

# A Linguistics-Stylistic Analysis of Newspaper Headlines of Metele Attack On Nigerian Army by Boko Haram Insurgents

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**Abstract-** The paper examines newspaper headlines captions of Boko Haram attack on the Nigerian Army Base in Metele, North East Nigeria of 18th November, 2018. Thirty newspaper headlines from twelve daily Nigerian newspapers published between November 21st and December 15th were selected. The headlines were subjected to three levels of linguistics analyses: lexical, syntactic and semantic. Findings from the study reveal that journalistic writings are either presented to portray objective views, or to whip up psychological sentiments in the choice of words and expressions. It was further revealed that journalistic style of headlines writing may or may not conform with linguistic rules and conventions of the language used. The paper, therefore, suggests that journalists should consider linguistic inadequacies of their readers by presenting headlines and other captions in simple language; they should also place less emphasis on propaganda, sentiments and emotions in the writing of newspaper headlines.

**Index Terms-** Linguistics, Boko Haram, Metele, Army, Attack

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian nation has been prosecuting the Boko Haram war for over one decade. The war has become the major military operations on Nigerian soil since the Nigerian Civil War ended in 1970. The crisis has led to the death of thousands of people, the destruction of properties, the dislocation of political and military structures and the displacement of Nigerians from their homes to internally displaced settlements.

Since the beginning of the crisis, the press has become an important stakeholder in the conflicts. It has become a trustworthy source of information about the war. Beyond information dissemination and transmission, function of the media, (local and foreign) has provided to a large extent, solid background information details of the crisis and warfare in general in the form of news, features, analyses, editorials, photographic information and other explanations related to the conflicts.

The media especially the newspaper is an important institution in every society. Whichever roles or functions it plays at a particular time matters a great deal. A particular news or feature story, editorial comments, personal commentary that is

published in a newspaper could play multiplicity of roles. It could serve as a platform to access information on the item of the news published; it could serve as a minor or a reflection of the social reality of the item published; it could have elements or ingredient of discernment that accelerates understanding of the news published. All of these could be combined in one way or the other to affect the level of understanding, knowledge, attitudes and actions of the reading public in determining the course, shape or effect of an event, action or situation.

In normal or peace times when human activities can be observed in their regularized or guided routines, the power and the importance of the press remains intact and unhindered. In abnormal or crisis situations when these peaceful routines are disorganized or disrupted, which sometimes make people's tempers to be frayed, leading to a highly charged social atmosphere, the role of the mass media can easily be very decisive in helping to escalate the crisis or to assuage the tempers, and bring the crisis under control (Schramm, 1977).

The press as a watchdog of the society has the ability and capability to determine and scrutinize what to report, when and how to report it, as well as where it will be published (Ibrahim and Yakubu, 2013). Looking at the power of the press, Dennis and Merrill (1994:4) state that "the media are quite powerful". In this sense, it could be inferred that the press tell us what to think and how to think. The meaning here is that the press can manipulate people's perception about an issue.

Thus, news (including features, editorials, commentaries etc) is important and basic to studying how press reported the attack on Nigerian Army by Boko Haram insurgents in Metele on November 18, 2018. This is a reflection of the assertion of Hallahan 1999:207) which states that "in news media, news frames serve as journalistic tools through which journalists recount a story in a limited amount of space and place an event within its broader context".

There have been several attacks and counter attacks between the Nigerian Army and the Boko Haram insurgents in which several deaths were recorded on both sides. A terrible one was the attack carried out on the Nigerian Army base in Metele on the 18th of November, 2018 by Boko Haram insurgents. In the attack, dozens of Nigerian soldiers were killed while arms and equipment belonging to Nigerian Army were carted away. The attack was widely reported by local and international media,

with attendant furious public debates and comments across Nigeria. Most of the debates obviously were drawn mainly on media reports of the attack.

This paper basically concerns itself with the language and style of newspaper headlines on the theme of war or insurgency. It is a focus on the presentations (newspaper headlines) of the attack by the Boko-Haram insurgents on the Nigerian Army station in Metele, Bornu State in North Eastern Nigeria that occurred on 18th November, 2018. Journalists have their own way or style of using language that can promote national development. Conversely, they may also use language in a way that can throw a nation into crisis. Like any other field, journalism has certain linguistic features that make its language distinct and unique. This paper examines the linguistics features that make journalistic style unique thereby portraying journalists (media men) as important stakeholders in national development.

## II. LANGUAGE OF NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

The language of the media especially the print media is unique in a number of ways. The peculiarity of the language has been tagged by media researchers and experts as style of journalistic writing. One way in which the journalistic writing manifests is in newspaper headlines. It is certain that every newspaper carries headlines for its story, feature or article. According to BBC (2003:2), the headlines of a story is "the short summary, which appears above stories or articles in a newspaper". In most cases, the headlines are not written in the form of full sentences. It is common to discover that the headlines of news stories or articles are written with either nominal or verbal ellipses (Agu 2010:168). The implication of this arrangement is that some words are deliberately omitted by the journalists with the aim of making the headlines less verbose and more attractive to the eye. Headlines play important roles in orienting the readers' attention and interpretation of the facts contained in the story or article. The language is elliptical and compressed. This made it difficult for many readers to understand them because they are often incomplete sentences.

Generally, the headlines of newspapers have basically been given two functions. The first is to summarize the article (story) in which it belongs or attached (Van Dijk 1988). According to (Bell 1991, Nir 1993), this function is performed either by being an abstract of the full article or by highlighting the main points of the article or story. In connection with this function, Dor (2003) notes that headlines are designed to optimize the relevance of their stories for their readers.

The second function of the headlines is to attract the attention of the readers and to provoke them to read the article (Bell 1991, Nir 1993). Research findings have revealed that readers realistically prefer headlines that are creative even if it makes the headline longer, more confusing or less informative (Ifantidou 2009). He further states that readers seem to value headlines for what they are, i.e under- informative, creative etc.

Newspaper headlines have their own linguistic features. There are lexical, structural and stylistic characteristics of the discourse of newspaper headlines. Being thoroughly compressed, condensed and foregrounded in half-understood forms, newspaper headlines are generated and maintained as a source of information about the society in which the papers are being

circulated. They create new frontiers of meanings with complex ambiguities. Very often, the fractured language and idiosyncratic vocabulary of English newspapers headlines challenge the understanding of what they represent. This is what Fairclough (1995:21) calls grammatical oddity. In dealing with newspaper headlines, readers are to be involved in seeking out and translating meaning.

## III. MEDIA COVERAGE OF TERRORISM

The way in the press cover and present news determines its interpretation by the audience. Media consumers base and build their opinions on how news story is framed. This means the press play very significant role in the formulation and development of opinions by the people. Graber (2006) points out that the media extends its role by not only surveying and bringing the daily events to the public's glare, but also interprets the events and putting them into context. The press equally tell the people the issues and activities that deserve attention. This directive is indicated through cues and banners headlines, front page placements in newspapers etc. The news stories placed in the front section of newspapers are regarded as more salient and accessible to readers than those in other sections. (Ibrahim and Yakubu, 2013). Chyi and McCombs (2004) further say that the salience of an object (the importance of an object increase the amount of news coverage about the topic.

Sometimes, the media base their reports on sensationalism such as terrorism, insurgency, war, armed robbery and other kinds of crises (Onwuzuruigbo, et al. 2017). The reason for this is based on the fact that crises reportage attracts high volume of readership viewership/listeningship, which in turn attracts more advertisement patronage. This might be responsible for the zeal that usually accompanies media response to terrorist attacks all over the world. In this connection, according to the opinion of Naco (2006), the quest for audience size, circulation and advertising revenue through terrorism reportage, the media may get rewarded. It is this media behaviour that re-echoes the popular aphorism in journalism parlance that says "if it bleeds, it leads, but if it does not bleed, it certainly should not lead and indeed, may not fit for print at all (Mueller, 2007.)

According to Gerrits (1992) the terrorists' use of the media is inclined to psychological warfare by demoralizing the enemies, gaining sympathy and creating fear and chaos. In the same way, Bandura (1998) says that the media are used in this respect for moral justification, arousal of sympathy and intimidation of the public. The inference from the argument here is that the sole goal of terrorists' use of the media is to create and spread fear among the people.

In furtherance of the assertions above, Hoffman (2006:174) cited in (Onwuzuruigbo et al 2017) posit that "only by spreading terror and outrage to a much larger audience can the terrorists gain maximum potential leverage that, they need to effect fundamental political change". Incidentally however, the relationship between Boko Haram sect and the Nigerian press is strained and has remained in the opposite. For instance on April 26, 2012, the Boko Haram sect bombed the offices of ThisDay, The Moment and Daily Sun newspapers. The sect had earlier on September 28, 2011 killed Isha Zakari (NTA reporter) and

Bernard Akogwu (Channels Television photographer). The sect cited lack of objectivity and blasphemy as reasons for the attacks (Ekwueme and Obayi, 2012). In justifying the attacks, the sect spokesman, Abu Qaqa (cited in Izuogu, 2012) says that:

...this is a war between us and the government of Nigeria; unfortunately the media have not been objective and fair in the report of the ongoing war... it is not only ThisDay that has engaged in the negative media campaign, but the sins of ThisDay are more. They once insulted the Prophet Mohammed in 2011 and we have not forgotten... we have just started this new campaign against the media and we will not stop here, we will hit the media hard since they have refused to listen to our pleas for them to be fair in their reportage.

The Boko Haram insurgency has got a fair deal of media attention since they started their war in Nigeria. No doubt, the perception and understanding that the Nigerian public has about the sect is as a result of media reportage of their activities. In a study, Okoro and Odoemekam (2013) examine the pattern of frames adopted by Nigerian newspapers in the coverage of Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. The study use The Guardian, Daily Sun, Vanguard and Thisday newspapers as the sources of the data. Findings from the study reveal that there are contrasting patterns in the frames adopted by Nigerian newspapers. The study specifically reveals that The Guardian, Vanguard and Thisday newspapers emphasize the responsibility frame 24% as against 17.1% by the Daily Sun newspaper.

In another study Okugo, et al (2012) carried out an investigation into documents, diaries, journals, historical artifacts, newspapers/magazines, as well as media broadcast reports on Boko Haram terrorists' activities. In its findings, the study reports that the mainstream media, by their very constitution, proprietorship, mode of operation and sustenance in the Nigerian battered economy, do not have the luxury of time for analytical reports or patience for investigative reporting.

While trying to find out how the mass media could be optimally used to reduce the menace of Boko Haram insurgency, and also preserve fundamental human rights of the people, Ekwueme and Obayi (2012) are of the opinion that despite constant attacks by Boko Haram, the Nigerian press can still help in building positive and courageous attitude in the people, in response to the sect attacks. The researchers further opine that this could be achieved through the way the media frame their reports on Boko Haram's attacks in the choice of words, pictures and the language of the reports. In concluding the study the researchers label Boko Haram sect as a faceless, conscienceless and bloody bunch of mass-murdering terrorist, and they should be framed as such (Onwuzuruigbo et al. 2017).

#### IV. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the beginning of Boko Haram insurgency more than a decade ago, there have been several attacks by the insurgents. Among such attacks were the attack on the United Nations building in Abuja, the attempt on the life of a former Inspector General of Police, the killing of students of Government Technical College in Yola, the kidnapping of Chibok girls, various attacks on mosques and churches, and the

recent attacks on the Army Base in Metele, Bornu State of Nigeria. Today, the Nigerian people have reason to complain bitterly about the seeming hopelessness of the war against the insurgents, and the poor media coverage as well as exposure of critical issues that can fast-track the end of the crisis. For the war to end in no distant future, there is a need for interaction and understanding among the Armed Forces, the Nigerian people and the media. The people have the right to know the progress of the war while the media are expected to be, not only the watch-dog but also to make accurate reportage of the war without undermining national security and the safety of the Nigerian soldiers.

The problem of this study is based on the premise that journalists often manipulate or play on words while reporting national or sensitive issues. They do this with the use of clichés, jargons, figurative expressions as well complex syntactic sentence structures. The reading public believe that the manipulative powers of the press is their style of writing. This study, therefore, considers it important to look (examine) at how the newspapers (reported) in their headlines the Metele attack on the Army Base by Boko Haram insurgents on 18th November 2018.

#### V. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Journalism is a profession practiced by people who are relatively trained in the art of information dissemination in which reporters chose words that would convey specific meanings to their intended or target audience within a particular thematic framework (Agu 2010:166). The aim of this study is to examine how the Nigerian newspapers cover the attack on the Nigerian Army Base. The study is guided by the following objectives:

- 1) To examine the lexical items employ by the newspapers' headlines and their semantic analysis in the reportage of the Boko-Haram attack on the Nigerian Army Base in Metele.
- 2) To look at the syntactic structure of the newspaper headlines and its linguistic components.
- 3) To identify and interpret the effects of the headlines on the readers.

#### VI. METHODOLOGY

This is a corpus-based linguistic study because stories were collected from headlines of some newspapers as a basic descriptive analysis of the language of newspapers headlines used for the study. To this end the study design used for this research work is content analysis. According to Berelson (1952) content analysis is a research method for the objective and systematic description of manifest content of communication. Similarly, Kerlinger (2000) defines content analysis as a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. Wimmer and Dominick (2014) are of the opinion that content analysis can systematically and practically reveal the manifest content of materials, which in this study are newspaper headlines.

Thirty headlines are selected from twelve daily newspapers in Nigeria for the study. The newspapers are The Nation, The Punch, The Guardian, Vanguard, Sahara Reporters, Premium Times, Daily Trust, Blue Print, Daily Post, Nigerian Tribune, Daily Monitor and Daily Independent. The criteria for the selection was the appearance of an headline related to the attack of Boko Haram on the Army base in Metele on each of the newspapers. The selections of the headlines are limited to the front pages of the newspapers because of the prominence attached to the front page, their attractiveness and the interest of the readers in the front page stories of newspapers. The data for the study was collected between November 21 and December 15, 2018. The reason for the period selected in the opinion of the researcher was that the interest and the prominence given to the attack would begin to wane three weeks after the attack.

## VII. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

### Lexical Features (items)

The media men especially those who work in the print media (journalists) are special breed of writers. They use or play on words in a way that a novelist or essay writer will not. In other words they have special methods of using words in captioning headlines in order to attract the attention of the readers, or to exhibit the editorial inclination (policy) of the newspaper(s) they represent. The choice of words by journalist is often sensitive or weighty that Agu (2010:173) opines that "journalist build the nation or even contribute in destroying what has been built over the years through the use of words. This study shall examine how the choice of words, phrases or expressions (diction) in the headlines selected for this study has contributed to the understanding of the headlines, and the portrayal (positive/negative) of the Nigerian Army and the Boko Haram sect in the ongoing crisis in North Eastern Nigeria.

The first lexical item identified in the study is **attack** which literally means to set upon with violent force which implies aggressively taking the initiative in a struggle (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms 1992). The item is the most recurring, appearing almost in all the headlines used for the study. It appears either as a base phrase on which the rest of the sentence stands, or as a verb portraying the two parties (the Nigerian Army and the Boko Haram Sect) positively or negatively.

- 1) Metele **Attack**: Soldiers' death toll rises...  
(*Premium Times, November 24, 2018*)
- 2) Buhari Summons Service Chiefs over Metele **Attack**  
(*The Nation November 23, 2018*)
- 3) Boko Haram attacks three military bases in NE Nigeria  
(*Daily Monitor, November 20, 2018*)

The word paints the Nigeria Army as being weak and unprepared. The word serves as a foundation to other words or expressions in all the headlines for the study.

The next prominent lexical item in the study is **kill**. This is a consequence of the attack that Boko Haram carried out on the Nigerian Army in Metele. The word clearly shows the extent of damage resulting from the attack thus portraying the Boko Haram sect as dangerous and merciless, and the Nigerian Army as a prey as reflected in the following headlines:

- 4) Boko Haram **kills** 79 soldiers in Metele  
(*Premium Times, November 22, 2018*)
- 5) Nigerian Islamists **kill** scores of soldiers in military base attack  
(*The Guardian, November 23, 2018*)

Related to "kill" is **bury**; it means that somebody that is killed has to be buried.

- 6) Tears flow as Army **buries** 19 soldiers  
(*Sahara Reporters, December 15, 2018*)
- 7) Army **buries** 19 soldiers killed in Metele attack  
(*The Punch, December 15, 2018*)

There are other expressions that are significant in the study. One of them is **Tears flow** as used in the following headlines:

- 8) **Tears flow** as Army buries 19 soldiers  
(*Sahara Reporters, December 15, 2018*)

As used in the headlines, **Tears flow** is an imprint intended to have emotional effect. Other expressions with similar intention are **death toll rises, causality rises** and **suffers heavy blow** as expressed in the following headlines:

- 9) Metele Boko Haram Attack: Soldiers' **death toll** rises to 118.  
(*Premium Times, November 24, 2018*)
- 10) Military Base in Bornu **Suffers heavy blow** as insurgents kill dozens of soldiers  
(*Daily Trust, November 21, 2018*)

The writers of the headlines deliberately want to attract sympathy for the families of the victims of the attack.

In other group of lexical expressions, the headline writers want to gauge reactions to the attack and the resultant damage as follows:

- 11) Buhari **expressed shock** over Boko Haram Attack at Metele  
(*Premium Times, November 23, 2018*)
- 12) Buhari **summons** service chiefs over Metele Attack  
(*The Nation, November 24, 2018*)
- 13) House **to investigate** Attack on the Army Base in Metele  
(*The Nation, November 23, 2018*)
- 14) Metele Attack: **Probe** military Budget now, groups tell Buhari  
(*The Punch, November 26, 2018*)
- 15) Afenifere asks Buhari **to sack** service chiefs over Boko Haram Attack  
(*The Guardian, November 27, 2018*)

The extracts (11-15) are reactions to the attack on the Army Base in Metele by the Boko Haram sect. The expression of **shock** (11) is an expression of disappointment by Buhari, the President of Nigeria. The disappointment leads to the President's action in (12) where he **summons** the service chiefs for explanations on the ugly development. Similarly, in order to show displeasure of the unexpected attack, the parliament

(House) promised **to investigate** (13) the attack, while civil society organizations called for a **probe** (14). The expressing words in the four headlines- shock, summon, investigate and probe cast negative view on the Nigerian Army. In a more draconian tone, a socio-cultural group in Nigeria, Afenifere wants the President **to sack** (15) the Service chiefs thus portraying them as incompetent to continue leading the Armed Forces of Nigeria.

Other lexical words of note used in the headlines include **re-ignited**, **pounds**, **sends SOS** as manifested in the following headlines.

- 16) **Metele Attack re-ignited** war on Boko Haram  
(*Daily Trust, December 1, 2018*)
- 17) **Boko Haram: NAF pounds** sect in Metele  
(*Daily Post, November 25, 2018*)
- 18) **Metele Attack: surviving soldiers sends SOS**  
to Buhari  
(*Vanguard, November 21, 2018*)

"Re-ignited as used in extract (16) is a subtle way of saying that the war was already at a low ebb before the attack suggesting that the attack is a renewal of the war. The word 'pounds' in extract (17) is saying that the Nigerian Airforce (NAF), a section of the armed forces of Nigeria has been in slumber; the attack is the tonic that wakes them up meaning that they are using fire-brigade approach to fight the war. The headline in extract (18) re-echoes the incompetence of the service chiefs, and the lack of confidence that the officers of the Nigerian Army have in them, thereby making the wounded soldiers to **send SOS** (save our souls) message to the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria.

### Syntactic Features

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2012) defines syntax as "the way that words and phrases are put together to form sentences in a language". Newspaper headlines are written in phrases, clauses or fragmented syntactic structures, often at variance with the grammatical rules of the language in which they are written. It is not common to see a headline written in a complete sentence. The headlines in the newspapers used for this study are typically written in elliptical expressions in which the operational words like the verb, nouns or the subject are ellipted; the use of to-infinitive as an operational word as well as the foregrounding of punctuations marks i.e. coma, colon and semi-colon in place of real words. The following examples illustrate these features and others that are not mentioned. The first syntactic feature common to most of the headlines is the presentation of **Metele Attack /Boko Haram** which serve as the base phrase and followed by other expressions separated by a colon as in the following headlines:

- 19) **Metele Attack: Soldiers death toll rises to 118,**  
over 150 missing  
(*Premium Times, November 24, 2018*)
- 20) **Boko Haram: NAF pounds** sect in Metele  
(*Daily Post, November 25, 2018*)
- 21) **Metele Attack: Boko Haram fight 'a must win**  
war', says Buhari  
(*The Punch, November 28, 2018*)

- 22) **Metele Attack: Boko Haram uses dromes,**  
foreign fighters

In each of the headlines above, the base phrase, "Metele Attack/Boko Haram stands ambiguous because the operational word (the verb) is missing, then comes the colon (: ) the expressions that follows the colon in each headline fills the gap. The verb in each of the headlines provides a clearer picture (meaning) to the initial ambiguity. Thus, **rise**, **pounds**, **fight** and **use** become the operational words that provide semantic interpretation in the respective headlines. Despite the structural similarities in the headlines, they do not have the same semantic interpretation. In extract 19, the effect of the attack results in the rise in death toll, in extract 20, the aerial assault of the Nigerian Air force (NAF) is a reaction to the attack by the Boko Haram sect. For extract 21, the severity of the attacks is a survival strategy by the sect in order to win the war. The semantic explanation of extract 22 is that the attack is made possible as a result of the usage of dromes by the sect as well as the assistance of foreigners. Surely, the syntactic structure puts an impediment to the semantic interpretation of each of the headlines if the reader does not take a careful look at the language. Also the insertion of colon (: ) after the phrase "Metele Attack/Boko Haram" shows that the caption in each case is the continuation of a story or situation. The writers of the headlines presumably are of the opinion that the readers must have been following the development (the attack) from the earlier editions of the papers or from other sources. This style of writing, according to Agu (2010) is referred to as "the vocative case in the classical grammar model". The headlines can be re-captioned: **soldiers death toll rises to 118 due to Metele Attack; NAF pounds the sect in Metele after the attack; Metele Attack is a "must win war" by Boko Haram, and Boko Haram uses dromes and foreign fighters in Metele Attack.**

Another syntactic features noticed in the headlines are the use of **to infinitive** and **over**. Of course, those features are common in newspaper headlines. Let us examine the following headlines.

- 23) **Afenifere asks Buhari to sack** service chiefs...  
(*The Guardian, November 27, 2018*)
- 24) **House to investigate** attack on the army base  
in Metele  
(*The Nation, November 24, 2018*)
- 25) **Buhari summons service chiefs over** Metele  
Attack.  
(*The Nation, November 24, 2018*)
- 26) **Metele Attack: Nigerian Army issues warning**  
**over** false report on attacks  
(*Daily Post, November 30, 2018*)

**To infinitive** has a subtle meaning/ interpretation of intention to do something which can be represented in ordinary language with **must**, **should** or **will/shall**. For instance extract 24 can be interpreted to mean that "House will" or must investigate the attack. Similarly, **over** means "for the reason", "because of something" or "as a result of something". For example extract 25 could mean that Buhari summons the Service Chiefs because

of or as a result of Metele Attack. Same interpretation could be given to extract 26.

Few of the headlines are written in simple, complete and grammatical sentences. Most writers of newspaper headlines have formed the habit of writing headlines in complete sentences. Even in some of the captions, we notice some kind of deviation from the norm as the captions below show.

- 27) Don't be deterred by Metele attack, women group tells soldiers  
(Sahara Reporters, November 30, 2018)
- 28) How Metele attack re-ignited war on Boko Haram  
(Daily Trust, December 1, 2018)
- 29) Boko Haram kills 70 soldiers in Metele  
(Premium Times, November 22, 2018)
- 30) Tears flow as army buries 19 soldiers  
(Sahara Reporters, December 15, 2018)
- 31) Boko Haram attacks leave commander, 53 soldiers dead  
(Daily Independent, November 21, 2018)

Some of the captions above can still be re-written to abide by grammatical or writing norms. For instance, extract 27 can be re-captioned thus "women group asks soldiers not to be deterred". Extract 28 can simply be re-written: "Metele Attack re-ignites war on Boko Haram".

One can notice what can be termed as journalistic style of the syntactic structure of the headlines in the form of noun strings and the use of the prepositional phrase. Noun strings and the use of three, four or more nouns together as in the following headlines: "Nigerian Islamists kill scores of soldiers in **military base attack**". The insertion of the noun strings here is a structural style of compressing "an attack on the military base. A similar feature is the use of the prepositional phrase. A prepositional phrase is the combination of a preposition and a noun or noun phrase. Notable examples in the headlines are: on the army base, over Metele attack, for Buhari, etc. Let us examine the following headline examples:

- 32) House to Investigate Attack on **the Army Base**  
(The Nation, November 24, 2018)
- 33) Buhari Summons Service Chiefs **over Metele Attack**  
(The Nation, November 24, 2018)
- 34) Boko-Haram: women stage solidarity rally **for Buhari**  
(Tribune, November 30, 2018)

The use of prepositional phrases is to assuage the intuitive anxieties of the readers by providing circumstantial meaning to the headlines. For instance in the extract 32 the question that can be asked is "which attack is the House investigating?" The answer to the question is the prepositional phrase in the headline. The question for extract 33 is "why is Buhari summoning the Service Chiefs?" In extract 34 we can ask the question "why/what is the rally about?"

#### Effects of the headlines on the Readers

One of the basic assumptions of magic bullet communication theory is the suggestion that the media injects its

messages straight into the audience and the audience is immediately affected by the messages (Arthur, 1995). Constant dissemination of message gives the mass media the ability to influence the importance placed on the topics of the messages being disseminated. This is the agenda setting theory of mass communication as pioneered by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in a study on the 1968 American Presidential election (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The perception of the readers to the various headlines in this study has varying degree of effects on them. These effects are determined by the interpretations of the headlines and the understanding of the Boko Haram crisis on which the headlines are based. The effects are variously categorized as negligence, incompetence, emotions/pity, loss of confidence, politicisation, lack of accountability, etc.

The interpretation of the headline captions for the study is based on **negligence**, **incompetence** and lack of **commitment** on the part of the Nigerian Army. On the part of the Boko Haram sect the interpretations of the headlines are **determination** and **boldness**. For negligence we have headlines such as:

- 35) Nigeria Islamists kill Scores of Soldiers  
36) Boko Haram Attacks Leave 53 Soldiers dead  
37) Metele Boko Haram Attack: Soldiers' Death Toll Rises to 118, over 150 missing.

On incompetence, the following headlines caption it thus:

- 38) House to Investigate Attack on the Army Base in Metele

Extracts 35 to 38 thoroughly portray the Nigerian Army and its leadership as highly incompetent and grossly negligent. It is unimaginable for the Nigerian Army to come under such attacks, with high causality figure in the process. A deeper probe could portray the member of the armed forces as lacking commitment.

The analysis of the headlines captions show the Boko Haram sect displaying spirit of determination and skill of boldness as could be inferred from the headlines below:

- 39) Boko Haram Attacks three Military Bases in NE Nigeria  
40) Metele Attack: Boko Haram opened Fire on Rescue Team  
41) Military Base in Bornu Suffers Heavy Blow as Insurgents kill Dozen of soldiers  
(Daily Trust November 21, 2018)

Inference from extracts 39 to 41 pointedly portrays the insurgents as bold, ruthless and determined. For example how can trained army explain the intensity of the attacks on them by untrained insurgents. The determination of the sects literally put the Nigerian Army on the defence by taking panicky actions, making denials and issuing threats all in efforts to play down the intensity of the attacks as illustrated in the following headlines:

- 42) NAF Pounds Sect in Metele  
(Daily Post, November 26, 2018)
- 43) Metele Attack Nigerian Army Issues Warning over False Report on Attacks  
(Daily Post, November 30, 2018))

- 44) Metele: Boko Haram uses Drones, Foreign Fighters-Buhari  
(*Daily Post, November 29, 2018*)

The action of the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) in extract 42 is an after thought and a belated action. In extract 43 the army is trying to save face, and in extract 44, the Chief of Army Staff gives excuses for the attack.

As reflected in the Agenda setting theory of mass communication, the headlines reveal the reactions of the readers. These reactions are physical, psychological and mental in outlook. They are based on the perception of the readers with emotional attachment (pity), political undertone, loss of confidence, lack of accountability and solidarity (encouragement and disappointment). Let us see how the headlines present these perceptive categorizations:

- 45) Tears flow as Army Buries 19 soldiers  
(*Sahara Reporters, December 15, 2018*)
- 46) Metele Attack: Surviving Soldiers Send SOS to Buhari  
(*Vanguard, November 24, 2018*)
- 47) Boko Haram Attack: Soldiers' Death toll rises to 118, over 150 Missing  
(*Premium Times, November 24, 2018*)
- 48) Boko Haram: Women Stage Solidarity Rally for Buhari  
(*Tribune, November 30, 2018*)
- 49) Afenifere asks Buhari to Sack Service Chiefs over Boko Haram Attack  
(*The Guardian, November 27, 2018*)
- 50) Metele Base Attack: Probe Military Budget now, Groups Tell Buhari  
(*Punch, November 26, 2018*)
- 51) Don't be Deterred by Metele Attack, women Group Tells Soldiers  
(*Sahara Reporters, November 30, 2018*)
- 52) Buhari Summons Service Chiefs over Metele Attack  
(*The Nation, November 23, 2018*)

Extracts 45 to 47 are clear emotion laden headlines. Emotion manifests in **tears, flow soldier's send SOS, death toll rises to 118**, etc. Extract 48 is a form of politicization of the Metele attack probably because of the general election that was to hold in February, 2019. A proper analysis of the headline in extract 49 shows a total loss of confidence in the leadership of the Nigeria armed forces. Although the call for the sack of the service chiefs comes from a social cultural group (Afenifere) it represents the opinion of majority of Nigerians. Extract 50 casts doubt on the accountability of the armed forces; the probe would look at how money being allocated for the prosecution of Boko Haram crisis is being utilized. The headline in extract 51 is a solidarity rally by a woman group who tries to encourage the soldiers. This is a significant morale booster for the soldiers that are fighting the war. Extract 52 is a reference to the disappointment of Buhari who is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Force, to the unexpected attack by the sect; he must have been shocked with the development.

## VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined the linguistic and stylistic aspect of structure and presentation of newspaper headlines with the attack of the dreaded Boko Haram insurgents on the Nigerian Army Base in Metele, North Eastern Nigeria as a case study. Three levels of linguistic analyses were carried out on the headlines which include lexical features (the choice of words, phrases and diction), the syntactic features (that deals with grammatical arrangement of words, phrases and clause) features, and the semantic feature (that have to do with the perceptive interpretation) of juxtaposition of the headlines and their literal as well as other meanings. Through the analyses it was discovered that journalistic writings are presented from different (though interwoven) perspectives. One, lexical items are selected sometimes to whip up psychological sentiments in the choice of words and expressions, all in an attempt to make the headlines attractive (catchy) and present their (headlines) meanings in the perceptive (understanding) of the writer. Two, some headlines are written in a neutral, normal and objective view point devoid of sentiments or emotional attachment. Three, some headlines are written specifically for some members of the reading public to present peculiar issues in which the readers are interested in. One other revelation from the study is the "journalistic writing style" in which newspaper headlines are presented in different structural and syntactic patterns; some of them conform with grammatical rules while some do not conform.

In view of the discussions so far, the following recommendations are made:

- Headlines writers should strive to write their headlines in simple and clear language in order to prevent misinterpretation.
- In the writing of newspaper headlines, less emphasis should be placed on propaganda, sentiments and emotions. This will enable the headlines to represent and focus the stories (news) they carry.
- Proprietors of media outfits (print media) should bear in mind that the language of their headlines and other bits has to do with the integrity and image of the outfit and the owners; they should therefore, stay neutral and remain apolitical in the discharge of their duties.
- Newspaper readership cuts across every segment of the society, language of headlines news, features, etc should, therefore, acknowledge and recognize the educational imbalance of the readers by not inserting big vocabularies in their write-ups.

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