

**AMBIGUITIES IN NEWSPAPER HEADLINES: A CASE STUDY  
OF *DAILY TRUST* AND *VANGUARD* NEWSPAPERS**

**BY**

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## **APPROVAL PAGE**

This is to certify that this study was carried out by Ibrahim Samaila and has been approved as having satisfied part of the requirements for the award of Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Language by the Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto.

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## **DEDICATION**

This research work is dedicated to my Late Grandmother; Mallama Niimatullah Afolabi (Iya Amoke), who encouraged me to go to school when she was alive. The manner she prioritized education gave me the sight since childhood that education is really important. I pray to Allah who made this dream a reality to reward her with Al-jannatul firdaus.

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## ABSTRACT

This project analyses semantic ambiguous headlines stating their communicative effectiveness with regards to print media. Using data from *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* newspapers, the study discovered that ambiguities are prevalent in the newspaper headlines as a result of various manipulations on sentences and lexical choice. This leads to the possibility of multiple meanings and interpretation of the headlines.



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

The crux of this research is semantic ambiguity as it affects communication effectiveness of media headlines of print media. Semantic ambiguity is concerned with meaning relations at sentence level which is a sub-field in the study of semantics that deals with the influence of one word upon another in sentences. Other related terms are tautology, redundancy, paraphrase, anomaly. Ambiguity is defined as a grammatical phenomenon in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation and could be caused by syntactic and semantic factors. Semantic ambiguity is a situation in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation based on the meaning of a word or words which in themselves can be misinterpreted. Syntactic ambiguity on the other hand is caused by the

grammatical construction of the phrase or sentence which bring about misinterpretation.

A headline like, “Fashola meets ex-girlfriend in Paris” from Vanguard newspaper of June 4, 2013 could be ambiguous and as such could be misinterpreted. The word ‘meets’ has several meanings and denotes a lot of things. It means among others (1) to come face to face with someone coincidentally or unexpectedly (2) to converge or come in contact and finally touch or have sexual intercourse with someone (3) to come together in conflict (4) to gather for a formal discussion. The construction has therefore distorted a direct translation of the sentence to mean Fashola, saw his former girlfriend in Paris coincidentally.

The invention of printing before AD 220 represents one of the greatest landmarks in human history. The development of printing has made it possible for books, newspapers, magazines, and other reading materials to produce in great numbers and it plays an important role in promoting

literacy among the masses. The printing press made possible wider dissemination of knowledge through the rapid flow of ideas from one country to another and the popularization of learning. This research considers a sentence from the point of view of its semantic structure which are ambiguous as regards to media headlines of print media.

The Newspaper headlines in their ambiguous state could be misinterpreted by reader based on the construction of phrases or sentences. Taking a close look at the second headline “Republican GRILL IRS Chief over lost emails” from Daily Trust newspaper of August 22, 2013 could be understood as Republicans harshly question the chief about the emails or that Republicans cook the chief using email at the fuel. It is clearly understood that ambiguous statements in themselves are incomplete, though they make some sense but could be analysed differently by people. It’s a perfect tool to demonstrate careful reading, showcase the need for editing and encourage, creativity and

divergent thinking. Therefore this research wishes to create awareness that the media headlines of some newspapers are ambiguous. It is based on this that the research intends to do x-ray of media headlines of print media that are sentences in nature.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The researcher is aware that diction and audience should be put into consideration when constructing newspaper headlines. It is therefore important to investigate the use of diction in the print media because language especially the choice of words depends and differs according to context.

Meanwhile, the study attempts to focus on two major areas. The misapplication of language use and confusion arising from different meaning, the same word can have, which are relevant in most Nigerian dailies.



### **1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this research are:

(i) To analyse semantic ambiguity in the headline structure of the print media.

(ii) To find several possible meanings of the ambiguous headlines.

(iii) To find out if reasons exist on why the newspaper choose to be ambiguous in their headlines.

### **1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The research is of great significance considering the level at which people misconstrue the facts and meanings of the concept of newspaper arising from the use of ambiguous words or language by the news editors and writers.

In view of this, the research work when completed would be significant to readers of newspapers, school libraries as well as general public. This is because it will facilitate their understanding of information transmitted to in the newspapers.

### **1.5 SCOPE AND DELIMITATIONS**

This research work shall be limited to the study of semantic ambiguity in the newspaper headlines. It does not intend to look at the lead, content and other elements of the newspaper such as advertisement, columns, letters to the editor, opinion etc.

This research work shall be delimited to *DAILYTRUST* and *VANGUARD*. The aforementioned newspapers are taken as samples because of their popularity in the area in which this research is carved out.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

People's utterance can be viewed from various perspectives. The same sentence uttered by somebody can have different meanings. The meaning of an utterance, at times can go beyond the surface meaning of the sentence. Consider the simple sentence 'it is five o'clock' uttered by a parent to his/her friend might mean that 'I am worried that my son is not back yet', even though 'worried' is not mentioned. It can also mean 'Time is up' when uttered by a teacher conducting a test for his students. Comprehensibility goes beyond knowing how to put words together in sequence to make grammatically well formed sentence. And it also involves an understanding of meaning that different from knowing the meaning of words (lexical meaning) and the meaning of syntactic features (grammatical meaning).

## **2.2 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION**

Sapir (1977) defines language as “a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntary produced symbols”. Block and Trager (1986:23) define language as “ a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates”, Also, Hall (1978) sees language as “the institution where human beings communicate and interact with each other” while Gimson (1984) sees language as “ a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community”.

Language is a universal phenomenon which aims at promoting social and peaceful co-operation and existence amongst the numerous people of the different speech communities that constitute the world. Language has thus, become an enormously powerful tool, especially in its universal range of application, because language has become and will continue to be the most subtle and powerful device man has and will

ever have for controlling his environment including other people. However, language is not used to communicate meaning only but to mask it and such is the motive behind the analysis of this research in its focus on ambiguity.

Communication is seen by Crystal (1977) as the transmission and reception of linguistic contents, source and receiver are interpreted in human terms, the system involved is language, and the notion of response to (or acknowledgement of) the message becomes of crucial importance. On the other hand, Dominick (1990) defines mass communication as the process by which a complex organization with the aid of one or more machine produces and transmits public messages that are directed at large, heterogeneous and scattered audiences. From the above definition, mass communication is a process of transmitting message through a mass media like newspaper, magazine, books, radio and television to large population over long distance. Mass

communication often involves simultaneous contact between one sender and many receivers, allowing an immediate and extensive influence and an immediate response by many at a time (Mc Quail, 1987:32).

### **2.3 RULES OF COMMUNICATION**

There are several multiple rules associated with effectiveness of communication in language. Four sets of rules are relevant to the study; Semantic rules, Syntactic rules, Pragmatic rules, and Discourse analysis.

Morris (1938) defines semantics as meaning of words or linguistic expression in a given language, (without reference to the speaker and the situation). Semantics is the study of the way humans use language to evoke meaning in others. Semantics focuses on individual words and meaning. Semanticists are people who study semantics and are interested in how language and its meaning change over time. Syntax

on the other hand is the way in which words are arranged to form phrase and sentences. The meaning of an expression or statement can change its meaning either from declarative to interrogative statement or vice-versa.

Pragmatics has been defined variously by different scholars. Leech (1983) views meaning in pragmatics as relative to a speaker or user of the language. Yule (1996) in his definition of pragmatics affirms that pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted between a listener (or a reader). Grundy (1995) defines pragmatics as being to do with the distinction between what a speaker's word (literally) means and what the speaker might mean by his words. Verschueren (2003)'s definition might seem a bit different on the surface level but at deeper level it is still related to the above definitions. He sees pragmatics as the study of language use. May (2001) also maintains that pragmatics studies the use of language



in human communication as determined by conditions of society. Levinson (1983), after considering many options for definition comes to the conclusion that pragmatics is the study of the ability of language users to pair sentences with the context in which they would be appropriate. This is the fact, that pragmatics does not study meaning in abstraction, but from the point of view of the users and speakers. This is an important aspect of definition of pragmatics because language meaning depends on speaker's meaning. Also, sentence meaning is different from speakers meaning. In this regard, an operative definition of pragmatics must include speaker's point of view. By viewing pragmatics as being concerned with language in use, it means that pragmatics studies language functionally. It is when it is studies in this respect that various meanings attached to the language can be clearly understood.

Pragmatics as a linguistic field contrast with the study of semantics which is the study of linguistic meaning, since pragmatic is the study of how contextual factors the communicators. In many ways, pragmatics can simply be defined as the study of invisible meaning, or how we recognize what is meant even when it isn't actual said (or written) in order for such to happen, speakers and writers must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions based on ingenuity.

Discourse analysis studies the organization of language above the sentence or the clause such as conversational exchanges or written text (Stubbs 1985). It also follows that discourse analysis is also concerned with language in use in social contexts, and in particular with interaction or dialogue between speakers.

## **2.4 AMBIGUITY**

Kempson (1977) defines ambiguity as “the state of having two possible interpretations from an expression” that is an expression in general

terms is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning. When a word, for example, 'bank' has multiple meanings, we have lexical ambiguity, while a sentence can be ambiguous even if none of its words is ambiguous, because sometimes the ambiguity is considered syntactic as a result of an alternative meaning that correspond to an alternative syntactic configuration. For example, in the sentence: 'Mary saw John with a telescope' there are two possible interpretations. Listener 'A' may assume or understand that Mary saw John holding a telescope while Listener 'B' would deduce that Mary saw John with the aid of an instrument called a telescope.

Ndimele (1999) defines ambiguity "as a grammatical phenomenon in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation". He likens it to polysemy in the sense that one stretch of utterance is given more than one meaning. Ambiguity is thus divided into two types namely lexical and structural ambiguity.

Lexical ambiguity is a type of ambiguity which is realized when a construction has more than one meaning due to the presence of a particular word in that construction. Structural ambiguity, on the other hand, is a type of ambiguity which is realized when a particular word or phrase can modify more than one constituent or can be involved in more than one constituent or can be involved in more than one relational association.

According to Mayfield (2002), ambiguity refers to “the openness of a word or claim to more than one interpretation; the quality of possessing more than one meaning”. Palmer (1981), ambiguity could be defined as “the uncertainty of meaning, usually caused by word or phrases that convey more than one meaning”. For instance, “Yusuf is cool” can refer both to Yusuf’s body temperature and to his enviable social behaviour.

## 2.5 TYPES OF AMBIGUITY

Linguistic theories have identified Syntactic and Lexical Ambiguity.

Syntactic ambiguity otherwise known as ‘Structural ambiguity’ arises when the role a word plays in a sentence is unclear, as in: “Squad help dog bite victim”.

Lexical also known as Semantic ambiguity on the other hand, arises when a word has more than one generally accepted meaning, as exemplified in: “Drunk gets nine months in violin case”. Here it is necessary to mention the fact we may, at times come across the label “Lexical-Semantic ambiguity” especially in ‘linguistics’ to refer to lexical or semantic ambiguity. As stated above, it is a type of ambiguity that arises out of the fact a word may have more than one meaning. In most cases, the intended meaning is made clear by the context. To illustrate the case, let me adduce these examples. (i) Child’s stool is great for use in garden (ii) I saw a bat. Other types of ambiguity,

however, have also been identified by linguists. These generally exist in subtypes of ‘syntactic’ or ‘lexical’ ambiguity and can be described as:

Scope ambiguity, although, it is still under debate whether this type of ambiguity is a form of syntactic or lexical ambiguity, or whether it represents a unique class of ambiguity. An example of such ambiguity is: “Someone loves everyone”. This sentence can either mean ‘Everyone is loved by (at least) one person’ or ‘This is a person and this person loves everyone’.

Meanwhile, Metaphorical ambiguity occurs where the metaphor is taken literally, as in “Walls have ears”.

Phonological ambiguity is another subtype of lexical ambiguity that occurs when a set of sound can be interpreted in more than one way. In essence, it is a type of ambiguity that arises at the level of the surface

structure rather than the deep structure. An instance is the following;  
Psychotherapist Vs psychotherapist.

Punctuation ambiguity can also be considered as a mix of syntactic and lexical ambiguity. The ambiguity in the case is also in the surface structure rather than in the deep structure, notice, for example: (i) A woman without her man, is savage (ii) A woman without her, man is savage.

Grouping ambiguity is a type of ‘syntactic’ ambiguity. In this case the ambiguity arises from the precariousness of the clarity as to whether a modifier in a sentence modifies only or several object; for instance: (i) Hand me the red and yellow balls (ii) Hand me the red ball and yellow ball (iii) Hand me the balls that are red and yellow. Cross-reference ambiguity is another type of ‘syntactic’ ambiguity, that of ‘referent’, especially when using pronouns; a good example is (i) Bob kicked Tom’ and he broke his leg.

## **2.6 STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE OF NEWSPAPERS**

### **HEADLINE**

It is the basic responsibility of the newspapers as well as other mass media to inform people about the various happenings or events that take place around them and the media must also decide which news is most important and suitable for publication. They must be sure that such information is accurate to influence people's thoughts and attitudes through their editorial opinions.

This brings to mind the relevance of the relationship between language and culture. Culture may be defined "as all of the socially transmitted behavioural patterns, beliefs, attitudes and values of a particular period, class, community or culture" (Pearson, et al 2003). Culture is a tool that binds the general public and the mass media as a whole thereby creating the lens through which we perceive the world.



Language thus develops in response to the needs of the culture to the perception of the world. European scholars like Derrida (1974), Foucault (1980), Hebermas (1984) and Lucan (1981) assume that language creates reality in the sense that language in whatever way or manner use, shapes our perception of reality just as Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf were among the first to discuss the relationship between language and perception.

## **2.7 SEMANTIC AMBIGUITIES IN NIGERIA NEWSPAPER**

According to Lyons (1981), Semantic ambiguity is a situation in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation based on the meaning of word or words which in themselves can be misinterpreted.

He further classified it into:

The lexical ambiguity is the construction of sentence that has several meaning due to the presence of a particular word.

The structural ambiguity is a situation in which a particular word or phrase can modify more one constituent or can be involved in more than one relational association.

Syntactic ambiguity which was earlier mentioned is referred to the grammatical construction of the phrase or sentence which brings about misinterpretation e g “I know a man with a dog who has fleas”

The meaning of the above example is unclear and as can be misinterpreted based on its ambiguous nature. One is not clear whether it is the man or the dog that has fleas. The construction has therefore distorted a direct translation of the sentence.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

The chapter deals with the methodology employed in the conduct of the study. It describes the research design, study population, sample and sampling technique method of data collection.

#### **3.2 METHODOLOGY**

The research uses descriptive research which aims at identifying ambiguities found in the news of the *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* newspapers. Descriptive research is a research method that describes the subject or the object of the research based on the fact or reality. Isacc and Michael (1987:46) stated that, “descriptive method has a purpose to describe systematically a situation or area of interest

factually and accurately”. This study was conducted by formulating the problems, collecting the data and analysing the data.

The unit of analysis of this study is every phrases, clauses and sentences found in the news headlines in *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* newspapers that may consist of ambiguities. The researcher analysed the data through some steps. First, finding the data which has possibility of ambiguity from the newspapers and internet. Second, reading and comprehending the selected data. Third, identifying every phrases, clauses and sentences which are seemingly ambiguous. Forth, classifying the types of ambiguities based on Ullmann (1977:156) theories. Fifth, the researcher identifies the possible meaning of those ambiguous sentences, phrases, or even clauses. And the last in interpreting the data.

### **3.3 SAMPLE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES**

This research identifies thirty (30) ambiguities in both the *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* newspaper headlines. The population for this study is composed of newspapers published in Nigeria within the range of May-August 2013.

### **3.4 SOURCES OF DATA**

Data for this research were obtained online from ([www.vanguardngr.com/.../headlines](http://www.vanguardngr.com/.../headlines) and [www.lastestnigeriannews.com](http://www.lastestnigeriannews.com)), for the two Nigerian newspapers under study, namely: the *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*.

### **3.5 LIMITATION OF THE METHODOLOGY**

A lot of problems were encountered during the compilation of the selected headlines that make up this research work. It took several days to assemble the necessary newspapers and this consumed a lot of time.

The researcher also encountered the financial problem, then, there is a time factor, as the time for submission of the project is limited.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The focus of this research is to examine some expressions which are possibly ambiguous in the headlines of contemporary Nigerian newspaper. Newspaper headlines are written in a special kind of language with its own vocabulary and grammar. Headlines have a special grammar which differs from that of ordinary sentence.

The headline is the most interesting part of the newspaper, because newspaper headlines are considered to have their own characteristics and status in news discourse (Bell,1991). Fairclough (1995:21) states that “headlines have distinctive syntactic properties, which make them a grammatical oddity”. The headline is a unique type of text. It has a range of functions that specifically dictate its shape, content and

structure, and it operates within a range of restrictions that limit the freedom of the writer (Reah 1998). It encapsulates the story, i.e article content, in a minimum number of words, attracts the reader to the story and, if it appears on the front page, attracts the reader to the paper. Because of the functions of the headlines, and in view of limited space at the disposal of the writer, it attracts linguistic choices which sometimes result in ambiguity.

## **4.2 SOME SEMANTIC INTERPRETATIONS OF LEXICAL AMBIGUITIES**

Lexical ambiguity is conveyed by a word with more than one possible meaning in a context. There are many words and phrases in newspapers that are potentially ambiguous such that the readers sometimes get confused in determining the meaning. Let's examine the following headlines where lexical items result in ambiguity.



1. **Alex Akinyele, a nice-looking man who loves white's woman thing** (Daily Trust-May 11, 2013)
2. **Bike rider gives Senator's wife something and Senator gets angry** (Vanguard -July 26, 2013)

From the two headlines there is the lexical 'thing' or 'something'. However, from the context in which it is used we can ascribe another meaning to it. In headline (1) thing could possibly mean 'an item' peculiar to a white person. The next question is what is the item? The news story that follows headline 1 is all about Chief Alex Akinyele, a formal Nigeria's Minister of Information whose first wife was a Briton. After the death of the wife, Alex Akinyele re-married to another Briton. His penchant for marrying foreigner, British national in this instance, is what the newspaper is conveying to the reader. The writer then uses 'thing' possibly refers to (a) care being given by white woman to Akinyele, (b) food and delicacies that are typical of the white people,

(c) a cumulative of sexual and dexterity that a ‘white’ woman is known for.

In headline 2, something that was given to Senator’s wife belongs to the bike rider. The news story tells about a Senator’s wife who was having extra marital affair with a bike rider. She was lured into this affair because, the husband, a Senator of Republic of Nigeria was too busy with his oversight function in the National Assembly, leaving the wife’s emotional needs unattended. To fill this vacuum, the wife found solace in a young bike rider. The headline writer therefore uses ‘something’ to mean sexual intercourse, where as the lexical has the potential of having other meanings which includes an object or an item.

One of the building block of language comprehension of newspapers is the ability of the reader to access the meaning of words as they are encountered and to develop an interpretation that is consistent with the context. This process becomes particularly interesting at a choice point

in understanding, as is the case with lexically ambiguous words. When a word has multiple meaning, one meaning must be selected while somehow retaining the possibility of using the alternative meaning. In addition to this, the working memory capacity of individual reader affects their ability to maintain various representations in the process of understanding a sentence. The use of ‘thing/something’ in headline (1) and (2) creates ambiguity for the reader who is left with two options. Either to read the entire news story in order to resolves the ambiguity. The newspaper writer uses lexical ambiguity as seen in the above examples, to attract, sustain reader’s attention and possibly force the reader into reading the story in order to resolve the ambiguity.

Other lexical examples:

**3. Turkish Court backs Twitter but site still blocked** (Vanguard-  
June 18, 2013)

The headline above tells about Turkey's ban on Twitter. This is an example of lexical ambiguity in the case of homonymy. The ambiguity of the headline can be seen from the noun word 'site'. This word may cause the readers into wrong interpretation. Based on Oxford dictionary, the word 'site' has two meanings:

.An area of ground on which a town, building, or monument is constructed

. A website, a location connected to the Internet

Therefore, base on the definitions of the word 'site', above the interpretations that may arise as result are as follows:

- a. Turkish court backs Twitter but **the location** still blocked.
- b. Turkish court backs Twitter but **the website** still blocked.

Having two different interpretations can made the reader confused in determining the actual message, However, the actual interpretation or

the writer's intend meaning for this ambiguous headline is 'Turkish court backs Twitter but **the website** still blocked. Some of the readers may aware and interpret the ambiguous word 'site' into 'twitter' which refers to the one of the social media networking website. However, the headline still categorized as an ambiguous headline since it has multiple meaning attached.

**4. Somali tied to Militants held on US ship for months** (Daily Trust-May 7, 2013)

The meaning of the above example is unclear and it can be misinterpreted based on its ambiguous nature. One is not clear whether; the Somali was held for months, or the Somali was just now linked to militants who were held for months. One could also imagine rope involved, at which point lexical ambiguity comes into play.

**5. Stolen painting found by tree** (Vanguard- July 2, 2013)

The headline is two alternative syntactic representations which make it structurally ambivalent; (a) a tree found a stolen painting (b) a person found a stolen painting near a tree.

The headline can easily be read as the representation in (1) A tree found a painting, which is humorous because tree, being inanimate generally don't find things. Specifying in the computational lexicon that the verb find usually takes an agent with the property.

**6. Seun divorces Kayode, claims she is deprived of the thing**

(Daily Trust-June 7, 2013)

**7. I have boil on my thing** (Vanguard- August 11, 2013)

**8. In Ibadan, Old man puts something into my thing** (Vanguard-May 4, 2013)

In each of the headlines above, 'something or thing' is used to denote both man or woman's genitals. Something is euphemism for penis in

(6), virginal in (7) and both penis and virginal in (8). The word is employed to avoid being vulgar. Apart from avoiding vulgar language, the writer use the ambiguous word something/ thing to sustain readers' attention because readers' eye would remain longer on an ambiguous word than a word that has no such ambiguity effect. Interestingly, this type of ambiguous word increases reading time. The process that makes the headlines became more memorable.

### **4.3 SEMANTIC INTERPRETATION OF SOME STRUCTURAL AMBIGUITY**

An expression is deemed ambiguous if it has more than one interpretation or meaning. That is, a state of an expression having two possible interpretations from an expression. Ndimele (1999) sees ambiguity as a grammatical phenomenon in which an expression can be given more than one interpretation. He likens ambiguity to polysemy in

the sense that one stretch of utterance is given more than one meaning. This is what Hirst (1987) calls structural ambiguity.

Structural ambiguity includes ambiguities caused by syntactic structures that lend themselves to more than one interpretation, such as phenomena of ambiguous word order, referential ambiguity, and prepositional phrase attachment. While trying to be compact, precise and attract the reader, the newspaper writer ends up composing ambiguous headlines. This is sometimes due to influence of the headline code of English.

Another example

- 1. House wife seeks divorce because he does not respect the parents (Daily Trust-July 13, 2013)**



While the first of the headline is not ambiguous, the second part exhibits ambiguity and capable of having two meanings. The possible meanings are:

(a) Wife seeks divorce because he does not have respect for his parents

(b) Wife seeks divorce because he does not have respect for her parents.

The ambiguity would have been prevented. However the newspaper writer chooses the headline to persuade the reader between the husband and the wife. It was after reading the news story that I understood it is the husband that is being rude to his in laws. Creating ambiguity in the headline is deliberate and aimed at forcing reader to read the news story.

**2. Drivers Union fight each other in Ijebu-Ode** (Daily Trust-  
August 7, 2013)

The headline could be ascribed two meanings; (a) members of same drivers' union fight one another (b) two different drivers' union (NURTW) vs (RTEA) fight each other. Again the newspaper writer deliberately creates ambiguity in the headline possibly because he is aware of the identity of drivers' union. There are two Drivers' union in Nigeria, National Union Road Transport Workers (NURTW) and Road Transport Employees Association (RTEA). The writer is aware of these drivers' union but deliberately kept silent on the same union that were fighting or the two rival unions that were armed against each other.

The next example of structural ambiguity in headline of newspapers is worth examining because the ambiguity is wrapped in a figure of speech- personification.

### **3. Beer bottle kills father-in-law during naming ceremony**

(Daily Trust-July 26, 2013)

Here are the possible meaning the headline could have:

(a) Father-in-law was killed by a bottle of beer.

(b) Father- in-law was intoxicated by a bottle of beer he drank and died.

In the above example, the newspaper writer wants reader to know what actually caused the death of a father- in-law at the naming ceremony of his grandchild. In his attempt to portray this he ascribes human attribute to the bear bottle as if the bottle had hand to take action by itself. It is only by reading the accompanying news story that the reader could realize that it was an individual who was fighting another man that mistakenly stabbed the father-in-law to death, while the deceased was trying to separate those who were fighting. While the writer is able to keep reader in suspense and seduce him to read on, he creates ambiguity and leaves the reader wondering about the possibility of a bottle being able to kill a person. The ambiguity would have been resolved if the headline had read:

“Father-in-law stabbed to death with beer bottle at naming ceremony”.

As earlier mentioned, thirty (30) headlines in the corpus were subdivided into two categories: lexical and structural ambiguity. On a total of thirty headlines, the majority (66%) was found to be ambiguity at lexical level, while the rest (34%) presented some sort of structural ambiguity. Presumably, most headlines in the corpus are examples of lexical ambiguities create involuntary humor and give the reader some sort of verbal pleasure. The lexical items such as ‘thing’, ‘something’, and ‘with’ change meaning in their different interpretations. The frequency of lexical ambiguity seems to be higher and is deliberately contrived by newspaper writers to achieve effective communication and aesthetics.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **5.0 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION**

This research shows that ambiguity is an important topic worthy of consideration and exploration. It is a phenomenon that learners of English may very possibly encounter. As argued by many authors, ambiguity can be found everywhere in language and is usually difficult to understand. Clare (1993) suggests that “ambiguity is an obstacle to be ignored or a problem to be solved for people to understand each other”. Kelvin (1998) believes that there is a direct relationship between vision and cognition with respect to newspaper headlines.

Semantically ambiguous media headlines have been looked at from the two levels in which ambiguity is broken down. The approach which was employed in this analysis is called the lexico-grammar which is concerned with the syntactic organisation of words into utterances, using the systemic functional grammar or linguistic theory. Through

this method we could distinguish factors between lexical and structural ambiguous headlines of print media. There are quite a number of ambiguities ranging from syntactic through semantic and on to phonological and other types which are touched upon throughout this research work.

When analyzing ambiguity of sentences, it can be observed that ambiguity is not just limited to the meaning of sentences alone as in the case of semantic ambiguity but also on the order of word which is thus defined or called the syntactic ambiguity. Syntactic ambiguity comes about as a result of syntax which has to do with the patterns by which morphemes and grammatical categories such as noun, adjective, verbs, preposition and conjunction that are organized into sentences. To fully understand the syntax of a language one needs to have access to grammatical judgments. The distortion based on syntax of the media headline is that which journalists of print media employ mostly so as to

mask the denotative meaning of headlines, thereby making it structurally ambiguous. It is thus worthy of note that the print media have not limited their headline to a particular type ambiguity but are seen to have encompassed the two types of ambiguity as a medium of disseminating information. Ambiguity as a linguistic term is said to be synonymous to polysemy at word level and has a relationship with vagueness, non-specificity and that the term ambiguity cannot be fully elaborated without making mention to syntax.

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