

## SYNTACTIC DESCRIPTION OF SEPTEMBER 22, 2020 NEWSPAPER HEADLINES FROM NIGERIAN MAJOR NEWSPAPERS

*Chinelo Nwokolo*

*Directorate of General Studies, Federal University of Petroleum Resources, Effurun, Nigeria*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper describes the syntactic structures of newspaper headlines of September 22, 2020 from about seven Nigerian newspapers which include; the Nation, Leadership, Vanguard, Punch, This Day, Daily Trust and the Sun. The purpose of headline is to get the readers to read the item underneath, to attract the readers' eye and make them interested. The essence of this study is to bring to bear that headlines do not only attract readers to read the item underneath them but are structures worthy of syntactic examination. This paper therefore gathered about two hundred and thirty seven (237) newspaper headlines and randomly selected and analysed fifty six (56) headlines. The analysis is hinged on structural grammar as its theoretical framework. The study revealed that headlines as syntactic structures are grouped into sentential and non-sentential. The sentential group has headlines as sentences according to structure and function. The study discovered that the newspaper headlines demonstrate structural and functional sentences. Structurally, the headlines are made up of simple and compound sentences. The analysis showed that there is no unique structural pattern peculiar to a particular newspaper. It is also shown that compound sentences as headlines are structurally managed to enhance brevity by omitting conjunction and replacing same with comma. The tree diagram application of the headlines (sentences) demonstrated that despite the economical use of lexical items in newspaper headlines, the structures still contain elements that would be found in grammatical sentences.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Syntactic Description, Newspaper Headlines, Nigerian Major Newspapers*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Newspaper headlines are crafted for different reasons. The crafting is dependent on the journalist's competence in language use, thereby giving the reader(s) as much information as possible in the smallest space. As the headlines vary, so do the structures. Therefore, there is no universally acceptable structure of news headlines. As they vary from one language to the other, so do the differences from one journalist to another. Journalists craft headlines in different ways, the commonest according Ahmad (1974) is deletion. He further adds that most deleted constructions occur on the first page. To him, the more one gets into the inside pages, the more headlines tend to become lengthy and detailed. Nevertheless, this study is not restricted to the headlines of the first few pages.

It is obvious that the various newspaper and journalists differ as to the way they explore different syntactic devices. Though, they have some levels of similarities in headlines. It is on this note that this study is restricted to the headlines of Nigerian major newspapers.

A headline may be defined as the outline that begins a story of news in the opening and located above the article of a newspaper, magazine and other written news. It aims to attract the attention of the news. Generally, headlines are not long sentences. Schulz (2007) argues that headlines news language is a notice of what to suppose before reading a news story. Journalists or news writer like to do this because they want to grab attention from a news reader. The headlines have important role in attracting readers to buy a newspaper and read them. Newspaper readers usually get attracted and fascinated to read a newspaper when they look at the headlines.

Reah (1998) avers that “in order to make headlines attract the attention of the reader, headline writers may select words that carry particular strong connotation, that is, carry an emotional loading beyond their literal meaning.” Buttrressing the view of Reah, Napu (2018) concludes that the headlines writer or news writer tend to play with lexis which is called puns. Puns are frequently used by the news writer since they have important role in the newspaper because the heavies are more likely to conserve puns for news stories and headlines which are considered soft (Keeble, 2006 and Napu 2018). Again, Keeble holds that the language of news is tangible and non-abstract. In addition, Reah (1998) in her book said that headlines writer had developed a vocabulary that can fulfil the requirements of the headlines by using words which are short but still eye-catching. Words that are usually used in headlines are sometimes rarely used outside by people in common.

The goal of this study is to identify and discuss the syntactic structures of newspaper headlines, particularly, structures above the word level. It also classifies the sentential headlines into structure and function. The paper therefore dwells on examining the structures of newspaper headlines from Nigerian seven major newspapers which are; Nation, Leadership, Daily Trust, Vanguard, Punch, This Day and the Sun.

## CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

### Newspaper Headlines

The news means new information. The headline is a unique kind of written text. According to Papu (2018), headlines form a very important part of a newspaper. Headlines are often first thing the readers come across in newspapers. It is generally agreed that the headlines possess one of the striking features of modern day newspapers, and that journalistic language, in particular, headlines, has its own characteristics that can clearly be distinguished from the ordinary or everyday language. Hence, it has the capacity to encapsulate a story, and the headlines in a particular edition give the readers the overall picture of the current news (Reah, 1998). Sometimes, the space that a headline takes up is even larger than the item underneath it (Hildick, 1969). The purpose of a headline is to get the reader to read the item underneath, to attract the readers' eye and make them interested. Furthermore, headlines are the newspaper points that attract readers to read a story in a newspaper or other mass media. Schulz (2007) says that language of headlines news is a signpost for what to think before reading a story. The journalists usually do this in order to grab attention from readers.

Consequently, Papu (2018) upholds that newspaper headlines have very important role since headlines could attract readers to buy a newspaper. Usually, the readers will glance at the headlines to see whether or not it is worth reading before buying a newspaper. Often, headlines are displayed at public places such as at the train station, airport, and bus station and even at the red lights where drivers stop waiting for the green light. Therefore, headlines should be eye-catching, memorable and effective in attracting people to read them. Hence, newspaper headlines are almost usually written in short words which can be quickly understood by readers and also fitted in a small space on a newspaper. Newspaper headlines become more important on a newspaper since they represent and summarize the content of the whole

issue reported in a newspaper. According to Reah (1998), headline has a range of function that specifically dictates its shape, content, and structure, and it operates within a range of restrictions that limit the freedom of the writer.”

### Headlines Language

Considering the role of headlines in print media, they have a unique form and usually very short since they have limited space in the newspaper. Also, headlines select certain words which are ambiguous and rarely used in order to make it attractive to the readers Nwala and Umukoro (2017). Thus, headlines writer usually make headlines very short and fit it in a provided space. Reah (1998) in her book said that headlines writer had developed a vocabulary that can fulfil the requirements of the headlines by using words which are short but still eye-catching. Words that are usually used in headlines are sometimes rarely used outside by people in common. The headlines writer sometimes take some words that people know such as words from a movie, book titles or TV programs that make the headlines more attractive. Every culture will have a different range of familiar expression and phrases and sayings from books, TV, etc., i.e., English headlines might use a love book title which has the same story with the headlines to be written. Other headlines writer will also use the language based on where they live. Since the headlines have the main role in a story on a newspaper in order to attract people to read, the writer usually uses words that have literal or strong meaning. Moreover, to Reah (1998) says that, in order to make headlines attract the attention of the reader, headline writers may select words that carry particular strong connotation, that is, carry an emotional loading beyond their literal meaning.” This can be said that the headlines writer or news writer in general play with words and this is called puns. Puns are always used by the writer as they are very important in the newspaper and also the heavies are more likely to reserve puns for soft news stories and headlines (Keeble, 2006). Also, Keeble in his book states that news language is concrete and non-abstract.

### Syntax

A syntactic analysis is simply a grammatical examination of an aspect of language at the level of syntax. Such examination is usually carried out based on the rules of the grammar of the language involved. This emphasizes the importance of the rules governing the use of a language. These rules make up the grammar of a language. Grammar is simply a description of the rules governing the use of a language. It refers to a person’s knowledge (competence) and use of a language in written and spoken forms (performance). As an aspect of linguistics, grammar entails the set of structural rules that governs the composition and study of linguistic items like: words, phrases, clauses and sentences in a language. It involves the study of the rules of Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, Phonetics, Semantics and Pragmatics. Leech *et al* (2006) posit that one way of describing grammar is as a set of rules which allows us to put words together in certain ways, but not in other ways. They further put that at some levels, speakers of a language must know these rules otherwise they would not be able to put words together in a meaningful way. They further describe grammar as a generic way of referring to any aspect of English that people object to. This usually involves the aspects of English which are mostly relatively unfamiliar to everyday language, as such; most speakers tend to object to it because of its inconsistency in use. English grammar can be described as the analysis and study of the system and structure of the English language. This includes the structure of the English words, phrases, clauses and sentences. Tomori (1974), after an examination of four different meanings of grammar asserts that grammar is defined as the art of speaking and writing correctly. It implies that it is the knowledge of grammar that one has at the back of one’s mind when one refers to the utterance of the particular speaker as an example of poor grammar.

English grammar is primarily divided into morphology and syntax. Morphology is concerned with the study of the formation of words especially its internal structures while syntax is primarily concerned with the ways in which words are put together in phrases, clauses and sentences. The study of grammar can be descriptive or prescriptive. Descriptive grammar is the nature and systems of a language not necessarily considering how it is used while prescriptive grammar prescribes how a language should be used and how it should not be used.

Syntax is primarily the study of phrases, clauses and sentences in a language. It is the study of the principles and processes by which sentences are constructed in particular languages. The syntactic investigations of a given language has its goal as the construction of a grammar that can be viewed as a device of some sort for producing the sentences of the language it is concerned with (Chomsky 1957).

Radford (1997) opines that within traditional grammar, the syntax of a language is described in terms of taxonomy (i.e. the classificatory list) of the range of the different types of syntactic structures found in the language. He further puts that the central assumption underpinning syntactic analysis in traditional grammar is that phrases and sentences are built up of a series of constituents (i.e. syntactic units) each of which belongs to a specific grammatical category and serves a specific grammatical function. Given this assumption, the task of any grammatical analysis of the syntactic structure of any given type of sentence is to identify each of the constituents in the sentence, what category it belongs to and the function it serves. One of such syntactic units is the noun phrase. It is a syntactic term or unit which is a major part of a sentence.

Syntax is simply the study of phrases, clauses and sentences in a language. According to Chomsky (1957), it is the study of the principles and processes by which sentences are constructed in particular languages. The syntactic investigation of a given language has its goal as the construction of a grammar that can be viewed as a device of some sort for producing the sentences of the language it is concerned with. Yule (2006) defines syntax as the study of the structure and ordering of components within a sentence. Therefore, it can be deduced that the sentence and its constituents are the primary concern of syntax as such; a syntactic analysis is usually confined to the sentence level of every language. Koll and Funk (2009) view syntax as the structure of sentences, and the relationship of the parts of the sentences. From these definitions, it is noted that syntactic units as the constituents of sentences are the primary concern of every syntactic analysis in the study of a language.

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## EMPIRICAL STUDIES

The study of newspaper headlines about lexical feature was investigated by Chin which is observing the lexical items of Chinese news headlines compared to Hong Kong and Taiwan. He found that Chinese news headlines constitute an entirely different genre. The findings of his study of the Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwan headlines are in content words. The geographical names are dominant in. The distribution is a contrast to most contemporary Chinese writing. The comparison of the headlines from Hong Kong and Taiwan shows that they have critical differences in the distribution of the cultural compatibility. According to Chin, the differences among Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are due to their socio-cultural differences. In addition, he concluded that Hong Kong headlines are more outward looking compared to Taiwan because Taiwan news headlines are more domestically oriented.

Moreover, Khodabandeh (2007) in her study of headlines complexity between English and Persian found the similarities and differences. She analysed the variability of syntactical and lexical features and concluded that the headlines of English and Persian are similar in using dynamic verbs, active voice, short words, declarative sentences, finite clauses and simple sentences. The differences between English and Persian headlines are in the use of tense forms, headlines types, modification and words omission.

### **Clauses and Noun Phrase**

The complexity of headlines has also been investigated by Brisau (as cited in Khodabandeh: 2007). He investigated and measured the complexity of headlines. In terms of clauses, Brisau found 264 examples out of 3000 headlines which contained two or more clauses. He concluded that in headlines, more complex structure than two very simple clauses linked together rarely appeared. Also, it is clear that headlines use simple and limited words and make the meaning unclear as what Reah (1998) states that "...headlines are of limited use in giving a clear overview on the news of the day, or the relative importance of the items". Maestre (1998) also investigated the complexity of headlines in terms of the noun phrase in Times newspaper. She explored the complexity of the headlines as well as distinguished between noun phrase in nominal and verbal headlines types. She found that the differences between nominal and verbal headlines showed that how much complexity is responsive to a stylistic and situational aspect of the context of the situation.

Nwala and Umukoro (2017) in a work entitled, "Investigating the Meaning of Newspaper Headlines: The Issue of Ambiguity" investigated data collected from three Nigerian newspapers (Vanguard, Guardian and Punch) and qualitatively analysed them, identifying linguistic features which make the headlines ambiguous. The analyses revealed that newspaper headline is a type of in-house journalistic market strategy, which puts costumers on suspense with the sole aim of promoting readership and merchandise, and that interpretation of newspaper headlines should be hesitated until the entire text has been read. It is only through this that the exact operational and contextual interpretation of a headline can be precisely and accurately achieved.

This study differs from all previous studies carried out so far though they all used linguistic theories and newspaper headlines; the theory of this study and the headlines differ. This is significant as it studies structure of newspaper headlines of 22 September, 2020 from Nigerian major newspapers using structural grammar.

Structural Grammar also called structuralism refers to a descriptivist approach to grammar associated with the mid-twentieth century linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield. From the point of

view of the structuralism, all texts can be analysed for their underlying structures. According to Syal and Jindal (2013), the structural linguist attempts to describe language in terms of its structure, as it is used, and try to look for ‘irregularities’, and ‘patterns’ or ‘rules’ in language structure. In his own analysis, Bloomfield posited that language structure is associated with phoneme as the unit of phonology and morpheme as the unit of grammar. Therefore a linguist must be aware of the string of phonemes or morphemes that make up a sentence in order to study the structure of the sentence.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper uses the Nation, Leadership, Daily Trust, Vanguard, Punch, This Day and Sun newspapers headlines of September 22, 2020, as its data for this study. A total of two hundred and thirty seven (237) headlines were gathered from the seven newspaper and fifty six (56) headlines were randomly selected and analysed. The paper uses descriptive method of analysis thereby describing the structures of headlines in the selected headlines.

### Structural Analysis of Newspaper Headlines

#### Types of Headlines

The data for this study is grouped into sentential and non-sentential headlines. From about two hundred and thirty seven (237) headlines gathered from seven (7) Nigerian major newspapers, almost all are sentential headlines with about four (4) non-sentential headlines. For the sake of this study, the sentential and non-sentential headlines will be discussed with particular attention to phrasal headlines under non-sentential headlines. This paper identifies the types of sentences used in the headlines. Sentence types such as structural and functional sentences as headlines with a close examination of their structural patterns.

#### Sentential Headlines

This group of headlines are headlines with regular sentence structure, that is to say, the headlines have a subject and a finite verb. This type of headline is more than other types. The sentential headlines are mostly simple and compound sentences. Hence, we analyse the sentence based on the structure, components and functional types.

#### Simple Sentences as Headlines

Simple sentences are divided into subject and predicate. The subject of a sentence refers to the things or persons that the writer or speaker is talking about. The subject should be a noun or pronoun. What the writer or speaker says about a person or thing is called predicate. The following are the examples of headlines as simple sentences.

1. Fayose's elder sister, Ladeji | dies.  
S P
2. UK | James Ogunbiyi co-chair of UK Covid-19 data in nine states.  
S P
3. Governors, Obasanjo, senators, monarchs | mourn Emir of Zazzau.  
S P
4. Ex-defence minister | is Mali interim President.  
S P
5. Edo: losing | is a possibility.  
S P
6. No nation | can progress without engaging its best brains.  
S P
7. APC | congratulates Obaseki.  
S P
8. Nigeria | urged to explore Africa's £ 7tn GDP projection.  
S P
9. FG | sites hydropower station in Osun.  
S P
10. Fuel subsidy removal | all-timed.  
S P
11. Emirates | parleys Nigeria over ban.  
S P
12. FG | monitors 2017 FEC approved projects.  
S P

Figure 1



15. S

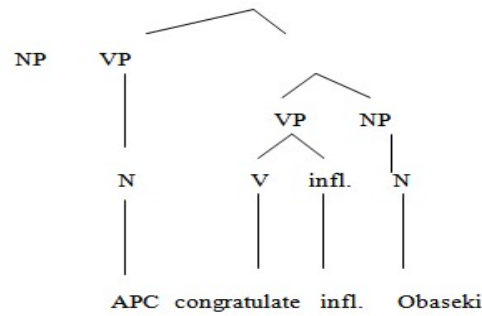


Figure 4

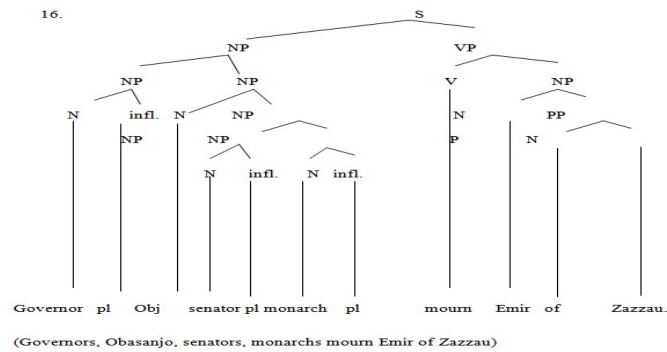


Figure 5

### Compound Sentences as Headlines

A compound sentence is that sentence that contains two independent clauses which are connected by a co-ordinating conjunction. This group of sentence reflects in the headlines of September 22, 2020 gathered. Below are some examples to buttress the claim:

17. Buhari |sues for peace in Kaduna, says let's live together.  
S P
18. Fuel scarcity |looms as NARTO embarks on warning strike.  
S P
19. Analysts |rule out interest rate cut, MPC decides today.  
S P
20. Ikpeazu |calls for vigilance as unknown attackers disarm security agents.  
S P
21. Obaseki |hails Edo electorate, promises to work for the people.  
S P
22. Three |killed, residents flee as soldiers allegedly raid Rivers communities.  
S P
23. Buratai |mourns as Boko Haram kills colonel.  
S P

Figure 6

Examples 17 to 23 are examples of compound sentences as newspaper headlines. As seen in some of the examples, the headlines as compound sentences are structurally managed such that instead of using a coordinating conjunction to connect the two clauses, comma is used instead. This is seen in examples; 17, 19 and 21. In the examples identified, the comma inserted plays the role the omitted coordinating conjunction. The essence of this is to manage the length of the headlines and to ensure brevity.





### Newspaper Headlines as Statement

- 34. APC shifts focus to Ondo as party concedes defeat in Edo. (positive)
- 35. ADC increases political enlightenment. (positive)
- 36. Uzodimma didn't reject Edo election results, says commissioner. (negative)
- 37. Okunbo congratulates Edo people, Obaseki. (positive)
- 38. Government has no business running refinery, says Osinbajo. (negative)

**Figure 9**

### Newspaper Headlines as Command

Headlines also function as command apart from being statements. The headlines as command seem to give orders to somebody to do something. The headlines as command do not usually have grammatical subjects and their verbs are in the imperative mood.

The following examples illustrate the above claim.

- 39. Don't let NDDC IMC run 2020 budget.
- 40. Shut power plants.
- 41. Halt medical workers' incessant strikes.
- 42. Reject violent politicians with your votes.

**Figure 10**

### Non-Sentential Headlines

This is another group of headlines in the Nigerian major newspapers under study. This group includes examples of headlines as clauses and phrases. There are no many examples under this group as few instances were identified in the data gathered. Therefore, we start with headlines as clauses.

### Headlines as Clauses

The following are examples of clausal headlines in the newspaper headlines of September 22, 2020 from Nigerian major newspapers.

- 43. What Obaseki victory means.
- 44. How I will lift people out of poverty.
- 45. Why FG is commercialising NFC.
- 46. Why we're regulating digital assets.
- 47. Why we embarked on Niger Bridge light up initiative.

**Figure 11**

All the examples of headlines under clause are dependent clauses. In order to manage space and enhance brevity, the headlines are crafted to bear the salient point(s). Therefore, the readers depend majorly on the news content for details needed. Being dependent clauses, the examples fall under noun clause and adverbial clauses. Consider the following examples:

48. What Obaseki victory mean. (Noun clause)
49. How I will lift people out of poverty. (Adverbial clause of manner)
50. Why FG is commercializing NFC. (Adverbial clause of reason)
51. Why we're regulating digital assets. (Adverbial clause of reason)
52. Why we embarked on the Niger Bridge light up initiative. (Adverbial clause of reason).

**Figure 12**

### **Headlines as Phrases**

A phrase is a group of words that lacks a finite or main verb, and which does not make a complete sense or meaning. Apart from examples under clause as headlines, we have some headlines as phrases. The phrases identified are all noun phrase functioning as subject. Being headlines, they occupy subject position without the verb they function as their subjects. The following examples demonstrate the above assertion.

53. Opening the tap of nation's water resources
54. Transactional politics and the future of democracy
55. Governance: the legislative perspective
56. Obasanjo/Soyinka's interventions

**Figure 13**

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

This paper groups the newspaper into sentential and non-sentential. The sentential group has headlines as sentences according to structure and function. The study discovered that the newspaper headlines of September 22, 2020 from the major Nigerian newspapers demonstrate structural and functional sentences. Structurally, the headlines are made up of simple and compound sentences. The analysis showed that there is no unique structural pattern peculiar to a particular newspaper. The analysis showed that the selected newspaper shared sentence structural patterns in the headlines gathered. It is also shown that compound sentences as headlines are structurally managed to enhance brevity by omitting conjunction and replacing same with comma and in the situation where conjunction is used, it is 'as' that is used throughout such instances. The tree diagram application of the headlines (sentences) demonstrated that despite the economical use of lexical items in newspaper headlines, the structures still contain elements that would be found in grammatical sentences. Some of the structures appear complex and others are simple.

Apart from the structural sentential headlines, the study revealed that some of the headlines perform some functions such as: statement and command. At the non-sentential level, we have some headlines gathered as clauses and others as phrases. Out of the two hundred and thirty seven headlines gathered, about five (5) of them are clauses. The five clauses are divided into one noun clause, one adverbial clause of manner and three adverbial clause of reason. We equally have four phrases as headlines out of the two hundred and thirty seven headlines.

## CONCLUSIONS

Language plays a pivotal role in communication. Despite that, its use varies from one profession to another. From the description of newspaper headlines, we have discovered a unique use of language in the print media, particularly in the crafting of headlines. The study drew its data from seven Nigerian major newspaper headlines of September 22, 2020. The newspapers are: The Nation, Leadership, Daily Trust, Vanguard, Punch, This Day, and the Sun. The paper identified two basic types of headlines according to structure. They are sentential and non-sentential headlines. The paper however concluded that the peculiar forms observed in the headlines structure are pointers to the uniqueness of language use in journalism.

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