

Modal auxiliaries as linguistic tools in Insecurity Discourse: A study of some Nigerian Newspaper Editorials

Obiageli C. Okpala

Department of English Language
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam
obypascal2@gmail.com

&

Prof. Ephraim A. Chukwu

Department of English Language & Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
chukwuephraim@yahoo.com

Abstract

The choices of certain lexical items and syntactic patterns have functional roles in relating the editorial writers' intentions to their target audience or readers. The linguist, however, interprets the language use by these writers based on ways the writer packages his opinion according to the situation. This study, analyses the use of modal auxiliaries in three Nigerian newspapers; *Guardian*, *Vanguard* and *Punch* editorials on insecurity situations in Nigeria from April 2021 till July 2022. The aim is to see how these editorials discussed the issues of insecurity currently destabilising the Nigerian polity and see the writers' opinions on the issues. It adopted Halliday's systemic functional linguistics for the theoretical framework; it also adopts qualitative and descriptive methods of data analysis. The study found that the editorial writers used modal auxiliaries as linguistic tools to express different opinions and attitudes towards the state of insecurity in the country. The study recommends comparative studies of the selected editorials and studies of this kind on other related issues in other Nigerian newspapers.

Keywords: Modality, linguistic tools, editorials, Nigeria, Newspapers

Introduction

The Nigerian security system “intensifies” daily from the issue of Boko Haram terrorism, herdsmen attacks, kidnapping, ethno-religious conflicts, Niger Delta militancy, and recently, the unknown gunmen attacks. All these terrorist activities threaten the polity as no part of the country is safe anymore. People now live in fear of being attacked, kidnapped or killed in their farms, churches, travelling by road or train within the country. The efforts of the governments so far in curbing these issues seem to have no effect in ending the insecurity in Nigeria. Hence, the need to investigate the editorial sections of three Nigerian newspapers: *The Guardian*, *The Vanguard* and *The Punch* from April 2021 to July 2022. This period is pivotal in understanding the escalated level of insecurity in Nigeria. It marked the basic departure from earlier attacks that targeted worship centres and marketplaces. The year was particularly catastrophic in the degree of human carnage in Nigeria. The aim is to see how these editorials present the insecurity situation in the country through their use of modal auxiliaries and know how these editorial writers' opinions on insecurities presented through their use of modality.

The media, especially the newspaper, is an important institution in every society, it's socially constructed discourse is handed down as the "main source of people's knowledge, attitude and ideologies, (van Dijk, 1993:36). Daily, 'journalists' use language to communicate news, express opinion on issues that concern the society while the “editors are responsible for cutting and modifying the language, (Bell,1991)”. The editorials present the newspapers' opinions and positions by reinforcing, undermining or challenging some dominant ideologies. The editorial, may impact public opinion regarding issues in the society. Be that as it may, scholars' interests have been in examining how editorials argue in favour or against issue of national importance, especially in adverse situations like the insecurity and political crises in Nigeria.

This study, however, focuses on use of modal auxiliaries by the selected editorials as linguistic tools in the discussions of insecurity activities in Nigeria in the years 2021 and 2022. The choice of the study is

to see how these editorial writers use **modal auxiliaries** present the insecurity situation in Nigeria to their readers and to see the opinion of the editorials on the insecurity menace ravaging the Nigerian country in the period of the study. In doing this, the researchers believe the study will add a voice to Nigerian national development.

Purpose of the Study

The media is the mirror through which the society sees the activities and events that happen in the world. And language is the only means through which this feat is achieved. The objective of this study is

- i) to identify the modal auxiliaries used in the selected editorials discussion of insecurity activities in Nigeria from April 2021 to July 2022.
- ii) to see how these editorials used the modal auxiliaries to express their opinions on the insecurity activities in Nigeria.

Conceptual Review

Modality

Modality is about the speakers' or writers' attitude towards the state of affairs or the writers' assessment, stance or attitude towards the issue or topic of study. In this context, it is the attitude of the editorial writers towards the insecurity situation in Nigeria. These writers use of modality express certainty, possibilities, willingness, obligations, necessity and ability by using modal words and expressions. Speakers or writers often have different opinions about the same thing. Modality "allows the writers to state different kinds of claims like assertions, opinion, hypothesis speculations(Cameron2001)". Bakuuro & Diedong (2021:49) say that "the modal auxiliary verbs such as 'must', 'may', 'can', 'will', 'should', 'would', 'could', 'ought to', 'might', used in editorials, allowed the writers to attach expression of belief, attitude and obligation to the statements they made".

Insecurity

Insecurity concept, can only be understood through the definition of security. Security, on its own, has no universality, it has been defined variously by scholars as regards their various schools of thought. It is the conditions within which people in a society can go about their normal daily activities without any threats to their lives or properties. It embraces all measures designed to protect and safeguard the citizenry and the resources of individuals, groups, businesses and the nation against sabotage of violent occurrences (Ogunleye, Adewale, Alesa and Ogunde, 2011). It is the state's physical ability to defend itself from internal and external threats and acts of aggression (Iheazuonu, 2014). Security generally is not the absence of threat or security issues but the ability to rise to the challenges posed by those threats with expediency and expertise (Motanye & Toro, 2015). Security in this study referred to the protection of lives and properties of citizens and non-citizens living within the Nigerian states by the government at all levels, security forces and society.

Insecurity is then the reverse of security. It also has no generally accepted definition. Motanya & Toro (2015) opine that because of the many ways insecurity affects human life and existence, the concept of insecurity has usually been ascribed to different interrelations in association with the various ways it affects individuals. They listed some common descriptors of insecurity as: want of safety, danger, hazard, uncertainty, want of confidence, doubtful, inadequately guarded or protected, lacking stability, troubled, lack of protection and unsafe... All of these have been used by different people to define the concept of insecurity (Motanya & Toro, 2015: 3). Insecurity, however, is the sufferings, fears, losses of lives and properties, kidnappings, killings and sabotages currently going on in Nigeria. The current insecurity situation in Nigeria is worrisome one that should be a concern for all Nigerians. Therefore, all hands must be on deck for a lasting solution of the plight.

Editorial

An editorial is a piece of writing in newspaper that gives the editors' opinion or stance about something rather than reporting facts. It is a space in the newspaper that contains "the corporate view of every newspaper industry on a topical issue that affects the public and on which necessary actions taken for

better. Editorials are pieces of opinion documented by senior editorial staff for publication in a newspaper or magazine. They reflect opinion and ideological stance of the newspaper on contemporary social, political and economic issues. Editorials meant to influence public opinion, promote critical thinking and cause people to make informed decisions on issues of political, economic and social concern to society (Weintraught, 2013:1). It is the space in which newspapers voice their opinions about the most pressing issues facing the country (Fartousi, 2012). Hence, the linguistic study of editorials on insecurity challenges in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the Systemic Functional Grammar theory due to its relevance in the functional aspect of language. The study will focus on the functions of modal auxiliaries in the editorial discussion of insecurity situations in Nigeria.

Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory propounded by M.A.K. Halliday. This theory views language as not just a formal activity but also a means through which its users perform actions and fulfil their social functions and obligations. Language is seen here through the lens of the 'functions' it performs in social institutions. In other words, systemic functional linguistics focuses on what people do with language. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) opine that the choice of particular lexical choice and syntactic patterns have some function roles in relating the writer's or speaker's intentions to an audience.

Empirical Studies

Linguistic scholars have focused attentions on the state of insecurity in Nigeria through different linguistic studies on how Nigerian media represent the activities of certain terrorist groups. Osisanwo (2016) explored "the discourse strategies deployed in Nigerian news reports on the representation of Boko Haram terrorism". Igwebuikwe and Taiwo (2015) examined the representation of the Bakassi-Peninsula Conflict in Nigeria and Cameroon print media through the System of transitivity". Bukola and Taiwo (2019) considered "the use of media framing and thematisation in representing terrorist attacks in Nigeria in newspaper editorials". Even though these studies are on different terrorist attacks, none of them studied the use of modality in the editorial discussion of insecurities in Nigeria in 2021 to 2022 of this study is concerned with.

Data Analysis

Modal auxiliaries used by the editorials to express different attitudes, assess the state of the nation, expression of opinions, promotion of critical thinking and suggestion of solutions to the seemingly unending insecurity situations in the country.

Textual Analysis

Question: How are modal auxiliaries used in the discourses of the insecurity situation in Nigeria by editorial writers of Nigerian newspapers selected for this study?

The researchers look out for the types of modal auxiliaries used in the Nigerian *Vanguard*, *Guardian* and *Punch* newspapers to see how their editorial boards utilized these modals in their discussion of the insecurity situation in Nigeria. Bonyadi (2011) says that editorial writers make use of modality to establish either a favourable or unfavourable bias in order to manipulate their readers' opinions.

The following excerpts show the use of modal verbs:

- 1) The military **must** refine its rule of engagement (*Vanguard* 29 May 2022).
- 2) The attack on whole communities in search of gunmen and criminals **must** stop (*Vanguard* 29 May 2022).
- 3) Rather, culprits **should** be identified and dealt with according to the law (*Vanguard* 29 May 2022).
- 4) The military **must** gain the people's confidence and enlist their support to restore order (*Vanguard* 29 May 2022).

- 5) The Federal Government **should** initiate dialogue with relevant stakeholders in the South-East and take measures to restore the alienated people's faith and sense of belonging to Nigeria (*Vanguard* 29 May 2022).
- 6) These senseless killings **must** be halted (*Vanguard* 29 May 2022).
- 7) Some state governments and politicians **may**, for political calculation and the votes they expect to win elections, have decided to keep mute over the alarming development (*Vanguard* 1 April 2021).
- 8) The opposition People's Democratic Party, PDP, and Governor Nyesom Wike of Rivers State have warned that Buhari and the Federal Government **would** be held responsible if "anything" happened to Ortom (*Vanguard* 2 April 2021).
- 9) The despair of Nigerians **can** only be imagined as they watch helplessly while criminals exterminate them, and law enforcement agencies appear powerless (*Guardian* 10 Dec. 2021).
- 10) That **may be** so, but **can** the country afford to station policemen and soldiers on every road and at every hour? (*Guardian* 10 Dec. 2021).
- 11) If a regular security presence on the highway **will** put a stop to the menace of bandits and kidnappers, why then is both the federal and Kaduna state governments not taking full control of the highway? (*Guardian* 10 Dec. 2021).
- 12) In particular, the Federal Government **should** accept its singular responsibility to safeguard lives, given that all official security paraphernalia are within its control and command (*Guardian* 10 Dec. 2021).
- 13) Unless some drastic action is initiated, not only **will** it be difficult for the country to survive eventually her downfall can be slow, steady and painful (*Guardian* 7 June 2022).
- 14) For this newspaper, it **would** amount to dereliction of duty, and perhaps, undermining the motto of our medium, that is, 'conscience, nurtured by truth,' if we fail to rouse the attention of Nigerians, and the entire international community (*Guardian* 7 June 2022).
- 15) This is a national shame, and the jinx **ought to** be broken in the pursuit of enlightened self-interest of those running the country (*Guardian* 7 June 2022).
- 16) To be sure, a ruling class **ought to** act in ways that ensures its hegemony, legitimacy in the wellbeing of the people (*Guardian* 7 June 2022).
- 17) It **might** not be so lucky this time around. It is the time to act; and to act quickly to rescue it from the brink of disintegration (*Guardian* 7 June 2022).
- 18) Every now and then, Nigerian troops are ambushed and killed in large numbers by the terrorists. What **could** be behind that other than compromise? (*Guardian* 10 Dec. 2021).
- 19) Obasanjo said, "All right thinking Nigerians **must** know that we have a situation that has overwhelmed the present administration." (*Punch* 11 April 2022)
- 20) Failure to act decisively **could** accelerate the pace towards complete disintegration (*Punch* 11 April 2022).

In the above excerpts, we can see that the editorial writers didn't just report the information on insecurity in Nigeria but also their stance towards the helpless condition of the Nigerians in this state of insecurity in the country through their use of modal verb auxiliaries.

For instance, in excerpts numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 12, 15, 16, and the 19, the editorial writers included their idea when they showed that some actions should be taken as a matter of necessity with a certain level of compulsion by the federal government, state government, security personnel and even individuals with such modal auxiliaries as '**should**', '**must**' and '**ought to**'. For instance, "the military refining its rules of engagement such as the attack on whole communities while searching for gunmen and criminals, instead, identify the real culprits and dealt with them according to the law, the government initiation of dialogue with relevant stakeholders as a way of restoring the alienated people's faith and sense of belonging, both federal and state governments taken control of the highways rather than bandits, etc.

In excerpts 8, 11, 13, and 14, the editorial writers expressed predictions of the future positive and negative events and the use of modal auxiliaries '**will**' and '**would**'. For instance, predicting how difficult the country can survive, how her downfall can be slow, steady and painful unless some drastic

actions initiated, what the opposition party PDP would do if anything happened to the governor, Ortom, etc. These editorial writers in this regard, applied their initiatives in their judgments of the security situation in the country and expressed their attitude on the issue.

The excerpts number 7, 9, 10, 17, 18 and 20 express different levels of possibility through the auxiliary modals '**may**', '**can**', '**could**' and '**might**', steps that could be taken by those in authority to curtail, control and solve insecurity challenges like; killings, kidnappings, and banditry that have been ravaging the country. The editorial writers expressed their attitudes towards the security challenges in the country in the specific statements they made through these auxiliary modals listed above. It also provokes critical thinking among the readers and speaks volumes of the writers' stance on the issue.

The analysis clearly shows the choice-based approach to the language of Systemic Functional Linguistics. The view that language based on individual choices to arrive at various meaning potentials demonstrated with the writer's choice of modal auxiliary verbs. These writers could have used different verb forms if they intended to mean differently.

Discussion

The analysis of the selected editorials indicated that editorial writers did not only aim at reporting and giving information on news events but also tried to suggest solutions to the authorities through their use modality.

The writers used modal auxiliaries such as '**should**', '**must**', and '**ought to**' to show necessary actions that should be taken as a matter of necessity with a certain level of compulsion by governments at all levels, security personnel and individuals especially stakeholders as a way of restoring peace and giving agitators sense of belonging, providing security on the highways for the safety of travellers. They used modal auxiliaries like '**may**', '**can**', '**could**' and '**might**' to express different levels of possibility. The editorial writers used such modals to express what steps could be taken by those in authority to curtail, control and solve insecurity challenges in Nigeria. Through these modal auxiliaries, the editorial writers expressed their attitudes towards the security challenges in the country.

Conclusion

The study has analyzed the modal auxiliaries used by the editorial writers of *Vanguard*, *Guardian* and *Punch* Nigerian newspapers on the insecurity situation in Nigeria. It found that the editorial writers used different modalities as linguistic tools to express opinions and attitudes towards the state of insecurity in the country. These linguistic tools used by these writers to influence, shape or reshape both their readers' and governments' attitudes, to promote critical thinking on the part of the readers and provoke both the government and Security forces into taking positive actions or changing their method of operations that are not effectively eradicating the menace of insecurity in the country.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to know that language is the key through which the media and the editorial writers use to express the state of affairs in society. The study, therefore, recommends comparative studies of these editorials and studies of this kind on other related issues in other Nigerian newspapers.

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