

## A Stylistic Exploration of Lexical Ambiguity in Newspaper Headlines

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**Abstract:** The study X-rays the tendency for editors of newspapers to latch on to the rich lexico-semantic resources of language to generate ambiguity in headlines. It thus examines how intra-textual and extra-textual constraints help the reader to narrow down the potential meanings of ambiguous lexical items in newspaper headlines. The corpus consists of thirty ambiguous headlines drawn from four Nigerian Newspapers. The method of data analysis is qualitative. Findings of the study reveal that newspaper editors can manipulate the discourse utility of lexical ambiguity in headlines to sustain communication acts and attract newspaper readers to innumerable topical issues. The lexical ambiguity analyzed in this study are shown to be capable, in some cases, of binary exposure and, at other times, multiple, leading to variegated semantic interpretations. This can and does, introduce misreading of headlines with the attendant confusion it can cause for the reader. However, this difficulty is ameliorated by cues from the stylistic context which are functional accompaniments of ambiguous newspaper headlines. Noun and verb ambiguities are found to be more preponderant in the corpus than adjective and preposition ambiguities. The study concludes that while ambiguity provides interpretation challenges for the reader, it is indeed a powerful stylo-semantic editorial strategy in the hands of an adept journalist.

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**Key words:** Lexical ambiguity • X-rays • Newspaper headlines and Newspapers

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### INTRODUCTION

Ambiguity in language entails the susceptibility of an expression to double or multiple interpretations. This may be caused by the presence of a word with double meanings in a sentence (lexical ambiguity) or by structural relations in the sentence (syntactic ambiguity). Ambiguity is an interesting as well as an intriguing linguistic phenomenon which has received a lot of attention and will continue to receive conspicuous attention as long as human communication remains feasible. What varies from linguist to linguist may however be the dimension of attention accorded it, just as the current foray is focused on the stylistics of lexical ambiguity in newspaper headlines.

Ambiguity may undermine the information-conveying efficacy of a linguistic message. It may task the comprehension faculties of the reader leaving him torn between double or multiple possible interpretations as he labours to construct meanings and messages from the texts. As the reader grapples with the enormous meaning encapsulated in a few words in a headline, the presence of ambiguity can further hamper his efforts. Thus, ambiguity unarguably poses a barrier to effective communication which demands that both the writer and the reader recognize the same meaning for each linguistic

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construction. Owing to the time lag between the production of a text and its reception by readers, Crystal and Davy advocate that writers should anticipate the problem that can arise from having their texts read and interpreted by many recipients in a diversity of settings. This is necessary because, unlike speech, written discourse, more often than not, lacks immediacy of feedback which serves to clarify the adequacy of the interpretation assigned to the message conveyed [1-3].

However, ambiguity is seen in some positive light in certain contexts. According to Sennet, “Authors, poets, lyricists and the like have found ambiguity to be an extremely powerful tool”. They can use it to great effect and play cleverly on the double meaning as a matter of style. Thus, the occurrence of ambiguity in language use may be deliberate or otherwise depending on the purpose of the discourse. The study therefore explores how ambiguity constitutes a part of the features of the style of newspaper headlines with implications for stylistic effects on the reader. It argues that the acclaimed challenge of interpretation, which lexical ambiguity may pose, forms part of the stylistic means of attracting attention to the work. It invites the reader to plunge deeper into the story with the hope that the meaning lapses are usually provided for by the stylistic context. This awareness of pragmatic enrichment is necessary because the level at which a person understands the plethora of discursive meaning churned out by the media daily determines the degree of acceptance or rejection of the ideologies overtly or covertly peddled [4-7].

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study adopts a descriptive design, as it is qualitative in nature. Thirty headlines selected from 2013 issues of four Nigerian newspapers through non-random purposive sampling form the corpus of primary data. The newspapers are *The Daily Trust (DT)*, *The Nation (TN)*, *The National Mirror (NM)* and *This Day (TD)*. For brevity, the abbreviations are used to represent the newspapers in the analyses. The number of headlines chosen from each of the four newspapers is not uniform given that some newspapers may have more ambiguous headlines than others. However, an attempt is made to give each newspaper adequate representation. The headlines are classified according to the word class of the ambiguous lexical items.

Textual analysis is adopted in the study. The textual analysis is corpus-based as only the headlines that depict the features investigated are taken from the newspapers, presented and analyzed in the relevant sections.

**The Concerns of Stylistics:** Defining stylistics holistically has constituted an enigmatic challenge to linguists, the reason being partly that the discipline covers a variety of approaches to the study of texts. Secondly, although the preoccupation of stylistics was originally the linguistic analysis of literary texts, the purview of stylistics has evidently encapsulated other text forms: literary or non-literary, spoken or written. However, the common core feature of stylistics, regardless of where it is applied, is the primacy given to language in textual analysis. Stylistics is a branch of linguistics that analyzes and describes features of style employed in a text. If ambiguity occurs distinctively in a piece of writing, it therefore becomes stylistically relevant. Wales underscores the need for a stylistic account of ambiguity in these words: “Very significantly, as a result of Roger Fowler’s interest from the 1980s onward in critical linguistics, stylistics began to place emphasis on language and texts located and functioning in particular social, ideological and political practices and has exposed linguistic ambiguity and obfuscation”. A stylistic analysis of lexical ambiguity in newspaper headlines attempted in this study thus meshes well with Wales’s observation.

Cluett and Kampeas, cited in Dada, posit that the object of stylistics is to study, criticize and expose the “tangible manifestations of style through bare facts (descriptive) and interpretative judgement”. It is therefore the duty of a stylistician to examine and critically analyze objectively apparent features of style noticed in a text and account for their occurrence – that is the semantic consequences of the patterns – in the context. This description may cut across different levels of stylistic analysis: phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics, discourse and graphology. Ambiguity also cuts across different linguistic levels: phonology, lexis, syntax and pragmatics. However, this study is limited to lexical ambiguity.

Stylistics follows from the concept of linguistic style. Thus stylistics can be defined plainly as the study of style – that is a study of those features that are markers of style in a text. Leckerle in Wales states unequivocally that “It is right to state, on the one hand, that no one has probably ever known exactly what the term stylistics comprises, yet, on the other hand, that the discipline is forever being reborn”. This belief presumably stems from the fact that style, which stylistics sets out to study, is multifaceted, unstable, slippery and nebulous. This presupposes that the preoccupation of stylistics is elastic and ever evolving and is defined by the manifestations of style. Although varied theories are germane to stylistic analysis, they may not all apply to a single stylistic enquiry. Even if they do, the level of relevance may differ among the theories. Thus, compelling a stylistic investigation to fit into all the moulds in equal capacity may be unrealistic. As a solution, Crystal and Davy advise that the task of a stylistician is “to interrelate his observations within the framework of some theory and thus piece together any general pattern of linguistic variation which may exist”. This study therefore draws specifically from style as choice and style as a product of context [8-10].

The style-as-choice theory recognizes that language, although consisting in a finite set of symbols, has the potential for numerous possibilities of patterning for the expression of similar linguistic ideas. Thus, in uttering message *a*, a speaker is at liberty to exploit the huge resources of language at his disposal with a view to choosing the linguistic items that best convey his idea – a choice that if substituted for another set of linguistic items within an approximate domain of meaning conveys the same message *a*, but only in a different style. Finegan accepts the foregoing view that the choice of words and the position the word occupies in a sentence have meaning consequences. As he puts it, word meaning and sentence meaning are intimately related in such a way that the occurrence of a word in a sentence in place of another word more often than not affects the whole sentence. The deliberate choice of one symbolization over another within an approximate domain of meaning in headlines is one of the factors that create ambiguity in headlines.

Implicit in this theory is that no linguistic construction is bereft of style only that one expression may be chosen consciously or unconsciously over an equivalent one for being more appropriate in that context. It is therefore deducible from the foregoing that choice is shaped by the social context. This theory is relevant to this study in that the lexical items in headlines are consciously chosen by the copy editor while these linguistic choices are shaped by contextual appropriateness as well as the illocutionary goal(s) of the editors.

The theory of style as a product of context recognizes the pivotal role of context in the explication of style. Hasan posits that the nature of the message conveyed in a text changes as the values of the contextual parameters change noting that this is what it means to claim that language in use suits itself to the speaker’s socio-semantic needs. By implication, a text and its context are inextricably tied in such a way that a text can only mean what its context confers on it. Delineating the nature of stylistic context, Azuiké explains that context “in addition to the intratextual and intertextual ordering of a text... includes extratextual features to which the resolution of items local to a text can be sought”. This perception of context, he argues, transcends textual boundaries to include exophoric references. Viewed in that manner, context forms a crucial factor in style as the preference for certain linguistic choices is occasioned by the writer’s expectation that the reader will locate the meaning within a broad context. If linguistic choices are context-sensitive, it implies that any attempt to ascribe meanings to utterances should not be divorced from the contexts that informed their construction. In a similar vein, Simpson notes that “stylistics is interested in language as a function of texts in context and it acknowledges that utterances (literary or otherwise) are produced in a time, a place and in a cultural and cognitive context. This assertion indicates that the meaning of a text may extend beyond its content and form to accommodate the physical, linguistic and social contexts that produce it. The foregoing stylistic theories are underscored by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) which emphasizes that “language is a resource for making meaning and meaning resides in systemic patterns of choices”. This presupposes that the construction of meaning requires the making of choices and the way the choices are realized is controlled by the function. SFL acknowledges that the entire architecture of language revolves around its functionality, thus making functionality intrinsic to language [11-17]. The theory therefore provides the key to understanding ambiguous texts as intentional acts of meaning.

**Lexical Ambiguity:** As observed by Fromkin and Rodman, lexical ambiguity arises when a lexical item in a phrase carries more than one meaning. The ensuing example captures this double denotation in the lexicon: *He struck the Master's temple*. The lexeme *temple* constitutes ambiguity in the sentence. The word in that sentential context could mean: *part of the head, part of the glasses, building for worship, meeting place, special place*. The first two of the meanings though different are related while the last three have related meanings which are distinct from the first two. Thus, the ambiguity in the sentence is caused by the occurrence of a lexical item with multiple denotations. Sentences of this nature abound in communication and by extension newspaper headlines.

Each of the double meanings identified in each set is distinct from the other. However, it should also be seen that while a set of meanings assigned to a lexeme may be related in some broad sense there are meanings that are practically unrelated. This observation introduces us to two semantic relations that give rise to lexical ambiguity: homonymy and polysemy. According to Lobner, homonymy and polysemy “are best taken as characterizing two extremes on a scale. Both phenomena constitute lexical ambiguity: the same lexical *form* has different lexical *meanings*”. Contrasting between the two phenomena, Lobner conceives of homonymy as “lexemes with different meanings that happen to have the same sound form or spelling.... In contrast, polysemy is a matter of one lexeme having several interrelated meanings, i.e. an instance of what was meant by ‘minor variation’ of lexical meaning”. However, the distinction between polysemy and homonymy is vague as two lexemes that seem unrelated by intuition may after all be related etymologically and vice versa. What is common to them and is of primary concern to the current study is that both phenomena constitute lexical ambiguity. Thus, the study focuses on how lexical ambiguity occurs as a result of the semiotic choices employed in newspaper headlines and the stylistic effects on the reader.

#### **Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion**

##### **Noun Ambiguity:**

- ATIKU ABUBAKAR CASES FOR LAUNCH TOMORROW *TD* 26/11/13
- KUNLE AFOLAYAN GARNERS SUPPORT FOR OCTOBER 1<sup>ST</sup> *TD* 11/8/13
- A COVER FOR ABU STUDENTS *TD* 14/11/13
- EYO EFFRONG'S NEW LINE *TN* 15/9/13
- TUNJI OLADELE LOOKS BEYOND THE COURTS *TN* 14/9/13
- YCE TO DISCUSS 'NEGLECT OF YORUBA' *TN* 18/11/13
- CHIME, OHANEZE LAMENT KILLING OF IGBO *TN* 20/3/13
- WHY BURNA BOYS PERFORMED IN PANTS *NM* 2/11/13
- MY GOAL, WILL OF GOD *NM* 21/11/13
- FAVOUR RETURNS TO SCHOOL, BUT... *TN* 30/9/13
- NFC BOSS SEEKS FILMMAKERS' COUNSEL *TN* 28/9/13
- CALABAR'S EROSION OF DEATH *TN* 13/9/13
- FIRM UNVIELS TWO TABLETS *DT* 18/11/13
- HISTORY ON KELANI'S CANVAS *TN* 27/11/13
- NWABUEZE APPLAUDS UWECHUE'S LEGAL SCHOLARSHIP *DT* 26/11/13

In headline 1 (H1 for short, henceforth), the ambiguity arises from the homonymy in the lexeme *case*. Its relevant meanings in the phrase include ‘a container’, ‘a matter that is being officially investigated, especially by the police’, ‘a question to be decided in court’. The occurrence of *launch* in the headline is expected to narrow down the meaning possibilities, but this is not feasible considering the sensational style that characterizes headlines which allows for a possible metaphoric use of *launch*. However, recourse to co-text reveals that ‘Atiku Abubakar Cases’ is a book.

This revelation is staggering as the ambiguity would have been avoided if the book title had been conventionally italicized. It can therefore be presumed that the writer's preferred presentation style is geared towards readership appeal. A similar explanation goes for (H2). Semantically, the date merely points to the first day in the month of October. However, armed with background knowledge, any Nigerian reader will naturally associate the phrase with Nigeria's Independence Day celebration. On the contrary, further reading reveals that 'October 1<sup>st</sup>' is the title of a new movie. Had the phrase been enclosed in quotation marks, this ambiguity would have been averted.

In (H3), the ambiguity is triggered off by the lexical item *cover*. A decontextualized interpretation opens H3 to vistas of meaning ranging from 'something you put over something else in order to hide it, protect it, or close it; place for shelter/hiding; protection from attack'; insurance agreement; among others. However, since any lexical item, whether monosemous, homonymous or polysemous, may have its meaning modulated on a particular occasion of use by the linguistic or non-linguistic context in which it occurs, contextual considerations are imposed on the lexeme *cover*. Stylistically, H3 occurs in a context that favours the perception of 'cover' as shelter provided by a building, taking cognizance of the picture of a gigantic university building housing tertiary education students, which precedes the article. This stylistic trick lures the reader into initially selecting 'shelter' from the meaning possibilities. The reader's choice is validated by Reah's claim that, "A picture adds an extra dimension of meaning". However, having been enticed into further reading, the reader soon discovers from the lead paragraph that the operative meaning of 'cover' is 'insurance' as the article talks about a health insurance scheme for students.

The ambiguity in H4 is localized in *line*, which has numerous meanings: some polysemous and others homonymous. There is nothing in the headline that suggests which of the meanings are more probable here and listing all the numerous possibilities will be cumbersome. The operative meaning emerges from the 24<sup>th</sup> meaning of the lexical item in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary: 'a type or area of business, activity or interest'. The only extra-textual clue to this meaning is awareness of who Eyo Effiong is and what he or she does for a living. But this knowledge is not shared by all the potential readers of the headline, thereby fostering the ambiguity and inviting the reader to seek clarification in the appertaining news story.

Similarly in H5, the ambiguity lies in the potential meanings of *court*: 'a place where legal trials take place', 'a place where games such as tennis is played' and 'a large open section of a building.' However, a reader who knows Tunji Oladele's profession as a lawyer will consider the headline totally unambiguous. Widdowson alerts us to this tendency: "There are innumerable instances of textual imprecision and ambiguity in actual language use which simply pass unnoticed because we of course quite naturally complement what we read with what we know." But the percentage of readers that know Tunji Oladele that much is certainly small. It can then be hypothesized that the writer has anticipated that the lexeme *court* be operationalized in the ensuing text.

The ambiguity in (H6) and (H7) is similar, lying between the use of *Yoruba* and *Igbo* as ethnic groups and as languages. However, in normal usage the lexemes are preceded by a definite article and pluralized to denote 'the people' as in *the Igbos* and *the Yorubas*. The zero article usage adopted here is used when the languages of these ethnic groups are meant. For example, people speak Yoruba/Igbo, but we say 'the Yoruba language' and 'the Igbo language'. The extra-textual basis for considering 'language' as a potential meaning option is drawn from background awareness that the speaking of ethnic languages in Nigeria is increasingly becoming unpopular among the younger generation and is thus lamentable and worthy of discussion by such concerned authorities. However, in each of the two headlines, intra-textual context shows that what is meant is the people, not the language as is semantically encoded. If the economy principle employed in headlining is the justification for this chosen structure, it is unarguable that the addition of -s will not increase the number of words in the headlines and by so doing no ambiguity would have occurred. The logic that underlies this style is perceived in terms of a cost/benefit criterion which engenders a communicative trade off to ambiguity and difficulty. This preference for ambiguity underscores its expressive potential [2].

Although *pants* in (H8) is polysemous with denotations such as underwear, knickers and trousers being entertained, it is noteworthy that the intended meaning will unlikely be trousers or even knickers – the reason being that it does not make news if a man entertains the audience publicly in trousers or even knickers. But certainly wearing underpants in a public show can make headline. These pragmatic considerations may obviate the putative lexical ambiguity in *pants* and narrow down its meanings to one. It is also noteworthy that the *trousers* meaning is American English, but this does not rule out the ambiguity outright as many Nigerian writers are in the habit of mixing up British and American English.

In H9, *goal* is ambiguous between ‘something that you hope to achieve’ and ‘the action of putting a ball into a goal.’ Thus, H9 could have two distinct paraphrases permissible by its elliptical nature: (a) My goal in life is to do the will of God (b) The goal I scored is the will of God. The latter meaning will be operative if the headline occurs in the sports column while the former is favoured in other contexts. However, the writer-meaning is not in doubt here because the headline is found in the sports column. *Favour* in (H10) is torn between its meaning as an abstract noun and its newly-acquired meaning as a proper noun. It is increasingly becoming fashionable among Nigerians to use abstract and common nouns as proper nouns in naming children, as seen in names like Favour, Gift, Precious and Excellence. Even adjectives and participles are used as proper names too: Peculiar, Amazing, Anointed, among others. Thus each of the two meanings of ‘favour’ is admissible in the headline; only further reading of co-text can exclude one. Ordinarily, the use of upper or lower case letter to begin the word could have brought about the needed priming, but quite unfortunately *Favour* begins the headline making such upper/lower case distinction impossible.

Similarly, the lexeme ‘counsel’ in (H11) has double denotations: ‘a piece of advice’ and ‘a lawyer,’ both of which are plausible in the context. Thus, when paraphrased, the headline could read (a) NFC boss seeks filmmakers’ advice or (b) NFC boss seeks filmmakers’ lawyer. However, if contextual parameters are brought to bear on the ambiguous lexeme, the meaning will undoubtedly favour the first denotation. While a person can seek a lawyer and also advice, the presence of ‘filmmakers’ pre-modifying ‘counsel’ suggests that it is their expert advice that is being sought. Besides, the encyclopedic knowledge that filmmakers in the country are so numerous that they would probably have more than one lawyer suggests that if ‘lawyer’ had been meant *counsels* would have been used. This calculation supports Saeed’s definition of encyclopedic knowledge as “the knowledge a speaker might calculate others would have before, or independently of, a particular conversation, by virtue of membership in a community”.

The ambiguous nouns in (H12) and (H13) are ‘erosion’ and ‘tablets’ respectively. In H12, *erosion* is ambiguous between two meanings: ‘the process by which the surface of land is gradually damaged by water and begins to disappear’ and ‘the gradual reduction or destruction of something.’ The two meanings though distinct are related, hence polysemous. The two likely interpretations here are ‘Erosion in Calabar which is deadly,’ or ‘reduction of death rate in Calabar.’ Although the second interpretation may seem unlikely elsewhere, the sensational nature of headlines makes this interpretation plausible. For instance, if there was an epidemic in Calabar which had claimed many lives and suddenly the epidemic was brought under control, the emergence of the headline favouring the second meaning will be reasonable. This interpretation supports Simpson’s assertion that utterances are produced in a time, in a place and in a social context, all of which affects meaning.

In a similar vein, *Tablet* in H13 has the following meanings: ‘solid piece of medicine’, ‘flat stone with writing’, ‘a personal computer’ and ‘paper for writing on’. To further worsen the reader’s selection of meaning, the term is countable in all the possible meanings, making recourse to pragmatics and co-text the best option in narrowing down the meaning possibilities. When co-text is considered, the occurrence of *firm* and *unveil* become crucial to the interpretation and points to the fact that a new product is being introduced to the public. However, we know pragmatically that drug manufacturing firms do not launch ‘tablets’ but ‘brands’ of the tablets. Furthermore, launching paper for writing on, arguably, does not seem newsworthy. A flat stone with writing cut into it can be unveiled certainly, but when this potential meaning is juxtaposed with the meaning of tablet as a personal computer, the former is dwindled by the encyclopedic knowledge that

new technologies are often invented in the computer ‘world’ quite competitively. Thus, any firm that has a new technology to showcase makes headline. This meaning is primed by the context in which this headline appears: IT World. Hasan’s remark comes into sharp focus here: the nature of the message conveyed changes as the values of the contextual parameters change; thus, language lends itself to the speaker’s socio-semantic needs.

Lastly, the nouns in boldface in H14 and H15 are ambiguous. *Canvas* has many distinct but related meanings such as ‘heavy fabric’, ‘fabric for painting on’, ‘painting’, ‘the background against which an event happens’, ‘cloth for needle work’, ‘a vessel’s sail’, ‘a tent or group of tents’ and ‘floor of boxing or wrestling ring’. All the meanings apply to the headline almost in equal capacity. The ambiguity can only be resolved by resort to background knowledge regarding Kelani’s profession and the fact that some of the meanings can be eliminated by considerations of newsworthiness. Readers who are incapable of employing the above cues soon find out from the story that Kelani is involved in artistic works. In a similar vein, the operative meaning of *scholarship* in H15 lies between two interpretations (a) Financial assistance which is legally awarded to Uwechue for something and (b) Uwechue’s academic learning or achievement in legal matters. The writer-intended meaning between the two can only be inferred effortlessly by readers who have background knowledge of Uwechue’s profession as a lawyer.

**Verb Ambiguity:** Besides noun ambiguity, the data have many cases of verb ambiguity as exemplified in the headlines that follow numbered (16) – (26).

- OSUN SCHOOL PRINCIPAL ATTACKED FOR SENDING *HIJAB*-WEARING STUDENT HOME *TD* 26/11/13
- BORNO HOSPITAL PATIENTS SWELL OVER FREE FEEDING SCHEME 15/11/13
- YINKA OSOBU STRIKES GOLD *TN* 14/9/13
- FATAI ROLLING DOLLAR RESURRECTS IN ONIKOLA *TD* 11/8/13
- ABDULLAHI TIPS OKAGBARE FOR WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP TITLE *DT* 29/7/13
- WOMEN SOCIETY LIFTS 50 WIDOWS *TN* 1/11/13
- FADAMA III PROJECT OPENS ONDO RURAL COMMUNITIES *TD* 29/8/13
- MEET THE MAN WHO FIXED HIS OWN HEART *DT* 26/11/13
- SOLDIERS MARCH IN IBADAN *TN* 27/9/13
- JONATHAN SHELVES BUDGET PRESENTATION OVER HECKLING FEARS *DT* 20/11/13
- WHEN DNAKA RESIDENTS TURN TO DOGS FOR SECURITY *DT* 13/11/13

In (H16) and (H17), the ambiguity is caused by the polysemous nature of the verbs *attacked* and *swell*. *Attacked* in the headline context could mean *beaten* or *criticized*. There are no contextual signals to select one of the meanings over the other making the headline globally ambiguous. Usually, such headlines provoke inquisitiveness which presumably goads the reader into the main story. H17 is akin to this scenario because *swell*, as used here, can mean ‘to become bigger or rounder’, or ‘to increase in number or size’. The rationale for entertaining the two meanings is the presence of ‘patient’ (favouring the 1<sup>st</sup> meaning) and ‘free feeding scheme’ (favouring the 2<sup>nd</sup>). Even encyclopedic knowledge does not advance the ambiguity resolution: it is common knowledge that hospital patients can respond to free feeding scheme by overfeeding, or by non-adherence to prescribed diets, which can induce the swelling reaction. Similarly, a hospital that runs a free feeding scheme in a developing country like Nigeria, where hunger wrecks more havoc than diseases, will indubitably have an unprecedented number of patients at its doorstep, thus selecting the second meaning. These observations indicate that the motive behind the editor’s lexical choice in the headline may be readership appeal. The reader is required to read the main story to unwind the writer-meaning in the two headlines.

The ambiguity in (H18) and (H19) stems from a distinction between literal and non-literal senses of the verbs *strikes* and *resurrects*. The two headlines viewed literally seem to be semantically odd and unlikely, which paves the way for a search for a new meaning that is pragmatically relevant. However, semantically perceived, dealing a physical blow on *gold*

as the patient is not newsworthy which signals that the writer is pursuing a different illocutionary goal. Based on contextual relevance the headline could mean that the agent has come into some fortune. This inference is validated by co-text which reveals that Yinka Osobu acquired a multi-million naira property in Lagos. The ambiguity in (H19) is accentuated by the phrase *in Onikola*, which sounds like the name of a place. If this meaning is preserved, the ambiguous lexeme *resurrect* naturally takes the meaning ‘rises from the dead’ which overrides the other meaning ‘to bring back into use something that has disappeared or been forgotten’. However, the intra-textual context shows that Fatai Rolling Dollar, a high life musician, featured in a film entitled “Onikola”. The implication for meaning is that the film has brought him back to limelight. Had “Onikola” been enclosed in quotation marks, this ambiguity would not have arisen. Again, encyclopedic knowledge enables a reader aware of the movie to jettison the ambiguity.

*Tips* in H20 has about eight semantic possibilities though only two of these meanings are relevant in this headline context: ‘to give extra money’ and ‘to say who will succeed.’ The second meaning is usually passive, as in *Mary is tipped to take over from her boss*. Considering that the headline is in active voice, the reader may easily select the first meaning, only to discover later from the lead that the writer’s intended meaning is the second in which Abdullahi predicts Okagbare’s success. However, this ambiguity may not be tasking to a reader who knows Okagbare as a winner of a world championship title and Abdullahi as the Sports Minister. Similarly in H21, the lexical ambiguity in the lexeme *lift* is easily resolved through pragmatic inference. With the occurrence of *widows* in the headline, the reader is led to draw from the presuppositional pool the fact that the *lifting* in question means ‘to improve their situation (empowerment)’ or even ‘to make them happier’, not ‘to raise them up to a higher position’ or ‘to airlift them’.

Headlines (22) – (25) have lexical ambiguity localized in their verbs. In (H22) *opens* is polysemous as it allows for such denotations as ‘makes the community accessible’, ‘makes the community vulnerable’, ‘flags off the communities’, etc. However, the operative meaning is derived from our background knowledge of what Fadama Projects do for rural communities: empowerment and development. In (H23), the polysemous use of *fixed* brings to the fore such meanings as ‘repair the heart’, ‘set up the heart’ and ‘put the heart firmly in its position’. Each of the meanings has a tint of impossibility in the headline context. If the fixing is done by another person, questions may not be raised, but it seems unlikely that one should perform such a delicate procedure on oneself. Thus, H23 sparks off some inquisitiveness which urges the reader to plunge into further reading where the ambiguity is resolved with the discovery that the man in question just invented a device that alleviated his heart defect.

*March* in H24 is ambiguous between its meanings as ‘to walk in military fashion’ and ‘to walk to protest or publicize something.’ Both meanings are possible in the headline, but when pragmatic constraints are imposed on the headline, the second meaning may become more plausible. The reason for this contextual wager is that soldiers merely walking in a military fashion may not really make news, being a regular exercise. However, if soldiers walk to protest or publicize something, the event becomes newsworthy, though only further reading can resolve the ambiguity. Similarly, *shelves* in (H25) has two meanings: to postpone a plan or an activity and to put books, etc. on a shelf. However, in this context the first meaning easily takes precedence over the second due to the accompanying lexical item *presentation*, which suggests an oral delivery and not the document itself. However, it should not be ruled out that the other meaning is being primed too. If not, why would the writer choose the polysemous lexical item *shelve* when another monosemous one like *postpone* could have served?

Furthermore, in (H26) it is no news for people to use dogs as security, but certainly when human beings turn into dogs for security reasons it becomes ‘hot’ news. MacDonald, Pearlmutter and Seidenberg note that “context can promote one meaning of the equibaised word, resulting in a ‘selective access’ pattern”. Thus, this latter meaning is played on to lend the simple story of using dogs as security newsworthiness and draw more readership to the newspaper.

**Adjective Ambiguity:** Only one instance of adjective ambiguity is found in the data as presented below:

- PROTECT POOR ELECTRICITY CONSUMERS NM 22/11/13



The adjective *poor* is responsible for the ambiguity in (H27). Its polysemous meanings relevant to the context include 'having very little money', 'unfortunate' and 'of a quality that is low or lower than expected'. The ambiguity in H26 is both lexical and syntactic which makes it possible for the three meanings to stand. The syntactic nature of the ambiguity arises from the fact that *poor* can modify either *electricity* or *consumers*. Or both *poor* and *electricity* can form a constituent an adjective phrase (AP) modifying the head of the noun phrase (NP) *consumers*. If *poor* modifies only consumers, then the first two meanings compete for selection equally. But if *poor* modifies electricity only, the third meaning becomes the only relevant meaning. All the three meanings are backed up by background knowledge: the quality of electricity supply in the country is abysmally low, thus making Nigerian consumers unfortunate. Thirdly, the high electricity tariff is not favourable to low income earners. Only further reading can extricate the writer-meaning from the potential meanings.

#### Preposition Ambiguity

Preposition ambiguity is rare in the data as only three cases are found:

- ONDO PDP AFTER AGAGU *TN* 17/9/13
- JILTED WOMAN RUNS OVER BOYFRIEND *DT* 22/11/13
- HOW I'M TORTURED BY TELEPHONE *TN* 4/5/13

H28 can be paraphrased as Ondo PDP is after Agagu, or Ondo PDP after Agagu's leadership or demise. These potential semantic interpretations are enabled by the elliptical nature of headlines. However, any reader conversant with Agagu's position in the People's Democratic Party (PDP) will take the perceived ambiguity for granted. The writer must have really calculated how much the readers know about Agagu's position before allowing the ambiguity to exist. This implies that the writer who has a communicative intent of affecting the reader's knowledge conveys this intention by employing an input closest to the reader's existing knowledge and less expensive to the reader.

Similarly, H29 can be read as a phrasal verb meaning to 'knock down a boyfriend with a vehicle and drive over his body'. An alternative interpretation arises where *run* and *over* do not form a constituent as VP; *over* becomes the head of the prepositional phrase: *over boyfriend*. The interpretation then becomes "Jilted woman runs because of her boyfriend". This type of ambiguity may not survive in speech as intonation will provide the needed distinction. Bussman corroborates this view: "In everyday communication, ambiguity is a rather marginal problem as context, intonation, situation, etc. usually sift out the adequate reading".

In H<sub>30</sub>, the preposition *by* is ambiguous between the instrumental meaning (a piece of electronic device) and its functional meaning (as a means of communication). In the instrumental meaning, one can be metaphorically tortured by a missing telephone, a malfunctioning telephone or even the crave for a particular type of telephone. Alternatively, one can be harassed by calls over the telephone especially at odd hours. The content of the message might constitute the torture or it might be the timing or frequency of the calls.

### CONCLUSION

The lexical ambiguities identified in the study are occasioned by the writers' preferences and semiotic choices. Writers of headlines are exposed to a myriad of linguistic choices in the construal of experience; however, the choices are contingent on the intended communicative functions of the headlines. These choices, as demonstrated in the analyses, have semantic consequences one of which is lexical ambiguity. The analyses show how the reader plods through the meaning possibilities engendered by equivocation in a bid to grasp the writer's communicative intention. The potential interpretation difficulties engendered is found to be greatly ameliorated by the stylistic context of the ambiguous headlines, which encompasses the

intra-textual and extra-textual contexts. The delayed interpretation that lexical ambiguity creates is stylistically functional in newspaper headlines as it provokes inquisitiveness which draws the reader's attention forcibly to the discourse. Thus, the study concludes that while headline ambiguity provides interpretation challenges for the reader, it is indeed a powerful stylo-semantic editorial strategy in the hands of an adept journalist.

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