

A Speech Act Analysis of Headline Captions in Selected Nigerian Dailies

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Abstract

In every discursive situation, discourse producers tend to give off their intentions represented as a force of action in their discourses, which invariably creates impacts on the discourse consumers. This study investigates the acts of locution, force of illocution and effects of perlocutionary acts in discourses. Gathering data from Nigerian dailies, this study focuses on exploring the headlines of certain Nigerian dailies. Using the pragmatic theory of J. L. Austin's (1962) as the theoretical framework for investigative analysis, fifty headlines were collected but twenty (20) headlines were sampled from ten (10) different newspaper headlines. The captions of the newspaper headlines that were sampled were in May, 2023. The study reveals that, illocutionary acts (force) of Expositives, Verdictives, Behabitives and Exercitives are used in different ways. The expositive acts are used more while the Exercitives is the least used. The perlocutionary effects of being informed dominates.

Keywords: Speech act, Nigerian Dailies, Headlines, Illocutionary force, Perlocutionary effects

1.0 Introduction

Across the globe, humans share and receive information. Language is the most available social tool that is employed in the acts of

sharing and receiving information. Information are conveyed through means like oral interaction, social media, print media, online media, and what have you. Currently, the media: television, radio, social media

sites, magazine and newspapers are mostly employed in disseminating information.

Media discourse is a type of discourse that revolves around the media, involving the media writers/presenters and the readers/audiences. The newspaper is an important media type that exist in both print and electronic forms thus it has wide range of users/readers. The language of the media is the focal point for discourse analysts and/or pragmaticians because it involves studying the language, a social behavior, and uncovering the details of information bordering it.

The media discourse is a growing field and has drawn the attention of many researchers to it, who contribute to the progressive trend of the field. Some scholars like Akinwotu (2013), Haucsa et. al (2020), Ilyas & Khushi (2012) have conducted research in media discourse studies. As a field in discourse, it has continued to grow and scholars have continued to do critical research around the media to contribute the trend of growth. The findings so far have contributed immensely to what people know in the discourse.

In order to contribute to the growing field of the media discourse, this paper investigates recent newspapers captions to unveil the intentions of writers (illocutionary force) in producing sentences (locutionary acts) and the impacts/ effects on the readers/audiences (perlocutionary effects). This study is paramount as no recent research has been done in this pragmatic perspective, using speech act theory, to investigating newspaper headlines.

2.0. Concepts Definition

2.1. Media Discourse

Discourses represents the settings of its use. Media discourse rotates around the media, newspaper, magazine, television, and radio. It involves the media writers/ presenters and the readers (audience); the media writers/presenters basically generate their contents from other spheres of the geographical setting such as politics, religion, education, agriculture, socio-cultural and what have you, whereas the readers/ audiences are those who read/ watch what's presented in media forms. The media is a popular platform wherein important information are disseminated among the people of a state/nation.

2.1. Performing Actions Through Words

Words/utterances are used in almost on daily. These utterances are merely not spoken for speaking sake, but beyond the level of the linguistic items strung together or words combined while obeying the grammatical rules of the language, the speech act theory proposes uncovering in-depth meaning that sentence(s) contain(s). This is why Igwedibia (2019) asserts that "speech act is far from being mere act of speaking or the act of communication through the spoken form only" (96). For Ezeifeke (2018), speech act refers "verbal actions happening in the world" (51) in that they are those utterances that are actions that have the capability of generating enormous results on the hearer. For her, "such acts can affect our whole lives, deny us or restore our freedom, make us to be committed to a course of action, urge us to carry out a piece of instruction or change an existing state of affairs (50). For Collavin (2011; 373), there are

“two main ideas that are at the core of speech act theory: the first holds that the meaning of an utterance is distinct from the function that the utterance performs (what we shall call the force of an utterance): the second is that all utterances amount to the execution of an act”

(Collavin, 2011: 373).

Speakers communicate more as well as perform actions through their utterances, that is to say that words show or perform actions. Yule (2010) submits that speech acts are “actions performed by a speaker with an utterance” (133) He further stressed that such actions performed by utterances include: “requesting”, “commanding”, “questioning” or “informing”.

Syntactic structures, interrogative, imperative and declarative, instantiated in the following sentences as “Did you eat the cake?”, “Give me the money!” and “You took the money” respectively, perform grammatical functions of questioning, commanding/requesting and informing respectively.

J. L. Austin proposes three types of speech acts namely locutionary act (the act of saying something; at the linguistic level: segmental and supra-segmental levels. Syntactic and semantic levels), illocutionary act (force of actions in words) and perlocutionary act (effects the speakers’ utterance has). Locutionary force simply refers to the act of saying meaningful by a speaker. In Austin’s words, performing locutionary act is saying something in “the full normal sense” (1962:94). The locutionary act has three sub acts namely phonic act, phatic act and rhetic act which matches with verbal (phones; phonetic aspect), syntactic structures and semantic features respectively. locutionary

acts are certain sounds that are produced that comprise identifiable words, arranged on the basis of a particular grammar and has a certain sense and reference (Holtgraves, 2006). The force of locution consists of the conventional meaning attached to an utterance/sentence, which engenders different illocutionary forces.

The illocutionary is the action that one performs in what one says; the “force” an utterance has which underlies what the intentions of the speaker at the time of speaking. Such that the force/intention of a speaker’s utterance could be that of command, request promise, warning, ordering and so on). Austin’s illocutionary acts are five in number: verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives and expositives, which he says are what a speaker/an addresser can perform or do in making an utterance. According to Oishi (2006:4), for Austin, these are actions one can perform, generally, in making an utterance/a sentence:

“one can exercise judgement (verdictives), exercise influence or exercise power (exercitives), assume obligation or declare intentions (commissive), adopt attitude or express feeling (behabitives), and clarify reasons, argument, or communication (expositives)”.

The perlocutionary is the impact of the illocutionary force of an utterance of a speaker on his/her addressee. For Holtgraves (2002), perlocutionary act is the effects the utterance has on the hearer. Illocutionary force of an utterance could have such effects (perlocutionary effects on the hearer) as persuaded, surprised, misled/convinced, scared, enlightened, inspired and so on the hearer.

3.0. Empirical Studies

The concept of speech act has been studied by various scholars since its inception. Some of them are:

Akinwotu (2013) investigated the role of language in and interpretation of intentions in political speeches using the five categories of speech act according to Searle and the study revealed that the acceptance of nomination speeches is marked by illocutionary act which are used as persuasion. According to him assertive acts are at 27.3%, commissive acts at 22.70%, expressive at 22.70%, directives at 18.2% and declarative at 9.1%.

Ilyas and Khushi (2012) investigated updates of Facebook statuses to unravel their communicative functions using Searle's speech act theory. The study revealed that status messages were most frequently constructed with expressive acts, followed by assertive acts and directive acts.

Abba and Musa (2015) investigated newspaper headlines reports on Boko Haram attack in Daily Trust and The Nations Newspapers to uncover the predominant speech acts types used and their implication to language use. Using J. R. Searle's theory, the findings reveal that assertive speech act is predominant for both and the reports are not to threaten, frighten or advise as those are the wrong notions and the ideological positions of the papers are not presented.

Aboh and Agbedo (2020) analysed the locutionary, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects of Buhari's statements a) "jailing of more thieves", b) "rule of law should be subjected to national interest" and c) "being fair in federal appointments". Deploying Austin's speech act theory, the researchers discovered locutionary acts,

illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects such as threatened are identified in the statements and the statements floured Austinian's Felicity conditions for utterances.

Basra and Thooyibah (2017) examined speech acts predominantly used by an EFL teacher in the classroom, reasons for choice of such acts and the impacts towards the process of teaching and learning. Using Searle's theory, the study revealed the frequency of speech act use as 70% for directives, representatives 21%, expressives 6%, and commissive 3%. It showed that EFL teachers mostly use directive speech act because of the principle of Communicative Language Teaching adopted and the usage is channelled towards improvement of students' productive skills.

Again, Nwaoke and Uzoagba (2021) studied Nigerian national dailies about Nigerians and Nigerian leaders. Using Austin's (1962) and Searle's (1968) speech act theories, the researchers discovered that Nigerian political leaders are power-drunk and are willing to do anything to come in and retain power. It also showed that assertive act is mostly used whereas declarative is the least. The perlocutionary effects ranges from frightened, anxious, threatened, prejudiced etc.

4.0. Theoretical Framework

This study uses J.L. Austin's speech act theory. The J.L. Austin's speech act theoretical framework emphasizes on the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts to uncover the forces of illocutionary force of utterances as depicted in newspaper headlines and the supposed effects of such acts on the addressees. Illocutionary acts represent the intentions of a speaker in

making an utterance. The force could be to persuade, inform, educate/enlighten, embarrass etc. a hearer. Whereas perlocutionary act refers to the effect/consequences of the illocutionary force of the speaker's utterance on the hearer(s), a hearer could feel inspired, embarrassed, educated/enlightened, informed and so on.

In summary, Ambroise (2010) reiterates the three things one performs in any utterance/sentence according to J.L. Austin: "one makes a locution in using a sentence to mean something in a certain context. One makes an illocution in using a sentence to alter (in a kind of legal way) the state of affairs. One makes perlocution in using a sentence to affect the audience" (Ambroise, 2010: 3).

5.0. Methodology

This study employs qualitative analysis wherein the utterance/data are collected and analyzed to uncover the force of illocution and perlocutionary effects of the newspaper headlines captions. Fifty (50) headlines are collected but twenty (20) headlines are sampled from ten (10) different newspaper headlines. Each of the newspaper has two different headlines. The duration of headlines sampled is in May 2023.

6.0. The Data

Below are the data excerpts for analysis in this study:

Excerpt A: Ahead of inauguration, Naira falls to 760/\$ (Friday, 19th May, 2023: Daily Trust Newspaper)

Excerpt B: 6 top sectors awaiting Tinubu's 'magic wand' (Monday, 22nd May, 2023: Daily Trust Newspaper)

Excerpt C: Matawalle under probe for N70bn fraud – EFCC (Friday, 19th May 2023: Blueprint Newspaper)

Excerpt D: This Dayolasubomi Balogun, Doyen of Modern Banking dies at 89 (Saturday, 20th May, 2023: Blueprint Newspaper)

Excerpt E: EFCC chairman demanded \$2m bribe from me" – Matawalle (Saturday, 20th May 2023: Liberty Newspaper)

Excerpt F: Tinubu returns to Nigeria 8 days to presidential inauguration (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: Liberty Newspaper)

Excerpt G: Atiku tells court: INEC is fighting proxy war for Tinubu (Saturday, 20th May 2023, Tribune Newspaper)

Excerpt H: Atiku, Obi line up 150 witnesses against Tinubu (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: Tribune Newspaper)

Excerpt I: Insecurity: 63,111 killed in Buhari's 8 years (Saturday, 20th May, 2023: Vanguard Newspaper)

Excerpt J: Manufacturers in dire straits as unsold goods hit N470bn (Monday, 22nd May, 2023: Vanguard Newspaper).

Excerpt K: Ganduje protests Tinubu, Kwankwaso's Paris meeting (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: The Daily Times Newspaper).

Excerpt L: Board, management bicker over N1,4tr unapproved spending (Monday, 22nd May, 2023; The Daily Times Newspaper)

Excerpt M: Activists finger state security, political gladiators (Saturday, 20th May, 2023: Independent Newspaper)

Excerpt N: Analysts divided over independent candidate bill (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: Independent Newspaper)

Excerpt O: Outgoing senators, reps, aides to get N30.2b severance allowances (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: The Nations Newspaper)

Excerpt P: Shettima: Tinubu will run an all-inclusive administration (Monday, 22nd May, 2023: The Nations Newspaper)

Excerpt Q: Buhari, Sanwo-Olu, Abiodun, others, eulogise business mogul, Balogun (Saturday, 20th may, 2023: The Guardian Newspaper)

Excerpt R: Electricity under Buhari: over \$7.5b spent on transmission, yet darkness persists (Sunday, 21st may, 2023; The Guardian Newspaper)

Excerpt S: How we survived Buhari's eight years: Nigerians tell own stories (Sunday, 21st may, 2023: Business Day Newspaper)

Excerpt T: World's toughest job awaits Tinubu (Monday, 22nd May, 2023: Business Day Newspaper)

7.0. The Analysis

The focus of analysis would be investigating the illocutionary force (illocutionary act) and the supposed perlocutionary effects of the illocutionary force, given that all the data excerpts presented made sense and has reference, as such contains both a phone (phonetic act), a pHEME (phatic act) and a rHEME (rhetic act).

Excerpt A: Ahead of inauguration, Naira falls to 760/\$ (Friday, 19th May, 2023: Daily Trust Newspaper)

Here, the intention of the addresser is to alert to every one of the drop in naira as dollar increases, before the inauguration of the new president-elect. This is achieved using the expositive act illocutionary act. The illocutionary force is that of informing the

public about the change in exchange rates of dollar and naira and to be fore warned. On the aspect of the effect such information could have on the addressees, one could say that such information could make the addressees feel bad, displeased and annoyed in the sense that things are only but getting tougher and harder and living increasing growing difficult. The effect of this also, is to expect increase in the prices of goods and services. Thus, the perlocutionary effect of this is that of displeasure, sadness and anger.

Excerpt B: 6 top sectors awaiting Tinubu's 'magic wand' (Monday, 22nd May, 2023: Daily Trust Newspaper)

In this excerpt, the discourse addresser passed judgement in that the target/subject of the discourse will have a lot of work to do in the top six (6) sectors of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which he is required to transform magically using his "magic wand". The illocutionary act of verdictive sets the illocutionary force of warning and information on the subject. On the other hand, the effect of the illocutionary force could be that of being informed and about what to expect that will happen. Thus, this discourse passes the perlocutionary effect of being informed.

Excerpt C: Matawalle under probe for N70bn fraud – EFCC (Friday, 19th may 2023: Blueprint Newspaper)

The discourse producers showed the exertion of power/control of a powerful body over a less powerful one. Thus, the illocutionary act of exercitive is exemplified here. The EFCC is probing Matawalle over fraud of a certain amount. The illocutionary force of this is that of informing, and warning. The target is to be informed of the latest development and action of the EFCC. Again, this also warns

people and creates fear in them that the EFCC can get on anybody, thus, inspired to avoid from engaging in illegal actions.

Excerpt D: This Dayolasubomi Balogun, Doyen of Modern Banking dies at 89 (Saturday, 20th may, 2023: Blueprint Newspaper)

The discourse has the illocutionary act of expositive, wherein information about the death of the subject of the discourse is communicated to the general public. The force of the discourse is to disseminate the demise of the “doyen of modern banking” to all, thus the illocutionary force of informing manifests here. However, the effect of this information could bring sadness and displeasure over the loss of a life. Notwithstanding that some may have mixed feelings (joy/sadness) or either.

Excerpt E: EFCC chairman demanded \$2m bribe from me” – Matawalle (Saturday, 20th May 2023: Liberty Newspaper)

Here, the discourse producer presents the statement of Matawalle, who claims that the chairman of EFCC demanded a certain sum as bribe from him, perhaps for some reasons best known between the two subjects. The statement of Matawalle falls under the expositive act of illocutionary act, which has the intention to argue or clarify reasons. The illocutionary force is to inform the public that the act of bribery was initiated by the EFCC chairman by his/her request for it. the perlocutionary effect could be that of scorn or displeasure with the EFCC chairman for doing such act, if that is true, in all ramifications.

Excerpt F: Tinubu returns to Nigeria 8 days to presidential inauguration (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: Liberty Newspaper)

The discourse above communicates to the public of development as days to the inauguration of the president-elect of Nigeria draws near. The expositive act of illocution, as used here, has the force of keeping the readers informed about the recent happening. It is said that the president-elect, Mr. Tinubu, left the country for medical treatment immediately after the presidential election ended and results announced, leaving Nigerians worried and left without a leader, like a sheep without a shepherd. The perlocutionary effect of this utterance could be said to be one that informed the public and put them in the know.

Excerpt G: Atiku tells court: INEC is fighting proxy war for Tinubu (Saturday, 20th may 2023, Tribune Newspaper)

Here, the subject of the discourse presented makes a judgment over the fight INEC engages for Tinubu, which he describes as “proxy war”. The statement of the speaker, which goes in line with the verdictive act of illocution, could be said to have the intention of undermining the fight of the INEC for Tinubu and the perlocutionary effect of making such statement could cause the target to be angered/provoked.

Excerpt H: Atiku, Obi line up 150 witnesses against Tinubu (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: Tribune Newspaper)

The discourse producer here communicates what the other presidential candidates, Mr. Atiku and Mr. Obi did in their legal fight against Mr. Tinubu. This is an expositive act of illocution which bears the force of informing the public and keeping them

updated. On the aspect of the aspect of the effect such utterance could have on the readers/audience is that of being informed/updated.

Excerpt I: Insecurity: 63,111 killed in Buhari's 8 years (Saturday, 20th May, 2023: Vanguard Newspaper)

In this excerpt above, the discourse producer communicates the rate of death of humans during the eight years' tenure of the emeritus president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, which is at sixty-three thousand, one hundred and eleven (63,111) deaths. The expositive act informs the general public. The supposed effect this utterance could have on the public could be that of sadness over the high rate of death recorded and also create fear of uncertainty of what could be with the arrival of the next government.

Excerpt J: Manufacturers in dire straits as unsold goods hit N470bn (Monday, 22nd May, 2023: Vanguard Newspaper).

Here, the discourse exposes the situation of some manufacturers and their businesses, which is described as a very difficult one. The situation is that the amount of goods that are not sold yet is at forty-seven billion naira. The utterance, through the expositive act of illocution, conveys the intention of informing the public about the difficulty a few producers face in their business. However, the effect is such on the readers could cause a feeling of sadness and be empathetic towards the ugly situation of the manufacturers in question.

Excerpt K: Ganduje protests Tinubu, Kwankwaso's Paris meeting (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: The Daily Times Newspaper).

The discourse producer communicates what Ganduje's disposition is towards Tinubu and

Kwankwaso's Paris meeting is which is described as protest. Through this, the producer of discourse puts the general public in the know by informing them. This act falls under expositive act of illocution which communicates information. The perlocutionary consequence of this is to keep the audience informed.

Excerpt L: Board, management bicker over N1.4tr unapproved spending (Monday, 22nd May, 2023; The Daily Times Newspaper)

Here, the discourse here presents the sad feelings of the board and management which make them to "bicker" over the unapproved N1.4tr for spending. The behabitive act of illocutionary act could have the intent of keeping the audience informed. The effect could be that of perlocutionary effect of informed; the readers'/ target audience could be empathetic out of concern.

Excerpt M: Activists finger state security, political gladiators (Saturday, 20th May, 2023: Independent Newspaper)

The discourse producer, here, communicates information about what activists does with respect to security. The illocutionary force of this expositive (illocutionary) act could be said to be that of disseminating information or informing people to keep them updated on happenings. The perlocutionary effect of this utterance on their supposed readers/addressees could be that of staying informed having received new information.

Excerpt N: Analysts divided over independent candidate bill (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: Independent Newspaper)

Here, the discourse producer presents information about the division over independent candidate bill observed among

the analysts. Here, the intention of the producer for the utterance is that to clarify reasons for the display of attitude amongst the said analysts. Clarification of reasons is a component in meaning of the expositive act of illocution. However, the effect of this information as in the utterance could be that of displeasure over the division amongst the analysts. Thus, the perlocutionary effect of being displeased

Excerpt O: Outgoing senators, reps, aides to get N30.2b severance allowances (Sunday, 21st May, 2023: The Nations Newspaper)

Here, the expositive act of illocution is shown here. The discourse producer announces that outgoing senators, representatives and aides are to get a certain amount as severance allowances. The intention of this information is to create happiness and joy in the target, while the perlocutionary effect it would have on the target objects is to be happy and joyous. In others, asides the target object, confusion could set in as to the reason why such amount could be disbursed to them, thereby making them worried.

Excerpt P: Shettima: Tinubu will run an all-inclusive administration (Monday, 22nd May, 2023: The Nations Newspaper)

The verdictive act of the illocutionary act is manifested here through the utterance in excerpt P. the discourse producer presents a subject who makes judgement over the type of government the 2023 president-elect of Nigeria would do, “an all-inclusive administration”. The intention of subject could be said to be to convince the general public that the new government would be better than the (immediate) pasts. The addressees of this utterance could be convinced, but the act of staying convinced

has to do with seeing actions that make one not to have doubts about something. Again, they could also to be anxious, and expect to see the manifestation of the “all-inclusive administration”.

Excerpt Q: Buhari, Sanwo-Olu, Abiodun, others, eulogise business mogul, Balogun (Saturday, 20th may, 2023: The Guardian Newspaper)

The behabitive act of the illocutionary act is seen in this excerpt. As seen, the former president of Nigeria, Buhari and Sanwo-Olu, Abiodun, and others eulogize Balogun. This way they express their feeling of excitement towards the business mogul. The intention of this could be to please or show concern. On the other hand, the target could feel pleased, happy or excited over the recognition.

Excerpt R: Electricity under Buhari: over \$7.5b spent on transmission, yet darkness persists (Sunday, 21st may, 2023; The Guardian Newspaper)

Here, the tone of disappointment could be observed in this utterance. The discourse producer, lamenting over the exorbitant amount spent on electricity in the former president of Nigeria, Buhari but there has not be any change as “darkness persists”. This is achieved through the expositive act of illocution. Again, the addresser is also trying to question what it is really that the sum is spent on. However, the object of the discourse, Buhari, would feel embarrassed over this; the addressees would feel angry that such amount was spent on electricity, yet darkness still prevails.

Excerpt S: How we survived Buhari's eight years: Nigerians tell own stories (Sunday, 21st may, 2023: Business Day Newspaper)

The expositive act of illocutionary act manifested here, has the intention to expose or explain the stories behind the survival of Nigerians during the eight years' regime of the former president of Nigeria, Buhari. The effect of the utterance could be to keep the addressees informed about the stories of the people of Nigeria.

Excerpt T: World's toughest job awaits Tinubu (Monday, 22nd May, 2023: Business Day Newspaper)

Here, the discourse producer passes on judgement over the type of task that awaits Tinubu as president. An instantiation of verdictive act of illocution. In the words of the discourse maker, the task that waits for Tinubu is described as "world's toughest", which means that it is overly a very huge task. The intention could be said to warn the subject about it and propel him to stay more prepared as to face it head on. On the aspect of the perlocutionary effect, the addressees could be at alert and watchful to behold how the task could be tackled by Tinubu.

8.0. Discussion of Findings

From the foregoing, it could be that four types of illocutionary act are used in the data excerpts. The expositive act is maximally employed as a way to give or communicate information, clarify reasons or make arguments, and in this case, it is mostly used for clarifications and communication. This act, which accumulated to being used thirteen (13) times, are exemplified in excerpts A, D, E, F, H, I, J, K, M, N, O, R, and S. This act is followed by the verdictive act of illocution, which is occurred four times as seen in excerpts B, G, P and T. The behabitive act of illocution is employed at a very minimal rate in these excerpts, which occurred twice (2 times) in excerpts L and Q, while the

exercitive acts are the least used; employed only once in excerpt C. The predominant intention of the discourse producers, as with media producers, is to disseminate information (informing). In doing this, the producers tend to investigate (elicit responses), question and interrogate, say the subjects of their utterances. On the aspect of the perlocutionary impact of the [il]locutionary act, from the analysis, the addressees, are mostly being informed in all, in addition to being displeased, sad, angry, joyous, empathetic, worried and embarrassed.

9.0. Conclusion and Recommendation

Having analyzed these data excerpts above, it could be said that the newspaper headline captions perform actions their linguistic items that are strung together to make correct structures which have supposed or intended impacts that it has on the audiences where information are disseminated to reach the people. These impacts on the intended readers or addressees could be related to the intention for the captions produced (illocutionary force). Sometimes, media language is doctored; not presented as where the information is originated from. Thus, it could generate misrepresentation and resultant misinterpretation. It is important that in news production, information is rightly placed to enhance conveyance of accurate message to the target audiences/readers.

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