tied up with the way a text means" (p.3). These extra-textual inputs are often retrieved effortlessly from the reader's wealth of encyclopaedic knowledge. Enriching the meaning encoded in ambiguous headlines with contextual information based on the principles of contextual appropriateness compensates for the pervasive ambiguity of natural language (Akmajian et al., 2010). In conclusion, the idea of leaving the task of headline interpretation totally to the

encoded semantics while relegating contextual parameters to the background at the same is both superficial and unacceptable.

References

- Akmajian, A., Demers, R., Farmer, A., & Harnish, R. (2010). *Linguistics: An introduction to language and communication* (5th ed.). New Delhi: PH Learning Limited.
- Anaeto, S., Solo-Anaeto, M. & Tejumaiye, J. A. (2009). *Newspaper and magazine: management, production and marketing*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers Ltd.
- Bateman, J. A. (1997). Sentence generation and systemic grammar: An Introduction. *Iwanami Lecture Series: Language Sciences*, 8, 1-45. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten Publishers.
- Bucaria, C. (2004). Lexical and syntactic ambiguity as a source of humor: The case of newspaper headlines. *Humour*, 17 (3), 279-309.
- Butt, D. & Lukin, A. (2009). Stylistic analysis: Construing aesthetic organization. In M.A.K., Halliday, & J. J. Webster (Eds.), *Continuum Companion to Systemic Functional Linguistics*. London: Continuum.
- Brône, G. & Coulson, S. (2010). Processing Deliberate Ambiguity in Newspaper Headlines: Double Grounding. *Discourse Processes*, 47(3), 212-236.
- Cutting, J. (2002). *Pragmatics and discourse: A resource book for students*. London: Routledge.
- Crystal, D. (1989). *World Encyclopaedia of English Language*. London: Cambridge UP.
- Crystal, D. & Davy, D. (1969). *Investigating English Style*. London: Longman.
- Dada, S. A. (2012). A pragma-stylistic analysis of John 3:16. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 2(5), 85-93.
- Dor, D. (2003). On Newspaper Headlines As Relevance Optimizers. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 35, 695-721.
- Engelhardt, P. & Ferreira, F. (2014). Processing Coordination Ambiguity. *Language and Speech*, 53 (4), 494-509.
- Fowler, H. W. (1974). *Oxford Fowler's modern English usage*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Fredsted, E. (1998). On semantic and pragmatic ambiguity. Kreston Nordentoft in memoriam. *Journal of Pragmatic*, 30 (5), 527-541.
- Frey, L., Botan, C., & Kreps, G. (1999). *Investigating communication: An introduction to research methods* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R. & Hyams, N. (2011). *An introduction to language* (9th ed.). Canada: CENGAGE Learning.
- Hakobian, L. & Krunkyan, K. (2009). *Newspaper headlines: A handbook*. University of International Relations.
- Halliday, M. K. A. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London:

Edward Arnold Publishers.

- Halliday, M. A. K. & Matthiessen, C. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar* (3rd ed.). London: Hodder Education.
- Hurford, J. & Heasley, B. (2001). *Semantics: A coursebook*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Ifechelobi, J. N. (2011). Ambiguity in language use: A study of Nigerian newspapers. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
- Khamahani, G. & Tahirov, I. M. (2013). Focus on structural and lexical ambiguity in English newspaper headlines written by native and non-native journalists: A contrastive study. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(6), 379-383.
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Lobner, S. (2002). *Understanding semantics*. London: Hodder Education.
- MacDonald, M., Pearlmutter, N., & Seidenberg, M. (1994). Lexical nature of syntactic ambiguity resolution. *Psychological Review*, 101(4), 676-703.
- McCarthy, M., & O'Dell, F. (1994). *English vocabulary in use*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Mey, J. L. (2001). *Pragmatics: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Osuala, E. C. (2005). *Introduction to research methodology* (3rd ed.). Onitsha: Africana-Fep.
- Osunnuga, O. (2013). Investigating ambiguity in headlines of contemporary Yoruba newspapers. *Linguistics and Literature Studies*, 1(2), 61-65.
- Pexman, P., Hino, Y. & Lupker, S. J. (2004). Semantic ambiguity and the process of generating meaning from print. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 30(6), 1252–1270.
- Quirk, R. & Biber, D. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. London: Longman.
- Ramadani, N. (2015). Lexical ambiguity in the headlines of the *Jakarta Post* Newspaper. *Vivid Journal*, 4(1), 1-9.
- Saeed, J. (2003). *Semantics*. Kundli: Blackwell Publishing.
- Sennet, A. (2011). Ambiguity. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopaedia of philosophy* (Summer ed.). Stanford: Stanford University.
- Sewall, M. (n. d.). Ambiguous newspaper headlines. Retrieved from .
- Simpson, P. (2006). *Stylistics: A resource book for students*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wales, K. (2009). Stylistics. In J. L. Mey (Ed.), *Concise encyclopaedia of pragmatics* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Elsevier Ltd.
- Wasow, T., Perfors, A., & Beaver, D. (2012). *The Puzzle of Ambiguity*. Stanford: Stanford University.
- Wheeler, S. (2005). Headlines. *Print journalism: A Critical Introduction*. In K. Richard (Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Widdowson, H. (1973). An applied linguistic approach to discourse analysis. Unpublished Dissertation. University of Edinburgh, UK
- Yusufu, B. N. (2014). A semantic study of ambiguities in newspaper headlines. Unpublished Dissertation. University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria
-