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Speech Acts Ambiguity as a Pragma-Stylistic Strategy in Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract: The paper examines the use of speech acts ambiguity as a pragmatic cum stylistic strategy in newspaper headlines. It explores how ambiguous speech acts in headlines are often deliberately employed to provoke inquisitiveness, which ostensibly goads the reader into the main story and also the pragmatic considerations that guide the editor's choice of speech acts in headlines. The study employs a qualitative method of data analysis on a corpus of headlines chosen from four national dailies. Findings show that editors often allow two or more speech acts to run concurrently in one headline to arouse the reader's interest. The choice between ambiguous and unambiguous speech acts in a headline is often shaped by the mood of the story, writers' communicative goals and socio-linguistic considerations. The equivocation enables the writer to exonerate himself from taking a definite stance on the subject matter and allows the reader to isolate the relevant illocutionary force based on the reader's pragmatic competence. The study concludes that the use of ambiguous speech acts in newspaper headlines may be a stylistic device to spark off the reader's interest, inducing him to read deeper and more critically. The writer's expectation, if met, can be interpreted as the perlocutionary effect of the headline on the reader.

Key words: Speech acts · Newspaper headlines · Ambiguity and stories

INTRODUCTION

Many works on ambiguity in newspaper headlines have focused on lexical and syntactic ambiguities using foreign newspaper headlines culled from the web as primary data. A number of recent works exist in this capacity [1-5]. Pragmatic ambiguity in newspaper headlines has therefore received little attention. Thus, this study explores how pragmatic ambiguity in form of speech acts ambiguity is employed in newspaper headlines presumably as a stylistic ploy to bait readers and induce them to read the full news stories in order to resolve the equivocation that arises.

Pragmatics forms part of the seven stylistic levels of language analysis identified by Simpson. Pragmatics is concerned with the way words and sentences are used in everyday situations and the meaning of language in context. This notion is in line with the stance of the current study which argues that the meaning of an ambiguous headline text does not end at the semantic layer but transcends semantic boundaries to incorporate all the resources that context confers on a text which form part of its interpretation as a linguistic message.

Working out the intended meaning of an utterance in context (communicative meaning) is the ultimate responsibility of the hearer or reader as the case may be and the 'how' of this important enterprise falls within the ambit of pragmatics. Saeed conceives of pragmatics as "the field which studies how learners fill out the semantic structure with contextual information". This definition recognizes that for the meaning of an utterance to be completely interpreted, there is often

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a need to improve on the expression meaning which is a product of the semantic structure by adding other relevant information which context and encyclopedic knowledge provide. According to Yule, "Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader)". Thus, expression meaning, though emanating from the speaker, does not end with the speaker but is geared to be interpreted by the hearer as intended. In this interpretative task, the hearer's goal is not merely to decode the propositional content of the expression but its actual communicative meaning. Pragmatics therefore gives room for the hearer to expand or alter semantic meaning by taking into account the contextual variables that impinge on meaning – these variables being all the resources at the disposal of the hearer in the discourse context that enable him to construct the meaning intended by the speaker. Viewed in this manner, a pragmatic approach to meaning in communication is more holistic and reliable than a semantic approach considering that communication does not exist in a vacuum.

The communicative meaning of an utterance is the speech act it is meant to perform in the definite social context. As observed by Leech, "When we try to work out the meaning of an utterance, this can be thought of as an attempt to reconstruct what act, considered as a goal-directed communication, was it a goal of the speaker to perform in producing the utterance". He believes that the meaning of an utterance, in this regard, is its illocutionary force. Grundy illustrates the discrepancy between meaning as proposition and meaning as speech acts using a simple utterance *I'm here now.*

So if I had heard that a relative had been injured and taken to hospital, I might race there as quickly as possible and say on arrival 'I'm here now' which would count perhaps as a comforting reassurance. On the other hand, if I get home from work and see my children larking about instead of getting on with their homework and say 'I'm here now', it counts as a stern warning. Or if I were to arrive late for a meeting and knew that I had kept my colleagues waiting, uttering 'I'm here now' might count as an apology or a signal to start the meeting.

It is therefore possible that a single sentence uttered in four or more different contexts will have the same propositional meaning but will constitute four or more different speech acts. In this case, it is the speech act meant out of the possibilities that determines the real meaning of the utterance. This observation foreshadows the existence of speech acts ambiguity, which this study sets out to examine in newspaper headlines.

Leech and Short, on their part, disclose that sentences with different syntactic forms and semantic content may constitute a single speech act. The authors illustrate this observation using these sentences:

Please come here. (Imperative)
Could you come here? (Interrogative)
I'd like you to come here. (Declarative)

Thus, speech act are in principle independent of the semantic and syntactic categories they are composed of. This makes the pragmatic force of an utterance and its semantic sense distinct phenomena.

Scholars differ considerably in their classification of speech acts [6-10]. Of these, Austin's and Searle's are popular. Austin's classification is terms of verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behavitives and declaratives. However, we prefer to use Searle's classification of speech acts into declaratives, words that change the world by their very utterance; representatives, acts in which the words state what the speaker believes to be the case; commissives, acts in which the words commit the speaker to future action; directives, acts in which the words direct the speaker to do something; expressive, acts in which the words state what the speaker feels.

Mey identifies three facets of a speech act: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. In the first, the speaker says something; in the second, the speaker signals an associated speech act – that is *s* does something by uttering *U*; in the third, the speech act causes an effect on the listeners or the participants. An analysis of ambiguity in newspaper headlines is therefore made bearing these levels of meaning in mind and recognizing that if headlines are utterances, then they are speech acts which may be direct or indirect. Searle draws a distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. This distinction is based on recognition of the intended perlocutionary effect of an utterance on a specific occasion.

He defines indirect speech acts as "cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another". Leech adduces reasons for speaker's choice of direct or indirect speech act: "Individuals adopt the most direct course of action that is judged to be consistent with the fulfillment of their goals. (This is one way of interpreting the Maxim of Manner.) Hence if a speaker employs an indirect strategy to fulfill a goal, the reason for this is likely to be that *s* wants to achieve some other goal in addition." In headlines, this indirect speech act strategy may be embraced to capture the attention of the audience and induce them to read between the lines. This validates Searle's definition of indirect speech act cited above. This indirect strategy may constitute ambiguity as the utterance in this situation possesses two meanings: the meaning it has when considered as a direct speech act and its meaning when viewed as an indirect speech act.

The stylistic focus of this study is hinged on the fact that the editor's choice of speech act in conveying an illocution is often a matter of stylistic choice. Ten headlines are deliberately chosen from four Nigerian newspapers to depict speech acts ambiguity. The headlines are analyzed and discussed in the relevant section.

Ambiguity and Speech Acts: Ambiguity has been defined in many works. These definitions all capture the basic fact that ambiguity means having at least two meanings in one expression. Empson defines ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative interpretation to the same piece of language". In this definition, ambiguity is marked by the potentiality of an expression to have an alternative meaning, however trivial. Wasow, Perfors and Beaver similarly note that "An expression is ambiguous if it has two or more distinct denotations – that is, if it is associated with more than one region of the meaning space". According to them, ambiguity involves expressions with basically two denotations that are disjoint from one another. Thus, the presence of double or multiple significations distinct from each other is a decisive factor in the identification of ambiguity [11-15].

Wasow, Perfors and Beaver justify the remarkable attention which ambiguity commands. They believe that ambiguity is obviously deemed to be a source of real and potentially costly confusion in communication though they know of no study which systematically evaluates the degree to which theoretically present ambiguities cause confusion or otherwise impede the communication process. However, this does not take away from the fact that, in their own experience, ambiguities present challenges to speakers, listeners, writers and readers as the authors question captivatingly:

> Who has not ever been faced with the clarification question "Left?" while giving directions and then being momentarily phased by the inherent ambiguity of the natural confirmatory answer "Right!"? What writer has never struggled with how to reword a text so as to make it unambiguous? What teacher has never set a test only to find several students returning quite naively an answer to a completely different question than was intended? Or to take a case of speech act ambiguity, who has never mistakenly provided an answer to a rhetorical question?

As observed by Hurford and Heasley, "Ambiguity of various kinds is never far from the centre of our attention in semantics". Ambiguity is usually classified according to its source and nature – that is whether it emanates from a lexical item (lexical ambiguity), or from the linear ordering of constituents (syntactic ambiguity) or from the illocutionary force of the utterance (pragmatic ambiguity). This is appropriate considering that most ambiguities are located in just a lexical item, a fragment of a sentence, or the entire sentence. This study is focused on speech acts ambiguity (pragmatic ambiguity) which proceeds from the illocutionary force of newspaper headlines.

Sennet explains that ambiguity is not only a property of sentences but also of the speech acts in which the sentences are used thus making a case for pragmatic ambiguity. Sennet identifies pragmatic ambiguity as that which arises from speech acts and presuppositions. The author states that a speech act can be ambiguous between various types.

> 'The cops are coming' can be an assertion, a warning, or an expression of relief. 'I'm sorry you were raised so badly' can be an insult or an apology. 'You want to cook dinner' can, in Hebrew, function as a request or as a declarative sentence. 'Can you pick me up later?' can function as a request or a question or both. Many, if not all, sentences can be used in multiple ways.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that speech acts ambiguity occurs when a single utterance has the potential for more than one illocutionary force. Interestingly, this kind of ambiguity is not always provoked by the content of the sentence. Thus, even when the transformations of a single sentence convey the same idea, the communicative meaning and illocutionary force differ considerably.

Asher and Lascarides Present it this Way: "The relationship between the surface form of an utterance and its underlying purpose isn't always straightforward". The implication therefore is that we may have a sentence with a divergent illocutionary goal, or a sentence capable of performing two or more speech acts, which are simultaneously deducible from the surface form. A locution with a different surface form and a different illocutionary goal is said to be an indirect speech act. Lending credence to the fact that ambiguity can arise from indirect speech acts, Saeed avers, "Explicit performatives are merely a specialized subset of performatives whose nature as speech acts is more unambiguous than most". This implies that implicit performatives can constitute ambiguity in an expression. Cutting agrees with Saeed that implicit performatives can create ambiguity. "The use of implicit performatives can cause ambiguity. For example, 'I'll be back!' can either mean 'I promise that I'll be back' or 'I warn you that I'll be back'." Thus, in considering ambiguity in headlines and the operative meaning that emerges from the meaning possibilities, identification of the illocutionary force of the utterance is imperative.

Ordinarily, speakers employ direct illocutions in conveying their intentions. As such, throwing away this direct course in preference for the indirect strategy is a clear indication that the speaker/writer wishes to achieve another illocutionary goal in addition. The additional goal in this case may be preserving the Politeness Principle (PP) so as to maintain good social relationship. The apparent conflict between the Co-operative Principle and the Politeness Principle ushers in implicitness as a mitigating device. According to Leech, the PP is employed to meet two conditions: "standing features such as the social distance between participants interact with dynamic features such as the kind of illocutionary demand the speaker is making on the hearer… to produce a degree of politeness appropriate to the situation". Thus, the paper examines the pragmatic considerations that may affect an editor's choice of speech act in newspaper headlines [16-20].

Analysis of Speech Acts Ambiguity and Discussion

See Who Is Complaining *Daily trust* 20/11/13: SEE WHO IS COMPLAINING belongs structurally to the class of speech acts identified as directives. The locution seems structurally like an order to the reader to "check and see someone complaining." For example in a talk exchange, if a speaker says *See who is at the door,* the hearer will understand it as an order or a request for him to answer the door. However, the illocutionary act meant in the headline is sarcasm, mocking a certain complaint made by someone whom the speaker feels lacks the moral right to such a complaint. The locution can then be simultaneously asserting, mocking and questioning the moral basis of the complaint. This assumption is corroborated by the ensuing story which relates how ironical it is that Dr Chris Ngige was complaining of election rigging after debunking a similar complaint made against him ten years before by Mr Peter Obi, the former governor of Anambra State and assuming the mantle of leadership until the court ousted him after 3 years and swore Obi in. Asher and Lacasrides maintain that "understanding the motives behind utterances is often crucial to successful communication". The choice of this locution is presumably made to capture the mood of the story and sway the reader's feelings in favour of the writer's opinion. These stylistic effects on the reader may double as the perlocutionary effect of the utterance.

MR PRESIDENT, BE BOTHERED *The Nation* 10/11/13

MR PRESIDENT, BE BOTHERED is an implicit performative, a kind of constative. Apparently, the locution deliberately does not contain any performative verb that specifies the nature of the intended speech act. As Thomas puts it, "People often avoid using an explicit performative since in many circumstances it seems to imply an unequal power relationship or a particular set of rights on the part of the speaker". This observation is plausible in Headline 2 (H2 for short). As the headline is addressed to the President of the country, the writer is definitely conscious of the unequal power relationship

and thus couches his utterance in ambiguity. This underscores the fact that semiotic choices are influenced by the situations of use. Belonging to the class of directives, Headline may be advising, urging, rebuking, commanding, requesting and suggesting to Mr President. But in remaining equivocal, the writer exonerates himself from being rude to the number one citizen. The perlocutionary effect of the utterance is that readers are consequently lured into reading the news story to isolate the relevant illocutionary force.

Furthermore, although MR PRESIDENT, BE BOTHERED may be classified as a constative; its performative status is recoverable from the context of situation. Accounting for this locution as a product of choice, one might say that it could have possibly been reformulated as selecting any of these speech acts: I *charge/order/request/implore/advise/urge/challenge you to be bothered.* But as observed *ab initio*, certain sociolinguistic and felicity conditions negotiate the stylistic form taken by an utterance. In keeping with this claim, Schiffrin contests the distinction between the constative-performative dichotomy.

> The constative performative distinction cannot be maintained because both constatives and performatives involve truth and falsity; both are felicitous in relation to the conditions in which they occur; both are realised through a variety of forms that can be re-written in terms of a performative formular. To put this more generally, we cannot find either contextual or textual conditions that support the constative-performative distinction.

Headlines 3-6 have one thing in common: they are all cast in a question form.

- WHO IS AFRAID OF SOLUDO? *This Day* 26/8/13
- WHO IS AFRAID OF CONSTITUTIONAL CONFERENCE? *National Mirror* 28/11/13
- WHO WILL BE LEFT IN EGYPT? *The Nation* 16/9/13
- WHO IS AFRAID OF PDM? *This Day* 12/11/13

On the one hand, they can be seen as rhetorical questions; on the other hand, they can be perceived as information-seeking questions. Wasow, Perfor and Beaver justifying the potential of such locutions to cause ambiguity ask, "…take a case of speech act ambiguity, who has never mistakenly provided an answer to a rhetorical question? However, as speech acts each may have its potential illocutionary force in the context of occurrence. The headlines may be questioning, daring, probing, exculpating, asserting; however, each may not select all the speech acts suggested. For instance H64 *Who's afraid of Soludo?* may be daring or questioning. The possible interpretations might be: Who is Soludo that people should be afraid of him? Does his track record as former Central Bank Governor make him unchallengeable? Or who are those afraid of his anticipated emergence in the Anambra political sphere and stalling the state's economic emancipation? Any of these three interpretations is probable. The stylistic implication and perlocutionary effect is that it provokes the reader to think deeper and more critically. Šipošová underscores this point; he conceives of a rhetorical question as being more often a statement rather than a question expecting an answer which incites the reader to deep thinking. The answer, in this case, is to be found in the news story.

Headlines 7-9 are declarative sentences while headline 10 is an exclamatory sentence. However, each is capable of performing more than one speech act.

- YOU'RE ON CAMERA
- ANAMBRA ELECTIONS: YOU CAN CRY, OBI TELS OPPOSITION
- MY CONVOY IS LARGER THAN YOURS
- BRAZIL, HERE WE COME!

As speech acts, H7 could be classified under representatives, as the headline describes what the speaker believes. Thus, it could be informing, reminding, warning, or threatening the addressee. Structurally, H8 seems to convey that somebody is able to cry. But H8 can double as an expressive speech act mocking the post-election complaints and agitations of the addressee who had lost a gubernatorial election to the speaker and a directive speech act inviting or urging him to contest the result if he can. The confidence the speaker exudes in the utterance, as captured by the lexical choices, additionally suggests that the 'cry' may lack merit or may not change the status quo. Thus, the form of the locution is tied to the emotions of the writer towards the story and the anticipated perlocutionary effect on the reader, which may be to convince the reader that the election was free and fair. This claim finds credence in an observation made by Sadock that.

> Perlocutionary acts consist in the production of effects upon the thought, feelings, or actions of the addressee (s), speaker, or other parties, such as causing people to refer to a certain ship as the Joseph Stalin, producing the belief that Sam and Mary should be considered man and wife, convincing an addressee of the truth of the statement, causing an addressee to feel a requirement to do something and so on.

In H9, the surface form of the headline makes it a type of expressive speech act. As a declarative sentence, the headline is asserting or claiming that the status of a certain convoy is larger than another convoy. However, the locution is an indirect speech act of an expressive kind deploring the undue emphasis given to convoys by government officials and how these officials seem to be competing to surpass their colleagues in the constitution of their convoys. This mocking undertone is unarguably connected with the increasing spate of convoy accidents in the country, which came to a climax in the month this headline appeared claiming the life of a former president of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Festus Iyayi, owing to the recklessness of the convoy of a serving state Governor. The writer's disdain for this practice is made catchier by equivocation which draws attention and at the same time satirizes the readers who are among the perpetrators of the convoy rascality. The choice of words in the headline is carefully made to address both the reader and the writer: *My Convoy is Larger than Yours*. This presumably suggests that the subject matter is all embracing, affecting every member of society.

Lastly, Headline performs multiple speech acts. The locution is an exclamatory sentence performing such speech acts as asserting, threatening, warning, or promising. The relevant speech act, being implicit, can only be ascertained by reading the appertaining story. Contextually, this headline which appeared in the sports column of the newspaper could be alerting the Brazilian team to their imminent defeat, warning them of the danger ahead, or promising to give them a landslide defeat, among others. In remaining equivocal, the headline creates suspense which can induce the reader of the headline to buy the newspaper for more detailed reading.

This observation shows that headlines are employed as speech acts aimed at fulfilling some illocutionary goals and the choice of the act is usually shaped by the personality of the speaker/writer, the social distance between him and his interlocutor and the mood of the story. In a bid to capture these sociolinguistic constraints on usage, editors often create speech acts ambiguity in headlines. Widdowson supports these findings thus:

> The communicative import of an utterance will not only depend on the formal syntactic and semantic properties of the sentence with which it corresponds but also on such contextual features as the relationship of the addresser and addressee, the social situation in which the utterance is made and so on. Contextualization in this case involves a consideration of what sentences count as when they are used in the actual business of social interaction .

This aspect of language falls under the tenor of discourse, the interpersonal component of language. The findings are also in consonance with Halliday and Matthiessen's view that the clause is "not only a figure, representing some process – some doing or happening, saying or sensing, being or having – with its various participants and circumstances; it is also a proposition, or a proposal, whereby we inform or question, give orders or make an offer and express our

appraisal of and attitude towards whoever we are addressing and what we are talking about" . The reader is therefore expected as a mark of grammatical and pragmatic competence to understand headlines not only as propositions but as speech acts. And in cases of equivocation, the reader's competence also enables him to arrive at the relevant meaning. "More than just a common language is required to enable the hearer to identify the speaker's communicative intentions on the basis of the speaker's utterances. A shared system of beliefs and inferences must be operating, which function in effect as communicative strategies" [21-29].

CONCLUSION

The analyses show that headlines often exhibit a correspondence between structure and function (direct speech act) or lack of congruence between structure and illocutionary force (indirect speech act). Both phenomena can cause ambiguity. Thus, just as a sentence with a single surface structure can have two or more forms in deep structure, an utterance and the speech act it is set to perform may be structurally unparallel. A speech act that is structurally interrogative or declarative may function as a request. The implication therefore is that we may have a locution with an illocutionary force different from what the structure suggests (indirect speech act), or a sentence that performs two or more speech acts, which are simultaneously deducible from the surface form. This necessitates carefulness on the part of the reader/hearer in interpreting utterances not just at their propositional level but also by considering the explicit and implicit acts intended by the writer/speaker.

The paper concludes that the perlocutionary effect of such pragmatic ambiguity is that readers are lured into active reading of the ensuing news story to isolate the relevant illocutionary force. This exercise provokes them to think deeper and more critically. The reader is therefore expected as a mark of grammatical and pragmatic competence to understand headlines not only as propositions but as speech acts. The choice of a locution is often made to capture the mood of the story and to surreptitiously sway the reader's feelings in favour of the writer's opinion.

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