

## THE STYLISTIC STUDY OF THE HEADLINES OF COVID-19 REPORTS IN SELECTED NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines newspaper headlines captions of Covid-19 update. Thirty newspaper headlines sorted from three daily Nigerian newspapers published between June and December 2020 were chosen. The headlines were critically analyzed at two levels of linguistics analysis – graphological level and syntactical level. Halliday's functional stylistic theory was adopted for the analysis of the graphological, grammatical and other notable language features. The findings showed that journalists do not use full stop at the end of headlines and they use declarative sentences more than any other type of sentences.*

**Keywords:** Style, Stylistics, COVID-19, Newspaper, Headlines

### **Introduction**

Recently, researchers have worked a lot on newspaper headlines using different fields of study to analyze their data. Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska (2014) paid attention to the use of coercive metaphors in newspaper headlines; Ehineni (2014) examined the lexical and functional heads in Nigerian English newspaper headlines. Ehineni in (2015) also examined the syntactic features in Nigerian newspaper headlines. However, there has not been any study exclusively conducted on the stylistic features of Covid 19 updates in Nigerian newspaper.

This study focuses on the stylistic features of Covid 19 updates in selected Nigerian newspaper headlines.

### **Style**

Leech and Short (2007:10), see style “as the way in which language is used in a given context by a given person for a purpose.” *The New Webster’s Dictionary of English Language* defines style as “the distinguishing way in which something is done, said, written, made, executed, etc. The distinctive character of a particular school or type of music, painting, architecture or writing.” *To Webster’s Universal Dictionary & Thesaurus*, style is “the manner of writing, painting, composing music peculiar to an individual or group.” Leech (1969) opines that style can be viewed as foregrounded linguistic features that are characterized by deviation. He pointed that such deviations pronounce their presence and could be present across the various levels of linguistics, such as grammar, lexis, phonology, semantics and so on.

In line with the definitions above, it can be deduced that style reflects in all aspects of humans’ lives - dressing, religion, manner of speaking, food we eat and structure of houses. Style can be associated with individual, group, community or region. For this study, style is viewed as a unique feature of language used in the update of Covid-19 in newspaper headlines.

### **Covid-19**

The Federal Ministry of Health confirmed the first case of coronavirus in Lagos State, Nigeria on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2020. Coronavirus is a disease that originated in a food market in Wuhan, China in December, 2019. The virus is airborne because people contract it through air. The World Health Organization declared outbreak as a pandemic on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020.

Ever since, lots of countries went on total or partial lockdown. There was no movement of people from one country to another. There was a total lockdown in Nigeria as well in April 2020. Some states in Nigeria have actually locked down even before the Federal Ministry of Health suggested a lockdown.

### **Language of Newspaper Headlines**

Journalistic writing is the language that is common among journalists. This kind of writing is present in print media most especially the headlines. According to BBC (2003:2), the headline of any story can be described as “the short summary, which appears above stories or articles in a newspaper”. Most times, headlines are not written in full sentences. It is common to notice that the headlines of

news stories or articles are written with either nominal or verbal ellipses (Agu 2010:168). Omission is done by the journalists so that the headlines can be captivating. Headlines play unique roles in catching the readers' attention and interpretation of the facts contained in the story or article. The language of newspaper headlines is usually compressed. This made it difficult for many readers to comprehend them because they are often incomplete sentences.

The headlines of newspapers have basically been given two functions. The first is that it summarizes the article (story) in which it belongs or attached (Van Dijk 1988). This function is performed either by being an abstract of the full article or by highlighting the main points of the article or story (Bell 1991, Nir 1993). In connection with this function, Dor (2003) opines that headlines are structured to optimize the relevance of their stories for their readers.

The second function of the headlines is that they attract the attention of the readers and also provoke them to read the article (Bell 1991, Nir 1993). Research findings have revealed that readers realistically prefer headlines that are creative even if it makes the headline longer, more confusing or less informative (Ifantidou 2009). He further states that readers often value headlines for what they are, i.e. less informative and creative.

Newspaper headlines have their own linguistic elements. These include: lexical, structural and stylistic elements of the discourse of newspaper headlines. The headlines are thoroughly compressed, condensed and foregrounded in half-understood forms. The headlines are generated and maintained as a source of information about the society in which the papers are being circulated. They create new frontiers of meanings with complex ambiguities. The fractured language and unique vocabulary of English newspapers headlines challenge the understanding of what they represent. This is what Fairclough (1995:21) calls grammatical oddity. In dealing with newspaper headlines, readers are in charge of seeking out and translating meaning.

### **Scope of the study**

This study is limited to Covid-19 headlines published in Nigerian newspapers within year 2020 because Covid-19 shut down all countries in year 2020. Headlines from *The Punch*, *The Nation* and *The Guardian* newspapers are analyzed because these three papers can be regarded as national print media and not regional like others. The criteria for the selection of the headlines were the appearance of the word, "Covid-19" in the headlines. There are numerous updates published about Covid-19 in year 2020 but due to time constraints, this

study will focus on thirty selected headlines that are considered to be stylistically representative of others.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The aim of this study is to analyze thirty selected headlines about covid-19 from three Nigerian daily. The objective of this study is to investigate the graphological features of selected covid-19 headlines. This study will also indicate the dominant syntactic structure of the selected covid-19 headlines.

### **Methodology**

This research adopted the descriptive method. The researcher selected thirty covid-19 headlines using purposive sampling technique. The headlines were selected because they have notable graphological and structural features of stylistics.

### **Literature Review**

Newspaper headlines are tools that humans use to pass information across to other member of the society. Though they are usually printed in bold letters, their aims include grasping attention and passing information to a large number of people. According to Molek-Kozakowska (2014:23) headline has to perform multiple functions at once: introduce the issue covered in the news articles, generate audience interest in it and indicate the attitude of the newspaper's brand towards the issue covered. The impacts of headlines in influencing public opinions have made their study a compelling one to reveal their structures and socio-political significance.

Ehineni (2014) analyzed the lexical and functional heads in Nigerian newspaper headlines. According to the author, data for the study were collected from prominent Nigerian newspapers such as *The Punch*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *Vanguard* and *The Sun*. In order to achieve the objective of the study, the researcher used the x-bar theory of Generative Grammar to analyze the data. The findings revealed that both lexical and functional heads were projected in Nigerian newspaper headlines. He also noted that the type of sentences used in the selected headlines had more heads than phrasal headlines and that lexical heads had more projection than functional heads.

In a similar study, Ehineni also studied syntactic government in Nigerian newspaper headlines using the Generative Grammar approach in 2015. The data for the study were randomly selected from national newspapers, such as *The Punch*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *Vanguard* and *The Sun*. The study focused on head-

government, theta-government, lexical-government and antecedents-government. He noticed that all the forms noted above operate in Nigerian newspaper headlines. He noted that head-government and theta-government were not always visible at the S-structure of the headlines unlike at D-structure where it was very explicit. He also noted that lexical-government and antecedent-government operate in headlines when movement had taken place since they both dealt with government of a trace. Molek-Kozakowska (2014) studied the use of coercive metaphors in newspaper headlines using a cognitive-pragmatic approach. The data were samples of metaphors excerpted from a corpus of 400 most read headlines from *Daily Mail* website. The author adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis. The study found that coercive metaphors are used for the purposes of simplification, imaging, animalization, confrontation, (de) legitimization, emotionalization and dramatization.

### **Theoretical framework**

Crystal (2008:4) sees stylistics as the “branch of linguistics which the features of situational distinctive uses (varieties) of language that made by individuals and social groups in the use of their language”. It can be deduced that stylistics focuses on the style of language use. Crystal’s (2008) definition is not encompassing because such definition does not pay attention to the function of style which is very important. This deficiency is covered by Wales (2014:8) when he notes that “the aim of most stylistics is not only to describe the formal features of the text for their own sake but to show their functional significance for text interpretation, or to link the literary effect with the ‘linguistic cause’ where this is considered relevant”.

Lecerle (in Simpson, 2004:2) explained that in the end of the twentieth century, stylistics was moribund but at the beginning of the second century, this knowledge came back to life and was named modern stylistics. Even far from moribund, modern stylistics is positively flourishing. It has witnessed great acceptance from other sub-disciplines because stylistic methods are now enriched and enabled by theories of discourse, culture, and society.

Stylistics studies are based on the general assumption that in language systems, same information can be encoded using more than one linguistic form. The uniqueness and peculiarities in which newspaper headlines are encoded are of high interest to academic researchers. Stylistics can be applied to the understanding of literature and linguistics.

According to Simpson (2004:5), there are seven levels of language in linguistic that can be used for stylistic analysis. However, this study will only use three levels which are: graphological level, syntactical level and lexical choice.

### **Analysis of data:**

#### **Graphological Analysis**

Crystal and Davy (1969: 10) opine that graphology is “the analogous study of language’s writing system: punctuation and paragraph as well as spacing.” On the other hand, Wales (1989:213) describes graphology as “the writing system of a language as manifested in the hand writing and typography, and to other related features noted in the spelling and italicization”. Graphology involves examining the features of writing system such as capitalization, punctuation marks, boldening, colour and all other features that help to achieve effective communication.

#### **Punctuation Marks: Full stop (.)**

Sample 1: Senate urges FG to procure COVID-19 vaccines for Nigerians (The Guardian, Dec. 4, 2020)

In the headline above, full stop is not used. All the headlines selected for this study does not have full stop. The full stop was not used because the headlines are just a section of the news. It does not contain adequate information about the topic. Journalists do not use full stop because the headline does not mark the end of any sentence.

#### **Comma (,)**

Sample 2: COVID-19 vaccine: Nigerians risk global travel ban, Senate warns, NMA allays fears. (The Punch, Dec. 4, 2020)

In the headline above, two commas are used to express three different situations. The commas are used to put a temporary pause in the sentences and also to indicate that the three situations are linked to covid 19 vaccine and they are not separate. The function of comma in this sample is to maximize the use of space. Comma is also used to indicate reported speech in sample 23 and sample 9.

#### **Colon (:)**

Sample 3: COVID-19: Subsidise data for e-learning, school owners tell telcos  
(The Punch, Sept. 3, 2020)

In the headline, the colon is used to introduce comments that clarify the reported subject matter. The virus [covid-19] does not have any direct relationship with data or school owner but indirectly, covid-19 affected schools opening. Schools were shut down while children learn online from home. The colon was used to give voluminous information within a limited space.

### **Hyphen**

Sample 4: Six prospective corps members test positive for COVID-19 in Abia (The Guardian, Dec. 3, 2020)

Sample 5: Transport sector workers to get N4.9b COVID-19 support from FG (The Guardian, Dec. 1, 2020)

Hyphen is used in every sample that has the coinage 'covid-19' which stands for coronavirus disease'. The hyphen in between 'covid' and '19' is used to compound the word. Covid-19 is a disease that started in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The hyphen combines the name of the disease 'covid' and the year the disease became known.

### **Apostrophe (')**

Sample 6: COVID-19 has stretched Nigeria's health system, economy - NCDC DG, Iheakweazu (The Punch, Sept. 13, 2020)

Apostrophe is usually used to show possessions and sometimes omission of letters in English words. Apostrophe is used in the sample above to indicate possessions - health system and economy.

### **Question Mark (?)**

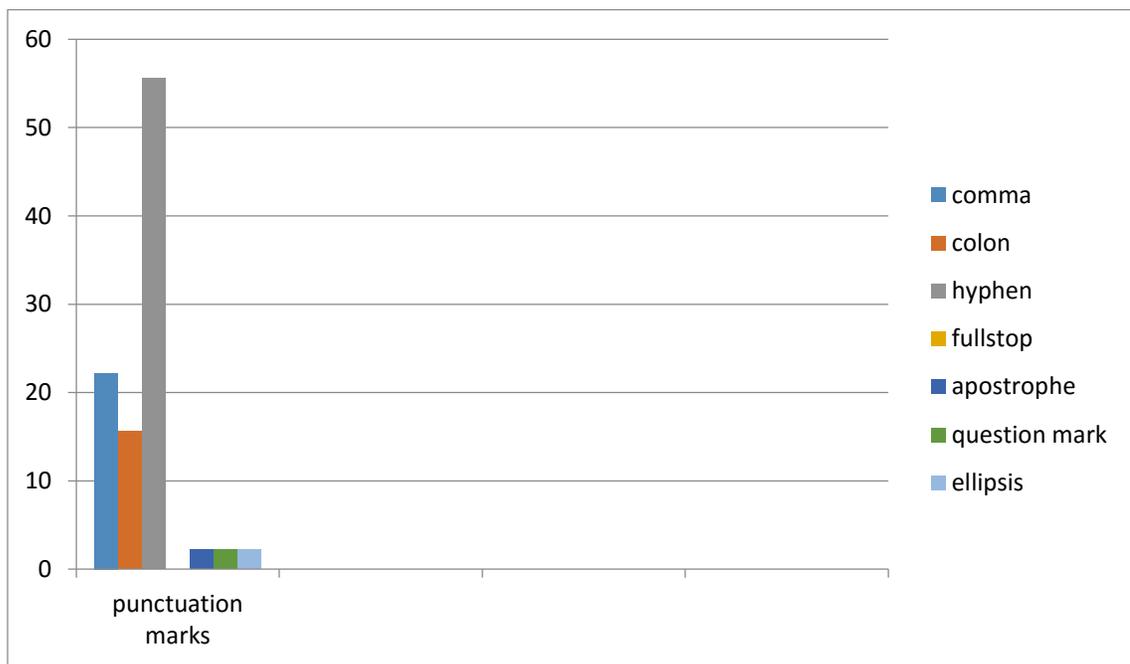
Sample 7: COVID-19: virtual marriages valid?

Question mark is used in the sample above for rhetorical question because virtual wedding is not necessary since the government has made guidelines for social gathering. Considering the superficial ways by which weddings are conducted, people opted for physical weddings with limited number of attendance than a virtual wedding where network always fluctuates.

Below is the tabular distribution of punctuations marks used in the data:

Punctuation marks	number	%
Comma	10	22.2
Colon	7	15.6

Hyphen	25	55.6
Full stop	-	-
Apostrophe	1	2.2
Question mark	1	2.2
Ellipsis	1	2.2
Total	45	100



From the graph above, it is observed that the hyphen is highly dominant in the headlines studied with 55.6%. It is dominant because the word 'covid-19' cannot be written without a hyphen. Comma is also significant because it has 22.2%. Colon is also significant because it has 15.6%. One important notice is that end markers are rarely used in headlines because there is no single full stop while question mark is only one. There isn't any exclamatory mark in the data. Leech and Short (2007:105) opines that 'graphological variations are minor and superficial part of style'. This study contradicts that opinion.

### The Use of Capitalization

Journalists use capital letters indiscriminately without abiding by the rules of English: only initial letters of proper nouns or initial letters of words beginning a sentence must be capitalized. In this study, it is observed that only the word

'covid-19' was capitalized anywhere in sentences - either at the beginning or end. The purpose of this capitalization is to lay emphasis on the word. Notable examples are:

Sample 8: COVID-19 has stretched Nigeria's health system, economy- NCDC DG, Iheakweazu (The Punch, Sept. 13, 2020)

Sample 9: Second wave of COVID-19 infections likely, PTF warns (The Nation, Oct. 13, 2020)

Sample 10: Remo... Ogun community 'immune' to COVID-19 (The Nation, Oct. 13, 2020)

### **Acronyms**

Acronyms which are always in the upper case are used in the headlines to maximize the use of space. Examples are:

Sample 11: LASG increases COVID-19 testing to 2,000 daily (The Punch, May 29, 2020)

Sample 12: NDDC shuts office, orders isolation as director dies of COVID-19 (The Punch, May 29, 2020)

Sample 13: CIIN restructures curriculum amid COVID-9 pandemic (The Punch, June 8, 2020)

Sample 14: 50% of Kano 979 strange deaths caused by coronavirus, says FG (The Punch, June 9, 2020)

Sample 15: NPFL clubs to pay N2.5m per game for COVID-19 tests (The Punch, June 6, 2020)

### **Use of Colour**

The predominant colour in all the headlines studied is black that is bold. It is used to draw the attention of the readers.

### **Grammatical Categories**

This section indicates the functions of the sentences that is dominant in the studied data.

Sample 16: LASG increases COVID-19 testing to 2,000 daily

Sample 17: CIIN restructures curriculum amid COVID-9 pandemic

Sample 18: Transport sector workers to get N4.9b COVID-19 support from FG

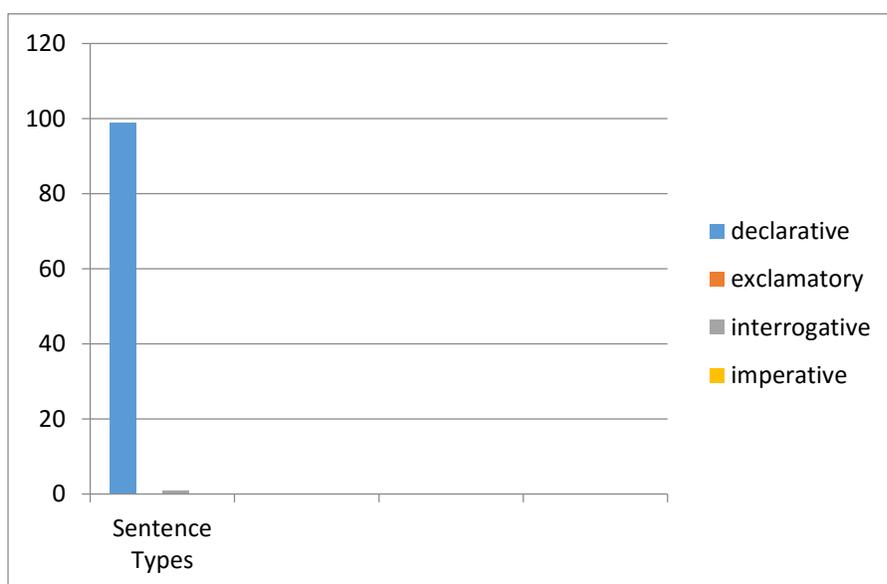
Sample 19: COVID-19 pandemic just beginning in Nigeria

Sample 20: Hospitals reject patients for fear of COVID-19

All the samples above are declarative sentences. It is important to note that declarative sentences are dominant in the data collected. Headlines are meant for giving readers hints about what the entire column is about. Journalists prefer declarative sentences since all they want to do is to tell the readers hints that are catchy to make them read the entire column.

### Sentence Type

Sentence Type	Number	%
Declarative	29	99
Exclamatory	-	-
Interrogative	1	1
Imperative	-	-
Total	30	100



The table above shows the type of sentence dominant in the data analyzed. Declarative sentences are 29 while interrogative is only one. There are no exclamatory or imperative sentences because newspapers' headlines are meant for quick information dissemination and not to give commands or ask questions. The table above shows that journalists use more of declaratives also known as

telling sentences since the major aim of headlines is to make readers have an idea of the events happening around.

Despite the fact that 29 declaratives sentences are used out of the 30 data analyzed, it is important to note that there is no single full stop at the end of any declarative sentence because the headlines are meant to pass information. The unavailability of the full stop does to affect the meaning of the headlines.

### **Sentence Structure**

This section indicates the kinds of sentence structure that is dominant in the studied data.

Sample 21: Hospital rejects patients for fear of COVID-19

Sample 22: six prospective corps members test positive for COVID-19 in Abia

Sample 23: LASG increases COVID-19 testing to 2,000 daily

Sample 24: NDDC shuts office, orders isolation as director dies of COVID-19

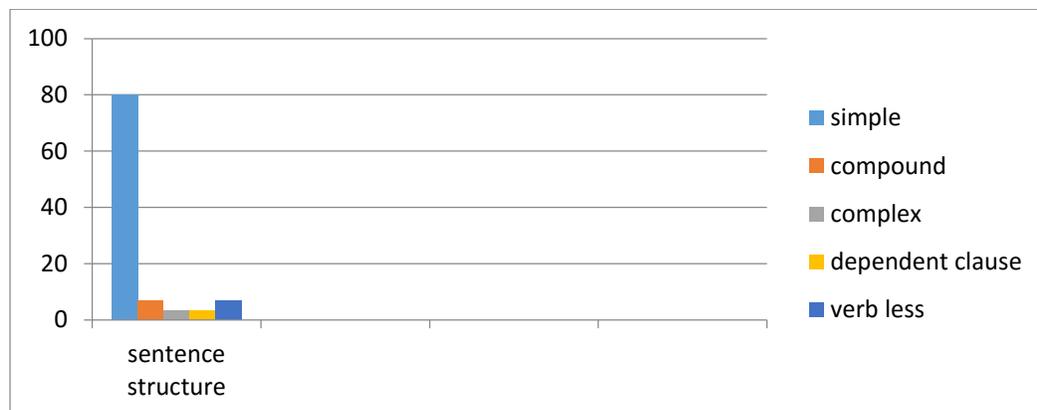
Sample 25: Crisis looms as COVID-19 cases outnumbered bed-spaces in states

Samples 21, 22 and 23 are simple sentences although they do not end with a period; they still pass singular complete messages across to the readers. Sample 24 is a compound sentence without the presence of any form of conjunction but the comma has been used to separate one message from the other. Sample 25 on the other hand is a complex sentence; it is made up of an independent clause '*crisis looms*' and a dependent clause '*as COVID-19 cases outnumbered bed-spaces in state*'.

Sentence Structure	Number	%
Simple	24	80
Compound	2	6.7
Complex	1	3.3
Dependent Clause	1	3.3
Verb less	2	6.7
Total	30	100

From the table above, it can be deduced that journalists use more of simple sentences in the studied data than any other sentence structure. This is because simple sentences are used to pass complete meaningful information across

without wasting too much space. Though, some units of the simple sentences are purposely omitted for space management and easy comprehension.



## Conclusion

This study was able to identify the graphological and grammatical features of headlines on COVID-19. At the graphological level, the use of punctuation marks, capitalization, colours and other features showed the effects of stylistics on them. At the grammatical level, the sentence type and structure were identified to reveal the kind of sentence that is dominant.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **The Guardian**

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020.  
December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020.  
December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

### **The Nation**

May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (2 items)  
June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (2 items)  
September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020

October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020

October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (2 items)

**The Punch**

May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (3 items)

June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (7 items)

June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 (5 items)

September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020

December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020.