

**The rhetorical strategies in the reportage of Boko Haram in newspaper headlines in Nigeria**

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***Abstract***

*In recent times, Boko Haram attacks have become a threat to the sustainability of the Nigerian state, and have engaged the interest of newspaper organisations. This study examines the rhetorical strategies used in the reportage of Boko Haram in newspaper headlines in Nigeria to explain the underlining interests. Thirty (30) headlines from Vanguard and The Punch newspapers were studied. The author studies the linguistic features used to show considerations for the choice of grammatical structures and lexis. Findings reveal that the newspaper organisations in the casting of headlines via structural and lexical choices tend to imbue Boko Haram sect members with valour and effectiveness in the conflict situation reported. While on the other hand, the Government and its agencies involved in the control of the conflict are portrayed as lacking in valour and commitment. This is very significant as such reports help to (de)legitimize the parties in the conflict situation. Arising from the above, the researcher believes that the newspaper organisations should show more commitment to national security and development as reports that undermine the government of Nigeria are counterproductive and not in the interest of the Nation and the media organisations*

*Keywords: Boko Haram, headlines, reportage. rhetorical, strategy*

**Introduction**

Shortly after the announcement of the presidential election result of 2011, in which Dr Goodluck Jonathan was adjudged the winner, there was upsurge of violence in the country, especially in the Northern part. Notable were the violent protests across several Northern States that followed the announcement. These occurrences, which were then considered, as just a storm in a tea cup, have snowballed into a full-fledged armed conflict coordinated by an Islamic sect, Boko Haram. This development has fueled the suspicion that Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria is a Northern political armed struggle for control of political power in the country. This is however not the subject of this study.

Boko Haram activities have become a conflagration that threatens personal safety and national security. Because of this, it has become a topical and sensitive subject in the

country that has engaged the interest of media houses in their reportage, especially in the casting of headlines. This study therefore aims to study the method of couching these headlines, especially in the choice of linguistic resources to reveal rhetorical strategy and understand the leaning and interest of the newspaper houses selected for the study.

Boko Haram is an ideological movement rooted in fundamental Islamism. Its launchpad is the denunciation of Western culture and civilization which is encapsulated in the nomenclature, “Boko Haram” literally meaning “Book is sinful”; where “Boko” represents western ideals and heritage, and “Haram” sinful and forbidden. Boko Haram, as an armed insurgent group has a principal object. And this, is to overthrow the government of Nigeria and enthroned Sharia system of government with the full implementation of Sharia criminal justice system. In pursuit of its avowed objective, it has engaged in a warfare that is characterised by bombing, sporadic shootings and kidnapping of defenceless citizen in public places and Christian worship centres, especially in the Northern part of the country, thereby creating enormous security challenges as no one is sure of his/her safety anymore.

In the past five years, it has engaged in coordinated bombing of Christian worship centres, market places and key government establishments. In 2011, the United Nations Office in Nigeria was bombed leaving scores dead. Likewise, Nigerian Police Forces Headquarters in Abuja was bombed within the same period. In addition to these, are numbers of schools, churches, local police offices, and military barracks that have been bombed or attacked with machine guns and other dangerous weapons. Of recent, precisely 14th April 2014, over 200 girls of a government secondary school in Chibok, Borno State were kidnapped. At the time of writing this paper, the girls have not been released or rescued. A newspaper report (Vanguard May 8, 2014) citing the President of Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan puts the death toll resulting from Boko Haram activities at over 12,000 in the past four years.

No doubt. such a phenomenon that threatens the very existence of the country and has made life unsafe and unpredictable for the citizenry has enjoyed wide coverage in the Nigerian Media, both the print and electronic. This study, therefore aims to examine the reportage of the Boko Haram insurgency in the media, particularly in the print media with reference to the couching of the newspaper headlines in such a manner that they influence the understanding and perception of Boko haram phenomenon in the public domain.

What comes to mind in a study like this are the following questions: What is the interest of the newspaper houses that report Boko Haram activities? Do they show sympathy to the terrorists, or to the generality of Nigerian masses? If the answer is yes to the former or latter, how do they report its activities in pursuance to the realisation of a set goal?

The study is limited to the study of twenty (30) newspaper headlines to reveal underlining interests in the choice of rhetorical strategies employed by newspaper houses in the reportage of Boko Haram. It examines lexical, grammatical and discursal features

as they are used to report Boko Haram. The size of data is dictated by the scope of the study. It is also important to note that the phenomenon under investigation is ongoing, therefore the findings are not conclusive. But all the same, the writer believes there is need for further research in this area.

### **Methodology**

The data used for this study consist of twenty (30) newspaper headlines from two national newspapers: *Vanguard* and *The Punch*. Sixteen (16) is from *Vanguard*, while fourteen (14) is from *The Punch*. The choice of the two newspapers is guided by two factors: the national coverage of the papers and the reportage special consideration in the choice of newspaper used or the relative high number of one to another. The twin guiding principles are the accessible of newspapers and the reportage of Boko Haram. The study adopts a mainly qualitative method of analysis as the researcher relied on his previous experience and knowledge of Nigerian environment for the interpretation of data. There are also instances of quantification as the researcher sought to explain the occurrence of certain languages features to the exclusion of others.

### **Literature review**

Headlines are the most important and most prominent reportage of a newspaper house and they contain topical issues (so decided by the media house) in a catchment area of its operation. This catchment area could be a community, region or country. These headlines are printed in bold graphemes aided by such features as colour, capitalisation and underlining for maximum highlighting to achieve the twin purpose of informing and catching attention of members of the reading public. According to Katarzyna Molek Kozakowska (2014) “The headline has to realise several functions at once: introduce the issue covered in the news articles, generate audience interest in it and indicate the news outlets attitude towards it”.

Indeed, the newspaper production, as an enterprise and a commitment to information dissemination and mass mobilization in nation building, is very impactful; however, the headlines appear to be more effective because of what Christine Develotte and Elizabeth Rechniewski (n.d) refer to as “diffusion”. According to them, this means the tendency of much more number of people, especially those who do not buy newspapers, but have the opportunity of reading the headlines at newsstands, on a bus or simply walking in a street. Because of this, headlines have more impact than the contents of newspapers.

Over time, newspaper headlines have evolved to become a text-genre with definable characteristics. This, in addition to their signification in national development, has made it an area of research interest to scholar and academics. In order to situate this study, an exploratory study of relevant literature in this area of study is necessary.

Develotte and Rechniewski (n.d) study national representation in newspaper headlines in France and Australia during the period of nuclear testing carried out by French

Government in Australian Territory. In doing this, they used 296 newspaper headlines from Australia and 346 from France. Their aim was to identify those linguistic features of headlines which are of particular relevance to the study of the role of newspaper headlines in national representation. In reporting their findings, they conclude by declaring as follow:

*They, thus constitute a kinds of “shorthand”, a simplification and Condensation of ideas ... they depend and mobilize this knowledge and in turn help to disseminate and reinforce it, they create new specific linguistics features relevant to the analysis of national representation such as designation, appraisal and presupposition.*

Again, Ingrid Mardh (1980) identifies the following as the linguistic features of a typical headlines in English Newspapers: the omission of articles; the omission of verbs and auxiliaries (the verb ‘to be’ for example); nominalization, the frequent use of complex noun phrases in subject position (in theme position); adverbial headlines with the omission of both verb and subject position .....; the use of shorthand, ... widespread use of puns, word play and ‘alliteration’; the importance of word order, with most important items placed first, even in some cases, a verb, and dependent ‘wh-’ constructions not linked to a main clause.

On the other hand, Molek-Kozakowska (2014) studies coercive metaphors in newspaper headlines to explain how they are used as strategic pragma-linguistic devices for representation of socio-political realities that he argues “are compactable with the interests of the news outlet rather than those that inform public debate”. He concludes that the use of coercive metaphors in newspaper headlines is used to achieve “simplification, imaging, animalization, confrontation, (de) legitimatization, emotionalization and dramatization.

Also related, is the work by Adewole A. Alagba and Moses Joseph (2009). They examine ambiguity and communicative effectiveness of newspaper headlines. They identify lexical, grammatical and semantic ambiguities as prevalent in the headlines studied and conclude that media outlets use them to mask the denotative meaning of language resources exploited to achieve a set objective.

The views above fall within the purview of rhetorics as they discuss the selection of structures and lexical items to achieve set goals as determined by particular newspaper houses in terms of representation of ideas, nations, individuals and so on. It is believed that the works reviewed give adequate background to the present study as to the understanding of the linguistic features of headlines and the various functions they are made to perform within a society. It is in line with this understanding that this study hopes to explain the reportage of Boko Haram in Nigerian newspaper headlines.

### **Theoretical consideration**

This study utilises Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric. This is a communication based theory that sees communication as an art and act that are driven by purpose – in this case persuasion.

Aristotle defines “rhetoric as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion”. According to him, in order to make a good speech effective, a speaker must follow certain principles which he terms canons of rhetoric. These are invention, arrangement, style, delivery and memory. He defines invention as the construction and arrangement of argument that is relevant to the communication purpose. This involves impacting on the information by deliberate act of the speaker (writer). On the other hand, he explains arrangement to mean the deliberate organisation of information to achieve comprehension. This entails using words and structures to achieve simplicity thereby making the object of communication to be understood by many. Style entails deliberate choice of words and imagery that are appropriate to context and subject matter. Delivery involves non verbal cues that enhance effective presentation of speech. These include eye contact pronunciation, body movement, physical appearance, pitch of voice and others that make a speech to achieve the purpose. Memory has to do with the capacity of the rhetor to memorize facts and content that enhance the speaker’s confidence and audience appreciation. For the purpose of this study invention, arrangement and style are relevant. Therefore rhetoric is seen in this study as the choice of words, structures and deliberate arrangement of information and emotions to achieve the goals of the newspaper houses.

### **Data presentation and analysis**

#### **Sentence structure**

The data used for the study show a high incidence of simple sentences. According to Quirk *et al* (1972:342), “sentences are either simple (containing just one clause) or complex (containing more than one clause), a clause being a unit that can be analysed into the elements of S(subject), V(verb), C(complement), O(object) and A(adverbial).” Below are some examples:

- Boko Haram (S) attacks (V) Air Force barracks (O) (Van. 1<sup>st</sup> Dec., 2012)
- Gunmen (S) kill (V) 100 (O) in Kaduna massacre (A) ( Punch 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2014)
- Terrorists (S) kill (V) pastor, 10 worshippers (O) (Van. 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb.,2014 )
- Grab (V) offer of dialogue (O) now (A) (Van 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2012)

The choice of simple sentences is to achieve quick and easy reading by a large number of people who have the opportunity of seeing the newspapers. It is also noted that out of the 30 headlines, 28 are declarative sentences. Out of this number, 27 have subject-verb sequence typical of a declarative sentence. The remaining headlines are instances of imperative sentences that are used to make request. One is that credited to the US Government:

*Boko Haram: catch Shekau, get ₦1.1bn – Govt. (Van. 14 June, 2013)*

*The other instance of imperative sentence is that credited to the government of Nigeria.*

*Grab offer of dialogue now (Van. 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2012)*

The two instances of imperative sentences noted above are marked by sense of urgency by the use of the transitive verbs “catch” , “get” and “grabs”. Their semantic connotations reveal attitude and authority. The tone of the statement credited to the US government is demanding and authoritative while that credited to the Nigerian Government is weak and condescending. No doubt, the lexical selections and ordering, which is a rhetorical device has helped to meditate the interpretation as indicated.

### **Lexical choices**

Headlines are known to use more of content words (nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs). This is to maximize quality meaning potentials of these words within the limited space available for the crafting of headlines. Therefore, in this section our study will only be concerned with the identified word classes as they contribute to rhetorical configuration of messages. The others will, however, be discussed when they are used as rhetorical strategies.

### **Nouns**

The nouns used are mostly proper nouns, concrete nouns of human specie and figures. There are few instances of abstract nouns. The proper nouns and the concrete noun of human specie are used to refer to Boko Haram and its associative meanings and they are used as subjects in mostly active declaration sentences. This category are (9) in the data collected. Some examples are:

*Boko Haram attacks Air Force barracks (Van. 1<sup>st</sup> Dec., 2012)*

*Gunmen kill 100 in Kaduna massacre ( Punch 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2014)*

*Terrorists kill pastor, to worshippers (Van. 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb.,2014 )*

Cumulatively the words, ’ Boko Haram’ appears 15 times ; ’terror’ and its other variants appear 5 times, while ’gunmen’ appears 2 times. Essentially the use of these words in the reportage under study to set up a semantic relationship has in no small way contributed to define Boko Haram insurgency as a threat to personal and national security that has created fear, apprehension and general sense of insecurity in the country. Figures are other forms of noun used. They are realised by Arabic numeral and are used for fast grasp of information presented. In virtually all the headlines that report Boko Haram attacks, explicit figures are used. This, as a rhetorical strategy, tends to portray Boko Haram as very effective.

### **Adjectives**

Adjectives are rarely used in headlines as the spatial constraints do not allow for description, except when absolutely necessary. There in only one example in the data under study.

*BLACK MONDAY in ABUJA (Van. 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2014)*

The adjective, which is figurative, is used to evoke great emotion, thereby accentuating grief and disconsolation. It aims to bind the audience in grief. It is commentary that is bereft of commitment.

### **Verbs**

The verbs used in the headlines are predominantly transitive verb. Transitive verbs are used in 21 headlines. This makes the headlines to be more effective in term of clarity in presentation of information. This means that majority of the sentences have objects. These mostly indicate the destructive impact of Boko Haram. Most of these transitive verbs have Boko Haram as the subjects. Some examples are given below:

*Boko Haram give Jonathan ultimatum (Van. 8<sup>th</sup> May 2012)*  
*Boko Haram attacks Nyako's convoy (Van. 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2014)*  
*Gunmen massacre 78 student in Yobe (30<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2013)*

Also significant is the form of active verb used to report the activities and efforts of government in the conflict.

*FG links Boko Haram to 2015 election (Van. 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2014)*  
*Tell Boko Haram to accept dialogue (Van. 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2013)*  
*FG hunts for Boko Haram BACKER in ARMY, SSS, NIA (Punch 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2012)*

The inactive verbs, *links* and *tell* in their context portray Boko Haram as purposeful as they *attack*, *massacre*, while Government is portrayed as unserious and uncommitted. However, the active verb, *hunts* is not directed at Boko Haram, but the backers.

### **Adverbs**

Adverbs are another key lexical items used in the crafting of the headlines studied. There are thirteen (13) instances: 9 indicate place; 3, time and one 1, disjunct.

*Grab offer of dialogue now (Van 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2012)*

### **Qualifications**

Another relevant feature of the headlines studied is the use of qualification. Out of the 30 headlines, 12 exploit qualifications as rhetorical strategy. According to *Encarta Dictionaries*, qualification modifies, clarifies or restricts a given information. Qualification as used in the referent texts serves the three purposes by the use of introductory phrases that are followed by qualifications realised by comment clauses and separated by a column. This device enables a newspaper headline is pile up a lot of information within the spatial constraint it operates. Some examples from the data include:

*12,000 lives lost to Boko Haram-Jonathan (Van. 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2014)*  
*Boko Haram bombs Maiduguri: over 100 feared dead (Van. 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2014)*

In the two instances above, qualifications amplify the information given, thereby making the reportage more effective in projecting the capacity and capability of Boko Haram sect. The use of qualification helps in maximizing space and avoiding windy and convoluted constructions that obfuscate meaning.

### **Findings**

The analysis above reveals that the newspaper headlines studied adopted rhetorical strategies that tended to portray Boko Haram as being more powerful and effective in the conflict situation reported. According to Geoffrey N. Leech (1969:27) “ Every serious, premeditated use of language (unless totally inept) goes some ways towards the ideal of style in which linguistic choices fit their purpose, and bear full weights of meaning.” Obviously, the linguistic choices as used in the casting of the headlines are well thought out and goal directed as they have successfully frame the government, especially the Federal Government and its agencies as being weak and therefore lacking in capacity. This, of course affects the morale of the members of the armed forces and create fear and lack of confidence in the ability of the Nation’s armed forces to effectively protect the territorial integrity of the nation. For instance, the exploits of Boko Haram are explicitly stated like in the headline below:

*Boko haram attack Air force barracks (Van 1<sup>st</sup> Feb., 2012)*

Whereas, the efforts of Nigerian armed forces are reported using indeterminate structures, for example:

*360 killed in Boko Haram, Army clash (Punch 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2014)*  
*Kano, Maiduguri ATTACK AGAIN*  
*12 killed in gun battle with Boko Haram (Van. 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2012)*

The above headlines, by the deliberate choice of linguistic resources, have failed to make categorical statements as to the party that recorded success in the conflict reported. It could be validly assumed that the reportage failed to be committed because the armed forces recorded success which is not in tandem with the objective of such reportage. Corroborating the above, Christopher Marizu asserts as follows: “What is happening is not what is being reported in the newspapers and sometimes I wonder if the media are wishing that the terrorists bring this nation down or what do they seek to gain by running our soldiers down” (Van. 14<sup>th</sup> Sept, 2014)

Through conscious representation of information, individuals, organisation or government can be legitimized or delegitimized. According to Molek-Kozakowska (2014) “media discourse is a prominent domain where cultural hegemony and political dominance are legitimized” This is related to what Fairclough (1996:93) refers to as “hegemonic struggle”. So there is ever continuing contest in the media space as interest groups continue to battle for the control of public conscience and support. For instance, the headline: “I will sell the Chibok girls into slavery”(Van. 22<sup>nd</sup> June, 2014) portrays Boko Haram as absolutist



and unassailable. This form of reportage and others studied make the Boko Haram sect members heroes, while Nigerian soldiers and by extension Federal Government are portrayed as lacking in capacity. Commenting on the impactful nature of the headline above, Wole Soyinka says: “Are you talking of amnesty for the creature? That monster who was boasting to humanity in general.” The referent reportage had devastating consequences on the legitimacy of Nigerian Government. In fact the reportage delegitimizes the Government of Nigerian as it generated negative comments questioning its legitimacy. For instance, Senator McCain, a member of US Senate has this to say:

*The government of Nigeria, has been, in my view derelict in its responsibility towards protecting boys and girls ... what we should have done as soon as we know that these young girls were kidnapped, we should have accessed every asset ... to go after them. We don't have to wait until a Nigerian government, the practically non-existent government gave us go ahead (cited in Vanguard 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2014)*

In the same vein the *New York Times* editorial of May 8, 2014 entitled “Nigerian Stolen Girls” comments “The country’s president, Goodluck Jonnathan has been shockingly slow and inept in addressing this serious crime”

From the above, media reportage of Boko Haram has succeeded in portraying Nigerian Government and its leadership in a bad light. Of course, the portrayal negatively affectshow the government is perceived, especially in the global community as evident in the scathing comments about the government

From the above it shows that the media through their reports support terrorism. Concurring Asogwa, Iyere and Attah (2012) say: “ communication media are inadvertently promoting crimes and terrorist activities globally”. So through structural and lexical selections, the Nigerian Newspaper Houses have contributed in no small way in delegitimizing the Nigeria Government

## **Conclusion**

The media organizations are critical stakeholders in the Nigerian enterprise. According to Pate (2011:867) “the mass media constitute one of the most important institutions of socialization and, in fact the major cultural industry responsible for contribution of ideas in Nigeria society”.

It is also important to note that the role of the media is recognised in the 1999 constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (Amended), (see section 39(1) and(3)); therefore much more is expected of the media houses in ensuring the stability of the nation in their reportage, especially in the crafting of the headlines. Commenting further, Pate (2011:867) citing Osadolor (2001), says: “the most critical role should be to prevent or at least attenuate the severity of conflicts”. In the same vein, Musa Mayaki opines: “There is need to review the media contents being churned out on the activities of the dreaded sect is

pertinent such that terrorists will not be using the coverage both for publicity and recruitment tool.”

The above can only be achieved when the media houses stop casting the government and its agents that are involved in curtailing the Boko Haram insurgency in bad light. Through commitment to National Development, this can be achieved. For instance, Spanish newspaper *Marca* cited in *Vanguard* 20 June, 2014 commenting on the early exit of the Spanish Nation team from the 2014 World Cup held in Brazil blames the ouster of the national team on “big mistake, and, a sense of brokenness, of exhaustion”. The above comment is positive, even in failure. It shows commitment and patriotism that sees the job of building the nation as a collective endeavour, rather than a blame game where sections are castigated and demonized for misfortunes that are not self wrought.

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