

Editorial Vagueness and Ambiguity in Anambra Broadcasting Service Radio News Headlines: An Exploratory Discourse

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Abstract

This article explores the prevalence and implications of editorial vagueness and ambiguity in radio news headlines. The importance of accuracy, clarity, brevity, and impact in news headlines cannot be overstated, as they play a pivotal role in capturing the listener's attention and conveying the essential information promptly. The objective of this article is to examine vagueness and ambiguity in radio news headlines and investigate the possible consequences on public understanding of the news in detail. By providing diverse examples drawn from the news bulletins of the Anambra state government owned radio, Abs 88.5 FM, Awka, a total of seventeen headlines were collected from the station's news broadcast within September 2023 and December 2023. Through an exploratory discourse, it sheds light on the complexities of headlines construction, the role of context, and the cognitive processes involved in audience comprehension of vague and ambiguous radio news headlines. By understanding the prevalent errors made by news editors, this research provides recommendations to improve headline writing quality in radio in order to enhance the overall effectiveness of news delivery and understanding. It also suggests strategies for improving clarity and accuracy in radio news headlines.

Keywords: exploratory discourse, editorial, vagueness, ambiguity, abs radio, news headlines

Introduction

Radio news plays a crucial role in informing and shaping public opinion, with news headlines serving as a key component of this process. Headlines are often the first point of contact between the listener and the news story, and are expected to convey essential information in a concise and impactful manner. Radio news headlines serve as a medium to quickly convey the most important aspects of a news story. As the first point of contact for listeners, these headlines need to encapsulate the essential elements accurately, maintain clarity, and engage the audience efficiently. However, the brevity of radio news headlines can sometimes result in ambiguity, leading to potential misunderstandings or misinterpretations by the audience. This article aims to explore the ambiguity of radio news headlines and its implications for audience interpretation.

Dor (2003), says that a headline is what creates a sort of communication between the reader and the meaning of the text. In the fast-paced world of radio news broadcasting, headlines serve as crucial tools for capturing audience attention and conveying essential information. Headlines are important points of the news stories that are read at the beginning, middle and end of a news presentation. Radio news headlines are the major news items read or discussed in the bulletin. The editor puts them at the beginning for the purpose of spotlight and also at the middle and end of the bulletin to sound a reminder on the prominence of the stories in detail. Sometimes these headlines that made up a news bulletin are referred to as main points or highlights.

Okoye (2023), explains:

Radio news headlines are short news stories that radio stations broadcast to inform listeners about the newest issue and current events... Writing radio news headlines is an art that should not be left in the hands of amateur news editors. It is a difficult task that requires professionalism. An editor needs a lot of creativity and mastery of the language in order to write a suitable radio news headline free of vagueness and ambiguity.

In support of the above, Fang (1991), says that radio style of writing stipulates that news stories be told/written in familiar words combined into sentences, which run at comfortable lengths in a style known as 'conversational.' Radio news headlines writing style is not the same with newspaper/Magazine headlines (print). As often, the language used by these print media is not suitable

for radio writing style. However, the inherent ambiguity of some news headlines can lead to multiple interpretations and misunderstandings among listeners. Writing radio news headlines requires a clear, concise and attention-grabbing approach to capture the listener's interest. The requirements suggest the 'KISS' approach which means keep it short and simple. Radio news headlines should be brief and straight to the point without causing any confusion of understanding on the listener. It is advised that the news editor should aim for around 10-15 words to convey the headline. This exploratory research seeks to unravel the multifaceted nature of vague and ambiguous radio news headlines, shedding light on the intricacies of language, context, and perception in news communication.

Concept of Vagueness and Ambiguity in Radio News Headlines

Vagueness is a concept in linguistics and philosophy of language that refers to the lack of precise boundaries or definitions in the meaning of words, phrases, or concepts. It is often characterized by the presence of unclear or imprecise boundaries, making it difficult to determine the exact meaning of a word or phrase in a given context. According to Burns (2003), despite the fact that vagueness is an essential part of the language, it is an obstacle to be ignored or problem to be solved for people to understand each other. But even when perceived as a problem, vagueness provides value since it can be understood as an illustration of the complexity of language itself. Vagueness can be found in various aspects of language, including lexical meanings, semantics, and pragmatics. Vagueness in radio news headlines can be a complex issue, as it relates to the challenge of conveying important information in a limited amount of space and time. While headlines are meant to provide a brief summary of a news story, they often employ language that is inherently vague, leaving room for interpretation and potential misunderstanding. This can have significant implications for how the audience perceives and understands the news. In this discourse, we will explore the phenomenon of vagueness and ambiguity in radio news headlines, analyze its potential impact, and provide examples to illustrate its prevalence and effect. Vagueness has been described as an expression that gives insufficient information (Smith & Lieberman, 2013). Ambiguity on the other hand is defined as a word, phrase or sentence that could fit in several ways within the same situation (Empson, 2014). Ambiguity in radio news headlines can stem from various sources, including lexical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity, and pragmatic ambiguity. These forms of ambiguity pose challenges to both news reader and listener, as they give rise to diverse and often conflicting interpretations of the intended message. The ambiguity of radio news headlines has significant implications for audience perception and understanding.

Vagueness and Ambiguity in radio news headlines arise when the intended meaning of the headline is unclear, leading to multiple interpretations or possible misinterpretations by the audience. This can stem from various linguistic and contextual factors, including wordplay, double entendre, lack of specificity, or the omission of crucial information and lack of the rudiments of headlines casting on the side of the news editor. One common source of vagueness and ambiguity in radio news headlines is the use of homonyms or words with multiple meanings. For instance, a headline such as *Strike ends today* could refer to a labour strike or a particular union strike coming to an end or a targeted military strike being concluded. Without further context, a listener may struggle to decipher the intended meaning. Moreover, the absence of specific details in news headlines can also contribute to ambiguity. For instance, a headline reading *Governor Soludo assents to 2024 budget* is vague. This headline is not clear as it can lead to confusion, misinterpretation, and even misinformation among listeners. The principles of writing for the radio stipulate simple and familiar words should be used. While the listener is puzzling out the meaning of *assents*, the information that follows vanishes into thin air. Also is the ambiguity of the particular 'budget.' To rewrite it, we have *Governor Soludo approves 2024 Anambra budget*. Let us look at another headline, *Governor Soludo's new tax Policy Implemented* provides little clarity on the nature of the tax policy and mode or its potential impacts, leaving room for interpretation and speculation. Such occurrences ultimately affect how the listener perceives and understands the news story being presented. Vague and ambiguous headlines can contribute to misunderstandings and even conflict, as individuals may take away different messages or meanings from the same news story. When listeners are unsure about the meaning of a headline, they may question the credibility and accuracy of the news source.

Some scholars have studied types of vagueness and ambiguity in newspaper headlines. While Mustafa (2021) investigated vagueness in news headlines and its effect on translation, Nwala and Umukoro

(2017) investigated the meaning of newspaper headlines and the use of ambiguity. Ezekulie (2015) also analyzed ambiguous news headlines pragmatically. However, not much has been done on news headlines ambiguity that may present a challenge to a radio news listener and discourage him or her from listening to the news. Identifying these editorial gaffes is crucial as it may serve as a guide for the radio news editors in writing the headlines for their bulletins in order not to discourage radio listenership. Vagueness and ambiguity have been explained to mean two different things in the field of linguistics, but for the purpose of this study, vagueness and ambiguity of radio news headlines can be described as the deficiency in headline(s) that makes it difficult for a listener to understand it properly, thereby creating confusion, communication lapses and misinterpretation of news headline(s). Such headlines can impact the overall comprehension of the news story. When listeners are unclear about the main points or headlines, they may struggle to fully understand the content and context of the full news story. This can lead to a lack of engagement and retention of the information from the news being read, ultimately hindering the effectiveness of the news broadcast and causing what could be referred to as semantic noise in communication. This has been described as the interference or distortion of meaning in communication due to differences in the interpretation or understanding of language, symbols, or information.

Theoretical Framework

This research work adopted the Relevance theory developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in the 1980s. The theory focuses on the idea that communication is successful when the information being conveyed is relevant to the listener's cognitive environment and can be processed in a relatively efficient manner. Relevance theory posits that human cognition is geared towards maximizing relevance, and that comprehension involves the inference of the intended meaning from the communicated information. The key tenet of relevance theory is the 'Principle of Relevance,' which states that every utterance conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). This means that speakers are expected to provide information that is both relevant and accessible to the listener, and that listeners are motivated to process and interpret utterances in a way that maximizes their relevance to their cognitive environment. Thus, this paper resorted to this theoretical framework as it suggests that the process of comprehension involves a continuous assessment of relevance, where listeners continually adjust their expectations and interpretations based on the incoming information.

An Appraisal of the Editorial Vagueness and Ambiguities in Abs Radio News Headlines

The objective of this article is to examine the prevalence of vagueness and ambiguity in radio news headlines and investigate the possible consequences on public understanding. By providing diverse examples drawn from the news bulletins of the Anambra state government owned radio, Abs 88.5 FM, Awka. A total of seventeen headlines were collected from the station's news broadcast within September 2023 and December 2023 to shed light on the significance of clarity and accuracy in radio news headline writing. The radio has been described as a transient medium meaning that the message vanishes once read, except when repeated. This requires that radio news editors must be professionals in casting the headlines by writing them in simple and conversational style for retentive sake. Ume-Nwagbo (1996) buttresses this point by saying:

One of the quickest ways of blowing down the flow of the broadcast copy is by over writing-what has been called 'verbal overkill.' This happens with excessive use of clichés, meaningless phrases and modifiers. Such poorly written headlines have the potential to misinform or create confusion among listeners, impacting their understanding of current events.

The following headlines are from Abs news bulletin on 15th September 2023. **A** *SON* asks manufacturers, service providers to embrace standardization. The word *SON* is an abbreviation for the Standard Organization of Nigeria. An agency tasked with the responsibility of ensuring standard products in Nigerian markets, but the editor has shown myopic understanding of radio headlines writing. When pronounced, the word 'SON' as a lexical item is ambiguous. It could be understood to mean son as a male child or the sun which the earth revolves around. And also, there is structural ambiguity in 'to embrace standardization.' Even when spelt out as S-O-N, It still poses a challenge to understanding the full meaning of S-O-N. Another vague and ambiguous headline from the same bulletin read **B** *SERAP*

asks NASS to reject social media regulation bill. The underlined words are not acceptable in broadcast journalism, and they smack of editorial laziness. The confusion for the listener in understanding the meaning of SERAP and NASS would be unimaginable and chaotic. From 27th December bulletin, **C** National president BACANA, *Nwakasi urges Christians to increase effort in helping less privileged* and **D** State government, WHO, CHAIN, *to train medical doctors on cervical cancer treatment* from 11th September 2023. The rules of writing headlines whether print or electronic media suggest that only popular abbreviations should be used. And in the case of the radio, say the abbreviation in full and still be concise. Radio news editors must avoid jargon and acronyms. They should Steer clear of industry-specific jargon and acronyms that may not be familiar to all listeners. Use language that the average listener can easily understand. Example: UNESCO *declares Ogbunike cave a world heritage site* and NAFDAC *Arrests fake wine makers in Aba*. These two headlines may be acceptable in radio news headlines since the two acronyms are not new to average Nigerians. Editors should use language that is accessible to a broad audience, making the headline more easily understandable. To rewrite the four analyzed headlines, we now have:

- A. Standard Organization of Nigeria asks manufacturers to make quality products
- B. National president of Born Again Christians' Association of Nigeria, Mister Nwakasi urges Christians to help the needy,
- C. Anambra State government and international health partners to train medical doctors on cervical cancer treatment.
- D. Civil society organization tells Nigerian senate to reject social media regulatory bill.

The news bulletin of November 22, 2023 aired a foreign headline: **A.** *Israel-Hamas war: Gaza truce agreed, Palestinian, Israeli prisoners to be freed*. This headline towed the print media path by using the kicker and rider technique of headline writing. Kicker is a single line above the main headline that introduces the headline while rider is the additional information to the headline or what comes after the kicker. In the above headline, 'Israel-Hamas war:' is the kicker while 'Gaza truce agreed, Palestinian, Israeli prisoners to be freed' is the rider. Away from the print media pattern of it, the commas which the news reader would observe with dignity pause creates more lexical and structural ambiguity from different names for the same issue to difficulty in understanding the story. Another one from 19th December bulletin read, **B.** *Anambra police command nabs baby traffickers, buyers*. From listening to the above on radio, the listener may interpret it to mean that police has arrested the buyers of baby traffickers even though the main story says it was a couple who had bought a new born baby. From the 27th December news headlines, we have **C.** *two prominent Nigerians feared dead*. The harm of this sensational headline is unimaginable. It is vague, ambiguous and unacceptable. Why burden the listener with the task of guessing the prominent Nigerians who are feared dead when the editor has enough time to mention their names or just one of them based on prominence. Every radio news headlines must avoid sensationalism or biased language that can create ambiguity or misinterpretation. The editor should present the facts in a neutral and objective manner to ensure clarity and accuracy in the headline. For example, instead of "Shocking Scandal Unveiled in CBN," a more neutral headline could be "Investigation Reveals Misconduct and misappropriation of funds in CBN/(Central Bank of Nigeria)." Radio news editors should be cautious of words or phrases that can have double meanings, leading to misinterpretation. To rewrite the analyzed headlines, we have:

- A. Isreal and Palestine agree on peace talks as prisoners will be exchanged.
- B. Anambra police command arrests baby traffickers in Onitsha
- C. Governor Akerodolu of Ekiti state is dead (the second prominent Nigeria was left out of the headline because he is less important to the story)

From 22nd November news, we have **A.** *senate confirms FERMA MD, Agbata, nine others as board members*. Apart from the fact that the headline contravened the rule of abbreviation, it is ambiguous. There is difficulty in understating in clear term if the FERMA MD whom we do not know, one Mr Agbata and nine others were being confirmed as board members of an unfamiliar agency or if Mr Agbata has been confirmed as the latest FERMA MD, while nine others made it to the board. Here, the listener battles to understand the meaning of FERMA and MD and two meanings from the sentence as a whole. There is no way the listener can give a correct interpretation of the headline without extra knowledge of the news in detail. The headline of 19th December also followed the same pattern of

unclear words and abbreviation **B. Anambra HOS, Igwegbe assures workers of bonus this yuletide.** Editors should use precise language that communicates the key information clearly. For example, instead of a headline like "State Government Makes Changes in taxation," a clearer headline could be "Anambra state Government Announces New Tax Policy for commercial drivers."

To rewrite the analyzed headlines, we have:

- A. Senate confirms Mister Agbata as Managing Director, Federal Road Maintenance Agency.
- B. Anambra State Head of Service, Barrister Igwegbe assures workers of Christmas Bonus

From, 26th December, **A PSN Anambra state holds dinner, awards night.** The possible interpretations of this headline are: PSN (which is unfamiliar to the listener) organizes dinner and presentation of awards and PSN organizes dinner and confers knighthood on people. Already dinner and night are already posing a tautological challenge here. In radio news headline writing, a comma should not be used as a conjunction as it is obtainable in the print media to avoid ambiguity for the listener. From the same bulletin, a foreign story headline read: **B Many people feared dead in Australian severe thunderstorms with damages running into billions.** This headline, used for the sake of emotional proximity in media, which refers to events that evoke strong emotions in the audience, regardless of geographical or cultural distance, did not achieve the purpose. It kept the listener in a state of confusion in deciphering how many people died, which part of Australia did the incident happen, are the damages counted to be a billion in number or the damages worth billion dollars, pounds or naira. This means that linguistically it is structurally vague and ambiguous. Another headline from 17th October read: **C NAFDAC goes tough on milk sellers, cereals, others in open air.** This headline contravenes the radio style by use of comma instead of and, lack of relevant details and also smacks of lexical and structural ambiguity. Different possible interpretations include: NAFDAC has implemented strict measures against milk sellers and cereals as a product and other things in a free market, NAFDAC has implemented strict measures to stop people from selling milk and other things in the open air market. Lexically, open air refers to open air market which is a market that is open to anyone who wishes to buy, sell or trade goods and services. It can be physical or online locations. Editors should provide enough information in the headline to give the audience a clear understanding of the story. This can help reduce ambiguity and ensure that the main message is effectively conveyed. To rewrite the analyzed headlines, we have:

- A. Anambra state chapter of Pharmaceutical Society of Nigeria holds dinner and awards presentation.
- B. Severe thunderstorms in eastern Australia kill ten people
- C. NAFDAC enhances operations against sellers of measured milk and cereals in open-air market

Given the potential consequences of vague and ambiguous headlines, it is crucial for media professionals to employ strategies to mitigate ambiguity and enhance clarity in their radio news writing. Radio stations can implement rigorous editorial standards, including precise and specific language, as well as providing adequate context within the limited space of headlines. By taking these steps, News editors and broadcasters can help to enhance audience comprehension and ensure that their messages are accurately received and understood.

Conclusion

This study has established the presence and significance of vagueness and ambiguity in ABS radio news headlines. Through an exploratory discourse analysis, we have highlighted the various ways in which bad journalistic practices and editorial incompetency contribute to the creation of vague and ambiguous headlines. This research not only offers a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances within journalistic language, but also underscores the potential impact of such vagueness and ambiguity on audience interpretation and comprehension. By applying the principles of Relevance theory, this paper unravels the complex relationship between language choices and audience interpretations, providing valuable insights for both news media practitioners and consumers. Since radio headline is like a bribe given to a listener to stay tuned from the beginning of the news to the end, it is also crucial for radio news editors to be mindful of the potential implications of their language choices. They should be trained and retrained on the rudiments of writing for the radio audience. Proof readers should be employed in radio stations. Not only that these professionals ensure accurate news productions, they

also act as role models before news editors who are still learning ropes of editorial responsibilities. It would also improve radio news headlines writing quality and ultimately enhance the overall effectiveness of news delivery and understanding. This study serves as a starting point for further investigations into the role of editorial and linguistic vagueness and ambiguity in journalistic discourse.

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