A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL CHOICES IN SELECT NEWSPAPER HEADLINES ON THE 2023 GOVERNORSHIP ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the lexical choices used by headlines from seven newspapers in reporting the 2023 governorship election in Nigeria. The objectives are to investigate the lexical choices that these news headlines used in reporting the elections, identify how each news headline reported the election and determine the similarities and differences in the choice of lexical items used by the reporters of the headlines. The data for the study were randomly selected from the websites of the *Nigerian Tribune*, *Aljazeera*, *Sahara Reporters*, *Vanguard*, *Arise News*, the *Guardian* and *Punch*. Guided by the assumptions of critical discourse analysis and drawing on the framework of lexical classification in Halliday's (1994) systemic functional grammar, the paper demonstrates how the headlines from these newspapers represented the same event in vastly different ways through the particular uses of lexicon that reflected their differing standpoints and national interests.

Key Words: Contrastive analysis, lexical choices, headlines, elections

1. Introduction

The news primarily covers events that have occurred recently. It describes fresh information regarding recent occurrences in news articles, radios and televisions featuring accounts of these events. It is an information about recent events that are of interest to a large group or that may affect the lives of such a group (Reah, 2007; Aluya et. al., 2019). The foregoing implies that the news encompasses both recent events and those that are deemed significant. It is the dissemination of

chosen stories based on news values, which are derived from societal norms like journalistic ethics, the quality of sources, publication frequency and schedule (Fairclough, 1989). As a result, news contains more than just global facts; it also generally contains ideas, morals, theories, conceptualisations, and ideologies. News, in the opinion of Fowler (1991), is a split of the selection and modification of an actual event rather than a newsworthy event. The selection of events instantly provides readers with a limited perspective of the world because the great majority of events are not documented in news reports. Thus, the news world is a distorted and evaluated version of reality rather than the real one (Fowler, 1991).

The news discourse presents facts in an unbiased manner with several distinct characteristics from other discourses. Its headlines are striking, and the semantic units in lead sentences are more compelling. The language used in newspapers has a distinct tone and framework (van Dijk, 1995). It is prevalent and all-encompassing in our society. Like any other discourse, news is inherently not an objective representation of reality (Fowler, 1991). Consequently, it is beneficial to understand how language functions and influences people's perceptions of the outside world, as well as how news is created and influenced by moral principles (Ogunsiji and Aluya, 2022). Therefore, it is useful to examine the lexical choices used in reporting specific events in our society. In light of the foregoing preliminary discourse, this paper focuses on the lexical choices deployed by *the Vanguard* and *Arise News* in reporting the 2023 governorship elections in Nigeria. The objectives include: to investigate the lexical choices that the two newspapers used in reporting the elections, identify how they reported the election and determine the similarities and differences in the choice of words used by both newspapers in reporting the same election. The next subsection takes on the theoretical framework adopted for the study.

Theoretical Framework

The systemic functional grammar model is made up of a network of systems which offers the language user choices at different levels of language description from which linguistic events or texts are accounted for (Aluya, 2016). The primary levels are form, substance and context. Form, which is the focus of this study, is the organisation of the graphic or phonic substance into patterns that conveys message, and is made up of two levels: grammar and lexis. Lexis, from which the present study draws insight, is the level of form at which open set patterns operate in a language. Lexis plays a significant role in determining the ideational structure in Halliday's (1994) linguistic theory. People with varying sociolinguistic abilities use classification of lexis as a fundamental method of cognition, which may have an impact on how they use language from the perspective of an ideational experience given their varied social experiences (Halliday, 1994).

Classification is thought of as the linguistic arrangement of the universe (Kress and Hodge, 1979). It is founded on language and cognition, and without classification acts, no one can connect ideas or words to new ideas or messages. Since words and concepts can only exist through classification, the description of objects or events is primarily accomplished through polarized lexical choice (Xin, 2005). Words carry both implied and denoted meanings, which reflect the influence of society in general and value judgements in particular. Ideology constantly governs lexis, which affects word choice. In news discourse, lexical choices can conceal ideologies and opinions (Edem and Aluya, 2023). Language cannot be used to describe things objectively, and things and objects do not always accurately reflect the labels or definitions people ascribe to them. The reason for this is that, in most cases, people's classifications of principles differ because of their emotional and cognitive states (Zhang, 2011, p.32).

Zhang (2011) proposed that words can be classified into three groups based on their emotional connotations: positive, negative and neutral words. Words with active evaluation that demonstrate the user's

positive attitude toward his or her descriptive objects are called commendatory terms. Derogatory terms are the ones that convey a negative attitude and are negatively evaluated. Words that lack judgement are called neutral terms. When a user uses neutral terms, they merely express the facts without offering any commentary on the objects they are describing. Evaluative colouring is present in both positive and negative words. As a result, journalists are free to employ any colouring words they choose, particularly adverbs and adjectives that have connotations.

2. Methodology

The data for the present study came from seven news headlines on the official websites of the *Nigerian Tribune, Aljazeera, Sahara Reporters, Vanguard, Arise News, Guardian* and *Punch.* There was a random sampling procedure of selecting the news headlines. The 2023 Governorship election in Nigeria took place on March 18th, 2023 to November 11th, 2023. What this implies is that not all the governorship elections were held on March 18th, 2023. This explains one of the reasons why the headlines reflected different dates of publication. Then, some words of defining and describing the election from each of the headlines were paired for comparison. Thus, all together there were seven sample news headlines. In terms of length, the headline from *Nigerian Tribune* consists of eleven words, *Aljazeera* has seven words, *Sahara Reporters* consists of eleven words, *Vanguard* consists of five words, *Arise News* has fourteen words, the *Guardian* consists of seven words and the *Punch* has seven words.

The present study adopts a qualitative approach to analyse samples of the news headlines on 2023 governorship election obtained from the websites of these news reports with a view to determining the similarities and differences in the choice of lexical words used in reporting the election. This is with a view to determining the stance taken by the news headlines. All the samples of news headlines are examined with the analytical tool of

lexical classification in Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, and a detailed contrastive analysis is done on the various news headlines. The chosen words have different meanings and forms; however, in the news reports they are used to address the same person, depict the same object or describe an event and so on.

3. Data Analysis
This section examines the headlines' choice of lexical items used in reporting the 2023 governorship elections in Nigeria. The following headlines are culled from the eight different newspapers:

Headline One: 2023 General Elections: Nigeria Records 238 <u>Violence Cases</u>, <u>24 Deaths</u> (***Nigerian Tribune***, May 13th, 2023).

Headline Two: How <u>Violence Robs</u> Nigerians of their Votes (***Aljazeera***, March 2nd, 2023).

Headline Three: Nigeria Elections 2023: <u>Two People Killed</u> During <u>Election Violence</u> in Abia (***Sahara Reporters***, May 24th, 2023).

Headline Four: <u>Violence that Marred</u> 2023 Elections (***Vanguard***, March 25th, 2023).

Headline Five: <u>17 Feared Killed</u> as <u>Violence, Apathy, Voter Suppression</u> <u>mar</u> Nigeria's Governorship, State Assembly Election (***Arise News***, March 19th, 2023).

Headline Six: <u>Intimidation</u>, <u>Violence Mar</u> Governorship, State Assembly Polls (***The Guardian***, March 19th, 2023).

Headline Seven: Voters, INEC Officials, <u>other Casualties</u> of 2023 Elections (***Daily Trust***, March 29th, 2024).

Headline Eight: Gov Election 2023: <u>Armed Thugs invade</u> Lagos Polling Unit (***Punch,*** March 18th, 2023).

The focus of the present analysis is on the underlined lexical words in each news headline. A close study of the eight headlines as captured above indicates that the reporters of the various newspapers used lexical items that have both positive and negative connotations. However, there is more usage of lexical items with negative connotations in the headlines.

The first headline is culled from the *Nigerian Tribune* which was published on May 13th, 2023. It reads, "Nigeria records 238 violence cases, 24 deaths". Observe that the news reporter of this headline carefully selected lexical items that effectively help to vividly capture the conduct of the election. He employs the lexical expression, 'Nigeria records 238 violence cases.' This is followed immediately by '24 deaths'. The headline consists of seven words which are mixed with numerals. The numeral '238' and adjective 'violence' add descriptive quality to the noun 'cases' in the first lexical expression. Similarly, the numeral '24' in the second lexical expression functions as an adjective to qualify the noun 'deaths.' While the first lexical expression is a simple clause, the second is a phrase. Both lexical expressions are very powerful and possess negative connotations. Obviously, the choice of the lexical word 'violence' indicates that the governorship election was characterised by various destructive acts. The editor's claim of violence during the election is further corroborated by the number of casualties. The 238 violence cases as related through the headline cut across the various states in the federation where the governorship election held. From this analysis, it is safe to conclude that the 2023 governorship election in Nigeria was disrupted by various destructive acts.

The second newspaper headline to be examined is culled from *Aljazeera*. It was published on March 2nd, 2023. The headline reads, 'How violence robs Nigerians of their Votes.' This headline has similar word count with the first one that was culled from the *Nigerian Tribune*. It is a simple clause configured with lexical items from different grammatical categories. Just like in article headline, the lexical item 'violence' features in this headline. The only difference in the usage of the word in both articles headlines is that the word is used as an adjective in the first article headline; conversely, it is used as a noun in this article headline. Despite the fact that the word is used differently by the two reporters, it is

noteworthy to mention that the two words have similar negative connotations. Another lexical item that is worth explicating in this headline is the lexical word 'mar'. This is a dynamic verb deployed by the reporter to vividly describe the destructive acts that characterised the election. The choice of including 'Nigeria' in its headline is to signal to the whole world that the election being reported or covered is Nigeria's election.

The third news headline is drawn from *Sahara reporters*. It was published on May 24th, 2023 and reads, 'Nigeria Elections 2023: Two people killed during electoral violence in Abia State.' This news headline seems to be more elaborate than the first two that have been examined. It consists of twelve words. The first part of the article headline, 'Nigeria Elections 2023' signals to the reader that the reporter's focus is on the 2023 election. However, the second part of the headline, 'two people killed during election violence in Abia State' is worrisome. This is because of the message it relates. Observe that in this expression, the lexical word 'killed' precedes 'Two people' to describe what happened to the people. Obviously, the people being refereed to here must have been voters, that is, innocent Nigerians who came out to exercise their civic rights. Also, the adjective 'electoral' precedes the noun 'violence' to highlight the kind of violence being referred to by the reporter. Both 'killed' and 'violence' have negative connotations. As this headline has shown, the reporter establishes electoral violence as one of the characteristics of the 2023 governorship elections and corroborates the assertion citing the death of some voters. Unlike some of the previously examined headlines where no location in the federation was mentioned, this headline specifies the particular state in the federation where this act of electoral violence occurred.

The next news headline is culled from the *Vanguard*. It was published on March 25th, 2023 and reads, 'Violence that marred 2023 elections.' This headline consists of five words and appears

to be article shortest of all the headlines examined. Two lexical items that are worth explicating here are 'violence' and 'marred'. The first is a noun while the second is a verb. The reporter's choice of fronting the lexical item 'violence' in this headline is to draw the reader's attention to the headline with a view to relating to them what violence has done to Nigeria's 2023 election. The Vanguard reporter seems to be more succinct in the use of words. It is noteworthy that the *Vanguard* followed the path of *Aljazeera* newspapers that captured the violence that rocked Nigeria's 2023 elections but did not provide evidence to corroborate the claim raised.

The fifth headline is drawn from *Arise News*. It was published on March 19th, 2023. The article headline reads, '17 feared killed as violence, apathy, voter suppression mar Nigeria's Governorship, State Assembly Election'. The headline consists of fourteen words. It is the longest and most detailed headline when compared with the other headlines that have been examined. The lexical items that form this headline is mixed with numeral. One similarity which this headline shares with the previous headlines is the use of the words, 'violence', 'mar' and 'killed'. These are all words with negative connotations. What differentiates this headline from the other headlines is the fact that it is more detailed in the information it provides than the previous ones examined. For instance, while other headlines like *Nigerian Tribune, Aljazeera*, *Vanguard* and *Sahara Reporters* provide one form of violence that discredited Nigeria's 2023 election, the *Arise News* headline presented two more additional forms as seen in 'apathy' and 'voter suppression'. This implies that apathy and voter suppression are another shade of violence that undermined the credibility of the 2023 governorship election. Observe that in this headline, the lexical items, '17 feared killed' is fronted. The reporter's aim of fronting this lexical expression is to attract the reader's attention.

The sixth headline for examination is drawn from the *Guardian* of March 19th, 2023. The headline reads, 'Intimidation, violence mar Governorship, State Assembly polls.' This headline consists of seven words. The first three words, 'intimidation', 'violence' and 'mar' all have negative connotations. The point of convergence in the use of lexical words between this headline and the previously examined ones is the presence of words such as 'violence' and 'mar'. However, lexical words such as 'intimidation' and 'polls' deployed by the *Guardian* establishes its divergence from the other news headlines. What this implies is that, none of the previously examined news headlines used words like 'intimidation' and 'polls.' In all, though the *Guardian* reporter admits that the governorship election was undermined by different shades of violence, no evidence was provided to buttress the violent acts that discredited the election.

The last news headline to be examined is drawn from the *Punch* of March 18th, 2023. It reads, 'Gov Election 2023: Armed thugs invade Lagos polling unit'. The headline consists of nine words which are separated into two parts by colon The first part begins with the lexical expression, 'Gov Election 2023' pointing to the fact that the 2023 governorship election in Nigeria is the reporter's focus. The second part of the headlines begins with 'Armed thugs invade....' These are three lexical items with negative connotations and their sight alone puts fear in the reader considering the havoc that such hoodlums are capable of wrecking. The use of lexical words such 'governorship', '2023' and 'election' establishes the point of convergence between this headline and the previously examined ones. What makes it different from others is the choice of the words 'Armed', 'thugs' and 'invade'. One spectacular fact to be highlighted in this headline is the location invaded by the armed thug. It is noteworthy to mention that in its headline, the *Punch* reporter makes no reference to violence or use

the word. This is another factor that different this headline from the previously examined ones.

4. Conclusion

Applying the analytical tool of lexical classification, this paper has conducted a critical analysis of seven newspapers headlines, selected from *the Nigerian Tribune, Aljazeera, Sahara Reporters, Vanguard, Arise News,* the *Guardian* and the *Punch*. After a systematic contrastive analysis, it is found that there are points of convergence and divergence in the lexical words used by these news headlines in reporting the 2023 governorship election. All the news headlines used lexical items with negative connotations to report the election. Some of the news headlines (e.g. *Arise News, Nigeria Tribune, Sahara Reporters* and the *Guardian*) provided detailed information in their headlines to help readers have a vivid grasped of the message. However, the others such as (the *Punch, Vanguard* and *Aljazeera*) alluded to the violence that discredited the election without specifying the kind of violence or citing instances to corroborate their claims. Some of the headlines (e.g. *Aljazeera, Vanguard, the Guardian* and *Punch*) are short in terms of word count while others (e.g. *Nigerian Tribune, Arise News* and *Sahara Reporters*) are long. All the news headlines (excluding the headline from Punch) used the lexical item 'violence' in reporting the 2023 governorship election. Whereas the news headlines from the *Guardian, Arise News* and *Vanguard* used similar verbal item, 'mar or marred' in reporting the election, the remaining news headlines used varied lexical item as verbs. For instance, the *Nigerian Tribune* used 'records', *Aljazeera* deployed 'robs', *Sahara Reporters* used 'killed' while the *Punch* used 'invade'. Finally, *Arise News* and the *Guardian* are the only headlines that cited the shades of violence that discredited the 2023 election.

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