

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MEDIA LITERACY AND NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER HEADLINES' REPORTAGE OF HIGH COST OF LIVING

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Abstract

Language plays an invaluable role in the area of news dissemination and it is the window through which the world is understood. It serves as a useful tool in the hands of newspaper editors who deploy its resourcefulness in presenting news to the reading audience. This study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how Nigerian newspaper headlines shape public perception and discourse on the rising cost of living. Focusing on media literacy and linguistic devices, the research investigates patterns of representation and framing in headlines, as well as framing in the use of rhetorical devices and lexical choices. The study aims to identify the linguistic devices employed by Nigerian newspapers and evaluate their impact on public perception and discourse. The paper adopts Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) which respectively account for ideologically driven meaning and linguistic forms. A qualitative Content analysis of four Nigerian newspaper headlines (The Nation, Punch, Tribune, and Guardian), Selected through purposive Sampling is used over a period of six months (January to June, 2024). The focus of this study ultimately lies in the significance of print media language and media literacy in influencing readers' perceptions of the world and how they react to social and political issues.

Keywords: Media literacy, Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic functional linguistics, Newspaper headline.

Introduction

The capacity and skill needed by the audience (book readers, newspaper readers, listeners and watchers of radio and television) to form their own opinions on the media material is known as media literacy, or ML for short. To navigate media information, one has to possess media literacy (ML) skills. What is considered media literacy (ML) is the capacity to process media information. In the words of Kubey (1997:18), "Media Literacy is a skill for individual to interpret, appraise, scrutinize and create both print and electronic media messages".

Again, Chris & Porter (1998:7) submit that "Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of contexts." Media literacy is all about an audience's exposure to and processing of media messages and material. According to Thomas (1999), media literacy is the capacity of an individual to produce meaningful messages for themselves using words and images that they have absorbed from a variety of media, including computers, radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and advertisements.

Thus, ML may be thought of as a collection of multifaceted abilities needed by the target audience. One of the many analytical skills needed for people to interact with print media is language. Media consumers have an obligation to be media literate and cognizant of the nuances of media terminology. Since language is the primary means of message delivery to readers, it is essential to print media. "Language is used to express cogent and explicit ideas and beliefs which have the ability to change, implicate, convince, and redirect people's thinking in media discourse, particularly the print media," state Bakuro & Diedong (2021:46). Language serves as a medium for the communication of sociocultural, political, intellectual, and artistic ideas. It is the main instrument used in print media to communicate ideas. The printed word serves as a language medium and a means of communicating thoughts and information to readers. The audience is able to learn about global events and happenings through print media. Print media discourse is a product of language. Print media uses language to convey concepts, ideas, viewpoints, and opinions.

The linguistic representation of thoughts and ideas is the preoccupation of print media. In other words, the media discourse is replete with information, ideas, opinions, and propaganda that are meant to persuade and refocus readers' thoughts and perceptions. Print media is utilized to control readers' thoughts by assisting them in using language to articulate their beliefs on any issue, including national problems. The language of news is a specific style of speech that combines a variety of linguistic, national, social, economic and cultural traditions with audience expectations. The public's assessment and perception

of news events are greatly influenced by the way that is reported by the media through language. It is therefore imperative and vital to have a deeper investigation of the linguistic devices embedded in print media news, especially the newspaper headlines. Headlines play a crucial role in shaping public discourse, influencing reader perceptions, and reinforcing power dynamics (van Dijk, 1995). For this reason, this research, therefore, explores Nigerian newspaper headlines on the issues of high cost of living in Nigeria owing to current policies of government from a CDA perspective. The aim is to identify the linguistic devices employed by newspapers to reporting the phenomenon, and how they portray their ideologies to shape the mind of the audience through their reportage.

CDA AND NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

Discourse Analysis (DA) simply refers to what an author intends for a text to mean or what a document really communicates to its reader. It simply a social context analysis of language. It is based on the way that writings serve as means of expressing or describing certain world views. According to Bloor and Bloor (2013), DA is defined as the difference between what the author intends for a text to signify and what a text really signifies to a reader. A text's message may allude to a variety of topics, including internal social and ideological connotations, modes of expression, and the imposition of certain worldviews (Widdowson, 2007). Ogden (2020) also posits that discourse analysis is a term used to describe meanings at a higher level. As Nordquist put it, "discourse analysis is the study of the ways in which language is used in texts and contexts (2013: 1)". The various definitions above portray DA as a broad and complex

interdisciplinary field that is concerned with language use. In other words, they all focus on specific instances of language. Common people communicate with language, but they have never been aware of the ideology that deeply hides in discourse. Wherever the analysis of discourse is based on social, political or economic ideology, it becomes critical to discourse analysis. Hence, the term, Critical Discourse Analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) has established itself as a significantly multidisciplinary domain that explores the interrelationship among language, power, and social transformation. CDA looks at how language functions in relation to the socio-political framework of a certain human culture. It combines a range of multi-purpose, micro-sociological, socio-science, and power-based ideas (Fairclough 1995). van Dijk (2004:43) describes CDA as a type of analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted in text and talk in the social and political contexts. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately resist social inequality.

CDA is an approach that is used to investigate how discourse is utilized in connection to social and cultural concerns. The CDA method investigates the relationship between language usage and the social and political settings in which it takes place. CDA looks at how topics like gender, race, cultural diversity, and ideology are formed and represented in texts. Chilwa (2006:89) observes that CDA "explains the relationship between language as a social process and ideology which is mediated by language". He goes further to state that

"Critical discourse analysis shows how language is used to affect people and confine them in some social and economic conditions as the Society deems fit."

A discourse analysis that is based on phenomena such as ideology, social crisis, politics, gender and other social events would be regarded as CDA. The issue of high cost of living is a social phenomenon which can also be mediated by language. To this end, this work is a critical discourse analysis of Nigerian Newspaper headlines' reportage of high cost of living. Reah (2002:13) asserts that headline is "a unique type of text that consists of a range of functions that specifically dictate its shape, content, and structure, and it operates within a range of restrictions that limit the freedom of the writer" Newspaper headlines serve as the forerunner to the news reports. The headline provides the reader the insight to the news article proper.

Theoretical Considerations

This paper is hinged on both the Van Dijk's Media Discourse Theory and Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar Theory. These two theories adopted for this study are not only appropriate but suitable.

Van Dijk's Media Discourse Theory

The Van Dijk (2006)'s socio cognitive framework on media discourse which focuses on the role of the context in interpreting the media discourse is adopted for this study. Rashidi (2010), (as cited in Yashin & Ali, 2021:37) notes that the theory is based on the assumption that cognition mediates between society and discourse. The framework sees news stories as having an interpretation which is influenced by the social, political and cultural background within which they are made and

consumed. The theory is a guideline to the way we think and communicate through the media. In his view, the ideologies are usually articulated and replicated in discourse and communication (van Dijk, 1998). The fundamental theory used by Van Dijk is that media texts are mirrors of and cause certain beliefs and attitudes in society and tend to reinforce the existing ideologies and support the existing structure of power (Van Dijk, 1993). The media text such as newspaper headlines is not neutral, but it has implicit and explicit bias which influences a mass opinion and brings about social inequality (Van Dijk, 1995). The theory is applicable in this study because the analyses of the newspaper headlines in Nigeria will show the linguistic devices and styles used in headlines.

Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar

The proponent of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) theory is Michael Halliday who identifies language as a tool unit system, which language users use to unify and communicate with each other. The theory looks at the different grammatical structures which can be used in the expression of meaning through the use of language; word order, tense, and modality. SFG considers text to be in the context of additional linguistic situations and culture (Coffin, 2017:94). The theory states that language can be used in three major purposes, such as textual, interpersonal, and ideational. The ideational function explains how human beings explain notions, relationships and happenings in the world through language. The interpersonal function is the way we use language to establish a relationship and communicate with other people. This is the way we communicate our

intentions, feelings and attitudes using words. The third function or the textual function is the way in which the language is organized and structured in order to create coherence and cohesion in conversation. According to Halliday (1978:64), the ideational and textual meta-functions are three handy abstractions, which associate the variability of language and the variability of social settings.

The theory is also applicable to this research since the current study investigates the influence of the Newspapers headlines in Nigeria to form a perspectives and discourse regarding the increasing cost of living by the selections of linguistic devices and styles.

Methodology

The purposive sampling technique known as typical case sampling technique which involves taking a sample of the typical for a particular phenomenon (Patton, 1990) was used. A sample of 20 headlines from the four sampled Nigerian newspapers. The newspapers headlines were culled from *The Nigerian Tribune*, *Guardian*, *The Nation* and *Punch* Newspapers respectively. Only news headlines relating to high cost of living owing to government policies were purposively chosen. The four newspapers selected for this study- *The Nigerian Tribune*, *Guardian*, *Nation* and *Punch*- are among the most widely circulated and respected newspapers in Nigeria. They provide a good representative sample of the country's print media landscape. The selection was also informed for the purpose of balanced representation, two older newspaper and more established newspapers (*The Nigerian Tribune* and *Guardian*) and two newer, more modern ones (*Nation* and *Punch*). This would surely ensure a balance between traditional and contemporary

perspectives. The data were subjected to content analysis based on the linguistic devices and power dynamics in the headlines.

DATA ANALYSIS

Twenty (20) newspapers' headlines (HL) from four National dailies in Nigeria – *The Nigerian Tribune*, *Guardian*, *The Nation* and *Punch* were randomly extracted and used as data for this paper. Five (5) headlines henceforth (HL) were used from each of the four National newspapers. In order to make it easy to refer to the headlines in the analysis, "HL" is used as reference code for each of the headlines. Numbers are attached to each code for the purpose of specificity. The headlines are numbered as HL 001 – HL 020.

1. Despite FG's assurance of economy picking, food prices still high.
#HL 001 (*The Nigerian Tribune*, Monday, April 8, 2024)
2. Economic pains, hardships unintended – FG.
#HL 002 (*The Nigerian Tribune*, Thursday, May 23, 2024)
3. Nigeria's inflation rate soared to 33.69% in April.
#HL 003 (*The Nigerian Tribune*, Thursday, May 16, 2024)
4. Cyber security levy will add more burden on Nigerians.
#HL 004 (*The Nigerian Tribune*, Wednesday, May 8, 2024)
5. Less than 20% of Nigerians access 12hrs power daily.
#HL 005 (*The Nigerian Tribune*, Wednesday, 24 April, 2024)
6. Growing nation of destitute as homeless kids invade Abuja. S' West
#HL 006 (*The Guardian*, Friday, June 7, 2024)
7. Tinubu's costly reforms leaves Nigerians on edge one year after.
#HL 007 (*The Guardian*, Friday, May 24, 2024)
8. Over 17million Nigerians currently food insecure, says firm.
#HL 008 (*The Guardian*, Monday, April 15, 2024)
9. World Bank: Rising inflation, weak earnings push 10 million Nigerians into poverty in 2023.
#HL 009 (*The Guardian*, Friday, April 19, 2024)
10. Cooking gas prices spikes further as Nigerians struggle with food inflation.
#HL 010 (*The Guardian*, Tuesday, April 23, 2024)
11. I'm working to improve quality of life - Tinubu
#HL 011 (*The Nation*, Wednesday, February 21, 2024)
12. Tinubu may suspend import duties on food, drugs
#HL 012 (*The Nation*, Thursday, June 6, 2024)
13. President not to blame for economic crisis.
#HL 013 (*The Nation*, Monday, June 17, 2024)
14. Minimum wage: Tinubu opts for more consultation.
#HL 014 (*The Nation*, Friday, February 23, 2024)
15. Nigeria will overcome current economic challenges.
#HL 015 (*The Nation*, Monday, March 18, 2024)
16. Easter: Governors, Senators beg Nigerians, say hardship over soon.
#HL 016 (*Punch*, Monday, April 1, 2024)
17. Hunger, desperate search for food drive citizens to early grave.
#HL 017 (*Punch*, Sunday, April 21, 2024)
18. Food stuffs exorbitant cost threaten Sallah celebrations.
#HL 018 (*Punch*, Sunday, June 16, 2024)
19. Minimum wage talks collapse again as labour rejects 60,000.00
#HL 019 (*Punch*, Wednesday, May 29, 2024)
20. Nigerians reject electricity tariff cut, demand total reversal.
#HL 020 (*Punch*, Tuesday, May 7, 2024)

Modality

Modality is a concept that has to do with the expression of possibility and necessity. In linguistics, it refers to the expression of degree of necessity, obligation, possibility, and potentiality, as well as speaker attitudes and judgments, through various grammatical and lexical means, such as modal verbs (e.g, can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would), adverbs (e.g possibly, necessarily), and auxiliaries (e.g have to, need to) (Huddleston & pullum, 2002, Palmer, 2001). Modality helps news writers to shape the narrative, tone, and reader engagement in the headlines, thereby making it an important linguistic device in the context of new reporting. According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014:371), Modality, “refers to the degree to which a proposition is likely to be true or possible”. Modal verbs, adverbs and auxiliaries are some of the modalities employ to express various shades of meaning, some of which include ability, obligation, permission and probability. In the headlines extracted for this study modalities were employed to express news writers’ disposition of events being reported. The following headlines contain examples of modality:

1. HL 002: Economic pains, hardship **Unintended**
2. HL 011: I’m **working** to improve quality of life - Tinubu
3. HL 012: Tinubu **May** suspend import duties on food, drugs.
4. HL 014: FG, Labour **in** fresh showdown over minimum wage.
5. HL 015: Nigeria **will** overcome current economic challenges.

In the headlines above, the headline writers expresses their feelings and attitude through their employment of modal auxiliaries. The writers used the

headlines to provide the information and their disposition towards the events being reported. For instance, in HLO02, the use of “unintended” was to express possibility just like we have it also in HLO12 where “May” was employed to express possibility. In HLO11, the word “working” was used to imply obligation. In HLO14, the word “in” used in the headline “FG, Labour **in** fresh showdown over “minimum wage” implies a possible conflict between Government and their employees. The news writers employed these modals to paint the picture of government obligation to the people by using “May” and “Will” in both HLO12 and HLO15 respectively. This, of course is in tandem with Systemic functional grammar (SFG) which considers language use as a process of making choices for specific purposes.

Adjectives

The news writers employed vivid language to convey and illustrate the living conditions of Nigerians due to the country's high cost of living. The purpose of these language tactics was to depict a nation in which the rising cost of living is making it increasingly difficult for the average man to survive. Adjectives abound in the following headlines:

1. HL 001: **Economic pains**, hardships unintended – FG.
2. HLO06: **Growing nation of destitute** as homeless kids invade Abuja. S’ West
3. HLO06: Growing nation of destitute as **homeless kids** invade Abuja. S’ West
4. HLO17: Hunger, **desperate search for food** drive citizens to early grave.

These above extractions depict hardship being experienced by Nigerians due to government economic policies

which had made prices of commodities to go up and beyond the means of average Nigerians. The headline Writers demonstrated their disposition through linguistic representation by painting hardship, pains and callousness through their descriptive words. Specifically, the following types of adjectives were found in the extracted news headlines for this study. These are:

- **Quantitative adjectives:** This type of adjective is found in both HLO03 and HLO08 where the specific percentage of inflation rate is mentioned and where exact number of people that are food insecure in Nigeria is mentioned.
- **Qualitative adjective:** The news writer employed this type of adjective to represent and describe qualities and characteristics of phenomenon. Instances of this appear in both HLO01 and HLO06 where the prices of food is described as high and also where the population of destitute is described as being growing.
- **Evaluative adjective:** this type of adjective is used to make judgement or evaluation. The data extracted for this study display this type of adjective in HLO04 and HLO18. In the case of HLO04, we can see an instance of a negative evaluation while HLO18 displays a total negative evaluation (HLO04: Cyber security levy will add more burden. HLO18: Foodstuffs exorbitant cost threaten sallah celebrations.)
- **Emotive Adjective:** This type of adjective, which is use to evoke emotions or to create specific atmosphere, is found only in HLO17 where the news writer purposely employed this adjective for the purpose of evoking sympathy and

sense of urgency” Hunger, desperate search for food drive citizens to early grave “is couched to arouse sympathy from the readers and to evoke hatred from the citizens against the state.

The choice of these adjectives being employed by news writers was not just to express their opinions but also to stimulate critical thinking on the part of the public newspaper readers. This, of course, is in tandem with Van Dijk’s Media theory’s preoccupation of communicating a certain ideology to readers. Obviously, the use of expressions such as “economic hardship”, “growing nation of destitute”. “homeless citizens”, and “desperate search for food” were deliberately chosen for the purpose of emphasis in other to express the ideology of callousness of government as regards its economic policies that did not favour the common man. These adjectives were used for the purpose of influencing readers’ perception of the news about high cost of living.

Reporting Verbs

Some of the data extracted for this study display elements of modality through the use of reporting verbs. The following reporting verbs are identified: HLO02 (FG), HLO08 (says), HLO16 (beg, say) and HLO17 (reveals) respectively. The use of reporting verbs in these headlines serve to convey different meanings for the purpose of influencing the minds of the readers. For instance, the following words **says**, **beg**, **say** and **reveals** attribute statement to sources of the information so that readers would know who says what and reveal the maker and source of message(s). The use of reporting verb to convey news to readers creates shades of meanings and nuance in the headlines. This help the

news writer to distance themselves from the statement and thereby emphasizing the significant of the statements in the headlines. It also attributes responsibility and acknowledgement to the person, organization and body where the information is sourced from and the maker of such information.

Representation and Framing

Particularly, the data retrieved for this study (HLO01–HLO20) exhibit a representational and framing pattern that demonstrates how language is used to influence public opinion and uphold power relations. The gravity of the situation in Nigeria is emphasized by the negative framing used in the headlines HLO03 "Growing nation of destitute" and HLO04 "...add more burden on Nigerians." This framing reinforces a narrative of crisis and helplessness, which may perpetuate a sense of powerlessness among Nigerians (Entman, 1993). It's also important to notice how emotive language is employed in the headlines to evoke anger and sympathy. From HLO06 "...homeless kids invade Abuja, S' west" to HLO17 "Desperate search for food," it is clear that the authors are using vivid images to elicit strong feelings from their readers. According to Scheufele, (1999:6), this type of framing can influence public opinion and shape attitudes towards the issue. An examination of the linguistic elements used in the headlines with a critical eye reveals a distinct framing pattern as well. For example, the lexical terms in HLO17 "Hunger, desperate search for food **drive** citizens to **early grave**" and HLO18 "Food items **exorbitant cost threaten** Sallah celebrations" carry negative connotations. This word's connotations may sway news readers' opinions and

cause them to believe that the government is cruel and heartless.

In summary, a narrative of crisis, helplessness, and despair is perpetuated through the use of emotive language, negative framing, and lexical choices. Thus, our study has shown how important CDA is for revealing the language and power structures around contentious topics like the high cost of living.

Conclusion

Based on the research presented above, this study has identified a number of language devices that are critical to influencing readers' views and sustaining power dynamics. The importance of media literacy in comprehending print media's messages has been emphasized in this paper. Media literacy in the words of Kellner & Share (2005), "is essential to critically evaluate and understand the ideologies and power dynamics embedded in language use". Readers can better understand the ideas being given and make wise judgments by identifying and analyzing these language strategies.

In summary, this study has shown how important media literacy and critical discourse analysis (CDA) are to comprehending the linguistic devices used in Nigerian newspaper headlines. By adopting a critical viewpoint, readers can assess and question the power dynamics and ideologies entrenched in language use. The focus of this study ultimately lies in the importance of print media language and media literacy in influencing readers' perceptions of the world and how they react to social and political issues.

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