

A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER HEADLINES ON THE REPORTED DEATH OF FORMER PRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI IN SELECTED NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS

Moshood Abimbola ALABI

Lagos State University of Science and Technology

Abstract

As we use language in every interaction, it serves specific purposes in various environments among different individuals. This study investigates the features of the language of newspaper headlines on the recent death of the former president Muhammadu Buhari. The qualitative approach of data analysis has been adopted in this research. Six prominent Nigerian newspapers have been selected for the content analysis of their headlines. The headlines chosen from the selected newspapers are presented and analysed through the foregrounding theory of stylistics. It is obvious that each headline has a purpose and is meant to achieve some psychological effects on the readers. It is also an undeniable fact that it is meant to capture the gist of the story. The implication of this study is very significant as it can be used to account for many unwritten underlying factors that determine how headlines are written. It contributes to our understanding of the styles of writing headlines, the motive behind the construction of a headline and the effects of the headlines on the readers.

Keywords: Death, former president Muhammadu Buhari , language, newspaper headlines

Introduction

Language is complex, and it is an invaluable asset of humans. It is a distinctive feature that makes humans different from other creatures. The interaction between humans and nonhumans is not language but communication. Language is the instrument for exchanging ideas, and it is also used to perform an expressive function when it is used to arouse emotions. As we make use of language, it elicits some feedback on the receivers of the message because of its effects on them. The choice of words, the structure of the expressions and the sentence type are all the factors that determine the emotions of the readers. Yule (2020).

According to recent studies, stylistics is an evolving linguistic field. It is an important linguistic field that is used to investigate the linguistic features of any text. Newspaper headlines are meant to catch the attention of the readers through the use of creative and imaginative expressions to achieve some effect on the readers. It is not an overstatement to say that stylistics has been understudied despite its relevance to different disciplines. This paper aims to examine the language of newspaper headlines, the features of the headlines, and the use of foregrounding

devices for the analysis of six selected headlines of some Nigerian Newspapers. By examining a stylistic study of some newspaper headlines in Nigeria, the reasons behind the way some headlines are written are investigated. This study implies that readers are exposed to the reason for the choice of words in some lexical items in some newspaper headlines. Readers can also compare different headlines in different newspapers.

Most Nigerian newspaper headlines are usually written according to the style and the point of view of the news media. Some media houses prefer the use of denotative meanings in the construction of their headlines, while other headlines are written through the connotative meanings to achieve some level of linguistic prominence with the readers. The identification of the devices deployed to achieve linguistic prominence is the concern of foregrounding. Headlines are expected to attract the attention of the readers so that they develop some interest in the story. It is also expected to capture the gist of the story so that the readers can understand the story from the headlines. To achieve this, different headlines are written styles for the attainment of some levels of idiosyncrasies.

Literature Review

Stylistics and Style

The two terms, style and stylistics, may look as if stylistics is derived from style. The important thing to note is that their areas of concern are not the same. Wales (2016) explains that stylistics is considered difficult to define because it is still evolving. It is used in different areas where language is present, and it is therefore possible to have different definitions of the term based on the situation in which it is used. Simpson (2014) supports this view by explaining that the term stylistics is unknown to many people, and they do not show any interest in finding out what the term means.

In terms of the place of stylistics in language, scholars are divided on its place in linguistics. Scholars view stylistics as a linguistic field. However, scholars view it as Applied Linguistics. The divergence in the conception of the term stylistics can be responsible for the emergence of different definitions. Gibbons and Whiteley (2018) explain stylistics as an attempt to combine the study of language and literature. They explain further that stylistics develops and adapts to any development in linguistics and becomes relevant to the field. In other words, it has no specific domain, but belongs to any field where language is used.

Leech and Short (2007) view stylistics as the method of giving an account for the style of a particular user of language. It is used to account for what is known as linguistic evidence in any text that is being analysed. Abrams and Harpham (2015) explain that objectivity in the analysis of literary texts, as against subjectivity that literary texts are known for, is the major function of stylistics. He stresses the fact that language is scientific and at the same time, objective, and the interpretation of literary texts through linguistic devices. Burke (2023) specifically states that stylistics is mostly concerned with the interpretation of literary texts through the use of language devices. Burke agrees, to an extent, with the definition provided by Abrams by relating stylistics to the study and interpretation of literary texts. The concern of stylistics is not the identification of the grammar rules that are applied

to the construction of a statement. Stylistics stresses the meaning that the expression conveys and how the meaning has been achieved in sentence construction. (Studer, 2008). Hamawand (2023) describes stylistics as the intermediary between language and literary studies. The linguist emphasises that stylistics is an academic discipline that uses linguistic evidence and literary devices to study and examine a text. The scholar concludes that it gets to the extent that it is difficult to separate language studies from literary studies because they both operate on the same level.

According to Enkvist (1973), stylistic analysis is not only concerned with formal texts that are structured according to grammar rules, but also examines other texts. This is because ideas, theme and literary structure shape the linguistic surface of a text. Having explained the term stylistic, it is necessary to explain the term style. Freeborn (1996) defines style as being associated with literary texts, but it can be extended a bit to the everyday varieties of language use. This definition almost restricts the study of style to the study of literary texts. This definition is supported by Abrams and Harpham (2015), who explain that style is the language used in prose or verse. The way language is used in prose or poetry is what is known as style. Wales (2016) states that:

“Although style is invoked very frequently in literary criticism, translation studies, sociolinguistics and especially stylistics, it is very difficult to define... Style, moreover, pervades all aspects of our life”.
(p.412)

Wales explains that style is concerned with language analysis in literature. It is also extended to the study of translation and is even related to stylistics. What style represents is the uniqueness in the way individuals do things. It is a choice some individuals decide to make in their language use.

The fact that language use in style is subjective and it is by choice has been explained by Leech and Short (2007). They explain that deciding on how to use a language in different contexts, for different purposes, makes style the choice every individual makes in using a language.

Style is what makes an individual different from another person. It involves the punctuation method, the sentence structure, the choice of words and some other choices made in grammatical categories.

From the explanations so far, the prominent difference between style and stylistics is objectivity and subjectivity. Style is subjective because it depends on the context and the situation in which it is used. In style, choices are made by the user of a language in order to be unique and sometimes different from others. There can also be a violation of some of the norms in the conventions of a particular text for the uniqueness to be achieved. Style is a function of the choice of an individual in language use. The violation of linguistic norms is permitted in a literary text, and that is why most authors relate style to literature. Stylistics, however, is objective. The linguistic norm is still sustained. It is the linguistic devices that are used in stylistics to identify the creativity in a text, account for the reason for such aesthetic use of language and explain the effect of such choices on the readers or audience. The scope of stylistics goes beyond literary texts.

Language of Newspaper Headlines

Headlines are important in stories because they provide an overview of the story. Reach (2002) explains that the major aim of a headline is to catch the attention of the readers so that they can be interested in reading the stories. The author states that the headline provides a succinct view of the story by making the content clearer to the reader. According to Reah, headlines are the first point of contact for the reader with the newspaper. They are used to persuade the readers to read. The basics identified features of newspaper headlines are word choice, word play, intersexuality, sound, loaded language, omission of grammatical words, noun phrases and class shift. Despite the structure of the headlines, Jaki (2014) thinks that readers do not interpret the headlines the same way. That readers do not have the same interpretation of a headline suggests that the headlines do not have the same effects on the readers.

Conboy (2010) identifies the categories of people who read the headlines for different reasons. The readers who are interested in the story

for some information and some reactions. Advertisers read newspapers to increase their profit. The financial gain is the major purpose for reading newspapers by advertisers. Politicians, however, are afraid of criticism and may also have some positive thoughts that the story may favour them. Three types of headlines are identified by Thorne (1997). The main headline that captures the main story, which is usually in a short phrase, is the boldest. The strap line or overline is usually the statement before the main headline, which is mostly used to introduce the headline. The third one is the sub-headline, which is used to explain the main headline further. Thorne explains that headlines are expected to make some impact on the readers whenever they read them. The lexical item in a headline is often determined by the target readers and their cognitive capacities. However, a headline is expected to be simple, easy to read and needs appropriate headlines that usually contain some creative expression to make an impact on the readers.

Fowler (2013) explains that one of the distinctive syntactic features of the language of newspaper headlines is the use of the present tense to describe a past event. As we know that the major use of tenses is to determine the time of an action. The past tense conventionally indicates an action that occurs at a particular time in the past, while the present tense indicates relevant actions. Headlines are written in the present tense to make the story alive and relevant to the current situation, to make the readers active. Another feature of newspaper headlines, as stated by Fairclough (2003), is the use of nominalisation in the construction of the headlines. This is the process of changing the verbs in the headlines to nouns for the achievement of conciseness. To understand the message easily, concise language is needed. Fowler (2013) further explains that headlines often contain active voices rather than passive voices. Active voices are preferred in active reading, where there is no change of emphasis and the performer of the action is easily identified.

Methodology

This study used the qualitative approach through content analysis to investigate the different styles of presenting the headlines in six

selected Nigerian Newspapers on the death of former president Muhammadu Buhari. The headlines were collected through the following selected Nigerian Newspapers: Vanguard Newspaper, The Guardian, The Street Reporters Newspaper, The Nation, Daily Tribune and This Day. The main headline, the strapline, the subheadline, the name of the newspaper and the date of the publication were collected. The structure of the headlines was not altered syntactically or lexically. There were no strict criteria for the selection of the newspapers except for their availability and readability. Each headline was presented as text and numbered according to the order of arrangement. The data were analysed through the foregrounding theory of stylistics by identifying the foregrounding devices in the selected texts and the likely effect of this on the readers, which were explained in the discussion after the analysis. The potential limitations of the study are the restrictions of the headlines to some selected Nigerian newspapers without examining all. Another limitation is the fact that other media outlets, like the broadcast media and social media, also reported the death through their headlines. The qualitative approach gave room for a broader interpretation and understanding of the headlines because the readers can relate better with headlines and make some comparative analysis of the headlines in different newspapers.

Data Presentation

The following headlines were collected through the following newspapers on Sunday and Monday, 13th and 14th July 2025

- 1 The Vanguard Newspaper:
“Deluge of tributes as Buhari dies at 82
- 2 The Guardian:
Tributes and reflections on Buhari’s legacy as former leader passes away”.
- 3 The Street Reporters Newspaper:
Breaking: Former President Muhammadu Buhari Reported Passes Away in London.”
- 4 The Nation:
Breaking: “Former President Buhari dies in London hospital
- 5 Tribute: Breaking:
Former President Muhammadu Buhari is dead”
- 6 This Day:
“Former Nigeria President Buhari is dead”

Texts

- Text 1: “Deluge of tributes as Buhari dies at 82
Text 2: Tributes and reflections on Buhari’s legacy as former leader passes away”.
Text 3: Breaking: Former President Muhammadu Buhari Reported Passes Away in London.”
Text 4: Breaking: “Former President Buhari dies in London hospital
Text 5: Former President Muhammadu Buhari is dead”
Text 6: “Former Nigeria President Buhari is dead”

DATA ANALYSIS

Text	Foregrounding Device
“Deluge of tributes as Buhari dies at 82	Deviation: the use of the simple present “dies” to report a past event. Writing the number instead of spelling it according to the grammar convention.
Tributes and reflections on Buhari’s legacy as former leader passes away”.	Metaphor: the expression “passes away” used to replace the verb died” Deviation: the use of the present tense to report a past event “passes”
Breaking: Former President Muhammadu Buhari Reported Passes Away in London.”	Metaphor” “Passes away”. Deviation: Passes
Breaking: “Former President Buhari dies in London hospital	Deviation” “Dies”
Former President Muhammadu Buhari is dead” “Former Nigeria President Buhari is dead”	Deviation: Informal address as Buhari

Discussion

The findings of this study support the hypothesis that there are reasons for using some styles in the newspaper headlines and that the headlines have some effects on the readers. (Reach, 2002). In text one, “Deluge” is a loaded language with the aim of attracting the interest of the readers. The verb “dies” as used in the sentence is supposed to be in the past tense, but it is being expressed in the present tense to achieve the same effect. (Thorne, 1997). In text two, the expression “passes away” is metaphorically used to have an effect. The expression suggests another meaning (Hawkes, 2018). The effect of this is for the creation of linguistic prominence so as to be perceived by the audience. Strapline is used in texts 3, 4, and 5 as explained by Thorne (1997). The essence of this is to arouse the interest of the readers. The mention of the name “Buhari” in some of the texts is an aspect of deviation. Thorne explained that some omission of some linguistic item might take place, but the expression is informal. The headline is for public consumption and it is expected to be formal if not for some

artistic reasons. These findings imply that there are deliberate violations of grammar norms by some journalists for the purpose of achieving perception. Connotative expression and loaded expressions are deliberately used to achieve ambiguity and confusion sometimes (Jaki, 2014). There is no doubt that this study focused on selected newspapers and not all the newspaper headlines. Other researchers can investigate other linguistic field and other newspapers for further comparisons.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that there are basic reasons for writing the newspaper headlines in different ways. The obvious reason is to attract the attention of the readers. By analyzing various headlines through the stylistic theory of foregrounding, we demonstrated the different ways through which journalist present their headlines. The findings explained the reason for justifying the deviation and metaphors used by the writers in their headlines. Future research can explore more areas of investigation on the language of newspapers and headlines.

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