

# Pragmatics of Truth and Modality in Newspaper Editorials: An Example of the Punch and the Tribune

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**Abstract**—In the contemporary newspapers, a large amount of report is based on speeches, statements, replies to questions and interviews. These formats therefore provide rich sources of personal utterance from the people who are perceived important in the society. The press represents what they say as news. Among the methods used by newspapers is modality. Modality has the insistence of a speaker who assumes the position of authority, including a claim to know what is inevitably going to happen. The modal auxiliary ‘must’; is a crucial word in editorials for instance, used to claim that the source has the right to specify obligations. However, because newspaper editors are steeped in the ideology of ownership and power, the modals used are not neutral or devoid of the subjective learning of the writer. Thus the writer may not be truly committed to the preposition made. This paper examines the pragmatic relationship between what can be termed truth and modality in language use, employing the Grice’s Co-operative principles for the analysis.

**Index Terms**—modality, newspaper reports, editorials, ownership ideology, truth value and pragmatics

## I. INTRODUCTION

This centres on the background knowledge of language in use vis-à-vis the editorial house style which allows it to communicate with its readers, using the institutional power to influence attitudes of readers rather than projecting truth in most cases.

Linguistic communication is successful if the hearer recognizes the speaker’s communicative intention. But the speaker always faces the problem of getting the hearer to recognize that intention. This is perhaps why (Akmajian et.al, 2003, p.216) opines that in order to accommodate this basic problem, the speaker must choose an expression that will facilitate such recognition, given the context of utterance. The contents of newspaper have been held to wield a lot of influence over the mind and imagination, just as literature does. The press is seen as representation of the world in language, because, as (Fowler, 1991, p. 64) observes, language is a semiotic code which imposes structure of values on whatever is represented. And so, news like every discourse, constructively patterns that of which it speaks.

A newspaper assumes that there is always only one reasonable point of view on any matter presented to the public. Editorial seems to affirm this point of view. This editorial represents the opinion of every newspaper. (Fowler, 1991, p.64) points out that what is even about newspaper editorial, apart from offering values and beliefs, is that they employ textual strategies which foreground the speech act of offering values and beliefs. It is of course these textual strategies adopted by the editorial that concern this study. And notable among these strategies is modality.

## II. METHODOLOGY

In this section, we have attempted to analyse the extracts of two selected Nigerian newspapers’ editorial comments. The pragmatic analysis of truth and modality is the focus. In doing this, the researcher has made the extracts from the Punch and the Tribune. In the analysis, attempts have been made to determine the extent to which propositions of the editorials are true, especially when modality is employed as a linguistic device. Particularly, we have sought to analyse the text along the dimension of H.P Grice’s co-operative principles. According to Grice’ (1975; p.45), the word ‘true’ and ‘truth’ refer to properties of utterance, not state of affairs. This illustrates the view that writer’s proposition based on this study, is just to influence, not the belief, but the attitudes of his/her readers towards the reliability of whatever is expressed. In addition to these features of true and untrue propositions, the attempt is shown in every text examined, the attitudes of readers towards the verifiability of the editor’s comments. Added to this, the pragmatic effects of the propositions on readers are explicated therein.

## III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Modal expressions signify judgment as to truth (correct) likelihood (certainty) and (might). Other modal usages stipulate obligations (should, ought to) and grant permission (‘may’). This linguistic device (modality) is an important means by editorial writers to have the insistence of a speaker who has assumed a position of authority, the authority here includes a claim to know what is inevitably going to happen. (Herndon, 1976, p.205) shares this view when she

points out that a sentence is made up of a modality constituent which includes tense and sentence modifiers such as negation. According to her, this proposition is a verb (or predicator) plus one or more noun phrases – each of which is associated with the verb in a case relationship. This modification is actually central to the work because it really shows the extent to which the writer is committed to any utterance made in newspaper representations.

This perhaps attests to the opinion of (Fowler, 1991, p.64) when he points out that anytime modal expressions are frequently high- lighted, subjectivity is enhanced but further opines that it is only in scientific reporting that modality expressions are fairly minimized. In his view, the significance of modality as far as the cueing of an oral model is concerned is that it suggests the presence of an individual subjectivity behind the printed text, who is qualified with the knowledge required to pass judgment, the status to grant leave or assign responsibility. Modality therefore becomes a useful device in the hands of journalist to blow issues out of proportion, thereby beclouding truths.

A proposition is either true or false, and it should be as exact as possible. This is evidently the sort of rationality that is useful in science. But when we stop to analyse the meaning of words, propositions tend to be meaningless in the true sense of meaning that is, they do not really tell us the truth. (Wilson, 1974, p.75) reveals that before one can be certain about the truth condition of any statement, three things must first be ascertained. The first thing, according to him, is knowing what the statement means, second, by knowing the right way to verify it and lastly, to have good evidence for believing it. Based on Wilson's opinion, if one says for instance that the 'earth is round but add either 'I don't know what that statement means, or I don't know how one could verify that statement, or 'I have no good evidence for that statement, any of these conditions makes the original statement absurd.

Wilson's argument sounds convincing but how do one account for some statements that are used often like ' I sleep all the time, doctor ;' Do we in real life judge the above mentioned statement to be 'false or ' meaningless' or do we try to make sense of it, in spite of the fact that it is really illogical? There is no way one can sleep all the time but in everyday conversation, it will trigger an interpretation by the listener which may reinstate the co-operative principles.

In the view of (Akmajian et.al, 1978, p.231) they differentiate truth relations from truth properties, arguing that both though fall within the scope of semantics, the most central truth relation for semantics is entailment. That is, one sentence 'S' is said to entail another sentence 'S' when the truth of the first guarantees the truth of the second and the falsity of the second guaranteed the falsity of the first, as in;

- a. 'The car is red entails the car has a colour'
- b. 'The needle is too short entails the needle is not long enough'

We can see that the first sentence in each example, if true, guarantees the truth of the second, and the falsity of the second sentence in each example.

(Papafragou, 2005, p.3) sees truth – conditionality from the epistemic modality view. She counters the epistemic position of modality that it does not contribute to truth conditional content, using Halliday's argument that modality is external to the content of any proposition and thus constitutes the attitude taken up by the speaker. This means of course that modality represents the opinion of any speaker or writer and not any total commitment to the truth of the statement.

Linguistic theory exists in several different models, which have divergent goals and terminologies. Language is a human function that pervades and shapes our daily lives. The complexity of English language, as any other human language, allows it to be analysed from different positions over the years. Notable among them are sociolinguistics, syntax, phonology, semantics just to mention a few.

Besides the aforementioned aspects of linguistic analysis, language comprises also a pragmatic aspect, to which are reckoned all those mechanisms that relate the language to its context of use, where this context includes the speaker, his audience, and the non-linguistic setting. Two general arrears of pragmatic function are well known: one is the area of speech acts, the other that of cooperative principles.

The central insight underlying the notion of speech act is that, in addition to meaning something, a sentence may also do something: it may assert, question, command, warn, and promise. Thus, as we are saying something, we are also doing something through speaking. This aspect of the interpersonal function of language has been studied particularly by linguistic philosophers, and notably by J. L. Austin – whose 'How to do things with words'' (1955) sums up this perspective – and following him, J.R. Searle. To Austin and Searle we owe the notion of 'illocutionary act'' or (a slightly more elegant label)'' speech act '' A speech act is a form of words which, if spoken or written in appropriate conditions and under appropriate conventions actually constitutes the performance of an action. Austin calls them '*performatives*.' Consider the following utterances:

1. The dog is on the mat;
2. Dele drinks habitually;
3. I declare you man and wife;
4. I name this ship Bankole;
5. I promise to pay you ₦ 10.

Notice that sentences 1 and 2 above are quite different from those of 3 – 5 because 1 and 2 only describe states of affairs and sequentially conform to the true/ false criterion. Austin therefore names this class of sentences '*constatives*'. The other class of sentences (3- 5), he labels '*performatives*'. In the view of Austin, in uttering 3-5, the speaker does not report a state of affairs but performs an action, bringing into existence a new state of affairs.

Where the utterance literally affects the act referred to: Kola and Dupe are thereby married, the ship named, the speaker commits himself to pay the addressee ₦10. Thus speech acts are integrally enmeshed with the system of conventions that constitute a social and political world, and speech act analysis offers linguistics a direct point of entry into some practices such as newspaper editorials, which is the subject of this article.

As we rightly know, the illocutionary act possesses only one meaning, its illocutionary force, the reader of a text recognizes that the utterance of a particular utterance in any context counts as a certain action. This means that the presence of many directives, threats, advice which carries ambiguous and modified expressions in editorial columns only signify that the utterance stand for attempts by the writer to get his reader to perform future action and the reader will accordingly hold the editor responsible for the felicity conditions of asserting. This therefore qualifies speech act theory as a good candidate for the analysis of this study.

However, the application of speech act's concept of intentionality to newspaper discourse, especially on the editorial, may not hold enough water because the concept limits itself to those intentions specified by a writer's invocation of felicity conditions established by his linguistic community. The theory cannot handle unconscious intentions or conscious purpose not identifiable by the conventional procedures for making speech act work.

More so, the notion that only performative verbs could be used to perform actions seems unpersuasive because there is no formal (grammatical) way of distinguishing performative verbs from other sorts of verbs in any text, most especially on editorial pages. Similarly, the presence of a performative verb does not guarantee that the specified action is performed by the reader.

Based on the above, any attempt to adopt speech act theory to analyse this study shall be tantamount to pushing it beyond certain limitations. While Austin makes a distinction between what speakers say and what they mean, (Grice, 1975, p.45) also formulates a theory to explain how a hearer gets from what is said to what is meant, from the level of expressed meaning to the level of implied meaning.

Since Grice conceives of conversation as a purposive, rational behavior, he formulates rules that explain men's conduct in their talk exchanges. First of all, he says speakers and hearers assume a co-operative principle (CP), which he believes should be in force throughout their conversations.

According to (Grice, 1975, p.45), the rule states thus: "make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." The CP encompasses four principles or maxims:

**1. Maxim of Quantity**

- i. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).
- ii. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

**2. Maxim of Quality**

- i. Do not say what you believe to be false.
- ii. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**3. Maxim of Relation**

- i. Be relevant

**4. Maxim of Manner**

- Super-maxim: Be perspicuous
- i. Avoid obscurity of expression
- ii. Avoid ambiguity
- iii. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
- iv. Be Orderly

(Adapted from Grice, 45-46)

Just as speech theory has not provided a fool proof method of detecting authorial intentions in any text, critics also hold that Grice's CP and maxims fail to account for the following:

One, sometimes an utterance has a range of possible interpretations. How do we know when the speaker is deliberately failing to observe a maxim and hence that an implicature is intended?

Two, how can we distinguish between different types of non-observance (e.g., distinguish a violation from an infringement)?

And more in this purpose, Grice argued that there should be a mechanism for calculating implicature, but it is not always clear how this operates. For instance, the same words may convey, in different implicatures. The implicature so conveyed in one particular context is not random, however. Yet Grice's CP and maxim would be more attractive to the attention of this work than Austin's speech act theory in the sense that, two aspects of Grice's maxims are central to the concern of this study. For example, when the maxim of quality is flouted, Grice lists irony metaphor, meiosis, and hyperbole as the outcome whereas the flouting of the maxim of manner results in ambiguity and obscurity. In this light, the theory of conversational implicature is of use to this article. CP, which directs the conversational participants to follow the points of the talk exchange, is especially protected in the selection process for editorial writing. Based on this application, any text produced by the writer represents a conversation between the writer and reader.

Grice's formulation of the CP and the maxims, describes in particular the behavior of participants in a conversation whose purpose is to communicate efficiently. He does not however, rule out other purposes for other conversations.

Taking this hint therefore, the study proposes that the point of the interaction between the writer of an editorial and his readers is the assertion of modality as linguistic tool to reach out to the audience (reader).

Whenever a reader detects any violation of the two maxims by the editorial writer, it is interpreted as a deliberate attempt to flatter or necessarily appeal to emotion rather than presenting the truth. Our attitude to this pragmatic analysis is basically integrative. However, it is evident from the foregoing review of speech act and conversational analysis that a more suitable model for this study is the latter. Thus where it suits our purpose, we can add terms and concepts from other models particularly semantics, sociolinguistics, syntax, when they would do a particular job better

### Texts

The study provides two Newspaper editorials- namely The Punch and Tribune for the analysis. 'The Punch' is labeled (A) while 'Tribune' is labeled (B). The two editorial columns are used to discuss the pragmatic impact they have on the writers and readers, using modality as the basis.

*(A) So far, the FG seems to have mismanaged the Niger Delta crisis by relying so much on the use of force instead of finding a lasting political solution to the problem. The 2005 National Political Reform Conference provided a good opportunity for the FG to resolve the matter politically, but it did not seize it. Now, if the FG listens to the hawks who want more troops deployed in the Niger Delta, a full blown armed confrontation may result, and the nation's economy mainly driven by oil wealth, may be grounded... The FG should be cautions not to plunge the whole nation into another civil strife through the Niger Delta conflict Punch; Monday, March 13, 2006 P.16.*

### Ai

The first sentence of this text is governed by the illocutionary force admonition, adopted to accuse the government's stance on the resolution of conflict in the Niger Delta region. Moreover, the writer applies the technique of violating the Maxim of Quality by not stating or revealing the actual solution offered by 2005 National Conference to tackle the problem.

Very central to this work is the use of modality. In the first line, the lexeme 'seems to have mismanaged' is used and towards the end of the sentence, another modal verb, 'may result' and finally 'should be cautions...' One thing important in the use of modality is that the vocabulary is somewhat an ethical judgment which undeniably relates to the opinion of the writer. For instance, one can notice in the text that the degree of truth condition varies from one modal verb to the other in the way they occur in the text. While the truth condition in 'seems to' and 'may', elicit little confidence in terms of reliability that of 'should' is higher. Judged from the above, the writer is therefore led to violate the 1<sup>st</sup> part of Maxim of Quality (Do not say what you believe to be false.)

*(A) But the militants must eschew violence and embrace dialogue in the interest of their people who bear the brunt of the armed engagement with the standing military. They must allow the due process to prevail in the matters involving chief Alamiyeseigha and Mujahid Asari Dokubo. Also, the nine hostages should be released unconditionally, as a resort to terror in the Niger Delta, under any guide, is bound to fail and must be condemned. Monday, February 27, 2006. P.g.10*

### (Aii)

The text begins with the voice of a speaker who has assumed a position of authority. The authority here includes a claim to know what is unfailingly going to happen; the effect of a full weight of military campaign on the militants. The modal auxiliary 'must' which is repeated twice makes more salient the cruciality of the language of editorials. They claim that the source has the right to specify obligation; 'the nine hostages should be released unconditionally...'

However, the whole utterance seems to appeal seriously to emotion rather than indicating fact or truth since no one is sure of the total commitment of the writer to the truth of the proposition. And in as much as modals go with the ethical judgment of the writer towards his proposition, the truth conveyed is unreliable because the major use of ethical judgment as observed by (Levinson, 1983, p.6), is not to indicate fact but to create influence.

Therefore, based on the use of these modals with strong opinions, it is plausible to infer that the writer uses the said modals to evince his attitude and thereafter exert own influence upon the attitude of the readers. Thus the modals are crucial enough to give appearance of consensus and solidarity with the people of the region. 'Must' is authoritative in nature but equally has a dialogic style of arousing the feelings of the audience. Due to the emotive nature of the comment therefore, the indication of truth in the utterance is far from being convincing and accordingly violates the two maxims- Quantity and Quality.

### (B)

*The reference to the Niger Delta region as "The underbelly of Nigeria" is definitely an apt metaphor describing both the wealth and the vulnerability of that region vis-à-vis the corporate existence of the country. If Nigeria were to be an immense, docile retille, the Niger Delta region would have been its soft, vulnerable underbelly, at which, for over a month now, darts and poisonous arrows of anger, discount- entment, abduction and subterfuge had been hunted by vicious, angry youth of that region.*

*Thursday, 10th February, 2006. Pg.10*

### (B)

This text responds to the basic story of the Niger Delta crisis and its attendant consequences. The writer of this text has violated the maxim of Quality by presenting falsehood. Looking at the text closely, the editorial dramatizes vocabulary that is generally emotive. And this leads to the common use of evaluative words such as 'definitely',

'immense', 'docile', 'its soft', 'vulnerable underbelly', 'darts', etc.. All these words have the purpose of modifying the attitudes of the readers towards his strong feelings on Niger Delta crisis. For instance, the last two lines couched in highly emotive terms really show his personal opinions about the issue at hand. The writer merely uses these words to evince his own attitude and thereafter exerts influence upon the attitude of his addressee. This is why the truth in the whole utterance is questionable because no one knows the extent of his commitment to the utterance made. For instance lines (5 and 6) seriously question the truth value of the utterance by the use of the modal verb 'would' have been its.....' The above mentioned agent of modality can just be regarded as comment or attitude ascribable to the writer. The uncertainty in the truth content of the utterance is not dependable.

(B) *We urge the lawmakers to be patriotic and honest, to put the tenure extension saga behind them and do what is right for the country by giving it a body of laws that would usher in peace and propel it towards growth and development. In essence, our advice is that our law makers should revisit the amendment bill and give the country a wholesome, workable constitution.*

Thursday, 9<sup>th</sup> February, 2006. Pg.10.

(B)

The editorial enters a dialogic relationship with its readership, starting this paragraph with pronoun 'we'. There is no doubt that readers are implicated in the ideological position of the 'we' to the extent that they almost accept the position of the writer. Striking in the text is the use of modality which concerns this study. We notice that the truth content of one modal varies from the other in the way they occur in the text. For instance, '...our law makers should' is definitely surer than "... that would usher in peace..." in line (3) this difference really attests to the points that modality is an ethical language which does not go with truth whenever it is employed in discourse. It is therefore plausible to render the text unreliable, thereby constituting a flagrant violation of the maxims of Quality as well as Quantity.

#### IV. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The work of art is generated as part of a communicative action system whereby the narrator (writer) who has been granted full audience by his readers does this communicative act to the fullest. Thus, a writer such as an editor newspaper, often creates a level of communication within the artistic framework between an assumed narrative personality and his idealized communicative partner, the astute reader. This is to say that the reader who picks up a work of literature (newspaper inclusive) of a given genre already has a predetermined idea of what the nature of the communication situation is. A writer equally addresses to an audience a narrative utterance whose point is to observe the CP and maxims as specified for such utterances; that is, he knows the story, provides all the relevant information, evaluates adequately, and succeeds in making the Audience-ship worth it. As far as communicative action game (CAG) is concerned, adequate communication cannot take place if the reader is not prepared to recognize and accept his role as the writer's partner within the fictional world. His narrative turn will therefore be accordingly judged by the co-operative principle, i.e a set of conventions agreed upon by all the participants in the narrative situation.

It is obvious from the foregoing that in newspaper representations, certain attitudes are displayed linguistically by writers but basically, the newspaper and its readers share a common discursive competence who know the permissible statements and even prohibitions. Therefore, any proposition is assessed by reader on the basis of this agreement. And this makes it very salient that the relationship which the editorial voice constructs with the readers seems to be dual in nature. One, the source claims the authority to explain an argument and to persuade the reader of its correctness. Second, the editorial claims solidarity by invoking consensus. This institutional power enables the writer to use words, using the 'journalese' to influence attitudes rather than pointing out what is supposed to be true.

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