

**A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF SOME SELECTED NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER
READERS' FACEBOOK COMMENTS**

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a stylistic analysis of selected Nigerian newspaper readers' comments on Facebook. Two national newspapers' websites were purposively selected to generate a corpus for the study using some popular news items on their Facebook pages. The paper analysed readers' comments based on rhetorical and graphological features. Findings show that there is preponderance of coinages, abbreviation, mixed capitalisation and small letter from the graphological aspect and rhetorical questions and repetition from the rhetorical side. The study concludes that newspaper readers' comments on Facebook vary with the hardcopy versions both in quantity and quality. Reader comments on Facebook tend to be unconventional in English language use. The study recommends that newspaper readers' comments on social media be further subjected to other stylistic analysis.

Keywords: Facebook, comments, stylistics, newspaper

Introduction

The newspaper is one of the important media of mass communication that convey information to people in various languages. Although, it started among the earliest means of modern communication, it is still prevalent in most societies despite the challenge of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) which brought numerous digital avenues for news and information sharing. In fact, the rise of ICTs was seen by some as the likely end of newspaper as we know it today (Briggs,

1995 in Encarta, 2009). However, the newspaper seems to have adapted to the digital era by incorporating a lot of features and technologies that make it relevant till today. Even here in Nigeria, as in many developing countries, most newspaper houses have adopted ICTs in their productions and have online editions in various formats so that they are accessed globally (Nwabueze, 2009). Newspaper adaptation to ICTs is seen for instance in their having social media presence like, YouTube, Twitter, Google+, etc.

Newspaper, like other media of mass communication, is a language based phenomenon with its unique and varying linguistics features. The language features of headlines, for instance, might vary from editorials, news, to letters to editors. The same applies to the other parts of newspaper contents. Crystal and Davy (1985) point out that a newspaper is always very eclectic from a stylistic point of view. One can find within its pages articles, reviews, imaginative writings of various kinds like adverts, sports, pictures, cartoons, editorials, etc. with varying graphological, semantic, lexical, syntactic and other features. The newspaper medium can be said to be a collection of a wide range of linguistic variety than many other domains of communication. One of the popular varieties of newspaper language is the letters to the editor where comments by readers though edited are placed. The coming of social media like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc. and its adoption by newspapers brings more opportunity for readers to freely comment on newspaper contents with less restriction than the print version (letters to the editor). Thus reader comments on pages of newspapers are

avenues for open expression by readers. To this extent therefore, this study is concerned with the stylistic analysis of such comments as a relatively new sphere of linguistic engagement. Do the reader comments have similar stylistic features with the ones in newspaper hardcopies? This study, using a sample of readers' comments on Facebook pages of two national newspapers in Nigeria, analyses the stylistic features of these comments. The study is guided by the following objectives:

- I. To determine the graphological features of Nigerian newspaper readers' comments.
- II. To determine the rhetorical expression of Nigerian newspaper readers' comments on Facebook.

The study is significant to linguists, editors and interested members of the public as it exposes them to those styles imbedded in the comments by Nigerian newspaper readers. It also adds to existing literature in the area of study and, based on what has been analysed before, useful to design language structure of comment by users.

Although there are many types of content on social media and internet in general, each has its own unique styles. Therefore, this study is limited to examining the comments of readers on newspaper Facebook page and their stylistic peculiarities. This study is limited to the graphological and rhetorical features.

Review of Related Literature

Communication and language are inevitable in our day to day living. Udall and Udall(1979) posit that communication is the process by which one person (or group) clearly understands one another. This implies that the language used by an individual or group in imparting knowledge, ideas and feeling has to be "common". In other words, both the sender and receiver of the message need to share common language.

On the other hand, style varies from one register to another and many people have their different opinions as to what style is. Richard, Platt and Weber (1985) see style as a situational distinctive use of language. On the other hand, Payne(2001) sees style as the way something is said or done. Halliday and Hassan(1976) posit that each person has a writing style. Styles is a kind of deviation from the norm here it could be said that "style is the man"(Halliday and Hassan, 1976). Therefore, Bradford(1997) sees stylistics as the study and interpretation of texts from a linguistic perspective. The preferred object of stylistic studies is literature; and also other forms of written texts. Such texts include those generated from the domains of advertising, politics, religions, academia, etc.

Stylistic attempts to establish principles capable of explaining the particular choices made by individuals and social groups in their use of language, such as socialisation, the production and reception of meaning, critical discourse analysis and literary criticism. Widdowson(1992) asserts that stylistics is the study of varieties of language whose

properties position the language in context. This means that the language at a time for a particular occasion, will determine the style of its presentation. Stylistics is a distinctive term that may be used to determine the connection between the form and effect within a particular variety of language.

The aim of stylistics is to analyse language habits with the main purpose of identifying from the general mass linguistic features what is common to, as used on every considerable occasion, those features which are restricted to certain kind of social context; to explain, where possible, why such features have been used upon a view of their function in the social context. By 'features' here, it means any bit of speech or writing which can be singled out from the general words, part of a word, sequence of words, or way of uttering a word. A feature is restricted in its occurrence to a limited number of social contexts. This is called stylistically significant or stylistically distinctive features (Crystal and Davy, 1985).

The features of stylistics are the distribution of sentence lengths, the use of particular language registers, use of lexical items, use of rhetorical devices, semantic features, graphological features, etc. In addition, stylistics is a distinctive term that may be used to determine the connection between the form and effect within a particular variety of language.

Components of Style

Crystal(1988), states that though there are many sense of style, they can be grouped into two broad types. These are evaluative and descriptive styles.

Hicks(1998), on other hand, is of the opinion that style differs from grammar in that, it cannot be quantified; it has no precise rules. Style is not much concerned with the choices of language as with the way a writer uses it to play on the sensation of the reader. Hicks(1998) is, therefore, of the opinion that a writer must develop a style that has four principal attributes: suitability, simplicity, precision, and poise. This study therefore stylistically analyses the graphological and rhetorical features of newspaper readers Facebook comments.

Method

As a study concerned with style of a text, the appropriate research design is qualitative design where the text analysed is described in terms of stylistic feature(s) present. Two national newspapers were purposively selected; *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*. The rationale for selection of the two papers is to limit the size of the corpus and to give a balance between the different geo-political orientations of north and south. The two newspapers also have Facebook presence where some of their contents are featured for those who subscribe or, to use Facebook term, 'like' them. The researchers generated the corpus for this study purposively. The purposes applied for generating the corpus are based on issues that generate relatively high number of comments on the newspapers Facebook account within the period of study. While there are numerous issues that generated Facebook comments by the two newspapers, the researchers selected only two news items that generated comments. Text I is selected from the Facebook site of

Daily Trust newspaper and is a news item based on statement credited to former president of the country, that no Nigerian should live in abject poverty. The story published on 4th October, 2012 is bound to be interesting to Nigerians because the speaker was a two-term president of the country with lots of comments or issues with his performance. Text II is selected from *Vanguard* newspaper Facebook site with a headline that reads 'INEC broke can't pay salary – Jega' published on 4th October, 2012. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is the national agency charged with managing national elections in Nigeria and for its chair to admit that it is broke is topical to Nigerians. Both the two issues selected are political and generated comments from many Facebook newspaper readers. The comments from Facebook users were then stylistically analysed using the Crystal and Davy (1985) model. The analysis seeks to answer the research questions that were drawn to guide the research and the identified features are discussed with examples from the corpus. Major aspects of the discussion are syntactic and semantic features.

Result

Most of the comments by Facebook newspaper readers are short with some as short as one word. Result of the data as presented show the availability of the following features:

Graphological features:

Nigerian newspaper readers' comment on Facebook show some features that tend to differentiate them from other writings like the traditional letters to the editor and other newspaper genres. Graphological features identified in the texts can be summarised as follows:

- a. *Coinages and abbreviations*: the texts are replete with coinages and abbreviations by those who made the comments. Common coinages in the texts include '9ja', '9ija', 'Lol', 'OBJ', 'IBB', 'b4', 'INEC' among others. Coinages and abbreviation could be many perhaps to save space and time especially those using mobile devices where writing long passages can take longer time.
- b. *Mixing capitalisation and small letters*: The writers use a lot of mixture of small and capital letters irrespective of the grammatical appropriateness. Comments like the following are common:

'Its unbelievable. Its not gud 4us. Ah WHICH WAY NIGERIA';

'BABA OBJ.don't tell nigerians u joking. u didn't eradicate poverty for 8yrs. now u want to b special adviser on d subject. since u've repented,u can return d money u looted to d masses through u personal supervision.LONG LIVE BABA OBJ!!!'

- c. *Unusual use of exclamation and question marks*: The writers of newspaper pages comment make use of repetitious exclamation and question marks may be to heighten what they

feel on the issue i.e. to emphasise particular points. Examples of such exclamations include: ‘U shud ve eradicated it in Ur tym,or was d natural resources not dere in Ur tym,wtcheeeeeeeeeew’, ‘me self go reach there one day chop my own. Yeeeeeepppprrrrr.....! Barawo's’.

Rhetorical features:

In addition to the graphological features presented above the texts also have the following rhetorical expressions:

- a. Rhetorical questions: some of the comments of readers on newspaper Facebook page are composed in the form of rhetorical questions. Expression like ‘Your entire 8 years of governance have been drenched in injustice and corruption. Nigeria has never been rich like the era of your time and now. What did you do to Nigerians during your time and What are you trying to scheme now?’; ‘How much naira do we earn from crude oil everyday! ask them up there that where do they keep the money?’
- b. Repetition: some of the comments use repetition to stress particular points. Examples of such repetition include ‘Same old faces! Same old ideas!! Same old stories!!! Same old Result!!!.’, ‘Up OBJ, up PDP’,

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

The study stylistically analysed reader’s comment on selected Nigerian newspaper Facebook pages graphologically and rhetorically. Common graphological features found in the corpus

are the use of coinages and abbreviation, mixed capitalisation and small letters and unusual exclamation marks. Social media writing has shown the tendency to go unconventional in spelling perhaps to reduce space, to achieve speed, and to draw attention. Facebook comment on newspaper news is not an exception despite the fact that the news is written in standard English. From the rhetorical point of view, there is preponderant use of rhetorical question and repetition in the corpus by the writers probably to highlight or emphasise what they feel are important in their comments. This can help them to stress some point which they may feel are important to the issue being commented upon.

In conclusion, this study reasserts the influence of social media like Facebook to alter the graphological and rhetorical features of language use especially reader comments which hitherto were relatively following the conventional rule of English language and were further edited compared to instantaneous posting on social media by readers. It shows the extent to which social media is influencing how newspaper readers and commentators write and what they write. There is the need for further studies to examine how other stylistic features like semantics and syntax others manifest in similar corpora. There is also need to go beyond Facebook and study reader comments on other social media like Twitter, Google+, Whatsapp, etc. The stylistic diversity or conformity can stimulate a lot of interest among scholars of English for Journalists to further understand the interrelationship between ICTs and English Language

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