



A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER HEADLINES ON SECURITY ISSUES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper analyses newspaper headlines on security issues in Nigeria in order to describe the speech acts used in the headlines, identify the types of speech acts and discuss the social implications of these speech acts. Six newspaper headlines—three from *The Punch* and three from *Vanguard*—were selected for analysis. The analysis was conducted using Speech Act Theory as propounded by John Austin and further developed by John R. Searle. The analysis of the data reveals that assertive speech acts predominantly characterise the headlines, serving to report on security events and achievements. The study also reveals that some headlines employ commissive speech acts to set expectations and manage public trust, particularly in relation to new leadership appointments. The analysis also found out that reports of violent incidents often utilise assertive speech acts to highlight ongoing security threats, thereby raising public awareness of security challenges. The study concludes that the Nigerian newspaper headlines analysed demonstrate the significant role of assertive language in shaping public perceptions of security and government actions, highlighting the fact that the media not only informs, but also influences the emotional and cognitive responses of the audience, thereby playing a critical role in shaping national discourse on security issues.

Keywords: Pragmatic Analysis, Newspaper Headlines, Speech Act Theory, Assertive Speech Acts, Security Issues and Public Perception

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Introduction

Newspaper headlines are not simply summaries of news stories—they can be influential tools that contribute to shaping public perception and may play a role in influencing policy decisions, particularly during times of heightened insecurity. Nigeria's sociopolitical landscape is shaped by significant security challenges, including insurgencies, terrorism, and civil unrest, which impact various regions to varying degrees. These issues have significant implications for national stability; and the way they are portrayed in the media, particularly through headlines, plays a critical role in how the public and policymakers understand and respond to them. Given this, the study of newspaper headlines can offer valuable insights into how language influences the broader socio-political discourse in Nigeria, especially with respect to security concerns.

The application of pragmatics, especially speech act theory, offers a useful framework for analysing how headlines convey meaning beyond their literal content, through the performative acts embedded in the language. According to this theory, as developed by philosophers like John Austin (1962) and John Searle (1969), communication is not simply about conveying information; it also involves performing actions through language—what are known as **locutionary**, **illocutionary**, and **perlocutionary** acts. According to them, locutionary acts refer to the act of producing a meaningful words or sentences that convey information; illocutionary acts refer to the act of using language to perform specific function or intention while perlocutionary acts refer to the act of producing effect on the listener through the use of language. In the context of newspaper headlines on security issues, these acts may influence how individuals interpret the severity, urgency, and implications of a given security event, potentially shaping public attitudes and policy responses.

For instance, a headline like "Terrorist Attacks Kill Dozens in Northern Nigeria" performs a **locutionary act** by providing factual information, but it also performs an **illocutionary act**, conveying a message of warning or urgency to the reader. This in turn may prompt a **perlocutionary act**, such as fear or anxiety among the public, or a call to action by policymakers. These speech acts do not exist in isolation but interact with the social,

political, and historical context in which they occur, reflecting and reinforcing societal priorities and anxieties, particularly around issues of national security.

As **Christian, Amiriheobu, Chinwe, and Owunari** (2020) argue, insecurity and the destruction of lives and property are central threats to the Nigerian state in the 21st century. These threats have both physical and psychological dimensions, with media reports—especially headlines—playing a significant role in shaping public perceptions of the scale and urgency of security issues. Headlines, therefore, do more than inform; they frame issues in ways that can influence emotional and cognitive responses, especially when security concerns are framed in particular ways. This framing effect is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where media portrayal of security events can impact both public opinion and governmental policy.

By analysing the speech acts embedded in Nigerian newspaper headlines about security, this paper seeks to explore how language shapes and reflects societal concerns. Specifically, it examines how headlines on security issues perform locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, identifying common patterns and their potential social implications. Furthermore, the paper explores how these speech acts may either exacerbate or mitigate public anxieties about security, thus influencing social and political outcomes.

Empirical Review

Most of the previous works reviewed have focused on security issues, and distinctive properties of newspaper headlines, applying pragmatics, stylistics, and speech act theory on headlines. However, those who analysed these news headlines applied linguistic frameworks like pragmatics, critical discourse analysis and speech act theory. For example, Akanbi Olugbenga (2020) conducted a study on a linguistic stylistic analysis of newspaper headlines of mete attack on Nigerian army by Boko Haram insurgents. The writer worked on thirty newspaper headlines from twelve daily Nigerian newspapers published between November 21st and December 15th and discovered that journalistic writings are either presented to portray objective views, or to whip up psychological

sentiments in the choice of words and expressions. The writer also observed that journalistic style of headline writing may or may not conform with linguistic rules and conventions of the language used. Elly Ifantidou (2009) states that the single function of newspaper headlines is “attention-getting rather than information-providing device since headlines do not accurately represent the articles they introduce” (48). In other words, newspaper headlines are persuasive rather than informative. Rotimi Taiwo (2007) also conducted a study of a critical discourse analysis on Nigerian newspaper headlines, and finds out that the headlines have hidden ideological meanings.

Folorunso Oloruntobi (2020) adopted a stylistic approach to the study of some linguistic devices in Nigerian newspaper headlines and found out that most of the newspaper headlines on fuel subsidy removal and electricity tariff hike relied heavily on positive adjectives to palatably present government policies, actions and steps to the masses. Yaser Hadidi, Ilham Taghiyev & Saadat Ahmadova (2022), for instance, worked on linguistic devices used in newspaper headlines. They stated that in news headlines, linguistic devices carefully and sensitively used in order to make headlines unique and different, influence the readers, create trust for the newspaper and, most importantly, invite and encourage the reader to proceed to the whole story and the main body of the report/news report. They observed that the newspapers studied mostly used full sentences and ellipsis in their headlines and that most of the semantic, linguistic and discursive strategies used in headlines are geared to the tactical incompleteness strategy, a helpful notion and part of Montgomery's model. Desi Sari (2019) also conducted a study on discourse analysis on headlines news, using Fairclough theory in the analysis which tries to see texts in three dimensions: text, discourse and social practice dimension. The study observed that the journalists used some figurative expressions to attract the readers' attention. Overall, this review of studies on language used in the media has provided areas of research and findings of other researchers.

The work most closely related to this study is the paper of Tijjani Abba, Idris Olakunle and Nasiry Musa (2015). They employed speech act theory to analyse Daily Trust Newspaper headline reports on Boko Haram attacks, with a view to identifying the types of speech acts used in the headlines, the predominant speech act used, as well as their implication to language used in the newspaper media. Thirty six headlines were selected from the Daily

Trust newspapers by purposeful random sampling and each is assigned a corresponding speech act category. The findings revealed that, out of the five speech act categories of J.R. Searle (1969) used as the theoretical framework of the research, only three categories are used in all the headlines in the newspaper with the assertive as the dominant speech act type. Therefore, the study concluded that the headline reports of the Daily Trust newspapers were not aimed at threatening, frightening or advising as wrongly perceived by readers.

However, some of the studies on the headlines are focused on linguistic, stylistic and pragmatic analysis of headlines. Security issues as reported by other media industries have rarely been explicated in the literature so far reviewed. Therefore, this paper investigates how security issues in Nigeria are constructed in the news headlines (news text) of the Nigerian press and how speech acts of these news headlines translate to shaping national discourse on security issues.

Theoretical Framework

Speech act theory, first developed by John Austin in 1962 and later expanded by John Searle in 1969, explores how utterances function not just to convey information, but to perform actions. Austin's foundational distinction is between two types of utterances: constatives and performatives. Constatives are utterances that describe or assert facts about the world, while performatives are utterances that perform an action when spoken (e.g., a promise, a request, or a greeting).

Austin further classified speech acts into three categories based on their roles:

1. Locutionary Acts: These refer to the basic act of producing sounds or words—essentially, the literal meaning of the utterance.
2. Illocutionary Acts: These are the actions performed by the speaker through their utterance, such as making a statement, asking a question, giving a command, or making a promise. Illocutionary acts reflect the speaker's intention and the force behind the utterance.
3. Perlocutionary Acts: These refer to the effects or responses that the utterance has on the listener, such as persuading, convincing, or inspiring an emotional reaction.

Austin (1962: 96) described speech acts as “utterances that fulfill a communicative function, involving both the speaker's intention and the impact of the utterance on the listener.” Essentially, speech acts are the actions speakers carry out through language.

While Austin's framework provides a foundational understanding of speech acts, it was further developed by John Searle, who refined and expanded these ideas. Searle (1969) introduced a more detailed classification of illocutionary acts, identifying several types of speech acts, such as assertives (statements or claims), directives (requests or commands), commissives (promises or offers), expressives (apologies, congratulations), and declarations (pronouncements that change the world, like "I now pronounce you married"). Searle's work emphasised the importance of the speaker's intentions and the social context in which these acts are performed.

The speech acts discussed here are consistent with the original theories of Austin and Searle. However, it is important to note that in the context of this study, the focus is primarily on how these different types of speech acts—locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary—function in communication and how they help us understand the dynamics between speakers and listeners.

Research Methodology

This study analyses the representation of security issues in Nigerian media through an analysis of newspaper headlines. The primary data for this study were obtained from two widely circulated Nigerian newspapers, *Punch* and *Vanguard*. These newspapers were chosen based on their prominence and influence in Nigerian media, as well as their regular coverage of security-related topics, such as terrorism, insurgency, and political instability. The data were collected from three security-related headlines from each of the two newspapers, *Punch* and *Vanguard* of 29th and 30th August, 2024. The period was selected to provide a snapshot of how security issues were represented in the media during a time of heightened national concern over insecurity. Headlines were selected purposively to ensure they directly addressed security issues in Nigeria, such as reports of armed conflicts, military operations, and government responses to security challenges.

The analysis of these headlines is guided by the Speech Act Theory, which was developed

by philosopher John Austin in the 1962 and further expanded by John Searle and other scholars. Speech Act Theory provides a framework for understanding how language is used not only to convey information but also to perform actions, such as making statements, issuing commands, or expressing beliefs. In the context of this study, the theory is applied to explore how newspaper headlines perform locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts that construct particular narratives or responses regarding security issues in Nigeria. The selected headlines are analysed qualitatively through the lens of Speech Act Theory. Specifically, the study identifies and categorises the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts embedded within each headline.

The study's sample consists of six headlines (three from each newspaper), which, although relatively small, is appropriate for a qualitative study focused on in-depth discourse analysis. The small sample size allows for a detailed and focused examination of how language is used in specific instances to represent security issues. However, the researcher acknowledges that this limited sample size may not fully capture the breadth of how security issues are portrayed across a wider range of Nigerian newspapers. Future researchers could extend the analysis by including more newspapers and a broader time frame.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Example 1: "Akwa Ibom Kidnap Kingpin Killed, G3 Rifle Recovered" (Punch, 30th August, 2024).

This headline exemplifies how assertive speech acts are commonly used in the reporting of security incidents. The locutionary act simply reports on the killing of a criminal and the recovery of a weapon. The illocutionary force behind the headline is an assertion of fact, but it also carries an implicit directive — urging readers to feel reassured by the government's action in addressing crime. The perlocutionary effect may involve evoking a sense of relief or approval, while simultaneously serving as a warning to potential criminals about the effectiveness of law enforcement. This aligns with the findings of Abba et al. (2015), who notes that Nigerian newspaper headlines related to Boko Haram attacks predominantly employed assertive speech acts to report on the outcomes of military or law enforcement actions. By framing events as decisive actions, the media

shapes public perceptions of the government's capability to handle security challenges.

Example 2: "NAF Airstrikes Kill Several Terrorists in Borno" (Punch, 29th August, 2024).

The locutionary act in this headline reports a military operation, while the illocutionary act asserts the success of the airstrikes. The perlocutionary act likely evokes fear among terrorists and reassures the public of the military's active role in combating terrorism. This headline not only asserts factual information, but also serves to bolster public confidence in the government's military capabilities, aligning with Oloruntobi's (2020) observations on how language in the media is often used to justify government actions. The terminologies used—such as "kill" and "terrorists"—contribute to shaping how the public perceives security threats. By labelling individuals as "terrorists," the media reinforces a narrative that supports the legitimacy of military force, a tactic that supports Montgomery's (2007) model of the tactical incompleteness strategy, where certain words or phrases are strategically chosen to reinforce a specific ideological perspective.

Example 3: "Military Neutralises 1,166 Terrorists, Apprehends 1,096 Suspects-DHQ" (Vanguard, 29th August, 2024).

The locutionary act of the headline is a factual statement that provides specific numerical information about military operations. The illocutionary act is that the speaker (the Defence Headquarters, in this case) is informing the audience of a military operation's results, with an implied aim to demonstrate the success of military efforts against terrorism. The Perlocutionary act is that the reader is likely to be informed, reassured, or emotionally stirred by the scale of the operations. Depending on their stance, they might feel approval, concern, or skepticism about the military's actions.

This headline uses assertive speech acts to report on a large-scale military operation and emphasises the success of the operation. The terms "neutralises" and "apprehends" imply decisive action, suggesting a high level of control and efficiency by the military. This type of headline reinforces the legitimacy of military actions, aligning with the argument made by Taiwo (2007) that headlines in Nigerian newspapers often contain ideological undercurrents that support the status quo, particularly when it comes to the military and government forces.

The social implications of this headline are significant. It fosters a perception of military success and promotes trust in security forces, aligning with Hadidi et al.'s (2022) assertion that headlines aim to promote confidence in the institutions they report on. However, it also raises concerns about the potential for language to simplify complex security issues and exclude alternative perspectives on the effectiveness or morality of such military operations.

Example 4: "Ajayi Takes Charge as DGSS, Vows to Crush Insecurity" (Vanguard, 29th August, 2024).

The locutionary act of this headline reports on the appointment of Ajayi as the new Director General of State Security Services (DGSS) and his subsequent commitment to addressing insecurity. The illocutionary act here is both assertive (reporting the appointment) and commissive (asserting Ajayi's promise to take action against insecurity). The perlocutionary act aims to reassure the public, creating expectations for concrete action.

This aligns with Oloruntobi's (2020) finding that positive language is often used in headlines to frame government actions in a favorable light. By using strong terms such as "crush," the headline sets a tone of urgency and decisiveness, signalling to the public that the new DGSS is committed to combatting insecurity. However, the headline also implicitly raises expectations. If Ajayi's vow is not met with concrete results, it could lead to public disillusionment and mistrust in the government, reflecting the broader socio-political dynamics discussed by van Dijk (1998).

Example 5: Security Challenge Facing Nigeria Surmountable, Says COAS (Vanguard, 29th August, 2024).

The locutionary act in this headline involves the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), stating that Nigeria's security challenges are "surmountable." The literal meaning of the words conveys the COAS's belief that the country's security issues can be overcome, suggesting optimism and a sense of control over the situation. The illocutionary force behind this headline is an **assertive speech act**. The COAS is making a declarative statement

regarding the state of Nigeria's security situation. His statement aims to communicate his perspective on the situation, reassuring the public and reinforcing the government's efforts to address security challenges. The assertion here emphasises that the problem is not insurmountable, which may be intended to influence public perception positively. By affirming that the security challenge is "surmountable," the COAS seeks to provide hope, reduce panic, and bolster confidence in the military's ability to handle security matters. In line with **Searle's** classification of speech acts (1969), this is **anassertive** because it reflects the COAS's belief or conviction about the situation, which he expresses in the form of a factual statement. The statement may implicitly serve to align public opinion with the government's view on the security challenge, thus steering public sentiment towards optimism.

The **perlocutionary effect** refers to the emotional or cognitive impact on the audience, which, in this case, would likely be a mixture of reassurance, reduced anxiety, and support for the military's activities. By portraying security issues as manageable, the headline may reduce public panic, presenting the crisis as one that is under control, thus fostering a sense of stability. Additionally, it might encourage greater public support for ongoing or future military actions, given that it suggests competence and progress in tackling the nation's security concerns.

Example 6: Gunmen Set Ablaze LG Secretariat in Anambra (*Punch*, 30th August, 2024).

The locutionary act of this headline reports a violent event—specifically, that "gunmen set ablaze LG secretariat in Anambra." This statement delivers a literal description of the event that occurred, providing details about the perpetrators ("gunmen") and the action ("set ablaze"). It conveys the severity and the violent nature of the act, while also offering geographical and institutional context ("LG secretariat in Anambra").

The illocutionary act here is an **assertive speech act**. The headline asserts the occurrence of an event—an act of arson committed by gunmen—and it commits the speaker to the truth of this proposition. Through this declarative act, the newspaper provides factual information about the security situation, which is a significant form of journalistic

reporting. Additionally, it can be understood as an **expressive act** since the language employed ("set ablaze") may be designed to evoke a sense of urgency or alarm among the readers. The intensity of the phrase emphasises the severity of the violence involved, which could stir emotions of concern or fear among the audience. This corresponds to **Sari (2019)**'s finding that journalists often employ figurative language to heighten attention and convey emotional tones within headlines.

The **perlocutionary effect** of this headline likely includes fear, shock, and concern from the readers. The choice of words—especially "set ablaze" and "gunmen"—intensifies the imagery of the violence, potentially heightening readers' anxiety about security in the region. The social reaction might include calls for increased security measures or a demand for accountability from local authorities. The urgency in the language also indirectly pressures readers to perceive the security situation as dire and unresolved, thus urging the need for immediate action.

As **Hadidi et al. (2022)** point out, the use of linguistic devices in headlines often has the strategic purpose of engaging the reader and prompting them to proceed to the full article. In this case, the stark nature of the headline could serve as a prompt for readers to learn more about the violent event, its context, and the responses of authorities, while also shaping their emotional response to the news.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are based on the interpretation the data analysed. The data analysis revealed how headlines in Nigerian newspapers use assertive speech acts to communicate the effectiveness of security measures, shaping public perceptions of government and military actions. In cases where military operations or law enforcement actions are reported, such as the killing of a kidnap kingpin or successful airstrikes on terrorists, headlines assert the factual outcome of these events while implicitly reinforcing the government's ability to address security concerns. The choice of terminologies like "neutralizes," "kill," or "terrorists" functions not just to report facts but to justify the legitimacy of military actions and to influence the audience's view of these operations as

necessary and justified. This aligns with previous research, which found that media often frames security issues in a way that supports government authority and law enforcement, while promoting confidence in their actions.

The headlines also show how language can be used strategically to manage public sentiment. For instance, the statement from the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) that security challenges are "surmountable" emphasises optimism and reinforces the narrative that the situation is under control. This rhetoric is designed to reduce anxiety and increase public support for the government's approach to tackling security issues. Similarly, headlines that report on the appointment of new security leaders, such as the Director General of State Security Services (DGSS), use strong, decisive language to set expectations for action. The word choice, like "crush" in reference to insecurity, aims to convey a sense of urgency and commitment, potentially increasing public faith in the effectiveness of the new leadership. However, this also sets a high bar for accountability, as unmet expectations could lead to public disillusionment.

On the other hand, more alarming headlines, such as, the one reporting gunmen setting an office ablaze, use vivid language to evoke strong emotional reactions. Words like "set ablaze" heighten the severity of the incident and are likely to provoke fear, concern, and a call for action from the public. This illustrates how the media can use language not just to inform, but to influence the emotional and cognitive response of the audience. The use of such intense language may also be a tool for engaging readers and prompting further investigation into the event's broader implications, particularly in terms of public safety. The overall findings highlight the media's power to shape public perception through language, either by fostering trust in government actions or by heightening public concern and urgency around security issues.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, it is pertinent to state that the analysis of Nigerian newspaper headlines demonstrates the significant role of assertive language in shaping public perceptions of security and government actions. Through strategic word choices that

emphasise military success or law enforcement effectiveness, the media frames security efforts as both justified and necessary, reinforcing government authority and fostering public trust. At the same time, emotionally charged language in reports of violent incidents serves to heighten public concern, driving calls for action. By managing public sentiment through carefully crafted rhetoric, the media not only informs but also influences the emotional and cognitive responses of the audience, thereby playing a critical role in shaping national discourse on security issues.

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