



A CORPUS STUDY OF THE LEXICAL FEATURES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE USED BY COLUMNISTS IN SOME SELECTED NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS

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ABSTRACT

The study was an analysis of the lexical features of the language used by various columnists in Nigerian Newspapers. The corpus consisted of five texts selected from different Nigerian Newspapers. In order to carry out the study, descriptive and discursive approach was adopted as method of investigation. The texts were therefore subjected to analysis to find out how the columnists select words to meet the needs of the mass audience. The result of the analysis showed that columnists do not use technical vocabulary much in their articles. However, the vocabulary was noted as being subject specific, that is, the columnists' topic or subject being handled determined the prevalent words. The result of the study showed also that columnists select nouns that are emotive in order to work on the emotion of the reader and thereby prompt action. In addition to being emotive, some of the nouns were metaphorically applied in order to address the content of their message. By way of making emphasis and reference to themselves, the columnists used pronouns frequently especially the first person pronoun singular, that is, I. Though the reading sounds boring and monotonous, clear reference has been achieved. Unlike writings on technical fields which have common registers, the selection of lexemes by the columnists depends on the subject matter and individual writer's experience. In other words, choice of words is idiosyncratic since it is based on an individual style

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INTRODUCTION

The languages used by journalists create and maintain relationship between journalists and the unknown situation by using language through self evidence. In doing this, journalists perceive the world correctly through the power of language. It also creates the relationship between the writer and the audience which is done through the language that the reader can understand. It is usually through the language of journalism that communities get their information (Rhetorica, 2010). The language of the print media by extension the language of journalism is not the same with the language of medicine, law, engineering etc., it has a different language usage entirely because journalist use their own kind of register that is only peculiar to the media profession. Crystal and Davy (1969) explain that journalese language is an important aspect of journalism, because it tends to be explicit and precise devoid of jargons. As a rule, journalists do not use long sentences while a short one will serve. However, every newspaper has its own style.

The different styles adopted by the different newspaper houses means the form of the language adopted to meet their target audience. The basic quality of the language of journalism is clarity, and its most desired effect is for the language to be understood. This language serves as a watching to the reader because it is the language used that determines what the reader can get from the story. The simplicity of the language of journalism makes the reader to have confidence in the kind of print media he choose to read, because the reader believes that what is being reported is the truth. Journalists in their use of Language make use of terms that are understood among them. It is the peculiarities of the language used that sets apart the field from others. For instance, words and phrases like 'watching' 'man, 25, drowns in well' 'As INEC's deadline clicks; this does not really connote the real interpretation that an individual outside the profession can easily understand. The language of the media is used in such a way that the language is used to erase the barriers between the producers of the news and the consumers thereby fostering a good relationship between them.

Statement of the Problem

The newspaper column is a regular feature or series of articles in a newspaper, magazine or the like; usually having a readily identifiable heading and the byline of the writer or editor, that reports or comments upon a particular field of interest, such as politics, theatre or etiquette (Wikipedia, 2011). Readers often open a publication with an expectation of reading another short essay by a specific writer who offers a personal point of view. In some instances, a column is written by a team of writers. Some columnists appear on a daily or weekly basis and later reprint the same material in book collections. In the daily Trust newspaper for instance, the following are example of such columnists: Mahmud Jega and one of his contribution is "many roasting chestnuts", Ifeoha Azikiwe; "Mubarak must step down for Egypt to move forward", and Mohammed Haruna, "still on the Jos Christmas Eve Bombings".

A columnist is therefore, a journalist or opinion writer who writes for publication in a series, creating an article that usually offers commentary and opinions. According to the Wikipedia (2000), newspaper columnists of the 1930s and 1940s, such as Franklin Pirce Adams, Nick Kenny, John Crosby etc. achieved a celebrity status and used their syndicated columns as a springboard to move into radio and television, and their radio programmes were quiet similar in format to their newspaper columns. The columnists contribute very well to newspaper development in Nigeria because they provide critical analysis of issues of public interest. They educate and sensitize the general public on the happenings around them.

Columnists usually select and write on issues, phenomena, programmes, policies and events that are not only critical but also important to the general public. It is through public enlightenment activities in the media, such as the critical comments and criticisms by newspaper contributors, that these issues are conveyed to the readership. Looking at the contribution of the columnists in the development of newspapers on one hand and their contribution in making the readers have contact with language in natural

contexts, it appears that little studies are carried out in Nigeria, to examine the columnists' use of language in Nigerian newspapers. It is in appreciation of the contributions of columnists in newspaper reporting, that this study was designed to examine the lexical features of the language use by columnists in some selected Nigerian newspapers.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study was aimed to investigate lexical features employed by the daily columnists in the Nigerian Newspapers. The following specific objectives were drawn to guide the study.

1. To identify the prevalent lexical features of the language of the columnists.
2. To identify and discuss the use of nouns and pronouns by the columnists in order to communicate with their readers
3. To identify and discuss the use of verbs, adverbs and adjectives by the columnists in presenting their contributions in the various columns.

Research Questions

In order to realize the objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the lexical features of the language of the columnists in the Nigerian newspapers?
2. What are the nouns and pronouns used by the columnists in order to communicate with their readers in Nigerian newspapers?
3. How do the columnists use verbs and adjectives in presenting their contributions in Nigerian Newspapers?

METHODOLOGY

This study was basically on the language of newspaper columnists in some selected Nigerian newspapers. It was therefore, a corpus based study that analyses the language used by the columnists to assess how they present their contributions. Descriptive and discursive approach was adopted in this study. Being a corpus based analysis, the

selected texts were presented, analyzed and the identified features were discussed. It was paramount to adopt the descriptive study because it exposes linguistic features as used in its natural context. The corpus on which this study was based consisted of selected columns from five selected Nigerian newspapers which included: The Daily Trust, New Nigeria, The Nation, The Punch and the Leadership Newspapers. Two columns were selected from each of the five newspapers based on systematic sampling which made up ten texts.

The selection of the corpus was carried out using convenience sampling technique as there were numerous newspapers. The convenience sampling refers to the ease by which the texts are obtained. It is the availability of the newspapers to the researcher that determine their selection. There are different approaches to the stylistic analysis of texts but for the purpose of this study, Leech and Short's (1985) approach was adopted for the analyses. The method is based on linguistic checklist that focuses on the analysis of literary texts which can as well be applicable to non literary texts. The checklist consists of four (4) categories as follows: lexical category, grammatical category, figures of speech and context and cohesion. The Leech and Short (1985) approach is adopted because it provides the detail levels of analysis of texts. In addition, Crystal and Davy's (1969) linguistic model was adopted. Their approach encourages analysis at all linguistic levels which include graphetic and graphology, phonetics and phonology and grammar or syntax. The discursive approach adopted therefore was eclectic and focused on only the lexical features. These approaches will help to look at the language use; the variations, how the columnists generally select language etc

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of the texts forming the corpus for the study is presented below following the research questions formulated:

Research Question 1. What are lexical features?

Lexis according to Otagburuagu, Obah, Onuigbo and Egbujor (1996) refer to the words or vocabulary items of a language. It is worthy to note that the

study of the various levels of language demands proper knowledge of the form and function of the words of a language. The analysis of the texts selected has revealed that most of the vocabularies found in the columnists' writings are jargons that are subject specific and based on every day usage. For instance, in THE NATION of Monday, July 11, 2011, the following sentence contains jargons and subject specific vocabularies "Although, *Honourable* Sanat Agunbiade (Ikorodu I) said that the leadership of the *house* would set the *agenda* for the 7th *assembly* while taking into consideration, contribution of members, and a situation where laws made for the people are brought closer to their understanding.

The uses of the words, Honorable, house, agenda, assembly, members are all instances of vocabulary of the legislature. The columnists of such words make the reader have a proper idea of what and where the writer is writing from. Similarly, in Daily Trust of Tuesday, January 25, 2011, common political jargons are found in the following sentences "But then the issues go beyond *PDP*. As long as the law remains unchanged *party leaders* will continue manipulating outcomes of *primaries*. Whatever method they choose to employ (*election* or *selection*) they can submit any name they choose to *INEC*."

Words like PDP, party, primaries, election, INEC are common vocabulary found in the area of politics and are use by the columnists to convey his feelings or opinions on political issue.

In the New Nigerian of Monday, July 4, 2011, the columnists selected vocabularies that present unpleasant picture or issue as contained in the following compound sentence "We are an *odd* people, very *strange* nation, a nation where leaders *destroy* infrastructures or at least *refuse* to provide them, *steal and loot* the nation *dry and grossly* display such wealth and reward them with state awards, universities honor and traditional titles."

From the above, it is found out that simple and everyday vocabulary is used by the columnist to convey his anger to the reader. Words like odd, strange, destroy, refuse, steal, loot, dry and grossly

are everyday vocabulary that can express negativity and unhappiness which can easily be interpreted by the reader. Since the word is central to language and communication, it needs to be carefully studied as can also be seen below:

Research Question 2: What are the nouns and pronouns used by the columnists in order to communicate with their readers in the various Nigerian newspapers?

Use of Nouns

A noun is the name of a person, place, thing etc. To be more elaborate we can include the names of abstracts ideas such as quality, activity condition. Nouns are either boldly mentioned or merely implied Daura (2005). In English for instance, the noun is inflected for number and for case as well as been used as the subject, object or compliment. Such usage for expressing personal opinion on an issue is sampled from The Punch of June 28, 2011. re

Last week, I wrote about natural disasters, such as **earthquakes, tornadoes** and **volcanic eruptions**, from which Nigeria has so far been insulated owing to her topographical, climatic and ecological features. But it is not the case that Nigeria is insulated from disasters altogether. Our disasters happen to be preventable **man-made** ones caused variously by poor leadership, ineffectual **government** institutions and poor **infrastructure**.

In the paragraph above, the columnist's choice of concrete nouns like **earthquakes, tornadoes, volcanoes, government and infrastructure** are intended to work on the emotion of the reader to compare the poor leadership in Nigeria with natural disasters. The compound noun '**man-made**' in the text, indicate the writer's intention to show the artificial nature of Nigeria's mal-administration. These nouns are stylistically significant in this text because the columnist was very concerned on the disastrous political leadership we have in the country. The kind of leadership we receive is rather destructive than creative and people oriented.

In THE NATION of Monday July 11, 2001, Sam Omatsye who won the columnist of the year award in 2009 portrayed the Coney attitudes of political leaders metaphorically. The columnist referred to Mallam Nasiru El-Rufai as chameleon.

Malam Nasiru El-Rufai is a Nigerian who basks in controversy like a **reptile** out of water in high noun. It does not matter in what **hue** or in whose company you find him. He is ready to square up to the next **guy**. It is all about El-Rufai's **interest** even if it masquerades as a national **pride**. He is one of our enduring **peacocks**.

He is also a **chameleon** of **interest**. Whether as a **lackey**, a **bureaucrat**, a **protégé**, a **master** or a **turncoat**, he is not afraid to stake a claim.

The columnist's style harmonizes both abstract and concrete nouns to deliver his message. The following word forms, interest, hue, emotion, critic, feel, justice, neutralist, pride etc are nouns that are abstract in nature used by the columnist to show to the reader the kind of character El-Rufai is. While concrete nouns such as peacock, reptile, chameleon, snake, birds, lackey, bureaucrat, protégé, turncoat etc are used by the columnist to provide a comparison of the behaviour and quality of El-Rufai on what he intends doing.

Use of Pronoun

Pronouns according to Daura (2005) are words that can replace nouns in sentences so as to avoid the monotonous repetition of nouns. In writings, pronouns are used for reference purposes either cataphorically or anaphorically. Through the use of referential pronouns, the writer achieves coherence. In the New Nigerian of Monday July 4, 2011 under the caption Don't pray for Nigeria, pray for, the repeatedly used the first person singular pronoun emphasize his opinion and knowledge on an issue he frowns at.

It is a funny odd country.... I love Nigeria. I had reason to be at the new park and departmental shop Ceddi plaza to pick some small this and that. I carried a mall basket, I knew him because I had opportunity to have seen his campaign

posters. I stood there watching...and I could not help asking..... as I made to frame my question. He interjected. I did not know, I actually thought.....

The first point of interest here is the repetitive nature of the personal pronoun 'I': **I love Nigeria, I had reason, I carried, I knew him, I had opportunity, I stood**, etc are all pronouns that are used to represent the narrator and demonstrate the commitment of the writer in the narration. However, in the statements 'I did not know,' 'I actually thought,' pronoun I represent the senator who is expressing his ignorance.

Research question 3: What are the verbs and adjectives used by the columnists in presenting their contributions in the various columns?

Use of verbs

The word forms that denote actions are called verbs. Olaoye and Olaniyi (2009) define verbs as words that denote action and are also referred to as lexical verbs. Verbs in this category are independent in nature and can be meaningful on their own.

In the Daily Trust of January 25, 2011, a story **Kwankwaso thought he could go scot-free** depicts how lexical verbs are used to portray crisis.

Obviously some members of the ruling PDP would like to eat their cake and still have it, first, it was Atiku Abubakar who contested with Good luck Jonathan His supporters surprised me.....they pretended to be shocked that they lost. Was it a redeemed PDP? When was it reformed?

The kinds of verbs used in the above paragraph are dynamic, referring to actions. The following verbs **contested, surprised, pretended, shocked, redeemed** and **reformed** are selected by the writer to refer to the crisis, struggle for power in the PDP with specific reference to Kwankwaso's experience as seen in the headline.

Use of Adjectives

Adjectives usually qualify or describe nouns so as to give additional information on the nouns they precede or follow. Adjectives therefore give readers the picture of an event or incidence. In the Leadership Newspaper of July 15, 2011, a story titled “**FG should privatize the railways**” by Daniel Omale depicts the use of adjectives to expose the poor states of railways in this country.

There was a time when the core issue with the railway was the size of our rails. *Narrow* and *wide gauges* were argued on the pages of newspaper. There were huge discussions at one point about the possibility of laying *new* rail tracks that would support modern trains/coaches.

From the above paragraph, some adjectives such as **narrow, wide and huge, new** etc are used by the writer to refer to both quality and quantity of rail ways in Nigeria which has for long been subject of discussion by the national assembly. These adjectives are specifically relevant when used with the registers of Rail transportation

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the lexical features revealed that columnists select vocabulary that relate to an issue they write on. The vocabularies therefore are idiosyncratic and subject specific. They are mostly jargons since they selected to present opinions not conventional or universal facts. The analysis carried revealed that columnist used a lot of nouns metaphorically to dress the content of their message. In similar vein, adjectives were employed to give vivid picture of an issue or event to the mass audience. It is not easy therefore to pin point a regular lexical items across columns but be done based a specific issue treated in a column. What seems to be uniform is that most of the words are everyday words. This entails the mass audience can easily read and comprehend the articles

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