

POLITENESS IN THE PRINT MEDIA: ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER HEADLINES ON SECURITY ISSUES IN NIGERIA

Musa, Ibrahim

Department of European Languages
Faculty of Arts, Social & Management Sciences
Federal University, Birnin Kebbi, Nigeria
musatela@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper examines linguistic politeness as it applies to language use in the print media. Particular attention is paid to newspaper headlines on security issues in the selected corpora of the Daily Trust newspaper in Nigeria. Many media outlets have been entangled in the insurgency that has been ravishing Nigeria for the past six years especially as newspapers report claims and counter-claims made by the armed forces, political leaders and the victims of the insurgency. Language has always been a vehicle of communication in this regard. The framework of analysis used in this study is that presented by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). The place of politeness as a linguistic phenomenon is examined. Samples of news headlines on the front pages of the selected copies of the Daily Trust newspaper are selected and analysed. The analysis shows that in newspaper headlines, politeness principles are employed in the presentation of information and may take the form of threats to either speaker or the hearer. A number of observations and conclusions which are drawn from the analysis are brought forward.

Key words: Newspaper headlines, media discourse, politeness, print media, front page and insurgency

Introduction

Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural society, with well over 300 different linguistic groups. Communication in this kind of society is therefore, not devoid of different kinds of problems. Some of these problems occur because of differences in language, culture and political orientations. Misrepresentation, misinformation and misinterpretation do occur within the context of the media communication. The result is that sometimes disharmony and poor relation occur not only between the media and the actors in the media but also between the media and the society and as such, poor communication leads to serious disconnection between the society, the media and the politicians. The media also serves as a major source of data that is available for research especially in the area of linguistics. The media in every society dictate the pace of the society especially in the area of meaning, language and communication. Again media being the main voice of the people greatly influence the way language is used in the society and this kind of study will open more ways for our understanding of the use of language in the electronic media. Certain use of language may be considered impolite and direct confrontation to others and this may inadvertently generate conflict and sometimes degenerate into a full scale war of words on the pages of newspaper. Of great interest to the writer here is the interpretation and misinterpretation that people associate with many of the headlines. The main focus will be to establish the role of politeness in this kind of media communication, especially in the use of headlines relating to security issues in Nigeria.

Insurgency according to US Department of Defense, can be defined as, "organized resistance movement that uses subversion, sabotage, and armed conflict to achieve its aims." The major aim of insurgencies is to overthrow the existing sociopolitical order. They may seek to overthrow established government, establish an autonomous national territory within the borders of a state, cause the withdrawal of an occupying power or even extract political concession which may not be achieved through other less violence means. In Nigeria, the insurgency as it is known today could be traced to the emergence of Boko Haram in 2009 and since then it has escalated to the level of submerging not only the northeastern Nigeria but the entire northern Nigeria. The economy of the region came to a stand still, farms were abandoned, and fishing became impossible, travels to and from the region were almost paralysed. Many lives were wasted, women rendered widows and their children; orphans. Internally Displaced Persons were camped both within Nigeria and in the neighbouring countries. While the carnage went on, the government of the day was busy arguing, making claims and counter claims about the number of people killed in each attack and usually on the pages of newspapers and in the media. Most of these claims and counter claims were used as excuses for the failure of the government to confront the glaring security threats with the necessary zeal.

The major aims and objectives of this paper is to establish the use of linguistic politeness or lack of it in the newspaper headlines relating to the activities of the insurgents and the response of the government against the insurgent activities. If linguistic politeness is used, how do we identify it? How do we analyse this politeness? Does the use of politeness imply attempt by people in authority to provide excuses for the failure of the government? Is there any future potentials for advancement in this area of research?

Research Design

The most influential pragmatic theory of politeness to date can be said to be that proffered by Brown and Levinson (1978). This assertion is substantiated by the fact that since their publication, politeness has become a major centre of focus in pragmatics thereby creating a vast data and theoretical as well as empirical studies. (Lakoff, 1990) cited in Mahuni, (2008, pg. 116) defined politeness as: "System of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and

confrontation in all human interchange". This definition emphasizes the importance of maintaining harmony in interpersonal relations among interlocutors.

1. **The face saving view:** This is perhaps the most notable work on politeness as proposed by Brown and Levinson, (1978). Their basic assumptions that all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have).
 - i. 'Face' the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects.
 - a. *Negative face:* the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non- distraction i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.
 - b. *Positive face:* the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants.
 - ii. Certain rational capacities, in particular consistent modes of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends.

Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) notion of face is derived from Goffman, (1967), and the English folk term, which links face with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated or losing face. The notion of face here implies that face is something emotionally invested and it can be lost, maintained, improved upon or attended to in an interaction. There is also the assumption of cooperative efforts between and among interlocutors in the maintenance of face to the extent that mutually interactants work together to save and maintain each other's' faces in the light of mutual vulnerability. This is important and in fact necessary because, according to this view, one does not save one's face at the expense of other person's face in an interaction.

They (Brown and Levinson, 1978) propose that certain types of acts are inherently face-threatening to the speaker or the hearer, or both. They propose the following four way analysis as cited in Fraser, (1990 pg. 229).

- i. Acts threatening to the hearer's negative face e.g. ordering, advising, threatening, warning, etc.
- ii. Acts threatening to the hearer's positive face: e.g. complaining, criticizing, disagreeing, and raising taboo topics.
- iii. Acts threatening to the speaker's negative face: e.g. accepting on other, accepting tanks, promising unwillingly.
- iv. Acts threatening to the speaker's positive face: e.g. apologizing, accepting, compliments, confessing.

In the analysis of politeness in this paper speech act theory is adopted. This is important because the politeness theory proffered by brown and Levinson claims that most speech acts inherently threaten either the hearer's or the speaker's face wants and that politeness is involved in redressing those face threats. The speech act theory is consequently selected for the analysis of politeness in this paper. This will enable us understand the speech act in our attempt to analyse the polite or impolite act. In line with this, four main strategies of performing speech acts are distinguished above

The Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory originates in Austin's (1962) observation that while sentences can be used to report states of affairs, the utterance of some sentences, in specific situations, must be treated as performance of an act. In a series of lectures published in a book titled, " *How to Do Things with Words*" Austin sets about demolishing the view of language that would place truth conditions as central to language understanding. He distinguished between what he called 'constatives' and 'performatives.' A constative is simply saying something true or false. A performative is doing something by speaking; paradigmatically, one can get married by saying "I do" (Austin, 1961). Constatives are true or false, depending on their correspondence (or not) with the facts; performatives are actions and, as such, are not true or false, but 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous,' depending on whether or not they successfully perform the action in question. In particular, for performative utterances to be felicitous they must invoke an existing convention and be invoked in the right circumstances.

According to Yule (1996:48), the actions we perform by producing an utterance will consist of three related acts as presented in the following table:

Table 1

S/NO	Type of act produced via utterance	Description
1	Locutionary act	Basic act of utterance or producing a meaningful linguistic expression. Reference. E.g. I've just made some coffee.
2	Illocutionary Force	This is performed via communicative force of the utterance. We may make a statement, offer an explanation, or some other communicative purpose. This is generally known as the illocutionary force of the utterance.
3	Perlocutionary Effect	The effect on the audience by means of uttering the sentence. Such effect being special to the circumstance of utterance. We create utterance usually with the intention to make it have an effect.

Yule (1996) also presents the following classification of speech acts:

Classification Of Speech Acts

1. **Declarations:** Declarations are those kinds of speech acts that change the word via their utterance. The speaker has to have a special institutional role, in a specific context, in order to perform a declaration appropriately. E.g. courtroom and judge.

2. **Representatives:** These are speech acts that state what the speaker believes to be the case or not. Statements of fact, assertions, conclusions, and descriptions, speaker representing the world as he believes it.
3. **Expressives:** These are speech acts that state what speaker feels. They express psychological state and can be statements of pleasure, pain, likes, dislike, joy or sorrow. They can be caused by something the speaker does or the hearer does, but they are about speaker's experience.
4. **Directives:** These are speech acts that speakers use to get someone to do something. They express what the speaker wants. They command, order, request, suggest, and they can be positive or negative. In using directives, the speaker attempts to make the world fit the words (via hearer)
5. **Commissives:** These are speech acts that speakers use to commit themselves to some future action. They express what the speaker intends. They are promises, threats, refusals, pledges and they can be performed by the speaker alone or by the speaker as a member of a group. In using a Commissives, the speaker undertakes to make the world fit the words (via the speaker).

The Analysis

In an attempt to analyze the headlines, only four major headlines were selected for analysis. One of the headlines is single but the others comprise of main headlines with riders. The riders are used in the analysis so as to get the full background of the headlines. In the analysis, the headline is presented in table format, followed by description of its status as speech act and finally its politeness implications.

Table 2

Main Headline	Rider related to main headline
Baga: Satellite Images Show 2,275 Houses Razed	1.Human Rights Watch alleges cover-up
	2.We stand by our report – DHQ
	3.Hundreds killed in Baga
	4.How a soldier's death sparked violence
	5.Jonathan: Death toll grossly exaggerated
	6.Senators faulted report on Baga
	7.Committee visited just one graveyard
	8.Only 1 of 13 southern senators visited Baga

(Daily Trust 2nd, 23rd April & 27th June 2013)

The reference here is about the first Baga massacre in which about 200 people were killed and 2,275 houses destroyed. The cause of the conflict could not be ascertain but it was clear that some army personnel were attacked and as a result, the military allegedly retaliated and the result is the first Baga massacre as reported above. The rider 5 is accredited to President Jonathan and he was making reference to Baga Massacre, The issue with this unfortunate happening was reduced to controversies on the actual number of victims and not who committed the killings or why.

Types of Speech Act: Representative because the President asserts what he believes to be the situation contrary to the claims and counter claims in riders 1, 2, 3, 6 & 7.

Politeness Implications: The death toll that is very high will threaten the positive face of President Jonathan and the security. The higher the casualty figure the more the bad face he has, hence his complaint about "the death toll grossly exaggerated."

Table 3

Main Headline	Rider related to main headline
Shettima to Jonathan:	Let's tackle Boko Haram...
	...insurgents better armed than military

(Daily Trust 13th February 2014)

Shettima is the Governor of Borno State, a State where the insurgency (Boko Haram) is believed to have originated. The Governor was elected under the opposition party APC and not President Jonathan's ruling PDP at the time. His above statement was considered inappropriate and a morale killer to the armed forces who were fighting the insurgents at the time.

Types of Speech Act: *Directive* because this is more of suggestion or advice.

Politeness Implication: This threatens the negative face of the hearer's (President Jonathan's face), telling him that the terrorists he is fighting are better armed than the national army. What is worse is the fact that an opposition governor, who is being helped by the national army is making the assertion. In addition, this is far from morale booster for the army.

Table 4

Main Headlines	Riders related to main headline
Boko Haram seizes 200 female students: some students escaped	1.FG under pressure to find missing girls
	2.Parents, US, NLC demand action
	3.DHQ says only 8 girls still missing
	4.99 girls missing – Borno official
	5.Shettima offers N50 million rewards for information
	6.Jonathan meets governors, security chiefs
	7.Youth vigilantes join search efforts

(Daily Trust, 16th, 17th, 18th April 2014)

The main headline above is one of the initial and authentic reports about the abducted Chibok School Girls. It is authentic because it is closer to 219 girls which is the exact figure. The figure given by the state government is 99, the defense headquarters (DHQ) claimed only 8 girls were missing, while pressure was mounting on the authorities to act (*parents, US, NLC demand action*).

Type of Speech Act: Representative because though it is supposed to be statement of fact, we have three speakers representing the world as they see it and as each of them wants us to believe it. **The Media – 200 girls, state officials – 99 while, Defense Headquarters (DHQ) –claim only 8 girls were abducted.** The actual figure is 219 school girls were abducted by the insurgents and this was confirmed after a thorough investigation resulting from local and international pressure.

Politeness Implications: This is a threat to the hearer’s positive face because the security as representatives of the Federal Authorities, they have the defense central information system in Abuja and whatever happened in Borno (some 860 Km away) can only be relayed to Nigerians and the world from Abuja. The state government owns the secondary school from where the girls were abducted, yet could not ascertain the number of girls missing. The newspaper seems more in control of the information, thereby stating the figure that is closer to reality. In addition, the pressure from parents, United States, Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and the youth vigilantes all mean that the government was not up to the task.

Table 5

Main Headline	Riders related to main Headline
71 die in Abuja blast	1. 16 buses, other vehicles destroyed
	2. 236 affected by the blast – minister
	3. Hospitals overstretched
	4. Red cross distributes 200 body bags
	5. We will defeat Boko Haram – Jonathan
	6. Sultan: We must wake up to challenges

(Daily Trust, 15th April 2014)

These headlines appeared a day after one attack by the Boko Haram insurgents. The headlines give a comprehensive coverage of the attack which occurred in Abuja 860 km away from northeast, the battle ground. It shows the ability of the insurgents and failure of the security and intelligence gathering systems.

Types of Speech Acts: The main headline plus the first four riders are *expressive* speech acts, painting the gloomy, painful and horrifying effects of just one attack by the Boko Haram. Rider 5 is a *Commissives* act in which the Commander-in-Chief gives his commitment to Nigerians that Boko Haram will be defeated. Rider 6 is a *directive* act in which the supreme leader of all the Muslims in Nigeria requests/or commands the people in leadership position to **wake up** to the challenges posed by the insurgence.

Politeness Implications:

- The main headline plus riders 1 – 4 form bad news threatening the positive face the government under Jonathan. They indicate a failure by the government.
- Rider 5 shows Jonathan again loosing negative face by promising apparently unwillingly to defeat the Boko Haram which was widening its destructive powers and scope.
- Rider 6 is a contradiction or affront against the positive face of the government because the Sultan is expected, by nature of the political situation, to calm the nerves but instead asking government to “*wake up*”, thereby implying some kind of sleeping on duty.

Results and Discussion

The politeness issues are very clear from the analysis. Large number of the citizens are being killed daily but the government is busy arguing about the figures of the casualties and no one is talking about how to stop the carnage. People in government are already believing that the terrorists are better armed than the national army. Over 200 school girls were abducted in an area that

is under state of emergency with all the security operatives on the ground and yet not even the actual figure could be established. The attacks by the insurgents spread all over the country including the federal capital that should be even more secured. So if one may ask, what kind of face has this kind of government not lost?

It is clear in headlines (a) above that both government and the security operatives could not perform their duty of properly accounting for the lives of innocent citizens. They resorted to shifting blames on failures to establish the actual number of victims.

It was clear in headline (b) above that the execution of the war against insurgents was not going the way it should but the government of the day was not ready to accept the true picture. The only accepted thing was everyone must be made to believe that the situation was under control, despite practical proves of failures.

In headlines (c) above the fact that more than 200 hundred school girls could be abducted by a group of terrorists from an area that is under state of emergency imposed by the federal authorities is too big a problem for the leaders of the government in power. What is worse is the failure to ascertain the actual number of the girls missing, no traces of the abductors, security operatives lack the necessary intelligence on the girls' whereabouts and seeming lack of decision as what steps to take at the time, are all signs that the government is not in control.

In headlines (d) above, the Abuja bombing shows that the terrorists are capable of taking the war to the door step of the government – federal capital. The implications here could be that if the government cannot fight on the battle ground in faraway Borno state, then let the battle be taken to them. Many people believe the government was sleeping hence the call in rider six on the government to 'wake up'.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has availed me the opportunity to have another understanding of language use in a different context – media. There is also an understanding that in terms of research in linguistic, there is an unquantifiable amount of data in media discourse. This could provide a fertile ground for further future researches. The vast data also become a serious limitation for the researcher as selecting the particular aspect to focus on became very tedious.

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