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A Discourse Analysis of Online Newspaper Reports on COVID-19 in Nigeria

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Abstract:
This study explored a discourse analysis of the online newspapers reportage of the news about COVID-19 using Van Dijk's discourse analysis parameters and J. Austin's speech acts concepts. To do this, 91 stories were retrieved from two online Nigerian newspapers. An online search was conducted using keywords: 'Coronavirus in Nigeria', 'updates on Coronavirus in Nigeria', 'COVID-19 in Nigeria from November to December 2021'. The search in total retrieved 91 articles consisting of 'news', 'feature', 'opinion' and 'column' articles over a period of two months - November and of December 2021 from Vanguard and The Punch newspapers. The parameters of Evidentiality, Metaphor, Lexicalisation and presupposition as provided by Van Dijik were used to analyse the headlines and leads of the newspapers. Because of the prominent roles which verbs in speech production, in the study, verbs were analysed from the concept of J. Austin's speech act to determine how they have been used in the newspapers' headlines and leads to pass COVID-19 messages across to the readers. Framing theory was employed to underpin the study. The theory explicated how the crafting (framing) of messages (in forms of headlines and leads) by the media plays a significant role in process by which the people (the audience) develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue and assign meaning to the issue or redirect their thinking about an issue. This study concluded that mass media plays a fundamental role in disseminating information, influences the public behavior which can curtail the spread of the pandemic. The way the media craft and present their messages in the headlines and leads especially during the COVID-19 pandemic has a long effect in ameliorating the challenges of the pandemic or aggravating it.

Keywords: Coronavirus, discourse analysis, online newspapers, newspaper headlines, newspaper leads

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has created a global health crisis that had a deep impact on the way we perceive our world and our everyday lives. Not only has the rate of contagion and patterns of transmission threatened our sense of agency, but the safety measures to contain the spread of the virus also required social and physical distancing, preventing us from finding solace in the company of others (Arriaga, *et al.*, 2021; Benito, 2020).

The novel Coronavirus is a current pandemic of Coronavirus family that is currently ravaging the whole world. It is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans. It has emerged as a respiratory infection with significant concern for global public health hazards. Starting with initial suspicions of animal to the human transmission for earlier cases, the paradigm has shifted towards human to human transmission via droplets, contacts and fomites. It was first identified in Wuhan, capital of Hubei Province of China in December, 2019. Early genetic analysis of the outbreak revealed that the virus was similar to, but distinct from SARS-CoV. However, the closest genetic similarity was found in a Coronavirus that had been isolated from bats (Apuke & Omar, 2020; Nwakpu, Ezema, & Ogbodo, 2020).

In Nigeria, the first confirmed case of the disease was announced on 27 February, 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus. On 9 March, 2020, a second case of the virus was reported in Ewekoro, Ogun State, involving a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen. The COVID-19update retrieved from the website (http://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/), of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) stated that as at December, 2021, a summary of the Coronavirus situation in Nigeria indicated that there had been 280,119,931 confirmed COVID-19cases with 5,403,662 deaths resulting in a case fatality rate of 2.0% worldwide. Cumulatively, since the outbreak began in Week 9, 2020, there have been 237,561 cases and 3,022 deaths reported with a case fatality rate (CFR) of 1.3% in Nigeria. The number of in-bound international travelers tested was 9,398 of which 668 (7.1%) were positive compared to 522 (6.3%) (Out of 8,306 tested), while the number of out-bound international travelers tested was 10,233 of which 1,864 (18.2%) were positive.

2. Media and Coronavirus

The media play crucial roles in shaping public opinion and perception of issues such as the outbreak of the virus. Part of the role of the media is to report any issue affecting the society to the masses. The way the media frame the

pandemic will determine how the public responds to it and whether to take a precautionary measure or not. The importance of the media in the coverage of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Nigeria and its implications among Nigerian populace cannot be overestimated (Nwakpu, Ezema, & Ogbodo, 2020).

Events of public concern such as health issues definitely attract media attention. This can take the form of print, electronic, internet or social media attention; in most cases, a combination of all. Whichever form it takes, what matters most is the level or impact of media intervention in health crisis, especially disease outbreak. Mass media cannot cure virus but can cure its spread. This statement explicitly underscores the role of mass media in health reporting, especially in curbing spread of infectious disease outbreak (Nwakpu, Ezema, & Ogbodo, 2020).

Scholars have argued that the mass media have the potential to influence health-related behaviors and perceptions. In Nigeria, the mass media are used independently or complementarily in health promotion activities to achieve positive lifestyle changes. Therefore, the role of mass media in health promotion and intervention goes beyond just creating awareness on a particular health issue or disease outbreak; it also entails placing emphasis on the angle or direction of reportage of such issue or outbreak. These media angles of presenting health issues take the form of media framing to influence public perception and induce attitudinal response, leading to positive behavioral changes (Nwakpu, Ezema, & Ogbodo, 2020).

Communication plays a crucial role in health promotion and healthcare delivery. This, according to Kreps, Bonaguro & Query (1998), cited in Solo-Anaeto (2017), is based upon the pervasive roles communication performs in creating, gathering, and sharing 'health information.' This role is important because when people have relevant and sufficient health information, they can make informed health decisions and adopt practices that will support good health. Badri (2009)'s comment, as cited in Solo-Anaeto (2017), corroborates this position as he posits that 'timely, accessible and credible health information is critical for improving public health outcomes'. Hence, there is the need for health communication.

Media is the primary source of information and plays a vital role in educating the masses. However, when overly eager sources spread information without proper verification, not only can it be harmful but it can have unintended consequences. Media can play pivotal roles in the current pandemic by promoting physical and psychological health measures and ensuring resilience in people belonging to different age groups and socio-economic conditions (Anwar, *et al.*, 2020).

Anwar, *et al.*, (2020) postulated that the media has the potential to unite people and end discrimination by spreading awareness. It can also be an excellent resource for information verification. However, this can only be possible through the responsible use of media where proper checks and balances are in place. This way, it can help prevent the spread of rumors and end stigmatization of those affected by COVID-19. According to Rauf, Ojo, Akinreti, Ogedengbe and Jegede (2013), it is worth mentioning here that the public rely on the media to be acquainted with whatever is going on in their environment and limiting them to the line of thinking and focus that suit the media's intention.

3. Objective of Study

The objective of this study is to explore through discourse analysis how the Nigerian online newspapers report Coronavirus issue in Nigeria thematically and linguistically through their headline casting and their leads with the aim of finding out how meanings are conveyed.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach discourse analysis which was used to analyze how Nigerian online newspapers carried out the treatment of the national health issue of Nigerian Coronavirus thematically and linguistically. Two widely read Nigerian newspapers available online were purposively selected for the study. The newspapers are *Vanguard* and *The Punch*. These newspapers were selected because of their national reach and readership. The coverage period was from November 2021 to December 2021. The Punch is described as Nigeria's most widely read newspaper with over 80,000 daily readers and followers online and offline (punchng.com). Similarly, *alexa.com* and *similarweb.com* ranked it as no 1 digital newspaper in Nigeria, while Vanguard is described as a newspaper with a penetrating reach to all the nooks and crannies of Nigeria with a total 120 copies with a print run of 130, 000 copies daily (vanguardngr.com). The sources of data collection were headlines and leads of the online newspapers on Coronavirus, published from November to December 2021. The period was selected because it was when Nigeria started to experience the fourth wave of COVID-19variant referred to as omicron. The period was also chosen because there have been studies on the outset and the emergence of previous variants of the virus. It was, therefore, important that this study focused on online newspaper reportage of Coronavirus, especially in the face of the prevailing omicron variant. Also, it was expected that the newspapers would have shifted attention from the emergence of the pandemic to reporting the character of the fourth variant and the efforts in vaccination in the Country. The corpus from both newspapers included a total number of 91 news reports comprising 79 in *Vanguard* and 12 in *The Punch*.

5. Techniques and Criteria for Selecting Stories

An online search was conducted using keywords including, 'Coronavirus in Nigeria', 'updates on Coronavirus in Nigeria', 'COVID-19in Nigeria from November to December 2021'. The search in total retrieved 93 articles consisting of 'news', , 'feature', 'opinion' and 'column' articles. For screening, the emphasis was on the headline and lead. Develotte *et al.*, (2001) cited in Gopang & Bughio, (2015), maintain that headlines are particularly revealing of the social, cultural and therefore national representations circulating in a society at a given time. Headlines reach an audience considerably wider

than those who read the articles, since all those who buy the paper will glance, if only fleetingly, at the headlines. Moreover, their impact is even wider than on those who actually buy the paper, since headlines are often glimpsed on public transport, displayed on fliers. Based on this position, it is assumed that the headlines of a newspaper convey a meaningful message to the readers. For the purpose of inclusion, articles needed to report on COVID-19within the time frame.

Although there have been researches on the media coverage of the outbreak of Coronavirus in Nigeria, these studies have not considered the analysis from the perspective of discourse analysis and how the choice of headlines and leads in the online newspapers have been cast to influence the messages being passed across. This is a gap that this study attempts to fill.

6. Discourse Analysis

Language has been described as human vocal noise (speech) or the arbitrary graphic representation (writing) of this noise, used systematically and conventionally by members of a speech community for purposes of communication (Osisanwo, 2003, p.1). Researchers often view language as a form of social practise that directly and indirectly influences the social world (Johnson & McLean, 2020) cited in Dezhkameha, Layegh and Hadidib, (2021). Language clearly is a human phenomenon as seen in this description.

Discourse Analysis (DA) is an area of research that is composed of numerous heterogeneous approaches, which are largely qualitative, to the study of relationships that exist between language-in-use and the social world. Yule (1983), quoted by Osisanwo (2003), states that the analysis of discourse is the analysis of language in use. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), in Dezhkameha, Layegh and Hadidib (2021), describe discourse analysis as having its roots in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which is mainly concerned with choices made by writers as well as the ones not made. All word choices matter and make a difference. Therefore, the concern of discourse analyst is what language is used for and not the formal properties of a language. He pays attention to the organisation and the process of encoding and decoding meaning in talks (Osisanwo, 2003),

For the purposes of this study, the discourse parameters used to analyse the online newspapers headlines and leads are: Evidentiality, Metaphor, National Self-Glorification, and Negative Lexicalisation. These parameters are defined according to Van Dijk (2006). Also Speech Acts concepts as enunciated by J. Austin (1962) were to be employed. According to Austin (1962), in Osisanwo (2003, p.60), in every utterance, a person performs an act such as stating a fact, stating an opinion, confirming or denying something, making a prediction or a request, asking a question, issuing an order, giving a permission, giving a piece of advice, making an offer, making a promise, thanking somebody or condoling somebody. All these, according to Austin, constitute speech act. Since verbs play crucial roles in speech acts, according to Osisanwo (2003), their roles and the act in the various headlines and leads of the online newspapers are under study.

7. Parameters for Analysis

7.1. Evidentiality

Claims or points of view in argument are more plausible when speakers present some evidence or proof for their knowledge or opinions. This may happen by references to authority figures or institutions (see 'Authority' above), or by various forms of evidentiality: How or where they got the information. Thus, people may have read something in the paper, heard it from reliable spokespersons, or have seen something with their own eyes. Especially in debates on immigration, in which negative beliefs about immigrants may be heard as biased, evidentials are an important move to convey objectivity, reliability, and hence credibility. In stories that are intended to provoke empathy, of course such evidence must be supplied by the victims themselves. When sources are actually being quoted, evidentiality is linked to intertextuality (Van Dijk, 2006),

7.2. Metaphor

Although metaphors are mainly used to convey abstract, unfamiliar meanings in more concrete terms, according to Kövecses (2010), in Dezhkameha, Layegh and Hadidib (2021), they can also have a strong persuasive effect. In ideological discourse, metaphors are a valuable asset to represent people or events positively or negatively.

7.3. Lexicalisation

Specific lexical items can be used to convey particular ideas and concepts. These lexical items can have positive or negative connotations. Thus, the choice of a word that has a positive connotation over a word that is neutral or has a negative connotation, and vice versa, can express the same or similar meanings in extremely divergent ways (Dezhkameha, Layegh and Hadidib, 2021).

7.4. Presupposition

Discourses are like the proverbial icebergs: most of their meanings are not explicitly expressed but presupposed to be known, and inferable from general socio-cultural knowledge. Strategically, presuppositions are often used to assume the truth of some proposition when such truth is not established at all (Van Dijk, 2006).

8. Result and Discussions

Discussions on the result of findings are presented under each of the parameters and the type of speech act verbs used to convey the intended meaning. For clarity, some examples of headlines and leads have been purposively extracted from the retrieved headlines and leads of the two online newspapers where 'Headline' is represented by 'HL' and 'Lead' is represented by 'L'.

8.1. Evidentiality

Both newspapers employed evidentiality in their reportage of COVID-19pandemic. According to Hsieh (2008), as cited by Dezhkameha, et al; (2021), the predominance of Evidentiality in political and business news cannot be ignored since it adds to the objectivity of reporting such news. In reporting the COVID-19pandemic, therefore, readers are likely to trust the newspaper if the news is reported through an authority. Evidentiality is prevalent in the headlines and leads of the online newspapers. Examples of Evidentiality are presented:

HL 1:
- NAFDAC-approved ABUAD herbal drug heals 19 COVID-19 patients

L 1:

To prove the efficacy of the herbal drug to combat COVID-19developed by AfeBabalola University, Ado-Ekiti (ABUAD) has been put to test as 19 patients of the dreaded disease have recovered through the usage of the drug.

HL 2:
- COVID-19infections rise by 326.67% in one week, Nigerians shun safety rules

L 2:

COVID-19cases are on the increasing and raising fears that the country is on the verge of the fourth wave of Coronavirus, findings by *The PUNCH* have shown.

'Heal,' 'developed,' 'recovered,' 'raising,' 'shun,' 'rise' are constative verbs that have been used to make statements, describe situations, events, state of affairs, observing phenomena and asserting their truth or otherwise in both the headlines and the leads in the two examples. They attest to the evidentiality of the news.

8.2. Metaphor

There is no doubt that both newspapers employed metaphor succinctly to pass their messages across to the readers. Those metaphors were used negatively and positively to represent people and present the devastating effect of Coronavirus on the people. Newspapers love to cast their headlines in metaphor sometimes to pass their hidden message emotionally. Examples of such metaphors in both newspapers are:

HL 3:
- COVID-19unkind to Nigeria on Christmas Day

L 3:
- COVID-19did not look kindly on Nigeria on Christmas Day as it hit 1,305 persons and took 21 lives.

HL 4:
- 21 died of COVID-19on Christmas Day in Nigeria –NCDC

L 4:

No fewer than 21 people died of Coronavirus on December 25 – Christmas Day, according to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control.

'Unkind,' did not look,' 'died' are descriptive constative verbs that convey metaphorical connotations of the devastating effect of Coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria, especially during the yuletide season when Nigerians are supposed to be in joyous mood of celebration.

8.3. Lexicalisation

In both the online newspapers, specific lexical items are used to craft the headlines and the leads. These lexical items are employed to convey and evoke emotion, fear with positive and negative connotations. Lexicalisation is also prevalently used in both online newspapers. Examples of lexicalization are presented:

HL5:
- Positivity rates of COVID-19infection drops from 29 to 15 % in Lagos — Abayomi

L5:

Lagos State Government has said that analysis of recent data has shown a significant reduction in positivity rates of COVID-19infection from 29 per cent on December 21, to 15 per cent as at December 28, 2021 in the state.

HL6:

8.4. WHO Predicts COVID-19Will End in 2022

L6:

World Health Organisation (WHO) Director General, Tedros Ghebreyesus, has expressed optimism that COVID-19pandemic will end in 2022.

In the headlines and leads above, the lexical items like 'positivity,' 'drop,' significant reduction,' 'analysis of recent data,' 'predicts,' 'will end' are suggestive constative verbs that have been chosen to express optimism and happiness. Examples of headlines and leads that express negative connotations are presented:
HL8:

8.5. Cases Rise, 107 Inbound Passengers Test Positive for COVID-19in One Week
L8:

No fewer than 107 inbound passengers to Nigeria have tested positive for COVID-19in the last one week
HL9:

8.6. Omicron, Delta Variants Pose 'Very High' Risk as Cases Surge Globally — WHO
L9:

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has warned of a very high overall risk of the Omicron variant spreading and overwhelming healthcare systems across the world.

8.6.1. Presupposition
HL10:

8.6.2. Omicron: Governments May Shut Down Schools; 647m Children Yet to Fully Resume
L10:

The World Bank has said that the new wave of COVID-19pandemic, that has seen a variant of the virus, Omicron, ravaging the world, may lead to governments across the globe being tempted to shut down schools again.
HL11:

8.7. COVID-19Fourth Wave to Hit Likely in December, Says Lagos
L11:

The Lagos State Commissioner for Health, Prof Akin Abayomi, has raised the alarm that the fourth wave of the COVID-19pandemic may be imminent in Nigeria by December.

The verbs 'may,' 'likely' are conjectural and suggestive in character thereby conveying the meaning that are not explicitly expressed but presupposed to be known, and inferable from general socio-cultural knowledge. The statements are used to assume the truth of some proposition when such truth has not been established.

9. Theoretical Underpinning

The framework of this study is located in framing theory. This theory focuses on the way the content of a message is delivered by media and interpreted by receivers (Chung and Cho, 2013; Iyengar, 1991) in Sheldon, (2015). Framing theory helps to situate the perspective from which a speaker delivers his message on issues and how it influences the interpretation given to such issues by the audience. In other words, the speaker sets the narrative of discourse, and the direction of the audience's interpretation of issues transpires from how such issues are being framed by the speakers, (Okere & Olomojobi, 2019).

The theory is important because media define what current political issues or aspects are important; frames, therefore, influence public opinion. According to Bichard (2006), cited in Sheldon, P. (2015), the political arena is saturated with individuals who try to frame issues in their favor. Gross and Aolain (2014), cited in Okere and Olomojobi (2018), point out that whoever manages to control the framing of information, greatly influences, and can manipulate the interpretation and meaning that recipients of that information are likely to attach to it.

The adoption of this theory bothers on the fact of how the crafting (framing) of messages (in forms of headlines and leads) by the media plays a significant role in process by which the people (the audience) develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue and assign meaning to the issue or redirect their thinking about an issue.

10. Conclusion

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has remained a global crisis that has spread worldwide at a very alarming rate. Mass media plays a fundamental role in disseminating information, influences the public behavior which can curtail the spread of the pandemic. This study was an attempt to present some insight into the framing of news reports in Vanguard and The Punch Newspapers in Nigeria which showed that the way the media craft and presents their messages, especially during the COVID-19pandemic, has a long effect in ameliorating the challenges of the pandemic or aggravating it.

The study, as its main thrust, attempted to discourse analyse the headlines and leads of the newspapers using Van Dijk (2006) parameters: evidentiality, metaphor, lexicalization, presupposition and national glorification, and also, J. Austin's speech Acts concepts. Since, in every utterance, a person performs an act, such as - stating a fact, stating an opinion, confirming or denying something, making a prediction or a request, asking a question, issuing an order, giving a permission, giving a piece of advice, making an offer, making a promise, thanking somebody or condoling somebody, the media frame their messages to reflect any of these actions by different verbal items employed.

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