

News Headlines as Pragmatic Strategy in Nigerian Press Discourse

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Abstract

This paper shows that headlines are discourse units that are analyzable as independent texts. They are functional parts of news stories that are pragmatically encoded to underscore some special kinds of social meaning other than mere encapsulation of the body of news stories. As pragmatically relevant discourse type, headlines and their overlines are interpreted in terms of their relationship to information in the social context. Previous studies on the language of the mass media identified some stylistic features of news reporting that are ideologically influenced by some peculiar perceptions or bias. (Adesanoye, 1974; Freeborn et al, 1986; Bell 1991). The present study applies the Speech act theory to show that headlines do indeed perform acts in the way they attempt to mediate the Nigerian socio-political experiences. News headlines are viewed as performing illocutionary functions as socially oriented discourse and are a critical strategy employed by journalists to denounce social malaise.

Key words: headlines, overlines, acts, illocutionary, crises

Introduction

This study investigates how social crises and political scandals in Nigeria are constructed in the news headlines of the Nigerian press and how the illocutionary functions of these news headlines translate to social criticism. The "Nigerian Press" under study refers to *Tell*, *The News* and *Newswatch* magazines, three most widely read weekly news magazines in Nigeria. All three magazines are privately owned, with little or no government control. Most Nigerian magazines and newspapers except *Daily Times* are owned by private organizations and are read by the average Nigerian. The *Tell* magazine for example is also known as "the people's parliament" because of its anti-military government position during the 1993 controversial general elections in Nigeria. My choice of these three magazines is in view of their relevance to the Nigerian media industry, and their prominence in the history of the Nigerian socio-political development. The three news magazines had at different times challenged injustice and human right violations during the military era and were constantly at loggerheads with the military dictators. *Newswatch's* antagonism against the military administration in the late 1980's which was characteristic of liberal democracies outside of Africa was viewed as too confrontational by the magazine's critics and feared that its style of reporting and the kind of support it enjoyed from the general public in a regime that did not tolerate public opinion was dangerous. Not long, the magazine's editor-in-chief was murdered with a letter bomb on the morning of 19th October, 1986. Six months later, the Babangida administration banned the magazine for publishing a report on the then political bureau. Many of the editors were detained and the offending edition of the magazine was seized by security agents.

Tell established in 1991, practised in the tradition of *Newswatch* and rose to prominence with the annulment of the June 12th 1993 general elections in Nigeria. Encouraged by its readers, the magazine was constantly at loggerheads with the military government. Again, security agents would seize thousands of copies of editions of the magazine, while several of its reporters were arrested and jailed.

The News magazine - the youngest of the three news magazines was also persecuted by the military government. For instance, one of its prominent editors was arrested and imprisoned by the Abacha government in 1997 for publishing a report that criticized the military administration. *The News* was

also at the centre of the crisis involving the first Speaker of the Nigerian House of Representatives of the Obasanjo government of 1999 when it published its findings revealing that the lawmaker swore to a false age declaration and paraded a forged university degree. This led to the removal of the Speaker and subsequently threatened the entire political structure. Thus, these most authoritative news magazines have remained very active in the Nigerian socio-political system.

Socio-Political and Economic Context of Study

The period of this study (1996 and 2002) covers both the military and civil governments in Nigeria, and significant being a period often considered as the most difficult in the history of the Nigerian socio-political development. It witnessed the height of military dictatorship in Nigeria, and the tensions associated with the transition to democratic rule. During this period Nigeria witnessed incessant civil strife, social and economic crises, religious clashes and inter-ethnic wars. Nigeria's economy was ruined and her wealth was ostensibly stolen and stacked away in foreign banks. With annual budget perpetually run on a deficit, Nigeria's foreign debts were over N30 billion (in 1999). With a population of over 102 million and a Gross National Product (GNP) at \$280 per capita many Nigerian families lived on less than US\$1 a day. The political class suffered in the crisis years that followed. Many Nigerians lost their lives in the height of military dictatorship. Some narrowly escaped assassination, while some who were in opposition to military dictatorship were jailed with or without trial; many died in detention.

In May 1999 when Olusegun Obasanjo came to power, the government was running on a budget deficit of N256 billion (or 8% of the GDP). The rate of inflation was 9% and consistently rose to 19% in 2002. In the World Bank's (2000) list of world's poorest nations, Nigeria occupies the 13th position out of 133 nations with a per capita average income of \$2600 per year. This figure further decreases by 1.0% yearly. Nigeria ranked 152nd out of 175 countries with life expectancy in 1999 at 51.5 years and only about 50% of the people had access to safe portable water. Per capita income for Nigerian was stagnant and grew only by 2.2% between 1999 and 2003, which was insufficient from the 4.2% per capita growth needed to reduce poverty (*National Planning Commission, 2004*). The economy has in fact remained stagnant with unemployment still on the increase and surprisingly, the civil administration witnessed more social crises, scandals and political assassinations than its predecessors. The accusations of corruption against the civil government have been significantly similar to the allegations against military governments despite the government efforts to reduce corruption. The spate of social insecurity in the nation following recurrent cases of armed robbery, planned assassinations and police inefficiency has at several times attracted the attention of the international community. This paper attempts to investigate:

- (i) How social crisis and political scandals are constructed in the news headlines of the Nigerian press between 1996 and 2002;
- (ii) How news headlines represent the Nigerian politics and socio-cultural experience; and
- (iii) What speech acts/illocutionary functions of the news headlines under study.

News Headlines

"News" refers to stories or information about social events "that are of interest to a sufficiently large group, or that may affect the lives of a sufficiently large group" (Reah 1998:4). It is however influenced by the ideological orientation of the individual journalist or the media organization the journalist represents. News is actually a product of journalistic process, an end result of a "systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories" (Fowler, 1991:12).

A news headline is the title of news story that summaries the entire story. The main headline is usually on the front page of a magazine or newspaper. Usually printed in bold letters, headlines summarize the main points of the story. They occupy more space than the texts they refer to and where more significant words or coinages exist, they are still printed bolder than others or highlighted in italics. This is in order to stress a particular word or idea. Words on the headline are usually short and crisp. Word-ing is determined by ideas to be expressed, technology of printing and the kind of audience associated with the paper or magazine. Technology of printing includes choices in terms of style, availa-

bility of space and accompanying photographs. Other criteria include simplicity, informality and impact (Freeborn et al, 1986).

Much of news headlines may be considered as “non-sentences” (Stainton, 2004). Grammatical elements in news headlines are structured on the basis of what news items are considered as the focal point. The most prominent include noun phrases, e.g. The Butcher of Zamfara, (*The News*) Crises in the Land (*Tell*); verbless clauses, especially where the operator “is’ is omitted, e.g. Abacha’s Loot Missing (*The News*) and prepositional phrases, e.g. From Neglect to Disaster (*Tell*). Simple clauses are sometimes presented without agents. Modifiers and modals are usually omitted, while compound structures consisting noun phrases/verb phrases are often written in two parts, separated by a colon, e.g. IBB and Abacha: the Billions they Stole (*The News*).

Methodology

The speech *act* theory is applied to study the illocutionary functions of news headlines of the Nigerian crisis situations. Speech Acts attempt to explain how speakers and writers perform actions using language in specific contexts. According to Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), language or utterance is to be viewed as performing some *acts* either as stating a fact or opinion, confirming or denying, predicting, warning, denouncing, christening, promising, thanking or consoling. The illocutionary act is where speakers or writers actually “*do things with words*”, thus representing the actual intention of the utterance to constitute a promise, command, threat, criticism, greeting or pronouncement. Leech (1983, p.104) identifies four types of illocutionary functions namely:

- (i) Competitive, e.g. ordering, asking, demanding
- (ii) Convivial, e.g. offering, greeting, inviting, thanking, congratulating
- (iii) Collaborative, e.g. asserting, reporting, announcing, instructing
- (iv) Conflictive, e.g. threatening, accusing, cursing, reprimanding

These categorizations coincide with Searle’s classifications of illocutionary *acts* (Searle, 1975). Hence, *representative act*, which is assertive, instructive or reporting, applies to the collaborative function, while the competitive function is synonymous with Searle’s *directive act* of commanding, asking, reporting, and inviting. The *expressive act* of greeting, appreciating and welcoming falls within Leech’s category of convivial illocutionary function. For the purpose of this analysis, the news headlines have been grouped under three illocutionary categories as follows:

- (i) Strategies of accusing, reprimanding, threatening (commissive acts/conflictive illocutionary function). In the context of this study, I have included denouncing, satirizing and attacking as commissive acts.
- (ii) Tact of reporting, asserting, announcing (representative acts/collaborative illocutionary function). I have included revealing, exposing and probing as part of representative and collaborative acts.
- (iii) Strategies of congratulating, thanking, greeting (expressive acts/convivial illocutionary function). I have also added praising and eulogizing for the purpose of the study.

Data

From a corpus of twenty-five news headlines/overlines of the three most popular news magazines in Nigeria, eight (08) that capture the Nigerian crisis situations; have been purposively selected for the purpose of this study. As stated earlier, the study covers 1999 to 2002, the period of Nigeria’s transition to democracy after more than 30 years of military rule. The selected news headlines are from articles on the economy, politics and society that reflect the tension associated with social struggles toward socio-economic emancipation. Hence, stories of social crises, political assassinations, and other social conflicts that resulted in loss of lives at this period are of particular interest to this study. The data are grouped as follows:

A. Headline performing commissive act of accusing, reprimanding, threatening denouncing, and attacking (i.e. conflictive illocutionary function)

(i) *Ige: The Lies, The Intrigues (Tell, March 4, 2002)*

B. Headlines performing representative acts of reporting, asserting, announcing, exposing and probing (i.e. collaborative illocutionary function).

(ii) *The Hidden facts of a Death (The News, July 27, 1998)*

(iii) *The Great Cover-up (Newswatch, August 9, 1999)*

(iv) *Female Graduate Robber (Tell, April 1, 2002)*

(v) *The Terror Gang: Mustapha's Men Still in the Army (Tell, Dec. 27, 1999)*

(vi) *War against IBB Begins (Tell, July 1, 2002)*

C. Headlines performing expressive acts of congratulating, thanking, greeting, praising and eulogizing (i.e. convivial illocutionary function)

(vii) *Olympic Heroes: Our Finest Hour (Newswatch, Aug. 19, 1996)*

(viii) *Comets for General Ken Saro Wiwa (The News, January 8, 1996)*

Data Analyses

(i) **Strategies of accusing, reprimanding, threatening denouncing, and attacking**

The headline under this heading is among those associated with national crises and general tension in Nigeria during this period. With the incessant crises in many parts of the country, there was a general sense of insecurity and uncertainty. The headlines attempt to mediate reality and at the same time manipulate people's reactions and attitudes. On the headline: "*Ige's Murder: the Lies, the Intrigues*" the *Tell* magazine takes sides with those that believe that the investigations of the murder had been characterized by "lies and intrigues".

Two months after the murder of Bola Ige, the nation's chief Law Officer, the prime suspect's new song deepen the public confusion and anxiety over police investigation. (Tell, March 4, 2002, p.22).

On Monday the 14th of January, 2002, the prime suspect in the murder of the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Bola Ige, a 36-year-old Ademola Adebayo, also known as *Fryo* confessed that he was contracted by the then deputy governor of Osun state, to murder Ige for a fee of N5 million. His lawyer promptly turned him over to the police. A week later, *Fryo* recanted his confession and alleged that the lawyer tutored him to implicate the deputy governor.

"Ige's murder" is taken for granted since the story had been in the news for about three months prior to this particular report and the Nigerian public had followed the story with keen interest. The second part of the headline "the lies, the intrigues," actually underscores the magazine's own bias because it believes that the investigation of the murder has been characterized by lies. "Intrigues" implies plotting or maneuvering, which in turn implies that the truth about the murder has not been told. The headline in my view performs the commissive acts of accusing, denouncing and attacking. By accusing the suspect and the police of dishonesty, the illocutionary function is to create doubts on the mind of the Nigerian public on the sincerity of the investigations. Dismissing the whole process of investigation and confessions as lies, probably based on the magazine's own private findings, is a discursive form of attack on the nation's legal system. It is worthy of note here that "the lies" in question are not just that of the suspect but also of the lawyer and the police. There had been suspicions from some quarters that the police investigations had been fraught with contradictions and lethargy. The magazine probably believes that the police were indeed concealing some intelligence and *Fryo*, the suspect in the story is constructed as someone who was under serious official pressure to conceal the truth. The headline constructs the Nigerian security and legal systems as vulnerable, and through the commissive act attempts to undermine the confidence of Nigerians in these systems, especially with regard to the murder case in question. Significantly till date, Bola Ige's killers have never been found.

The commissive act as it applies to this headline is not consistent with the principle of politeness because it aims at accusing, reprimanding, denouncing, or attacking the Nigerian social institutions.

(ii) Strategies of reporting, asserting, announcing, exposing and probing

The strategy of reporting, announcing or exposing in the headlines attempt to play the assumed traditional role of the mass media towards the public. This role recognizes the right of the public to access news on matters that affect them; therefore the public must be informed, educated and persuaded to participate on issues of governance and social well-being. In performing the representative acts, the headline portrays the mass media as the arbiter of truth. Hence the news reporter has the truth and reveals it to the public while it watches public reaction. On the headline: *The Hidden Facts of a Death: Who, What Killed Abiola?* The headline writer applies the strategies of revealing and probing through some subtle questioning “who, what killed Abiola?”

...Nigerians are still outraged, unconvinced about the official explanation of ‘natural causes’. Was there a conspiracy by imperialists and their local collaborators to kill M.K.O.? These are the hidden facts of a sudden death (The News, July 27, 1998, p.14).

“The hidden fact of a death” as a semantic unit conveys the idea that the real cause of Abiola’s death had been hidden away from public view. It provides the theme of the headline upon which further question might be possible. The overline suggests that the “hidden facts” were “conspiracy by imperialists and their local collaborators”. There is a tone of anger in the contracted form “who, what killed Abiola?” The headline by implication rejects the official explanation that Abiola died of natural causes, hence the use of “killed” rather than “died”. On the overline, the personal bias of the writer is tactically shifted to the Nigerian people. “Nigerians are still outraged, unconvinced...” is a tact aimed at appealing to the collective conscience of the Nigerian people. The idea is that the doubts over Abiola’s death and the questions about the involvement of foreign interests are to be viewed as not belonging to the magazine, rather the Nigerian people. Two mental processes are attributed to Nigerians, “outraged” and “unconvinced”. “Still” means that the processes were still in progress. In trying to reveal the actual cause of Abiola’s death the report attempts to answer the questions raised by the headline in the content of the report where the magazine points accusing fingers on the military government headed by the late Sani Abacha and later Abdulsalami Abubakar. It also accuses the international community represented by Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General, Thomas Pickering and Susan Rice of the United States. MKO Abiola, the presumed winner of Nigeria’s presidential election of June 12, 1993 died in detention in 1998 after the election was annulled by the Babangida government. Chief Abiola was arrested and detained for treason in Abuja. He died suddenly on the 8th of July 1998 while having tea with the visiting diplomats. Official explanation said he died of natural causes after an autopsy by foreign experts. However, in its “hidden facts of a death” the magazine implies some possibilities namely that Abiola could have been poisoned or that he could have been killed through death by installment. The latter means that his prolonged detention could have caused mental and psychological tortures inflicted on him deliberately so that he died slowly. Portraying Abiola death as mere cover up by the military government, the report attempts to unveil the “truth”. However the so called “hidden facts” remains an allegation which was never proved. It is left for the reader to work out the answers and take a possible position, on the question of who or what killed Abiola.

Similarly in the headline *Buharigate: the Great Cover Up* the media again assumes the position of the custodian of truth. The overline says:

“Ibrahim Salisu Buhari, the exposed Speaker of the House of Representatives resorts to desperate tricks as a shocked nation learns of his deceit. Money is his major weapon and his tools are the compromised souls of many legislators and the PDP leadership” (The News, July 26, 1999, p.12)

Buharigate is a media coinage of the scandal involving the first Speaker of the Nigerian House of Representative, Ibrahim Salisu Buhari, who was removed from office in 1999, barely four months after his election. The headline suggests that Buhari’s fraud was not a surprise to the ruling People Democratic Party, rather a collective responsibility of party members and the PDP leadership. “Buharigate” summarizes the theme of the headline – the contradictions of the Nigerian political class and how they struggle to wriggle free of increasing public criticism. “The great cover-up” is an indictment on the ruling party, which was particularly accused of the cover up, characterized by ‘tricks’, and ‘deceits’. The headline suggests that Buhari was actually favoured by his political godfathers, who knew of his deceit but decided to ignore it.

“Cover-up” on the headline stands for hiding and protecting a criminal from prosecution and from public view without regard to public opinion. In strategy of revealing, exposing and probing, media discourse here condemns the Nigerian political class, especially the ruling class for their tendency to aid and abet fraudsters. The report implies that in Nigerian politics, power is actually bought and sold; while money surpasses integrity. According to the headline, Buhari had only money to sail through to power and even after he was exposed, the then national chairman of the PDP, assured him of support and national backing. “Buharigate” is not to be seen as one man’s duplicity and corruption but as representative of the values of the ruling party. It satirizes the rot in Nigerian politics. *Buharigate* results in the cover up, which is indeed an irony in a government that profess anti-corruption. The idea of a cover up on the headline encodes a subtle presupposition that the Buhari scandal is a possible reflection of conduct of the Nigerian Assembly men and women and the Nigerian money politics. The report says, the legislators were “compromised souls.”

Again the media assumes the posture of a teacher as it further educates the Nigeria reader about more interesting social issues. On the headline *The Story of a Female Graduate Robber, Tell* applies a form of a persuasive strategy, to highlight an ideological shift about the changing roles of the modern women.

Behind one successful robbery gang is a woman, Funmi Ahmed, 29 year old graduate and mother of two. Converting her home to robbers’ den and armory, she led attacks to homes of family and friends. (Tell, April 1, 2002, pp. 28-29)

Three key words ‘female’, ‘graduate’ and ‘robber’ on the headline are significant just as the double adjectives ‘female’ and ‘graduate’ are ideologically revealing, hence the focal position they occupy on the headline. Traditionally the female gender is perceived as weak and non-violent and their matrimonial roles are undoubtedly inconsistent with armed robbery. It is news then that modern women are associated with violent crimes. Again, education which the word “graduate” represents is not consistent with robbery either. So the juxtaposition of “graduate” and “robber” in the headline is to achieve an ideological contrast. Robbery in Nigeria is a role which hitherto is associated with dropouts, touts and social miscreants. An educated female robber is therefore an ironical case. The headline presumes that armed robbery is no longer a masculine affair of the social miscreant as more women are involved in major robbery operations across the country. The headline constructs the woman as active violent specie which negates the erstwhile traditional concept of innocence and docility. The report is rendered in chopped sentences especially unusual in order to express the unusual situation. The headline is also to be perceived as a warning to the public and the police.

In another headline: *The Terror Gang: Mustapha’s men still in the Army (Tell, Dec. 27 1999)*

The press again applies a strategy of inciting and garnering the support of the reader and those who are directly responsible for state administration to seek redress to what it perceives as injustice. The adverb “still” in the headline implies that Mustapha’s men are not expected or wanted in the army. Their presence is considered as a social aberration. “Still” also gives a clue to the interpretation of the “terror gang” and provides a possible link between “the terror gang” and “Mustapha’s men”. The general meaning of “the terror gang” relies on the context and refers to the security arrangement of Al-Mustapha – the Chief Security Officer of the late General Sani Abacha. The men who worked with Al-Mustapha in the Strike Force were at several times accused of atrocities, ranging from human right abuse, to arson and murder. However they were retained in the armed forces, even after Nigeria returned to civil rule, and the media under study pragmatically questions the legality of this development. The headline by implication argues that these men were to be prosecuted for their crime against humanity. Their freedom in the Nigerian society is a further threat to peace; hence, the headline raises an alarm and encodes a tactical strategy for public reaction and protest if necessary. It is worthy of note here that the *Oputa Panel* set up by the civilian administration to review the cases of human rights violations and abuses during past governments indicted the “Mustapha’s men” and the headline indirectly called on the people and the relations of those victimized and abused to seek redress. The use of “still” on the headline also implies that retaining Mustapha’s men in the army is an extension of Abacha’s military dictatorship. The headline in my opinion is a discursive indictment of the Nigerian armed forces because if the armed forces still harbored men with criminal charges, their credibility is certainly in doubt. The story further presupposes that if the Chief of Army Staff and all those in charge of the various army formations absorb these men, it follows then that they are collaborators with Abacha’s dictatorship and should be removed or retired. This discourse strategy seeks to garner social support in an effort to sanitize and sensitize the Nigerian socio-political system.

In another news headline: *Dele Giwa: War against IBB Begins* (Tell, July 1, 2002), there is an assumed understanding between the Nigerian Press and the Nigerian audience in communicating what it may consider as the obvious. We notice that the meaning of the two parts of this headline differ significantly. The relationship between the two parts solely depends on the contextual information, which the writer and reader draw upon. The meaning of “War against IBB begins” is significantly linked with “Dele Giwa” in a way that inextricably makes the interpretation of the second part dependent on the first, i.e. the understanding of the second part of the headline is a function of the meaning of “Dele Giwa”. “War” is a hyperbole for the legal action between President Olusegun Obasanjo and Oputa Panel on one hand and Ibrahim Babangida, an ex-military dictator and two of his security chiefs on the other. The federal government and their lawyers instituted a case against Babangida over the gruesome murder of Dele Giwa, the founding editor in chief of the Newswatch magazine on the 19th of October, 1986. ‘IBB’ stands for Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida.

The headline takes the support of the Nigerian reader for granted in order to explain the issues in the story involving Babangida and his security chiefs who had been accused of masterminding the unusual murder of Giwa and had escaped justice for over fifteen years. The headline is however exaggerated in order to heighten the effect of the discourse in view of the sensitivity of the issues and the personalities involved. Prosecuting Babangida is constructed as military war equivalence. It presupposes that the public is in favour of the legal battle against the accused and tactically enlists public sympathy for the deceased. This strategy of inciting the public and garnering support is based on the assumption that Giwa’s death allegedly in the hands of the Babangida government is a common knowledge. It also takes public goodwill for granted and actually believes that the public joins in the efforts to unearth the perpetrators of the crime. To say that the war “begins” implies that it was anticipated. The media is convinced that justice must prevail regardless of the number of years in the struggle for social justice. Incidentally, this case was not revisited until President Obasanjo left office in 2007.

So far the magazines under study in this strategy of reporting, exposing and announcing social events constructs these events as being part of social forces that emanate from the people themselves; indirectly the people are constructed as victims of their own society and therefore hope that they respond appropriately toward social change.

(iii) Strategies of Congratulating, Praising and Eulogizing

News headlines and their overlines have also been used in the news magazines under study as a medium for praising and eulogizing some Nigerian heroes in their various social and professional endeavours. Two cases under focus here are Nigeria’s performance in the 1996 Olympics Games in USA and Ken Saro-Wiwa, a writer and environmentalist who was killed in 1994. The success of the Nigerian contingent in the Olympics is constructed as everyone’s success irrespective of tribal, cultural or religious differences. Significantly, sports are constructed as a unifying factor, amidst Nigeria’s multi-ethnic environment. On the headline: *Olympic Heroes: Our Finest Hour*, the possessive “our” represents Nigeria’s common interest.

The success of the Nigeria soccer wizards is the best piece of news for this country in a very long time. The exploits of our boys are not only good public relation for a country starved of good news; they are certainly a testimony to the fact that Nigeria is still a leader in this part of the world (Newswatch, Aug. 19, 1996, p.21)

The meaning of “Olympic heroes” is suggested in the second part, “our finest hour”, i.e. Olympic heroes beget our finest hour; “finest” being the superlative level of being fine or finesse. Heroism is a concept generally associated with courage and achievements. In the renaissance tradition, it includes military glory but the heroes of German Romantics were not warriors but poets and philosophers. The Nigerian Olympic heroes were sports men and women who won gold medals in football and long jump. Though in the same event the United States won a total of 46 gold, 32 silver and 25 bronzes, followed by Russia with 26 gold, 20 silver and 14 bronzes and Germany coming third with 19 gold, 16 silver and 27 bronze medals, Nigeria’s performance is considered as “exploits,” “heroic” and “wizardry”, being the first African nation to win a gold medal in football, beating world giants like Brazil and Argentina. “Exploits” evokes the image of warfare but in this context, it means victory of the Nigerian people. Thus, Nigeria’s victory is perceived as heroism in the renaissance sense. The footballers were called “wizards”. A wizard is full of wits and extraordinary abilities. The laurels of the Olympic Games amounted to “our finest hour”. Notably, sports neutralize Nigeria’s multi-cultural and tribal dif-

ferences. Critics however believe that the social roles of sports in Nigeria call for a more comprehensive policy for sports development in the country.

Lastly, eulogy in the headlines is presented with some bits of history. The headline on Saro Wiwa, says: *Comet for General Wiwa*. Part of the report says further:

Ken Saro-Wiwa was not a feudal prince, nor did he thrust himself into fame and reckoning as a usurper of thrones or unconstitutional wrestler of power. He came into the world reckoning by a dint of creativity and erudition and later, as an environmentalist, a defender of the world against impurities, then further as a man of peace and defender of his people's right to existence. (The News, Jan. 8, 1996, p.10)

This strategy of eulogizing thematizes the moral and ethical beauty and achievements of the man – Kenule Ken Saro-Wiwa who was hanged 10th November 1995 being accused of involvement in the killing of eight of his kinsmen. The media report extols the courage of the African writer, who in the face of official intimidation and dilemma was committed to social struggle. Wiwa in the headline is called “General Wiwa” in view of his leading roles in the Ogoni struggle. According to the report Ken refused to plead for clemency like a general, he rather urged his followers to continue in the struggle.

Like the true General, General Wiwa was propelled by the courage of the visionary. The mundane general needs bullets and guns, arms and ammunition; Saro-Wiwa had only truth. He was equipped with one fundamental law of life, the fact that, ultimately however long it takes, and justice will prevail, (p.12)

Quoting William Shakespeare the headline refers to the blazing “forth of the death of princes,” while no comets are seen at the death of the poor. In Nigeria it is believed that a comet usually appears when great men are born like in the case of Azikiwe. So when the headline says: “Comets for General Wiwa” it is a unique eulogy akin to the highest accolade to be ascribed to any great man in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the pragmatic functions of news headlines in three prominent Nigerian news magazines. The study shows that pragmatic strategies are the various ways of encoding meaning in news headlines that are not directly obvious in the vocabulary contents of the headline, rather meanings that impinge on the social context. Pragmatic or rhetoric values of news headlines are the implied or “invisible meanings’ (Yule, 1985), which mirror the illocutionary intention of the writer and what social goals that are anticipated. News headlines are however influenced by personal bias of the individual journalist as well as the overriding professional and social ethics of the news magazine itself. Tell and The News and Newswatch magazines apply their news headlines and overlines as a critical strategy to denounce, satirize, attack, expose and probe Nigerian political stakeholders and social situations. Headlines are also used as pragmatic medium of motivating and garnering mass supports toward social emancipation.

Since news headlines are functional parts of news texts with tactical meaning potentials, this paper calls on headline writers to adopt a more thorough, realistic and objective stance in writing them.

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