
SPEECH ACTS ANALYSIS OF SEX-FOR-GRADES AS HEADLINES OF NIGERIAN DAILIES

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Abstract

This paper examines the language of headlines report of the BBC African Eye investigation of two West African universities from a pragmatic viewpoint. Forty-seven (47) headlines were purposively selected from the websites of the Vanguard, The Guardian, The Herald, Nigerian Tribune, PUNCH, Premium Times, and The Nation serving as our sample population. Furthermore, this study adopted a qualitative and quantitative approach in the analysis of data using Searle's (1979) theory of speech acts as analytical framework. The overall relative frequency percentages (ORFPs) of headlines revealed that the representative act had the highest preponderance of 48.9%. Other ORFPs are directives 23.4%, declarative 14.9%, and the commissive act 12.8% respectively while the expressive speech act type was not evident in any of the newspaper headlines under review. Findings revealed that journalists and media houses tend to rely heavily on representatives in news reporting for objectivity's sake so as not to deviate from their primary onus which is giving information to the public.

Keywords: Media, headlines, sex-for-grades, investigative report, speech acts

Introduction

The mass media plays a pivotal role in our lives as it has been

influenced by news reports. These reports are basically captured on television and newspapers with catchy headlines. According to Chiluba (2007, p. 64), news headline “is the title of news story that summarises the entire story”. These headlines are constructed to score certain goals by manipulating the language using diverse linguistic and pragmatic aspects to convey issues. According to Ismail (2016, p. 756), headlines “expose the social, cultural and national representations ... and considered by the audience as more essential than the news articles”. This assertion by Ismail is proven in the Nigerian socio-political space as majority of Nigerians prefer reading/watching/listening to news headlines than reading the entire story to save time. Headlines are easily identifiable as they are captured using short and precise terms, printed in bold letters, or highlighted in italics and most often than not occupy the front page of the dailies. Conboy (2007) opines that there are three functions of a headline: cover news briefly, arouses attention and it can also be a chief indicator to value news.

As newspaper editor tend to manipulate language in their presentation, it is important that a pragmatic study is undertaken to forestall cases of misperception.

The sex-for-grades report is a BBC Africa Eye undercover investigative report carried out by journalists of the BBC who worn secret cameras and acted as undergraduate students hoping to secure admission into two West African universities- the University of Ghana, Legon and University of Lagos, Nigeria. The investigation was filmed within a nine-month period and the video was subsequently released in October 2019, sparking uproars offline and online social

media. The released video purportedly captures the sexual escapades of some university lecturers who were filmed live without their knowledge. Reporter Nkiru (Kiki) Mordi, who according to her, has had a first-hand experience of sexual harassment, was the brain behind the investigation.

The data for this paper will be analysed pragmatically using the Speech Act Theory of Searle (1979) as well as statistically. It is well-known that the use of speech acts is part of the activities of human communication, therefore, identifying the type of speech acts used in this report can help the listener or reader infer something that is not expressed by the editors explicitly.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This paper is aimed at investigating the speech acts prevalent in Nigerian news headlines on sex-for-grade. In achieving this aim therefore, the paper will set out to:

- a. Identify the various speech acts in the newspapers under review,
- b. Identify the predominant speech act(s) employed by these newspapers in the sex-for-grades reportage.
- c. Identify the pragmatic implications of the identified speech acts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the speech acts employed by the newspapers under review in the reportage of the sex-for-grade?
2. What speech act type has the highest level of preponderance in the headlines of the sex-for-grade reportage?

3. What are the pragmatic implications of these speech acts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous pragmatic studies have been carried out within and outside Nigeria on the analysis of newspaper headlines. Scholars who have worked on this include Rustam (2013), Abba & Musa (2015), Ismail (2016), Al-Saedi & Jabber (2020), Al-Hindawi & Ali (2018), Chiluya (2007), and Qomariyah (2019). Rustam (2013) investigated the pragmatic and linguistic devices in CNN headlines which focussed on the political affairs in Pakistan. He observed that illocutionary acts were used often in the headlines besides other linguistic devices. The study revealed that the illocutionary acts encode the meaning of the headlines pragmatically. Furthermore, Abba & Musa (2015) explored the speech act types and their levels of preponderance in the headlines of *The Daily Trust* and *The Nation* newspapers with a special focus on the Boko Haram attacks. The findings revealed that the assertives were predominant in the headlines of the selected newspapers. It concluded on the note that the use of such speech acts does not aim to be threatening, frightening, or advising. Ismail (2016) in his study of the inter-relationship of headlines from the BBC about the Ukraine crisis of Crimea, combined pragmatics and semantics by adopting presuppositional and entailments techniques in its analysis. The result revealed that the selected headlines function to inform the reader about the text pragmatically and semantically as understanding the context relates to the pragmatic knowledge of the reader and its function can affect and control readers' minds. Furthermore, Al-Saedi & Jabber (2020) investigated the

pragmatic aspects of newspaper headlines in media discourse with particular focus on Iraq. Fifty headlines were sampled from Iraqi official newspaper (ALSABAH NEWSPAPER) and analysed using Searle's speech acts taxonomy. Finding revealed that the writers of these headlines employed all speech acts but tilted more towards declaratives and expressives and that these speech acts addressed the feeling of the readers to express the achievement of victory and liberation. Also, Al-Hindawi & Ali (2018) undertook a pragmatic study of CNN and BBC news headlines covering the Syrian conflict. Fifty-six headlines were selected from these news channels. The study revealed that the assertives speech act was the most frequent in these headlines with commissives having the highest level of occurrence in CNN while BBC was more of expressives. Chiluya (2007) undertook an independent study of news headlines as pragmatic strategy in Nigerian press discourse as they can be interpreted in terms of their relationship to information in the social context. The study applied the speech act theory in its analysis showing that headlines do indeed perform acts. It concluded on the note that news headlines perform illocutionary functions as socially oriented discourse and are a critical strategy employed by journalist to denounce social malaise. Qomariyah (2019) explored the headlines of Jakarta Post and Jakarta Globe news headlines after Indonesian general elections of 2019. Seventy headlines were sampled using the descriptive statistical method and findings revealed that assertives occurred most frequently in both news headlines. It concluded on the note that the use of speech acts in news headlines could be a way to uncover hidden meanings that could influence the readers to certain issues which couldv

also affect their beliefs.

In addition to the above, some notable scholars have worked on headlines from other linguistic perspectives. Siposova (2011) explored the use of headlines and sub-headlines in the British Tabloid *The Sun* by focussing on the tense, modality and register. Also, from an ideological viewpoint of critical discourse analysis (CDA), Taiwo (2007) investigated the use of Nigerian newspaper headlines and how they play a role in shaping ideologies and power relations. Monsefi & Mahadi (2017) also undertook a rhetorical analysis of Persian news headlines using the textual rhetorical analysis to observe the wordplay roles.

In all the literature reviewed so far, none placed a particular focus on the sex-for-grades BBC investigation as captured in major Nigerian newspapers. It is this gap in scholarship that this paper intends to fill.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

According to Okoro (2017, p. 25), the Speech Act Theory, henceforth, SAT as a pragmatic theory is “historically attributed to the Austrian philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein but was given prominence by the British philosopher, John Langshaw Austin, in his William James' lectures at Harvard in 1955”. The ideas put together by Austin, however, were later refined by John R. Searle an American philosopher and a former student of Austin. SAT is hinged on the premise that speakers tend to do more with words as our utterances carry some illocutionary force and it is this force that gives our utterances their performative role. In other words, as users of language, we tend to perform act(s) when we make utterances.

SAT has three aspects which border on the speaker's utterance, the speaker's intention, and the desired effect on the hearer. These three aspects are pragmatically referred to as locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act (Austin, 1962). Locutionary act is the act of producing meaningful linguistic utterances. In other words, it is the act of saying something which makes sense and follows the code of the language. Illocutionary act centres on the intention of the speaker – the action he wants the hearer to take. It is the communicative force of an utterance. Perlocutionary act is the effect the said utterance has on the hearer- the reaction/response elicited by the utterance. Perlocutionary act may be persuading, encouraging, inspiring, motivating, etc.

Speech Act Classification

The taxonomy of speech acts (SA) is categorized into five areas of declaratives, expressives, directives, commissives and representatives (Searle, 1979).

Declaratives

This category of speech acts is used to change the world. In other words, they are used to say something and make it so. They include proclaiming, pronouncing, baptising, etc. For a declaration to be effective, the speaker must have some level of contextual privileges else the declaration will be ineffective. A layperson cannot pronounce a man and woman as husband and wife as he lacks that privilege as this authority is only vested in priests.

Expressives

These speech acts express the psychological state of the speaker- what he feels. It can be greeting, congratulating,

welcoming, criticizing, apologizing, etc. According to Mufiah & Rahmah (2018), in using an expressive, “the speaker makes words fit the world (of feeling)”.

Directives

According to Yule (1996), most speakers employ this act to get someone else to do something. They are used in expressing what the speaker wants. In this class, words cause the world to change. Examples include begging, ordering, requesting, demanding, commanding, etc.

Commissives

Searle calls it "unexceptionable", i.e., the obligation created in the word by commissive is created in the speaker not in the hearer. In other words, when used, they commit speakers to some future course of action. They include betting, challenging, promising, threatening, vowing, guaranteeing, offering, etc. In simple English, the term of this speech act is commonly called promise.

Representatives

In representatives, the speaker's intention is to assert the speaker's belief. According to Gusthini, Sobarna & Amalia (2018), this kind of speeches “state what the speaker believes to be the case or are statements of fact, assertions, conclusions and/or descriptions”. The speaker represents the world as he/she believes it to be.

The taxonomy of speech acts is captured in the figure below. However, this paper undertakes an analysis of the macro-level of speech acts while bringing to the fore the micro elements inherent in these macro-levels.

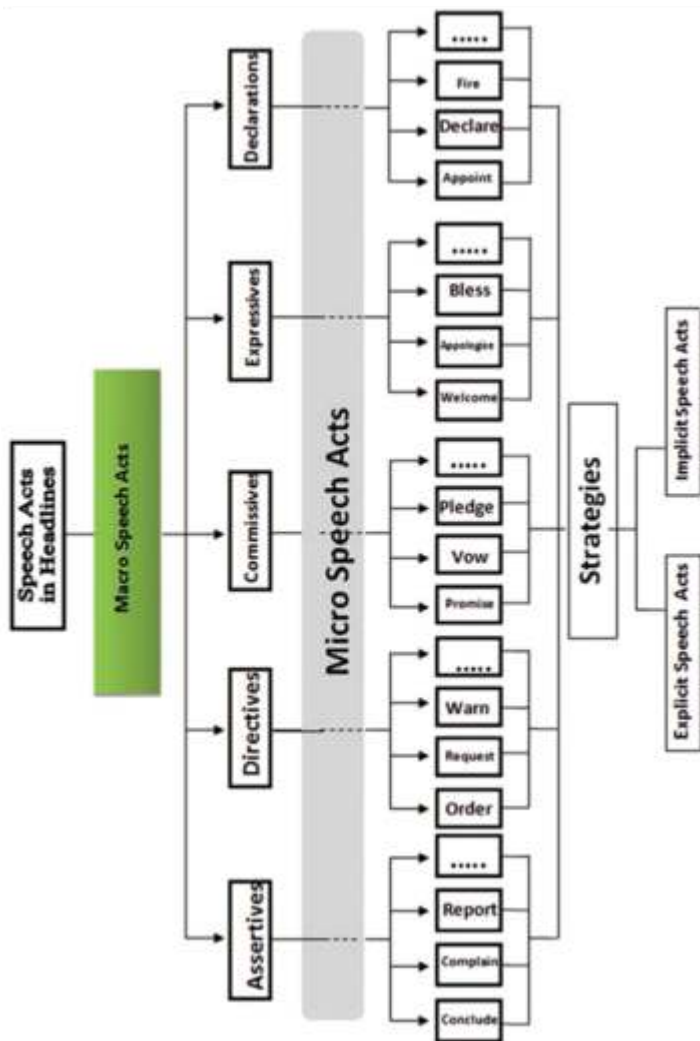


Figure 1: The taxonomy of speech acts (culled from Al-Hindawi & Ali, 2018)

Research Methodology

Method of Data Analysis

This paper analysed data descriptively (pragmatically) and quantitatively (statistically). The descriptive statistical method of data analysis began with a descriptive analysis of data by grouping each headline into their respective macro-classes. Thereafter, the percentage frequency of each macro and micro-classes was gotten using the statistical formula of:

$$\frac{\text{Total number of each speech act}}{\text{Total number of headlines used for analysis}} * 100$$

Data Collection

Data for analysis were sourced from seven online newspaper websites namely *Vanguard*, *The Guardian*, *The Herald*, *Nigerian Tribune*, *PUNCH*, *Premium Times*, and *The Nation*. These were chosen not only because of their comparative consistency in reportage of the case under review, but also due to their accessibility to the ordinary Nigerian and their level of importance as highly rated national dailies that almost all Nigerians peruse on a day-to-day basis. A total of forty-seven (47) headlines were sampled purposively for analysis, transcribed, and then analysed.

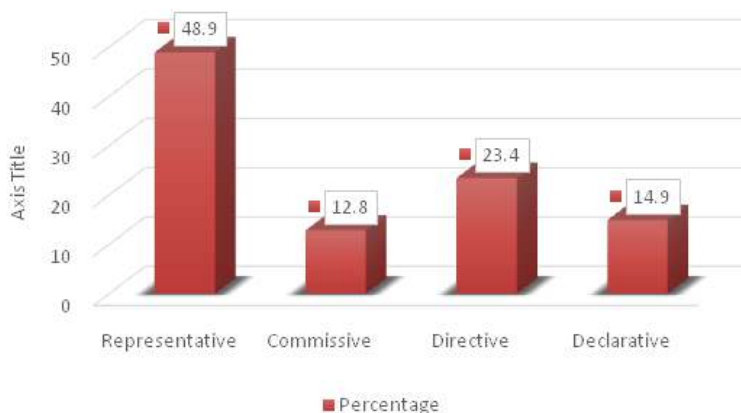
Results of Data Analysis

Using the statistical formula adopted in the method of data analysis section, the following results were generated:

Table 1: Types of speech acts and their frequencies and percentages of use in Nigerian newspaper headlines

Speech act type	Frequency	Percentage %
Representatives	23	48.9
Commissives	06	12.8
Directives	11	23.4
Declaratives	07	14.9
Total	47	100

Graphical representation of analyzed data



Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings is guided by the research questions of this paper earlier set. Hence, the question of identifying the various SAs in the headlines of newspapers under review, the predominant SAs employed and the pragmatic implications of these SAs will be the focus of this section.

Research Question 1: What are the speech acts employed by the newspapers under review in the reportage of the sex-for-

grades?

Table 2: Speech act type in newspapers under review

Name of Newspaper	Speech Act Type Present
<i>The Vanguard</i>	Directive, representative
<i>The Guardian</i>	Declarative, directive, representative
<i>The Herald</i>	Commissive, representative, directive, declarative
<i>The Nation</i>	Representative, commissive, declarative
<i>Nigerian Tribune</i>	Directive, representative
<i>Premium Times</i>	Directive, representative
<i>PUNCH</i>	Declarative, representative, directive, commissive

Research Question 2: What speech act type has the highest level of preponderance in the headlines of the sex-for-grade reportage?

Table 1 answers this question as it presents all speech act types and their levels of occurrence in all newspapers under review with their corresponding percentages. The representative speech act type had the highest level of preponderance occurring twenty-two (22) times and with an overall relative frequency percentage (ORFP) of 46.63%.

Research Question 3: What are the pragmatic implications of these speech acts?

Aside carrying out a quantitative analysis as expressed in Research Questions 1 and 2, this paper also ventured into a descriptive pragmatic overview of the newspaper's headlines under review. Representatives have the general role of making propositions and relating the current situation to the public. Headlines 4 and 6 of *The Guardian* are two instances of propositions with the former having the illocutionary force of alleging and the latter asserting. Writers and editors of certain

newspaper genre particularly news service rely heavily on facts and figures in their reportage from sources because by using the representative speech act statements are subject to truth and falsity conditions as expressed by Searle (1979). Propositions expressed by these newspapers are subject to these conditions in order to determine truth. Overall, representatives as a speech act in these newspapers have the illocutionary force of informing, asserting, alleging, and stating as they tend to bring to light issues surrounding the sex for grade documentary and to generate discussions bothering on them. This is one speech act type that cuts across all the newspapers under review as it informs the populace on the matter in question because it is a topical and national issue.

The directive speech act follows the representatives statistically with ORFP at 23.40%. This speech act is an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something, to act. Headline writers or editors ordinarily have no civic obligation to direct others to act as they always occupy a neutral ground while going about their affairs. However, while presenting this topical issue (sex for grade), they indirectly relayed home their points by presenting the opinions of other parties. This speech act abounds in *PUNCH* (Headlines 3, 8, and 10) and *Vanguard* (Headlines 2, 5 and 6) having the illocutionary force of urging, warning, instructing, requesting, and suggesting. Specifically, *PUNCH* headline 3 and *Vanguard* headline 5 have the illocutionary force of 'requesting' as Dr. Igbeneghu is invited by the police. Also, the illocutionary force of 'warning', 'instructing' is expressed in headline 6 of the *Vanguard* as President Buhari tasks the National University Commission (NUC) and university managements in various institutions to flush out 'bad eggs' in the system.

Furthermore, the declarative speech act is also evident in these headlines. Due to the sensitive nature of the discussion in question, it is necessary that some 'punitive measures' be taken by the organizations that the alleged worked for in other to save face. These measures are evident in the use of the declarative speech act type which uses performatives because they cause the world to change by bringing about alteration in the status of the referred object. In the headlines of the newspaper under review, the illocutionary force of sack, dismiss, suspend are evident- *The Guardian* headlines 1 and 8, *The Herald* headline 10, *PUNCH* headline 1 and 9, and *The Nation* headlines 5 and 6.

The commissive speech act is also present in some of the newspaper headlines under review. This speech act type commits the speaker to some future course of action. This speech act type is captured only in *The Herald*, *The Nation* and *PUNCH*. Illustratively, headline 9 in *The Herald* is an example having the illocutionary force of threaten- with the allegations levelled against him, the Ghanaian lecturer, Prof Ransford Gyampo, and Dr. Igbeneghu threatens to take legal actions against the BBC. Other headlines present have the illocutionary force of penalize, promise, and guarantee.

The result of analysis revealed that the newspaper headlines under review prominently feature the representative speech act as against other acts because the primary onus of news writers and editors is the passing out of accurate information by relying on facts from sources. Even though other acts were present, the representatives act was the central focus of the newspaper headlines analysed.

Conclusion

The present study has examined newspaper headlines using Searle's taxonomy of speech acts. It revealed that only four of the speech act types, vis-à-vis representative, declarative, directive and commissive acts, were evident in the six newspapers reviewed. It also revealed that there was a prevalent use of representative act in the headline reports, and this was primarily because newspaper editors/houses have the sole onus of disseminating information to the public.

On a final note, the recognition of speech act types inherent in these headlines will go a long way in ascribing meaning to them and in revealing the disposition of speakers as no one says something without having an intention in mind. However, one shouldn't be too quick to draw conclusions as definite generalizations cannot be made from such a small sample which employed only a singular research methodology. We, therefore, conclude on the note that these headlines can be analysed using other pragmatic theories to unravel other meanings.

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Appendix A: Headlines of *The Vanguard*

Headline No.	Headlines	Speech act classification
1.	Sex for grades: Ex-Covenant University VC blames action on students' indecent dressing	Representative
2.	ASUU condemns 'sex for Grades', demands thorough investigation, sanction for offenders	Directive
3.	Sex-for-grades documentary: Things we saw during investigation were a lot worse- Kiki Mordi, BBC reporter	Representative
4.	Sex-for-grades: NGO, Ford Foundation partner to develop report app.	Representative
5.	Sex-for-grades: Police invite suspended UNILAG lecturer, Boniface	Directive
6.	Sex-for-grades: Rid campuses of undesirable elements, Buhari warns	Directive

Appendix B: Headlines of *Nigerian Tribune*

Headline No.	Headlines	Speech act classification
1.	Buhari tasks ASUU, others on sex -for-grade	Directive
2.	Sex-for-grades: UNIPORT goes tough on students, lecturers	Representative

Appendix C: Headlines of *The Guardian*

Headline No.	Headlines	Speech act classification
1.	Sex-for-grades: UniAbuja sacks dean	Declarative
2.	Ibadan poly warns lecturers against sex-for-grades	Directive
3.	Sex-for-grades: UNIPORT goes tough on students, lecturers	Representative
4.	#sexforgrades: Dr. Boniface Igbeneghu alleges BBC set him up	Representative
5.	Aisha, Fayemi's wife seek justice for survivors of sexual harassment	Representative
6.	Sex-for-grades: Ghana varsity says no evidence against lecturers	Representative
7.	Outrage as sex for grades scandal rocks UNILAG	Representative
8.	Sex-for-grades: UNILAG suspends lecturer indefinitely	Declarative
9.	Sex-for-grades: Lawmaker wants lecturers exposed in BBC documentary jailed.	Directive

Appendix D: Headlines of *Premium Times*

Headline No.	Headlines	Speech act classification
1.	UNIPORT unveils policy document on sex for grades	Representative
2.	Aisha Buhari wants action to address sexual harassment against students	Directive

Appendix E: Headlines of *The Herald*

Headline No.	Headlines	Speech act classification
1.	ASUU to investigate, penalize offenders	Commissive
2.	Unilag VC speaks on how to deal with sexual harassment	Representative
3.	EXPOSED: Unilag lecturer, Foursquare Pastor in sex for grades investigation	Representative
4.	UNIPOINT prohibits hugging between lecturers and female students	Directive
5.	All culprits shall face the wrath of the law- Buhari	Commissive
6.	Exclusive: #sexforgrades "It's an attack from the pit of hell" Dr. Boniface	Representative
7.	My lecturers sexually harassed me - Gov Fayemi's wife	Representative
8.	Former VC of Covenant University identifies lack of fear of God as root of evil	Representative
9.	Lecturer to sue BBC, denies allegation	Commissive
10.	Foursquare suspends Dr Boniface	Declarative

Appendix F: Headlines of *PUNCH*

Headline No.	Headlines	Speech act classification
1.	UNILAG dismisses two lecturers in sex - for-grades scandal	Declarative
2.	Lagos govt mustn't allow offenders go unpunished- Toun Okewale-Sonaiya	Representative
3.	Police invite suspended UNILAG don, Igbeneghu	Directive
4.	NGO partners Ford Foundation to develop report app	Representative
5.	UNILAG raises probe panel on sexual harassment cases	Representative
6.	No evidence against lecturers in sexforgrades documentary - University of Ghana	Representative
7.	Ghanaian lecturer threatens to sue	Commissive
8.	Bisi Fayemi calls for creation of sexual offenders' register	Directive
9.	Foursquare suspends sex -for-grades UNILAG lecturer	Declarative
10.	Atiku calls for action against sexual harassment	Directive
11.	Twitter users narrate sex -for-grades experiences	Representative

Appendix G: Headlines of *The Nation*

Headline No.	Headlines	Speech act classification
1.	Kogi federal varsity investigates 12 officials	Representative
2.	FIDA urges more victims to speak out	Representative
3.	Another victim speaks out in Kaduna	Representative
4.	“9 th Assembly set to put school administrators on their toes” - Babajimi Benson	Commissive
5.	UNILAG sacks two lecturers	Declarative
6.	Ghanaian varsity lecturers suspended after ‘sex-for-grades’ leak	Declarative
7.	We’ll investigate sex -for-grades allegations- UNILAG	Commissive