

Style, Lexical Choice, and Media Ideology of Select Newspaper Reports on IPOB Crisis

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Abstract

The study investigated the style, lexical choice, and media ideology of select Nigerian newspaper reports on the IPOB crisis. Framing theory by Erving Goffman (1974) served as the framework for the study. Four research questions were formulated to guide the study. Population of the study comprised select Nigerian newspaper reports between January to December, 2017. The sample size was selected using purposive sampling method and the data for the study were sourced from printed newspaper copies as well as online publications from the digital archives of these selected newspapers. The data were analysed qualitatively using content analysis. The findings of the study reveal that evaluative, manipulative, and persuasive styles are predominantly employed to portray IPOB negatively, framing the group as a violent and destabilizing force against national security. Through strategic lexical choices and certain linguistic features, the findings suggest that these framing techniques contribute to a broader ideological agenda that prioritizes state control and security over alternative political expressions. It also discussed the implications and recommendations based on the findings of the study.

Keywords: Media Ideology, Framing, Journalistic style, Lexical choice, IPOB crisis

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that throughout the history of man, there has never been total peace in the world. There have been conflicts, sometimes, between countries or within a country; and they are either resolved or escalated principally through language. For a pluralistic society such as Nigeria, conflict is bound to occur. This crisis can be attributed to either because of unequal representation in government (that is, marginalisation) or unequal resource distribution among the different ethnic groups that make the country. However, despite these socio-cultural and religious differences, linguistic diversity, unhealthy competition and striking imbalance in development among the diverse ethnic groups, the British Government amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 to form a country, Nigeria. This foundational and systemic defect triggered a series of questions, debates and struggle among the ethnic groups from

inception (Okereka *et al* 2020). Hence, the nationalist struggles and subsequent formation of political parties were influenced by ethnicity rather than national interest, and therefore, had no unifying effect on the people.

Since independence, the struggle for dominance among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria has resulted to military coups and counter coups. Similarly, one of the conflict situations in Nigeria's existence has been the agitation by some parts of the country to exit from the federation and form their republics. Such agitations have at one point or the other resulted to issuance of quit notices to some ethnic groups of the country. While in some other instances, it has resulted to bloodshed, loss of lives and properties (Asogwa, Ojih, and Mohammed 2017). Some of these separationist movements in Nigeria include: The Movements for Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in South-South who agitated for self-determination, justice and

resource control. The Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) also from South-South, equally campaigned for self-determination, justice and resource control. Their dream state was Niger Delta Republic and their method of operation was the use of violence, destruction of oil installations and businesses as well as attacking of government forces. The Middle Belt Federation (MBF) also agitated for autonomy on grounds of the unfair provisions of the 1999 Constitution, and the Indigenous People of Biafra, (IPOB) from South-East had and are still agitating for the creation of Sovereign State of Biafra (Asogwa, Ojih, and Mohammed 2017).

However, while this struggle is on, the activities of the IPOB have been captured and presented to the masses by the media (Newspapers) through the medium of language. Language is an indispensable tool for driving person-to-person interactions and sharing attitudes, ideologies, expressing commitments, making and refuting claims

and establishing human relationships. Language has strong potential to influence people and redirect human perspectives to issues. Critically examining the effects of certain linguistic styles and choices on the message being communicated, it is obvious that not all elements of the clause structure bear the same persuasive weight. The verbal group is meticulously chosen to bear the ideological underpinnings of a communicator. Hence, in any political aspiration like that of the IPOB's, language is used as a tool to shape the perception of reality. How words are used, the exact language selected and the emphasis given to it, has the power of shaping someone's judgement of a subject (Yusuf, 1990). Language is, therefore, usually employed by the media to keep their readers informed and influenced.

In Nigeria, the media have dramatically changed political discussions and political participations with their instantaneous and

widespread campaign information and disinformation. Most notably, political influencers and manipulators have embraced the media in disseminating political information as well as disinformation to manipulate public opinion (Ahmad, Alvi, and Ittefaq, 2019). Hence, in recent times, this professional ethos, which is certainly what the journalist maintains in any general statement, has been questioned by scholars working on media discourse, who argue that news is not free from the moderations of its purveyors to suit their ideological purpose. The ongoing crisis surrounding the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in Nigeria has been a subject of significant media coverage and public discourse. From the survey of recent studies on the media and political discourses, the IPOB crisis have rather yielded linguistic interests from pragmatic/SA (e.g. Aliu, 2019), CDA (e.g. Chilwa, Taiwo, and Ajiboye, 2020), and stylistic analysis (e.g. Taiwo, 2016)

perspectives. This study aims to examine the interplay between journalistic style and media ideology in shaping newspaper reports on the IPOB crisis. By analysing select newspaper reports on the IPOB crisis, it seeks to uncover how language choices, framing techniques, and underlying ideological stances influence the portrayal of events and actors in this complex socio-political issue.

Purpose of the Study

The study investigates the linguistic styles and ideologies that manifest in the select Nigerian newspapers reports of the IPOB crisis with a view to establishing the link between media ideologies and lexico-stylistic choices in the reports. Specifically, the study is set:

1. To analyze the predominant style employed by select Nigerian newspapers in their coverage of the IPOB crisis;
2. To examine the patterns of lexical choices utilized by select Nigerian

newspapers in their reportage of the IPOB crisis;

3. To identify the salient linguistic features employed in the headlines of select Nigerian newspapers in their coverage of the IPOB crisis;
4. To investigate the underlying ideologies reflected through the stylistic and lexical choices in newspaper reports on the IPOB crisis.

Significance of the Study

The study holds particular importance for the field of language studies, offering valuable insights and contributions in several key areas. This study will contribute significantly to the field of CDA, particularly in the African context. By examining how language is used to construct and perpetuate ideologies in Nigerian newspaper reporting, it will provide a rich case study for scholars interested in the relationship between language, power, and society.

The study will offer valuable data on language use in Nigerian media, reflecting broader sociolinguistic patterns in the country. It will clarify how different linguistic choices are employed in formal written contexts, providing insights into the sociolinguistic landscape of Nigeria.

The study can offer insights into how language shapes cognitive framing of complex issues. By analysing metaphors, analogies, and other figurative language used in IPOB crisis reporting, the study can contribute to our understanding of conceptual metaphors and their role in shaping public perception of political events. By exploring how language is used to construct notions of identity, otherness, and national unity, this study will contribute to research on language and identity.

Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the predominant styles employed by select Nigerian newspapers in their coverage of the IPOB crisis?
2. What patterns of lexical choices are utilized by select Nigerian newspapers in their reportage of the IPOB crisis?
3. What are the salient linguistic features employed in the headlines of select Nigerian newspapers in their coverage of the IPOB crisis?
4. What ideologies are reflected through the style and lexical choices in newspaper reports on the IPOB crisis?

Theoretical framework

Framing Theory

The concept of framing was first proposed by Erving Goffman in 1974 in his book "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience." It has since been developed and applied in various fields. Framing theory

suggests that how something is presented (the "frame") influences the choices people make about how to process that information. It suggests that media outlets select certain aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in their reporting. This process can influence how the audience understands and interprets events.

Framing theory explains the process whereby one that spreads information builds into their message the perspectives which they want the audience to read the message from. The basis of the theory is that any given issue, event or development can be viewed and understood from varying perspectives. Put differently, every phenomenon can be seen through different frames of meaning depending on who is seeing and the circumstances of the seeing (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Hence, framing can be described as "the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an

issue” (Chong and Druckman, 2007, p.104). In other words, people’s approach to reality takes into account the contributions of others. The interpretation of people on a given issue would be dependent on the contributors, and that is why the definition of the situation is linked with action and interaction.

In the media, news editors are not excluded from framing. Like other members of society who possess their individual biases and social perspectives, news editors engage in framing once they are on the task of gathering and processing content. In agreement to this, McQuail (2010) posits that it “is almost unavoidable for journalists to” engage in framing “and in so doing to depart from pure ‘objectivity’ and to introduce some (unintended) bias” (p.380). Consequently, framing has been described as “an essential feature of news” (Tuchman, 1978 p. 56).

Similarly, Ardèvol-Abreu (2015) in discussing the relationship between news and framing argues that news messages are

“textual and visual structures built around a central axis of thought, from a certain perspective, and by information professionals” and other actors who in the process provides an interpretive framework within which the audience is to understand the messages. In this respect, framing thus can be seen as “a process in which some aspects of reality are selected, and given greater emphasis or importance, so that the problem is defined, its causes are diagnosed, moral judgments are suggested and appropriate solutions and actions are proposed” (p.424).

Within the context of this study, the framing theory helps to put in perspective the role of the news reports in influencing the judgments and feelings of the news readers by virtue of what they highlight and what they fail to highlight in their reportage of IPOB conflict. Thus, the process of selecting and processing these contents for transmission to the audience could be understood from the

perspective of the direction which the news editors might want the audience's thought, judgments and emotions to go. Hence, in reporting IPOB that is demanding for secession from Nigeria, the media might, for instance, choose to present the group as fighting for justice, as fomenting trouble, as pursuing a legitimate cause, as pursuing an illegitimate cause, as making lawfully demands from the state, or as usurping the powers of the state. All these constitute some of the frames in which the gatekeepers could structure their reports. This framing is reflected in their style and/or lexical choices in their news coverage and report. The decision of the media to apply any of the frames will be dependent on several factors including the ethnic disposition of the news editors, the owner's interest, political and legal control, influence of advertisers, and public taste, mood and expectations among others.

Methodology

The research adopted the descriptive design because the study aims to investigate the link between lexico-stylistic choices and media ideologies through the styles and strategies used by select newspaper reports in relaying information on a topical issue bordering the IPOB crisis. The population of the study comprised newspaper reports on the IPOB crisis from selected national newspapers in Nigeria (*The Punch*, *Premium Times*, *Vanguard*, and *THISDAY*), published in Nigeria between January, and December, 2017 which is the time frame of the study. The sample size for this study comprises 25 newspaper editions. Purposive sampling was used to collect the data for the study. The five South Eastern States were considered as the area of study. They comprise Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu, and Ebonyi states. Data for the study were sourced from printed newspaper copies of selected national and regional-based newspapers as well as online

publications from the digital archives of these selected newspapers, published between January and December, 2017. A structured document was used to record specific features of the newspaper reports, and content analysis was used to examine the selected newspaper report on IPOB crisis as it involved analysing how the media portrays the issue through language, tone, and underlying ideological perspectives.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1: What style is predominantly employed by select Nigerian newspapers in their report of the IPOB crisis?

In this context, "style" refers to the distinct way in which Nigerian newspapers craft their reports on the IPOB crisis. Three styles have been identified as the styles used by the newspaper reporters; they are: evaluative style, manipulative style, and persuasive style.

1. In the quest for political relevance, the Biafran agitator chose to fix a date

for independence of the Biafran nation. *Punch* May 8, 2017

2. Bomb scare rocks Anambra INEC Secretariat, IPOB members arrested *Punch* Nov. 14, 2017

3. Nigerians Will Remain United Despite IPOB's Agitation – Interior Minister *Premium Times* September 15, 2017

Evaluative style is achieved through metaphorization and adjectivisation (Martin and White, 2005). In Excerpt 1, the phrase "*quest for political relevance*" is metaphorical, comparing the individual or group's actions to a journey or mission in pursuit of something they lack - *relevance*. It suggests that the agitator is not already politically relevant but is striving for it, implying desperation or self-serving motives. This metaphor subtly discredits the Biafran leader's actions by framing them as part of a personal or selfish agenda rather than a legitimate political or social movement.

Manipulative style is achieved through agency deletion, Gricean maxim violation,

and/or thematization (White, 2006). The phrase "IPOB members arrested" in Excerpt 2 omits the agent responsible for the arrest. While it's implied that law enforcement made the arrest, the headline does not specify who is taking action. This omission distances the arresting authorities from the headline, focusing solely on the IPOB members as the subject of interest. By deleting the agency, the headline subtly reduces the accountability or involvement of the police or security forces. It manipulates the reader to concentrate on the IPOB members as perpetrators, without questioning the actions or motivations of the authorities involved.

Persuasive style style is realised is voice attribution and illocution (Connor and Lauer, 2015). In Excerpt 3, the phrase "Interior Minister" at the end of the headline is an example of voice attribution. The report attributes the statement about national unity to a government official, specifically the Interior Minister. This enhances the

credibility of the statement. By attributing the claim to a high-ranking official, the report becomes more authoritative. Readers are more likely to trust and be persuaded by a statement coming from someone in a position of power and responsibility. Similarly, the statement "Nigerians will remain united" carries an illocutionary force. According to the headline, the Interior Minister is not merely describing a current situation but is making a declaration about the future. This illocutionary act serves to reassure the public and project confidence that despite the IPOB's agitation, national unity is guaranteed.

Research Question 2: What lexical choices are predominantly employed by select Nigerian newspapers in their report of the IPOB crisis?

In this context, lexical choice refers to the specific words and phrases that Nigerian newspapers select in their reports on the IPOB crisis. This involves lexical choice (the

selection of specific words that describe the crisis or the people involved and the actions attributed to IPOB and other stakeholders in the crisis) and lexical collocation (two or more words used together to describe IPOB members or their activities).

4. IGP orders AIGs, CPs to disarm IPOB agitators *ThisDay* June 1, 2017
5. Bomb scare rocks Anambra INEC Secretariat, IPOB members arrested *Punch* 20 September 2017
6. We'll deal with any erring IPOB member, troublemaker – Police *Punch* 12 September 2017

In Excerpts 4, 5, 6, words such as ‘disarm’, ‘agitators’, ‘arrested’, ‘bomb scare’, ‘deal with’, and ‘troublemaker’ were adopted by the newspaper headlines. These are heavy loaded words with negative connotations. These choices of words give readers a subtle interpretation which casts IPOB as unruly individuals who disrupt public order. As a result, this projects IPOB members as potential threat to public order or safety. Similarly, by labelling IPOB members as

"agitators," "erring IPOB member", and "troublemaker", the headline suggests they are instigators of unrest rather than activists with legitimate grievances. These newspaper headlines reveal how lexical choices can convey implicit biases and reinforce a specific ideological stance regarding the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) crisis. These lexical choices often reflect the newspaper's alignment that frame IPOB as a disruptive or unlawful organization.

Research Question 3: What linguistic features are predominantly employed by select Nigerian newspapers headline in their report of the IPOB crisis?

The linguistic features of newspaper headlines include lexical choices, syntactic structures, and rhetorical strategies that make them effective at both delivering news and subtly framing narratives.

10. Court remands 30 IPOB members in prison *Punch* September 15, 2017

11. IPOB flays Buhari, Zuckerberg for allegedly blocking Facebook account
Vanguard June 04, 2017

12. IPOB Accuses DSS of Secretly Killing Its Members *THISDAY*
August 29, 2017

Some of these linguistic features are highlighted in the following examples:

From the texts above, it can be ascertained that there is omission of articles and determiners which helps make the headlines eye-catching and easy to scan, especially on front pages or online news feeds where space is limited. This journalistic practice is in line with Crystal and Davy (1969), who asserts that “words chosen are often high in semantic value to provide as much information as possible within limited space.” Also, from the texts above, the use of ‘disrupts’, ‘remands’, ‘flays’, and ‘accuses’ which are all in the simple present tense creates a sense of timelessness, making the news seem perpetually current and relevant, despite being a past event. The use of action-verbs “*disrupts*”, “*flays*”, “*remands*” conveys a

strong impact. It creates a vivid mental image of interruption and chaos, making the headline more compelling as well as adds an element of conflict to the headline. It implies a serious charge and grabs the reader’s attention, indicating a dispute or controversy. This makes the headline more urgent and dramatic, encouraging readers to want more details.

Research Question 4: What ideologies are expressed in the style and lexical choices used by newspaper report on IPOB crisis?

These ideological representations as used in select newspaper headlines are identified and discussed below.

IPOB as a Violent Separationist Group

13. Militants back IPOB to boycott Anambra guber election *ThisDay* July 20, 2017

The newspaper headline "Militants back IPOB to boycott Anambra guber election" expresses the ideology of IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) as a violent separationist group through specific lexical choices,

framing, and sourcing. The use of the term "militants" immediately frames IPOB and its supporters in a context of violence and armed struggle (Chiluwa, 2019). This word choice reinforces the perception of IPOB as a militant organization rather than a peaceful political movement. The verb "back" suggests an alliance or support between militant groups and IPOB, further emphasizing the violent connotations associated with the organization (Ojebode and Owacgiu, 2018). "Boycott" implies a deliberate act of defiance against the established political process, reinforcing IPOB's separatist ideology and rejection of the Nigerian state's authority (Onuoha, 2017).

IPOB as Threat to National Security

14. "Chatham House Attack: Okorochoa Can't Support IPOB, Says Imo Govt"
THISDAY March 12, 2017

The newspaper headline "Chatham House Attack: Okorochoa Can't Support IPOB, Says Imo Govt" expresses the ideology of threat to national security through several linguistic and framing devices. The use of the word "Attack" in relation to Chatham House immediately frames the event as violent and threatening. This lexical choice emphasizes the perceived danger associated with IPOB's actions, reinforcing the notion of a security threat. The headline frames the issue as a question of loyalty and security. By stating that Okorochoa "Can't Support IPOB," it implies that supporting IPOB is fundamentally incompatible with holding a position of authority or responsibility in the government.

This framing reinforces the idea that IPOB represents a threat that must be unequivocally rejected by legitimate political figures. The attribution "Says Imo Govt" lends official weight to the statement. By sourcing this claim to the Imo State Government, the

headline presents the view of IPOB as a security threat from an authoritative perspective. This official sourcing can serve to legitimize the security threat narrative. This framing serves to delegitimize IPOB and its goals while reinforcing the authority of the government in maintaining national security (Fairclough, 1989). The headline subtly encourages readers to view IPOB as a dangerous entity that responsible leaders must oppose, thus justifying potential security measures against the group.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Nigerian newspapers predominantly employ evaluative, manipulative, and persuasive styles in reporting on the IPOB crisis. These styles, through selective language, rhetorical devices, and voice attribution, shape public perception by portraying IPOB negatively. The evaluative and manipulative use of terms like "agitator" and "militant" aligns with a narrative that frames IPOB as a threat to

national security and stability, while emphasizing the government as a stabilizing force.

Lexical choices in these reports reinforce this narrative, with terms such as "Biafran agitators" and "disruptive" aligning IPOB with violence and disorder. This framing reflects an ideological bias prioritizing state authority over IPOB's socio-political grievances, subtly shaping public opinion to favor government positions. Also, the linguistic features of Nigerian newspaper headlines - such as omission of auxiliary verbs, use of present tense, action-oriented verbs, and active voice - convey urgency and conflict. These choices enhance the immediacy and impact of the headlines, further reinforcing the negative portrayal of IPOB and aligning with the broader ideological stance of security over dissent.

Ultimately, the study underscores the role of language in shaping media ideologies and public discourse. By selectively framing

IPOB as a destabilizing force through both style and lexical choices, Nigerian newspapers contribute to a polarized discourse that prioritizes national security and state control, diminishing the space for nuanced discussion of IPOB's grievances and potential solutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Nigerian newspapers should aim for more balanced reporting, especially on politically sensitive topics like IPOB.
2. Newspapers should provide clearer attribution of sources and intentions behind voice attribution to ensure that readers can differentiate between factual statements and opinionated or ideologically-driven statements.
3. Training journalists in ethical reporting practices, including avoiding rhetorical and manipulative

styles that compromise neutrality, could strengthen public trust in media institutions.

4. The media should encourage constructive dialogue by highlighting the motivations behind IPOB's actions, rather than framing them solely as security threats, thus fostering a more inclusive narrative that may contribute to conflict resolution.
5. Media houses should establish editorial standards that limit ideological bias, particularly when covering socio-political issues.

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