

Lexical and Structural Ambiguities in the Headlines of The Nigerian Tribune and The Punch, 2015-2022

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Abstract

The primary goal of communication is information sharing for mutual understanding between the sender and the recipient. A news headline is a form of communication that serves as the gist of the main points in the lead. It is written in a more succinctly attention-grabbing manner. It makes the readers curious and piques their interest. However, some of the Nigerian newspaper headlines are ambiguous. They are open to two or more interpretations against the writer's intended meaning. Therefore, this study investigated the lexical and structural ambiguity in the Nigerian newspapers: *The Nigerian Tribune* and *The Punch*. The use of Theory of Meaning by Ludwig Wittgenstein served as the theoretical framework for this study. The data were collected from *The Nigerian Tribune* and *The Punch* and qualitatively analysed. Ambiguous headlines were found and their interpretations were given, using the Use Theory of meaning. The study found that ambiguities are frequently used in newspaper headlines due to the polysemous nature of the lexical choices, the dual function of some parts of speech, indexical references and wrong places of prepositional phrases. The analysis showed that these phrases were not placed immediately after their antecedent and thus resulted in ambiguous headlines. The study concluded that headline writers should discontinue using too much ambiguity, to avoid discouraging the readers. The deck, kicker and rider should also be used along with the headlines. Also, the readers are encouraged to contextually study the contents to get the precise and intended message.

Keywords: News headlines; lexical ambiguity; structural ambiguity; polysemy; indexical references

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INTRODUCTION

A crucial component of daily life is effective communication. According to Ogbulogo (2004), communication is sending messages from the sender to the receiver utilizing a signaling system. According to him, the main goal of communication is information sharing for mutual understanding between the sender and the recipient. Therefore, whether a message is conveyed orally or in writing, it is effective when both parties understand it, indicating that a conversation has occurred. One of the components of communication is the news headline. It serves to inspire readers and facilitate their understanding of the news's underlying meaning. It is written in a clear, striking, and journalistic style. Reah (2018) cited Prateepchaikul (2010), news headlines should pique readers' interest and motivate them to read on. Nwala and Umukoro (2017) argue that in newspapers, the headlines are usually the

first thing a reader will see. It serves as an informative summary or abstract of the news content. Newsworthiness is enhanced by good headlines. It presents an overview of the contents and enhances the news story's credibility.

However, the headlines of certain Nigerian newspapers tell a different story. This suggests that some Nigerian newspapers' headlines contain a lot of ambiguity. Scholars have defined the word ambiguity in several ways. For instance, Olagunju (2011: 78) cited Alabi (2004), as ambiguity as a word, term, symbol, phrase, sentence, or other forms of communication that have more than one possible interpretation. To put it another way, ambiguity is the quality of an expression having more than one meaning or being susceptible to more than one interpretation. It has been proven that certain writers purposefully employ lexical and structural ambiguity to entice readers to read the entire article, however, this usually results in confusion and annoyance. Lexical and structural ambiguity prevents the intended interpretation from being realized, which is why it is regarded as a barrier to communication.

Consequently, the headline's lexical and structural ambiguity is what causes the problems that newspaper readers typically run into. By looking at the headlines, individuals cannot decipher the editors' intended meanings because they are frequently unclear. Most of the time, readers find it difficult to assign a specific meaning to headlines that could have more than one interpretation. Therefore, the focus of this research is to examine the lexical and structural ambiguity in the headlines of the Nigerian Tribune and The Punch, 2015-2022.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have been conducted on the lexical and structural ambiguity in newspaper headlines. For instance, Nwala & Umukoro (2017) Investigating the Meaning of Newspaper Headlines: The Issue of Ambiguity. This study's goal is to examine ambiguous headline constructions and analyze them using the operational theory of meaning. The study highlights that newspaper editors are well-known for journalistic in-house language which is one of the causes of headlines' ambiguity. It is a marketing tactic that keeps customers guessing to increase readership and sales. However, the study finds that when an expression is given a meaning other than the one intended, the primary purpose of the message or discourse is undermined. The outcome demonstrates that it is best to wait until you have read the complete content before interpreting newspaper headlines. This is the only way to obtain the operational and contextual interpretation of a headline accurately. Additionally, it concludes that to clarify uncertain headlines, headline editors and script writers should always employ additional headings termed "subhead" or "deck-head."

Khalifa (2018) researched Ambiguity in News Headlines: A Psycholinguistic Study. The researcher focuses on two different aspects. He starts by identifying the specific ambiguities in news headlines that are thought to present problems to readers and determining their proper interpretations. He then looks at the several kinds of ambiguity in news headlines that cause readers to stop reading. The study selects a few news headlines, categorizes them, and carries out a semantic analysis of them. According to the findings, lexical ambiguity was utilized less frequently in news headlines than syntactic ambiguity, while pragmatic ambiguity is the least often used type of ambiguity in headlines. He proves that pragmatically ambiguous headlines are the most frequently accurately interpreted by readers.

Conversely, the hardest headlines to understand are those that are syntactically confusing. Syntactically ambiguous headlines present a greater challenge to comprehension than lexically ambiguous headlines. The study's findings suggest that lexically ambiguous

headlines encourage readers to read on. However, people are discouraged from reading the content of headlines with structural ambiguity. He advises writers to avoid overusing grammatical ambiguity because it could divert readers' attention. The readers become disinterested in reading since it is difficult to determine the proper interpretation of the syntactically confusing headlines. Lexical ambiguity can be used by news headline writers to grab readers' interest and encourage them to keep reading.

Ayoola (2017) wrote a syntactic analysis of ambiguity in Nigerian newspaper headlines. To emphasize the linguistic features of the ambiguous structures, the research attempts to provide a syntactic analysis of ambiguous headlines of political news reports in Nigerian media. The x-bar syntax was used to analyze, describe, and explain using linguistic concepts. The outcome demonstrates that the X-bar syntax has been appropriate in accounting for the linguistic reasons of ambiguity, including incorrect sentential organization, the deletion and omission of sentential parts, and incomplete syntactic processes like nominalization, relativization, and passivization. The functional importance of ambiguity in terms of the communication requirement of users of ambiguous languages, however, has not been accounted for by the theory. The study shows that, despite being a characteristic of linguistic expression, ambiguity is solely a semantic issue involving linguistic meaning as opposed to the speaker's meaning. It proves that journalists write the most unclear headlines unintentionally to keep them brief. This is why some structural components in the headlines have been removed or left out. Furthermore, it claims that journalists use ambiguous headlines as a linguistic strategy to either grab readers' attention or mislead them. Additionally, ambiguity helps journalists hide the headlines' true meaning so that emotionalism does not appear to conflict with professionalism.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative and interpretive research design, focusing on the analysis of newspaper headlines from two prominent Nigerian publications: The Nigerian Tribune and The Punch. This design was chosen to facilitate a deep exploration of language ambiguity, particularly lexical and structural ambiguity, within the context of media communication. By using a qualitative approach, the researchers could delve into the nuances of meaning and interpretation, which are often lost in purely quantitative analyses. The interpretive framework further allowed for the consideration of multiple meanings and the socio-cultural contexts in which these headlines were created and understood. The study's qualitative methodology was well-suited for analyzing language use in media, as it emphasized understanding the meaning-making processes behind the headlines. Through careful selection and analysis of headlines, the researchers aimed to reveal how ambiguity in language can affect readers' interpretations and perceptions of news events. The selection of specific headlines and newspapers was critical in providing a representative sample of ambiguous language in Nigerian print media.

Research Object

The primary objects of analysis in this study were newspaper headlines from The Nigerian Tribune and The Punch, published between 2015 and 2022. These newspapers were selected due to their prominence and wide readership in Nigeria, making them influential in shaping public discourse. During the researchers' visit to the Kenneth Dike Library at the University of Ibadan, copies of both newspapers were obtained to serve as primary sources

for the study. From The Nigerian Tribune, forty-one headlines were selected for analysis, including thirty lexical items and eleven structural items. Among these, eleven headlines—ten lexical and one structural—were identified as ambiguous. Similarly, from The Punch, one hundred and fifty newspapers were reviewed, from which forty headlines were chosen. Of these, thirty were lexical items and ten were structural items. The researchers ultimately selected twenty ambiguous headlines, including both lexical and structural ambiguities, from the combined sources of The Nigerian Tribune and The Punch to serve as the primary focus of analysis. These headlines were chosen specifically for their potential to reveal multiple layers of meaning, showcasing how lexical and structural ambiguities are used in Nigerian media.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved a close examination of the selected ambiguous headlines from The Nigerian Tribune and The Punch, focusing on both lexical and structural ambiguity. The researchers characterized and interpreted the intended meaning behind the ambiguous headlines, using semantic theory to explore how different interpretations could arise from the same words or phrases. Specifically, the researchers employed the theory of meaning to track the various interpretations of the ambiguous words and expressions found in the newspaper headlines, identifying how certain linguistic choices could lead to multiple understandings. For lexical ambiguity, the focus was on words that have multiple meanings, which could lead readers to different interpretations based on context or personal knowledge. Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, referred to headlines where the grammatical structure could be interpreted in more than one way, thus altering the meaning of the entire sentence.

The analysis revealed that these ambiguities were often used intentionally to provoke curiosity or encourage engagement with the article. The researchers categorized the headlines based on their type of ambiguity and then discussed how each one could be interpreted differently by readers, providing insights into the complexities of meaning in newspaper communication. By examining the ambiguous headlines from both a lexical and structural perspective, the study shed light on how ambiguity in language can both engage and confuse readers, highlighting the importance of clear communication in journalism. The researchers' findings emphasize that while ambiguity can be a powerful tool in attracting readership, it also poses risks in terms of misinterpretation, potentially affecting public understanding of important news events.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the examination of ambiguous headlines in two prominent Nigerian newspapers, *The Punch* and *The Nigerian Tribune*, published between 2015 and 2022. Ambiguity in language can be classified into five main categories: phonological ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, semantic ambiguity, morphological ambiguity, and syntactic (or structural) ambiguity. However, this research narrows its focus to two specific types of ambiguity: lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity. These two forms were selected due to their frequent occurrence in newspaper headlines and their potential impact on readers' interpretation of news content. The identified ambiguous headlines in this study were analyzed under four distinct subheadings to provide a comprehensive examination of how ambiguity manifests in each newspaper. The subheadings include: Lexical Ambiguity in *The Punch*, Lexical Ambiguity in *The Nigerian Tribune*, Structural Ambiguity in *The Punch*, and Structural

Ambiguity in *The Nigerian Tribune*. By organizing the analysis in this way, the study offers a clear comparison between how these two types of ambiguity are employed in each newspaper, as well as the potential challenges they pose for readers attempting to discern the intended meaning.

An example of lexical ambiguity can be found in the use of the term "bi-weekly." This term can have two interpretations: it can mean "twice a week" (which would imply a total of 104 meetings in a year) or "once every two weeks" (resulting in 26 meetings annually). When this term is used in a headline, such as in scheduling a meeting, it can create confusion among readers as to the exact frequency of the event. This example underscores the broader issue of ambiguous language in headlines, where a lack of clarity can lead to multiple interpretations and affect the reader's understanding of the news. The following analysis explores how lexical and structural ambiguities appear in headlines from both newspapers, highlighting the implications for readers and the importance of precision in news reporting. The study ultimately aims to shed light on how ambiguity, while sometimes unintentional, can shape public perception and comprehension of news, making it a critical aspect of media communication.

Possible Interpretations of Lexical Ambiguity in the Punch Newspaper

Lexical ambiguity arises when a word or lexical item carries more than one meaning. Additionally, this describes circumstances in which a single word or lexical item has more than one semantic interpretation.

Excerpt 1

(1) Buhari's spokesman slammed for demanding focus on malaria (March 6, 2020)

Due to the lexical term "slammed," which is underlined, this headline is ambiguous. The word 'slammed' has different meanings. When a word has more than one meaning, it is known as 'Polysemy'. The meaning of "slam" in the *Longman Contemporary Dictionary* includes criticize, jail, and shout. According to the Use Theory of Meaning by Wittgenstein, the interpretation of a word should be contextually based. The context in which a word or statement is used determines its meaning. All these meanings can be used in this context. This has conditioned the audience to give various interpretations of the entire expression. The first possible interpretation is that Buhari's spokesperson was criticized for urging attention to malaria. This indicates that Buhari's spokesperson received criticism for insisting on focusing on malaria. The second possibility is that Buhari's spokesman was imprisoned for urging attention to malaria. In other words, Buhari's spokesperson was jailed for calling for a focus on malaria. The third possibility could be that when Buhari's spokesperson insisted on emphasizing malaria, he was shouted at. These are some different interpretations that can be drawn from the headlines' ambiguity due to the polysemic word "slammed." The following are some possible interpretations:

- (a) Buhari's spokesman faced criticism for insisting on emphasizing malaria.*
- (b) Buhari's spokesperson was imprisoned for calling for an emphasis on malaria.*
- (c) Buhari's spokesman was shouted at for insisting on emphasizing malaria.*

Excerpt 2

(2) Ekiti fires teacher for allegedly impregnating 17-year-old pupil (March 11, 2020)

The ambiguity in this sentence is caused through the use of the word *fire* underlined in the above excerpt. It has multiple meanings. Multiple meanings of a word are referred to as polysemy. As was previously stated, one of the causes of the ambiguity in newspaper headlines is polysemy. The word "fire," according to the *Longman Contemporary Dictionary*, can indicate sack, burn or stimulate. This headline is open to two interpretations. Ekiti sacks the teacher for committing the act. The second reader may think because of the offence he committed, Ekiti sets the teacher on fire, burning him alive. The final reader may take this to mean that Ekiti aids the teacher in getting a 17-year-old student impregnated.



The newspaper's ambiguous headline leaves room for these interpretations. It will obstruct the editor's intended interpretation, as was already stated. As a result, the word can be used in various ways based on the Use Theory of Meaning. These include:

- (a) A teacher is dismissed by Ekiti for allegedly impregnating a 17-year-old student.
- (b) A teacher is burned by Ekiti for allegedly impregnating a 17-year-old student.
- (c) A teacher is encouraged to impregnate a 17-year-old student.

Excerpt 3

(3) NYSC screens govs, ministers, and corps members at orientation camps (*Punch*– March 13, 2020)

'Screens' is a word that has different meanings. It is responsible for the ambiguity in this headline because of its polysemous nature. Multiple meanings of a word are referred to as polysemy.



It could be interpreted as NYSC Shields govs, ministers, and corps members at orientation camps by the first reader. The heat or the rain may be the cause of this. In other words, NYSC does not want the weather to negatively affect them. As a result of this, they are shielded from the rain or the sun. It may also function as a form of defence against dangerous things. In other words, NYSC doesn't want anything bad to happen to them. NYSC defends them at orientation camps. The second reader might translate it as follows: At orientation camps, NYSC tests ministers, officials, and youth corps members. In other words, an illness is the reason they are being tested. This might be due to a pandemic. Thus, to stop the spread of a disease, NYSC screens them before letting them come in. The last reader can read it as NYSC broadcasts govs, ministers, and the corps members. In other words, they are set up for television broadcasts. As a result of the various interpretations, the lexical term "screen" is ambiguous and can result in different interpretations as mentioned above.

Excerpt 4

(4) Police refuse to arrest Ogun Okada riders who ***hacked*** my husband (March 17, 2020)

The lexical item "hacked" is ambiguous, which leads to many interpretations of the entire sentence. 'Hacked' is a polysemous word. Multiple meanings of a word are referred to as polysemy. The word "hacked" has multiple meanings according to the *Longman Contemporary Dictionary*, which makes the entire expression ambiguous. The word "hacked" has the lexical meaning "annoyed." In this case, the phrase would be: "Police won't take the Ogun okada riders who irritated my husband into custody". The term "hacked" can also refer to cutting something or someone into pieces, which may result in death. Therefore, we can say that Ogun okada riders cut my husband into pieces but the police refused to arrest them. This indicates that the Ogun Okada motorcyclists who cut and killed the writer's husband are

not being detained by the police. We can interpret these different meanings in a variety of ways, for example:

(a) *Ogun Okada riders who irritated my husband are not arrested by the police.*

(b) *Ogun Okada riders who cut my husband are not arrested by the police.*

These are inferences that could be made due to the ambiguous nature of the lexical item that was "hacked."

Possible Interpretations of Lexical Ambiguity in the Nigerian Tribune

Excerpt 5

(1) *It is a very difficult act in Nigeria (Tribune-January 3, 2015)*

The lexical term "acting" in the headline above creates ambiguity because it might be interpreted differently by the readers. The word acting could therefore refer to a temporary administration, a theatrical performance, a fabrication of reality, or the process of working. As a result, the headline could be interpreted in various ways by the readers. "It is extremely challenging to serve as an interim government in Nigeria", according to reader A. It is possible that someone has served as an interim government in the past and he is sharing his experiences. In a local government, it can be an acting chairman, acting governor, or acting president. Also, it can be interpreted by reader B as: "Acting in Nigerian theatre is challenging". In other words, the author makes an effort to convey his theatre experience. It could be interpreted by reader C as: "Acting in Nigeria is challenging". This indicates that posing as someone else or creating a false appearance is challenging. It could be interpreted as: "Working in Nigeria is highly challenging" by the last reader D. This suggests that working for a living in Nigeria is difficult. Consequently, the ambiguous term "act" can lead to those aforementioned interpretations:

The use of act in the headline above creates ambiguity because it allows for multiple interpretations, making the headline's meaning unclear.

Excerpt 6

(2) *The positives of a challenged presidency (Tribune – January 11, 2015)*

The underlined modifier in this headline makes it ambiguous. 'Challenged' is a polysemous word. Multiple meanings of a word are referred to as polysemy. The ambiguity in this lexical ambiguity is caused by the vocabulary item "challenged." First, it can indicate that the presidency is under threat. *The Longman Contemporary Dictionary* defines a challenge as the denial of something's rightness, justice, or legality. Consequently, it may indicate that the public challenged the president. The citizens could ask the president to refrain from doing anything that he is attempting to do. On the other hand, the adjective "challenged" could be used to describe the president's issues. This indicates that the president may experience some psychological, bodily, or optical difficulties. The word "challenged" is used as a polite expression to describe someone who finds it difficult to perform tasks because he has a physical challenge, according to the Dictionary. The president may therefore have a visual impairment, a bodily impairment, or a mental impairment. These are some potential meanings for the ambiguous word "challenged."

Excerpt 7

(3) *The cruising train of Alao-Akala towards Agodi (Tribune – January 26, 2015)*

Due to the use of the lexical term "cruising," the expression is ambiguous. The lexical item serves two purposes, which makes it difficult to interpret the editor's message as he or she intended. It has two interpretations. It might be a word expressing an ongoing action, known as a verb. That is, it refers to the train's forward motion. Thus, the train is moving smoothly towards the direction of Agodi. That is, Alao Akala is moving by train to Agodi. On the other hand, it could be used to modify the noun that comes after it. In other words, the adjective "cruising" modifies the noun "train." This justification allows for the second interpretation, according to which the term "cruising" is an adjective that modifies the train. These are different meanings as a result of the lexical term "cruising," which serves two purposes. The ambiguity in the entire expression is caused by these functions.

Excerpt 8

(4) *Osun Assembly proposes death for killer kidnappers (Tribune – March 11, 2020)*

The 'killer' is the cause for this ambiguous headline. The word can be interpreted in two ways according to the Use Theory of Meaning. It could be used as a noun, or it could be used as an adjective. Thus, the expression could have two different interpretations. It could be an adjective that serves as a modifier. It means that the word 'killer' modifies the noun 'kidnappers'. If it is a modifier, we could have it as the Osun Assembly proposes death for the kidnappers who are killers. That is, after kidnapping the victims, they still go ahead to kill them. They combine both the attributes of kidnapping people and killing them. The second interpretation is that the word 'killer' could be a noun. If it is a noun, there will be an omission of a constituent known as an ellipsis. It means there is an omission of the word 'of'. Hence, we could have the second interpretation as the Osun Assembly proposes death for the killers of kidnappers. This means that the assembly proposes death for those who kill kidnappers, perhaps, without their trial at the law court. It has been established in the Nigerian constitution that the citizens should not take law into their own hands. Thus, the Osun assembly proposes death for those who take the law into their own hands by killing the kidnappers. Therefore, the lexical items are ambiguous and cause different interpretations of the expression.

Excerpt 9

(5) *Fashola's aide charges institutions on IGR (Tribune, January 22, 2015)*

The ambiguity in this sentence is due to the lexical word "charges". It is a polysemous word. Multiple meanings of a word are referred to as polysemy. It is possible to interpret the complete sentence in a variety of ways because the word "charge" has various meanings, according to the Longman Contemporary Dictionary. The lexical item may refer to the institutions being charged with a crime based on IGR. This suggests that the aide to Fasola charges the institutions with a crime and has them tried in court. The second meaning could mean that institutions must pay a specific amount of money on IGR. In other words, the institutions must send a predetermined percentage of their internally generated revenue (IGR). So, Fasola's assistant takes a predetermined amount out of the institutions' IGR. The third interpretation is that the institution has been allocated a specific task about IGR. This

suggests that the institution has been given a specific task to do on IGR by Fasola's assistant. Finally, the headline may suggest that Fasola's assistant blames the institutions for IGR issues. It is possible that the institutions may be discovered to have low IGR and will be held responsible. These are possible interpretations because of this ambiguous word.

Excerpt 10

(6) *Ladoja, Alao-Akala will fall again (January 29, 2015)*

This headline has different interpretations because of the underlined one. That is, it has multiple meanings because of the word. It could mean stumble, succumb, lose, or drop. Depending on the circumstances, the readers might interpret the headline differently. This expression will become ambiguous because of these various possible readings, which will change how it is generally understood. The headline's meaning might be interpreted as "Ladoja, Alao Akala will stumble again". Maybe he might have fallen before, and he will likely fall again. The interpretation of another reader can be: "Ladoja, Alao Akala will succumb again." It implies that he will give up challenging his superior and submit to him. The third reader can translate the phrase to mean "Ladoja, Alao Akala will lose once more" It implies that Alao-Akala will lose the election once more, just like he did in the last one. The reader might have understood it to mean that Alao Akala will once more drop. Alao-Akala will thus once more fall to a lower level. That is, his prestige will once more decline. Due to the word "fall", the following interpretations could be derived.

Excerpt 11

(7) *Three butchers in police net for stabbing barber at viewing centre Ekiti (Tribune, November 4, 2019).*

The underlined lexical is ambiguous because of its homonymous nature. The term "butchers" in the headline above causes ambiguity that affects the headline's meaning. In other words, the use of the lexical term "butchers" in the headline above creates ambiguity and leaves room for reader interpretation. 'Butcher' is a homonym. A word is a homophone when it has two or more distinct meanings. That is, the word "butcher" could refer to a person who sells beef. That is, the one selling meat. Three meat vendors are arrested for stabbing a barber at a viewing facility in Ekiti, according to one interpretation. The second interpretation of this ambiguous lexical word, on the other hand, is a brutal or indiscriminate killer. Therefore, the second possible interpretation is that three murderers are wanted by the police for stabbing a barber at an Ekiti viewing facility. Due to the homonymous nature of the ambiguous lexical term "butchers," there are two alternative interpretations.

Excerpt 12

(8) *Buhari puts off meeting with govts. (Tribune, February 16, 2022)*

This is an ambiguous headline. Its ambiguity is caused by the word underlined which is known as a phrasal verb. The phrasal verb might result in an ambiguous headline, as it does in this case. The term "put off" has multiple interpretations because of its ambiguity. For instance, the phrasal verb "put off" might refer to delaying an action or planning it for a future moment. This might be read as Buhari postponing his meeting with the govts. It could also imply that you hate doing anything. Therefore, Buhari hates meeting with govts. Making someone wait because you don't want to see them for now can also be referred to as this

phrasal verb "put off." This can be read as Buhari delays meeting with govts. Therefore, the ambiguous phrasal verb makes all these interpretations possible.

Excerpt 13

(9) *Oromoni Snr. Alleges cover-up by govt, police (Tribune, February 16, 2022)*

This headline is ambiguous because of the word underlined. That is, its ambiguity is caused by the underlined phrasal verb. The term "cover-up" has multiple interpretations because of its ambiguous nature. For instance, "cover-up" might refer to hiding something underneath to prevent detection. With this, it may be assumed that Oromoni Snr. is accusing the government and the police of hiding something from the people. The phrasal verb could also be interpreted to mean to shield people from the truth or faults. This might be read as Oromoni Snr. alleging a cover-up by the government and police. In other words, it is claimed that Buhari and the police covered up errors or wrongdoing by Oromoni Snr. It could also mean protecting a person by concealing his unfavourable acts. This might mean that Buhari and the government are accused of shielding someone. They may be protecting the individual because they know he has committed a crime. The ambiguous phrasal verb makes all these readings possible.

Excerpt 14

(10) *The crime called Yahoo (Tribune, November 28, 2022)*

This lexical item 'yahoo' is making the headline ambiguous. In addition to that, this lexical item renders the entire statement ungrammatical. According to *the Longman Contemporary Dictionary*, it refers to an internet search engine. This context indicates that the word underlined is known as coinage. It is an act of forming a new word or phrase in a language. That is, it is the invention of a new word or phrase. Based on this context, it is an act of getting money through ritual killings or internet fraud. As a result, this headline will be unclear to readers who are not familiar with the word in the environment where it is coined. It has been determined that many invented terms are regarded as poor-quality words and ought to be avoided in formal writings, such as newspapers. Newspapers cover a larger area and can be read anywhere in the world. Therefore, newspapers must use formal language, to avoid any misunderstanding on the part of the readers.

Possible Interpretations of Structural Ambiguity in the Punch Newspaper

Structural ambiguity on the other hand arises when a group of words or phrases gives two conceivable meanings. In other words, structural ambiguity results from how an entire sentence is organized to produce several interpretations. For instance, the following structure is ambiguous:

“Stubborn boys and girls”

The noun phrase above has at least two interpretations, the modifier *stubborn*, is responsible for the ambiguity. It could modify both *boys* and *girls*, with this rendering, boys and girls are stubborn. On the other hand, *stubbornness* could modify only boys. If this is the case, then boys but not girls, are stubborn. Based on this, the analysis can be given below:

Excerpt 15

(1) *Police battered, robbed, gave me #200 for fare (March 1, 2020)*

This sentence has syntactic ambiguity. There are two ways that this headline could be interpreted because of the ellipsis. Ellipsis describes the use of partial sentences or the removal of some sentence components, particularly in news headlines. While ellipses in news headlines encourage readers to read the content of the headlines, they may also be distracting, as this headline illustrates. One possible reading is as follows: I was beaten by the police, they stole from me, and they paid me #200 for my fare. This suggests that the writer was beaten and robbed by the police before receiving #200 as payment for his transportation. This employs an ellipsis, which eliminates the pronoun "me" from the sentence. It could also be that the police were the victim. That is, the police were beaten, robbed, and then gave the writer #200. The word "was" is omitted from this sentence using an elliptical approach. Therefore, these different readings can be attributed to the ellipsis.

Excerpt 16

(2) *I molested a three-year-old girl under a spell (March 6, 2020)*

I molested three-year-old girl under a spell - Suspect

Bola Bamigbola, Osofbo

A 29-year-old man, Olusegun Adeyele, sexually molested a three-year-old girl in Ife-Ife, Ogun State, said on Thursday that he acted under a spell and pleaded for mercy.

Speaking to journalists after he was paraded by the state Commissioner of Police, Johnson Kokumo, in Osofbo, the suspect said his head became clear after he had committed the crime.

Adeyele, a printer, said despite the victim's wailing, he could not stop, adding that he was a first-time offender and pleaded for mercy.

Kokumo said the complainant, a woman friend of the suspect, left her daughter in the care of Adeyele sometime in February 2020, adding that on coming back from the farm, she discovered that the girl had been defiled.

The CP stated, "When the mother returned from the farm, she noticed that the victim was bleeding. Upon the receipt of the complaint, the police swung into action and arrested the suspect, who confessed to the crime during the course of investigation."

"The victim was taken to hospital for medical examination and treatment, where she is still receiving treatment and the medical

men, with a UBA ATM card, intended to withdraw N50,000 from the PoS operator, but the card was not functioning. The self-styled soldier threatened the victim with a sword and jack knife when the PoS operator refused to hand over the sum to them."

"Another complainant was also dispossessed of N30,000 at his PoS stand by the same gang. On February 24, 2020, the same gang went to Iperumedu in its usual modus operandi, which eventually led to the arrest of the members by the Operation Puff Adder patrol team."

Another suspect paraded by the police, Idowu Adejare, was said to have killed one James Yankume in Ikotu village, Awo, Ogun State, when he went to the deceased's house with a cutlass and Dane gun, chased him and his wife out of the house, beheaded the victim and dumped the head in the forest.

Kokumo advised criminals to relocate from the state as the

arrest two, recover N2m

nabbed for rape

personation for survival cause of hardship.

He stated, "I am a carpenter and people know me in my area as a soldier. I love the profession. Since 2007, I have been applying to join the Nigerian Army. But I

the job, so I got an army uniform and started wearing it around. I travelled around with the uniform. People give me money because they know me as a soldier."

"This is the first time that I could be described as a soldier."

Abimbola Oyebamiji, from her poultry farm around 4pm on Tuesday.

The hoodlums were said to have demanded N60m ransom, but later reduced it to N10m when Oyebamiji's family members were unable to pay.

The victim was said to

The headline has syntactic ambiguity. The sentence has a structural ambiguity because of the prepositional phrase "under a spell." The difficulty in separating the sentence into its clear Immediate Constituents (ICs) is the cause of this syntactic ambiguity. Linguists developed a system called immediate constituents to break sentences down into their parts. This has made it feasible for the term to have multiple alternative interpretations. A reader could have it interpreted that the girl was under a spell before sexually assaulting her. Thus, "under a spell" is more naturally connected with the verb. This indicates that the writer abused the girl while she was under a spell. It will be: I assaulted her while she was under the spell. However, another reader could have as I assaulted a three-year-old girl while I was

under the spell. This indicates that the suspect was possessed before sexually assaulting the girl. In other words, he was forced to molest the girl by a spell.

Excerpt 17

(3) *Man lures a girl with suya in Ebonyi, and defiles her (Punch-March 14, 2020)*

Man lures girl with suya in Ebonyi, defiles her

Edward Nnachi, Abakaliki

A roasted meat (*suya*) seller, Dawuda Ibrahim, has been taken to an Ebonyi State magistrates' court for allegedly defiling a minor after luring her with the meat.

It was gathered that the victim, was a regular customer of the suspect, and that the suspect had constantly asked her out but she rejected the advances.

City Round gathered that on February 28, 2020, the victim went to buy *suya* (meat) from the suspect, and didn't know that the suspect gave her a special one purportedly laced with love potion.

IDPs' relief materials

Chima Azubuike, Gombe

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, Gombe zonal office, on Friday secured the conviction of a former Executive Secretary of the Gombe State Emergency Management Agency, Dr Dallami Rukuje, before Justice Abubakar Jauru of the state's high court on three counts bordering on conspiracy and criminal misappropriation.

Rukuje was said to have conspired with the second convict, Isa Garba, the store officer of GOSEMA, to steal building materials brought to Gombe State by the Presidential Committee for the North East Initiatives to Internally Displaced Persons as relief materials.

They were jailed 18 months' imprisonment with an option of a N900,000 fine each.

The convicts reportedly conspired to sell 5000 bags of cement and 4000 drums of 20-litre paints and used the proceeds for their personal benefit.

The offences are contrary to sections 84, 85, 97, and 309 of the Penal Code.

They were arraigned on February 28, 2018 and pleaded not guilty to all the three counts, which made the prosecution counsel, A. M. Labaran, to request a date for trial.

The trial lasted for 25 months from the day of their arraignment and five witnesses were called by the prosecution. Fifteen exhibits were also tendered.

On their part, the defence counsel invited three witnesses.

Both parties filed their final written addresses on December 20, 2019.

While delivering the judgment, Justice Jauru said the prosecution proved the case beyond reasonable doubts and pronounced the defendants guilty as charged.

The court sentenced the defendants to 14 months' imprisonment on count one and 18 months' imprisonment on each of count two and three.

The jail terms will run concurrently, meaning that the convicts would spend 18 months in prison.

However, an option of N100,000 fine was given to each of the convicts on each count, indicating they are to pay N300,000 fine each.

Justice Jauru also ordered Rukuje to pay the sum of N7,960,340.00 to GOSEMA, while the sum of N195,000 and N80,000 recovered from the second convict would be forfeited to the Federal Government of Nigeria.

He added that Bello was rushed to Orthopaedic Hospital, Katsina, where he is currently receiving treatment.

He said: "The command succeeded in smashing a notorious syndicate of *keanyas* terrorising Katsina metropolitan area. Numerous caught up with the suspects when they attacked one Ibrahim Bello aged 23 years of Mallamwari village, Abu Local Government Area of Katsina State at Kofar Yankula Quarters and cut off his wrist with a catfish."

In the course of investigation, suspects confessed to the commission of the offence. Investigation is ongoing."

He also disclosed that the command recovered one AK-47 rifle from a suspected bandit, Tahir Ali, who reportedly died of gunshot wounds when he and his associates were ambushed by the police.

Two interpretations can be derived from the headline which is making it ambiguous. The sentence's structural ambiguity is due to the prepositional phrase "with suya." The inability to cut the phrase into its clear immediate constituents has caused this ambiguity. An immediate constituent is a system devised by linguists to analyze sentences into successive layers or constituents. Thus, this headline is unclear because it has allowed the expression to have more than one possible interpretation. The prepositional phrase "with suya" is more rationally connected to the girl in the first interpretation. By qualifying the noun "girl," the prepositional phrase serves an adjectival function. It indicates that the girl whom the man lures is with suya. Thus, the prepositional phrase 'with suya' is used to describe the girl. The man is associated with the prepositional phrase "with suya." Thus, by defining the noun "man," the prepositional phrase also serves a descriptive purpose. This means that the man who seduces the girl is with Suya. The prepositional phrase 'with suya' is used to qualify the man. These are likely interpretations of this headline as occasioned by this structural ambiguity.

Excerpt 18

(4) *Amotekun grills 17 northerners with over 30 dogs (January 15, 2022)*

This is unclear syntactically. It can be interpreted in two ways. It has a structural ambiguity because of the prepositional phrase "with over 30 dogs." The inability to cut the phrase into its clear immediate constituents is the cause of this syntactic ambiguity. The headline is ambiguous because the expression has two likely interpretations. According to the first interpretation, Amotekun is related to the prepositional phrase "with over 30 dogs." By

qualifying the noun "Amotekun," the prepositional phrase serves an adjectival purpose. With this, it indicates that Amotekun is with the 30 dogs. Thus, the dogs are used to interrogate the northerners. On the other hand, the northerners are attached to the prepositional phrase "with over 30 dogs." This implies that the northerners have dogs with them. The implication could be that Amotekun grills northerners who are with more than 30 dogs. The northerners are referred to as having "over 30 dogs," a prepositional phrase. Due to the structural ambiguity of this headline, there are several potential readings.

Excerpt 19

(5) *Man, 28, remanded for defiling Adamawa five-year-old with biscuit bait (February 3, 2022)*

There are two possible meanings for this headline, it is syntactically ambiguous. The structural ambiguity in the headline is caused by the prepositional phrase "with biscuit bait." The difficulty in separating the prepositional phrase into its clear immediate constituent is the cause of this grammatical ambiguity. Hence, the headline is ambiguous because there are two possible interpretations of this headline. First, this expression "with biscuit bait" qualifies the offender, himself. That is, it indicates that he used biscuit bait to defile the five-year-old girl. On the other hand, the prepositional phrase "with biscuit bait" qualifies the girl. This means that the girl is holding the biscuit bait. Therefore, the prepositional phrase is used to qualify the girl.

Possible Interpretations of Structural Ambiguity in the Nigerian Tribune

Excerpt 20

(1) *Residents blame men-in-red (January 26, 2015)*

The headline has different interpretations because of the phrase "men-in-red." The phrase is called indexical reference. It is a word in which its meaning is based on the context where it is used. In other words, it is a word in which its reference depends on the context of utterance. The expression's meaning is left open because this indexical reference which allows different interpretations. Due to the several interpretations that could be made of this indexical reference, the headline "men-in-red" may refer to different people which makes the headline ambiguous. The fire brigades could be intended by the headline. In other words, the residents accuse the fire brigades. It can imply that a fire broke out, but the fire brigades did not show up as expected. The men wearing red dresses could be the meaning of this headline. This indicates that the residents accuse men of wearing red dresses. In other words, the residents accuse the males who wear red outfits. The word could also refer to skin tone. In other words, the residents accuse the males of their red skin. This implies that the locals accuse men with red skin. Due to the uncertainty in its grammatical structure, these are possible interpretations. Being an indexical reference, it is still open to several interpretations.

CONCLUSION

Twenty headlines from the Nigerian Tribune and The Punch, published between 2015 and 2022, were selected. Ten lexical and one structural headline were selected from the Nigerian Tribune. Nine headlines were selected from The Punch, comprising five structurally ambiguous headlines and four lexically ambiguous headlines. Two levels of ambiguity have been examined about semantics in media headlines: lexical and structural ambiguity. The analysis of this study was conducted using Wittgenstein's theory of Meaning. Various interpretations of these headlines that went against the editor's original meaning were

presented. The headlines' lexical and structural ambiguity can be attributed to several things, including polysemous words, vagueness, non-specificity, homographs, homophones, and indexical references. Finally, to avoid drawing readers' attention away from their content, journalists are advised to choose suitable wording for their headlines. Along with the headlines, a deck, kicker, and rider must be employed. It is also recommended that readers investigate the context of the use of unclear headlines. That is, readers should read the context to understand the writers' intended message. This is the only way to determine the operational and contextual interpretation of newspaper headline accurately.

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