

MORPHOLOGICAL STRATEGIES IN NEWSPAPER DISCOURSE ON SEXUAL ALLEGATIONS: EVIDENCE FROM THE NATASHA–AKPABIO CASE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the intricate dynamics of word formation in the context of sexual allegations involving prominent Nigerian figures, Natasha and Akpabio, as reported in various newspapers. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how language shapes public perception and discourse on sensitive issues such as sexual misconduct. The primary objective is to analyze the linguistic strategies employed in newspaper headlines and articles, focusing on the word formation processes such as compounding, derivation, and clipping. The research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing fifteen excerpts from three major Nigerian newspapers. The findings reveal that the choice of words not only reflects the gravity of the allegations but also influences public sentiment and the framing of the narrative. This study contributes to the field of linguistics and media studies by highlighting the power of language in shaping societal attitudes towards allegations of sexual misconduct.

Keywords: Word formation, sexual allegations, Nigerian newspapers, linguistic analysis, public perception.

Introduction

The recent sexual allegations involving Natasha and Akpabio have sparked widespread discourse in Nigeria, drawing attention to the role of language in shaping public perception of such sensitive issues. The media plays a crucial role in framing, and the choice of words can significantly influence how allegations are perceived by the public. This study aims to investigate the linguistic strategies employed in Nigerian newspapers to report on these allegations, with a particular focus on word formation processes.

The research questions guiding this study include: How do word formation processes shape the narrative surrounding sexual allegations? What linguistic strategies are employed to influence public perception? The significance of this study extends beyond mere academic interest; it seeks to illuminate the ways in which language can either empower or undermine individuals involved in allegations of sexual misconduct. By examining the interplay between language and public perception, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the societal implications of language use in media reporting.

Literature Review

Previous studies have explored the relationship between language and public perception, particularly in the context of media reporting on sensitive issues such as sexual misconduct. For instance, van Dijk (2020) highlights how the framing of news stories can shape public attitudes towards victims and perpetrators. Similarly, Baker (2018) discusses the role of lexical choices in constructing narratives that either support or challenge dominant ideologies. However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific linguistic strategies employed in the reporting of sexual allegations in Nigerian newspapers.

This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a detailed analysis of word formation processes in the context of the Natasha and Akpabio case. By synthesising existing research and critically evaluating the linguistic choices made in media reporting, this study aims to demonstrate how word formation not only reflects but also shapes societal attitudes towards allegations of sexual misconduct.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of linguistic relativity, which posits that the language one speaks influences their thoughts and perceptions of reality. Whorf (1956). In the context of media reporting, this framework suggests that the choice of words can significantly impact how allegations are perceived by the public. By applying these theoretical perspectives, this study aims to uncover the underlying ideologies and power structures that shape the discourse surrounding sexual allegations in Nigerian newspapers.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on a detailed analysis of fifteen excerpts from three major Nigerian newspapers: The Whistler, Punch, and The Nation. The data collection involved selecting headlines and articles that reported on the allegations against Natasha and Akpabio between February and March 2025. A coding framework was developed to categorize the linguistic features observed in the excerpts, focusing on word formation processes such as compounding, derivation, and clipping. The analytical procedure involved a close reading of the selected texts to identify patterns in word choice and their implications for public perception. In total, five excerpts were analyzed from each newspaper, providing a comprehensive overview of the linguistic strategies employed in the reporting of these allegations.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the fifteen excerpts reveals a complex interplay of word formation processes that shape the narrative surrounding the allegations. For instance, the term "sexual harassment" appears consistently across multiple headlines, serving as a compound that succinctly encapsulates the nature of the claims. This repetition reinforces the seriousness of the allegations and keeps the issue at the forefront of public consciousness. Additionally, the use of derivation in terms such as "allegations" and "traumatized" highlights the emotional weight of the accusations, framing the individuals involved in a particular light. The analysis also identifies instances of clipping, where phrases are simplified

to enhance accessibility and immediacy, thereby influencing public engagement with the story. Overall, the linguistic choices made in these excerpts reflect broader societal attitudes towards sexual misconduct and the individuals involved in such allegations.

1. Probe Allegations of Sexual Harassment Against Akpabio, Atiku Tells Tinubu, Senate (The Whistler - February 28, 2025)

In this headline, compounding is prominently featured in the term "sexual harassment," which combines the words "sexual" and "harassment" to create a clear and direct label for the nature of the allegations. This compound term is significant as it encapsulates a complex issue in a straightforward manner, allowing readers to immediately grasp the seriousness of the allegations being discussed. The use of "probe" as a verb also indicates an active investigation, suggesting a formal and serious approach to the allegations. This choice of language can influence public perception by framing the situation as one requiring scrutiny and accountability, thereby elevating the discourse surrounding the allegations.

Moreover, affixation is evident in the word "allegations," which derives from the root "allege" with the addition of the suffix "-ation." This transformation not only modifies the meaning but also emphasizes the process of claiming wrongdoing, thus shaping the narrative around the accusations. The choice of the term "allegations" rather than "accusations" may carry a connotation of uncertainty, which can affect how the public perceives the gravity of the claims. The distinction between these terms is crucial, as "allegations" implies that the claims are yet to be proven, which can lead to a more cautious interpretation of the events.

2. Akpabio's Wife Sues Senator Natasha For N251bn (The Whistler - March 1, 2025)

In this headline, clipping is not overtly present, but the term "sues" serves as a shortened form of "to file a lawsuit," making the headline more accessible and direct. This choice of language can make the legal action seem more immediate and relatable to the public, potentially influencing their engagement with the story. The

brevity of the term "sues" allows for a more impactful headline, drawing readers in with its straightforwardness.

Derivation is also at play with the term "sues," which derives from the Latin "sequi," meaning "to follow." The legal context of the term evokes a sense of pursuit of justice, which can frame the narrative in a way that emphasizes the seriousness of the legal implications involved in the allegations. The use of "sues" suggests an active pursuit of legal recourse, which can resonate with the public's understanding of justice and accountability in cases of alleged misconduct.

3. *Natasha's Allegations Against Akpabio Reckless, False - Deputy Whip (The Whistler - March 2, 2025)*

The headline employs derivation in the word "reckless," which derives from the root "reck" with the suffix "-less." This term conveys a strong moral judgment about Natasha's actions, suggesting irresponsibility and a lack of consideration for the consequences of her allegations. The use of "false" further intensifies this judgment, framing the allegations as not only untrue but also as potentially harmful. The combination of these terms serves to undermine Natasha's credibility and can sway public opinion against her.

Compounding is also present in "Natasha's allegations," where the possessive form indicates ownership of the claims, thus personalizing the narrative. This can evoke sympathy for Akpabio while simultaneously casting Natasha in a negative light, influencing public perception by framing the allegations as personal attacks rather than serious claims of misconduct. The possessive construction emphasizes the individual nature of the allegations, which can lead to a more polarized public response.

4. *Natasha Files Sexual Harassment Petition Against Akpabio At Plenary (The Whistler - March 5, 2025)*

The term "sexual harassment" reappears in this headline, reinforcing its significance in the discourse surrounding the allegations. The compounding of "sexual" and "harassment" continues to serve as a powerful descriptor that shapes the public's understanding of the nature of

the claims. This repetition underscores the gravity of the situation and keeps the issue at the forefront of public consciousness.

Affixation is evident in the word "petition," which derives from the Latin "petition," meaning "a request." The use of "files" as a verb indicates action and formality, suggesting that Natasha is taking a serious step in seeking redress. This choice of language can influence public perception by framing her actions as legitimate and grounded in legal processes. The term "petition" carries connotations of formal requests for action, which can lend an air of seriousness to Natasha's claims and highlight the procedural aspects of her allegations.

5. *Sexual harassment: Senate dismisses Natasha's petition, Kogi senator shun panel (Punch - March 6, 2025)*

In this headline, clipping is not explicitly present, but the term "shun" serves as a more informal and accessible way to convey the senators' actions. This choice of language can make the political dynamics surrounding the allegations more relatable to the public, potentially influencing their engagement with the story. The use of "shun" implies a deliberate avoidance, which can evoke strong feelings about the senators' refusal to engage with the allegations.

Derivation is again at play with "dismisses," which derives from the root "miss" with the prefix "dis-," indicating a rejection or refusal. This term carries significant weight, as it suggests that the Senate is not taking the allegations seriously, which can shape public perception by framing the institutional response as dismissive. The implications of this dismissal can resonate with the public, potentially leading to feelings of frustration or anger regarding the handling of the allegations.

6. *Senate Committee recommends six-month suspension for Natasha (Punch - March 6, 2025)*

In this headline, compounding is prominently featured in the term "Senate Committee." This compound combines "Senate," which refers to a legislative body, and "Committee," which denotes a subgroup within that body tasked with specific functions. The combination of these two terms conveys a sense of

authority and institutional legitimacy, framing the suspension as a formal and serious action. The use of "Senate Committee" not only identifies the source of the recommendation but also imbues it with a sense of gravitas, suggesting that the decision is backed by a significant political entity.

Additionally, affixation is present in the word "suspension," which is derived from the root "suspend" with the suffix "-ion." This transformation emphasizes the action of temporarily removing Natasha from her position, a decision that carries substantial implications for her reputation and public image. The choice of the term "suspension" suggests a procedural and bureaucratic approach to the allegations, potentially influencing public perception by framing the situation as a matter of governance rather than a personal conflict. This linguistic choice can evoke a sense of order and due process, which may mitigate the emotional weight of the allegations in the eyes of the public.

7. I was Traumatized By Natasha's Sexual Harassment Allegation - Akpabio (The Whistler - March 8, 2025)

The term "traumatized" serves as a prime example of derivation, formed from the root "trauma" with the addition of the suffix "-ised." This word choice is particularly impactful, as it conveys a deep emotional response to the allegations, thereby eliciting sympathy for Akpabio. The use of this derived term can shape public perception by framing him as a victim of emotional distress, complicating the narrative surrounding the allegations. By emphasizing his trauma, the language used here can evoke compassion and understanding from the audience, potentially swaying public opinion in his favor.

Moreover, the phrase "sexual harassment allegation" is a compound that succinctly encapsulates the nature of the claim. The combination of "sexual" and "harassment" directly communicates the seriousness of the issue, while the term "allegation" introduces a layer of ambiguity, suggesting that the claims are yet to be substantiated. This compound structure serves to inform the audience while also allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the events. The choice of the word "allegation" is particularly significant, as

it implies that the claims are not yet proven, which can influence how the public perceives the credibility of the accusations.

8. Natasha/Akpabio feud: External plot to tarnish Nigeria image - NASAC (THE NATION - March 11, 2025)

In this headline, the term "feud" is a clipping of the longer phrase "feudalist conflict," which simplifies the complex relationship between Natasha and Akpabio into a more digestible format. This clipped term can trivialize the gravity of the allegations, framing the situation as a personal dispute rather than a serious matter of sexual misconduct. By reducing the complexity of the situation to a single word, the media can influence public perception, potentially leading audiences to view the allegations as less severe.

The phrase "external plot" employs compounding, combining "external" and "plot" to suggest a conspiracy against Nigeria. This compound term introduces a narrative of victimization at a national level, potentially shifting the focus from the individuals involved to broader socio-political implications. Such framing can influence public sentiment by invoking a sense of patriotism and collective defense against perceived threats. By suggesting that there is an "external plot," the language used here can rally public support for Akpabio and create a narrative that positions him as a defender of national integrity.

9. Natasha: Group berates Saraki over comments against Akpabio (THE NATION - March 11, 2025)

In this headline, the term "berates" is a derivation from the root "rate," with the prefix "be-" suggesting an intensification of the action. This choice of word conveys a strong disapproval and criticism, which can shape public perception of Saraki's comments as not only inappropriate but also damaging to Akpabio's reputation. The use of "berates" implies a harshness in the criticism, which can further polarize public opinion regarding Saraki's stance and actions.

The phrase "comments against Akpabio" employs affixation, where "against" serves as a preposition that modifies the noun "comments." This construction emphasizes the adversarial

nature of the remarks, framing them as direct attacks on Akpabio. The choice of the word "against" is particularly significant, as it suggests hostility and opposition, which can influence how the public interprets the dynamics of the situation. By framing Saraki's comments in this way, the media can shape the narrative to portray Akpabio as a victim of unwarranted criticism.

10. Akpabio gets second confidence vote in two weeks (THE NATION - March 14, 2025)

The term "confidence vote" is a compound that combines "confidence" and "vote" to describe a parliamentary procedure. This compound term conveys a sense of legitimacy and support, suggesting that Akpabio retains backing despite the allegations. The use of this term can shape public perception by framing the situation as one of political resilience rather than personal scandal. By emphasizing the notion of a "confidence vote," the media can portray Akpabio as a leader who still commands respect and support, which may mitigate the impact of the allegations on his public image.

The phrase "in two weeks" employs clipping, as it simplifies the temporal context of the events. This brevity can enhance the immediacy of the situation, suggesting that the political landscape is rapidly evolving in response to the allegations. The use of a clipped phrase can create a sense of urgency, prompting the audience to pay closer attention to the unfolding events and their implications.

11. Group backs Senate on Natasha's suspension (Punch - March 14, 2025)

The term "backs" is a clipping of the longer phrase "to give support," which simplifies the expression of support for the Senate's decision. This choice of word can convey a sense of unity and collective agreement, potentially influencing public perception by framing the suspension as a widely accepted action. The use of "backs" suggests a straightforward endorsement, which can lend credibility to the Senate's decision and reinforce the idea that the action taken against Natasha is justified.

The phrase "Natasha's suspension" employs affixation, where "suspension" is derived from "suspend" with the suffix "-ion." This term

emphasizes the formal nature of the action taken against Natasha, reinforcing the seriousness of the allegations and the consequences she faces. The choice of this term can evoke a sense of finality and consequence, shaping public discourse around the implications of her suspension.

12. Civil society petitions UN over Natasha's sexual assault allegation (Punch - March 20, 2025)

The term "petitions" is a derivation from the root "petition," with the addition of the suffix "-s" to indicate plurality. This choice of word conveys a formal request for action, suggesting that civil society is mobilising in response to the allegations. The use of this derived term can shape public perception by framing the situation as one that requires international attention and intervention. By invoking the UN, the language used here elevates the issue to a global stage, potentially increasing the urgency and seriousness with which the public views the allegations.

The phrase "sexual assault allegation" is a compound that succinctly captures the nature of the claim. This compound structure conveys the seriousness of the issue while also allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the events. The choice of the term "allegation" is particularly significant, as it implies that the claims are not yet proven, which can influence how the public engages with the topic. By framing the issue in this way, the media can encourage a more thoughtful and critical examination of the allegations and their implications.

13. Natasha fights back as constituents intensify recall move (Punch - March 21, 2025)

The term "fights back" employs clipping, simplifying the longer phrase "to resist or oppose." This choice of words conveys a sense of agency and determination on Natasha's part, potentially influencing public perception by framing her as a proactive figure in the face of adversity. The use of "fights back" suggests resilience and strength, which can garner sympathy and support from the public, positioning her as a defender of her own reputation.

The phrase "recall move" is a compound that combines "recall" and "move" to describe a political action aimed at removing Natasha from

office. This compound term conveys urgency and seriousness, shaping public discourse by framing the situation as a significant political challenge. The choice of the word "recall" implies a formal process that involves constituents, which can enhance the legitimacy of the action and influence how the public perceives the motivations behind it.

14. In 50 years, Akpabio never exhibited sexual harassment trait, says classmate (THE NATION - March 29, 2025)

The headline presents a complex interplay of word formation processes that shape the narrative surrounding Akpabio's character in the context of sexual harassment allegations.

The word "exhibited" is derived from the root verb "exhibit," with the addition of the suffix "-ed," which transforms it into a past participle. This choice of word implies a definitive action taken over a significant period, suggesting that the speaker is providing a historical account of Akpabio's behaviour. The use of "trait" also reflects a derived concept, as it denotes an inherent quality or characteristic. This derivation serves to frame Akpabio's character in a way that may evoke sympathy or support from the audience, as it suggests a long-standing absence of the alleged behaviour.

The phrase "sexual harassment trait" is a compound noun that combines "sexual" and "harassment" to create a term that directly addresses the nature of the allegations. This compound term is significant as it encapsulates the seriousness of the accusations while simultaneously framing Akpabio's character in relation to these allegations. The choice of compound terms like this can influence public perception by providing a clear understanding of the issue at hand, thus guiding the discourse surrounding the allegations.

The use of "never" in the headline serves as a negation that modifies the verb "exhibited," emphasising the absence of the alleged behaviour over a long period. This strategic choice can influence how the audience interprets Akpabio's character, potentially fostering a presumption of innocence. The affixation process here is subtle but impactful, as it shapes the narrative in a way that may mitigate the severity of the allegations.

15. Supporters defy ban, rally for suspended Natasha Akpoti (THE NATION - April 1, 2025)

This headline presents a different set of word formation processes that contribute to the framing of Natasha Akpoti's situation in the context of public support and political dynamics. The term "suspended" is derived from the verb "suspend," with the addition of the suffix "-ed," indicating a temporary state. This choice of word emphasizes the ongoing nature of Natasha's situation, suggesting that her status is not permanent and may change in the future. The use of "suspended" can evoke sympathy from the audience, as it implies that Natasha is currently facing a challenge that could be resolved.

The word "supporters" is a compound noun formed from "support" and the suffix "-ers," indicating individuals who provide support. This term is significant as it highlights the collective action of individuals rallying for Natasha, framing her as a figure of solidarity and community. The use of this compound term can evoke a sense of mobilization and collective identity, influencing public perception of Natasha's situation and the broader implications of the allegations. The phrase "defy ban" employs the verb "defy," which carries a strong connotation of resistance and challenge. This choice of word can influence how the audience perceives the supporters' actions, framing them as courageous and assertive. The use of "ban" in this context suggests an authoritative action that the supporters are resisting, further emphasizing the political dynamics at play.

Conclusion

This study has provided a nuanced analysis of the linguistic strategies employed in the reporting of sexual allegations involving Natasha and Akpabio in Nigerian newspapers. By focusing on word formation processes such as compounding, derivation, and clipping, the research has illuminated how language not only reflects but actively shapes public perception and discourse surrounding sensitive issues, including sexual misconduct. The findings indicate that the choice of words in headlines and articles plays a critical role in framing the narrative, influencing public sentiment, and ultimately affecting the societal attitudes towards the individuals involved.

The analysis of fifteen excerpts from three major newspapers revealed that terms like "sexual harassment" and "allegations" serve as powerful compounds that encapsulate the seriousness of the claims while also introducing ambiguity that can sway public interpretation. The use of derivation in words such as "traumatized" and "suspension" further emphasizes the emotional weight and procedural implications of the allegations, shaping how the public perceives the gravity of the situation. Additionally, instances of clipping simplify complex narratives, making them more accessible and relatable, which can either trivialize the allegations or enhance their immediacy, depending on the context. Overall, this research contributes to the fields of linguistics and media

studies by highlighting the intricate relationship between language and public perception in the context of sexual allegations. It underscores the importance of linguistic choices in framing narratives that can empower or undermine individuals involved in such allegations. By revealing the underlying ideologies and power structures that influence media discourse, this study advocates for a more critical engagement with language in media reporting, particularly in relation to sensitive societal issues. The implications of these findings extend beyond the specific case of Natasha and Akpabio, offering valuable insights into the broader dynamics of language, power, and public perception in contemporary media landscapes.

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