

A CORPUS-BASED STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED RADIO NIGERIA NETWORK NEWS COMMENTARIES ON NATION BUILDING



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Abstract

*The way the media interpret societal phenomena is pivotally instrumental to the economic, political, and socio-cultural disposition of the citizenry. Radio Nigeria has employed news commentaries for decades as a veritable platform for educating its mammoth audience and shaping their views on topical national issues. The paper assesses the stylistic peculiarities of the selected Radio Nigeria network news commentaries focused on nation building with a view to exposing how the convergence between form and content has intensified the propagation of the ideologies of the writers. It argues that the application of stylistic devices to news commentaries is not an exercise in futility but an essential complement that accentuates the informative, persuasive, emotive, and aesthetic value of the discourse. The corpus of primary data comprises five commentaries extracted from *Pendants of Rhythm: A Selection of Radio Nigeria Network News Commentaries* using non-random purposeful sampling and analyzed using descriptive method. The analysis yields salient stylistic devices such as simple diction enhanced by lexical relations, profuse use of complex sentences with anticipatory and trailing constituents, complex noun and verb phrases, balanced constructions, figures of speech, rhetorical question, repetition and tone. These collectively engender a satisfactory actualization of the writers' communicative goals.*

Introduction

Style as a linguistic concept has been defined in many ways. Lucas's view of style as "the effective use of language in prose to make a statement or rouse emotions" (16) is germane to this study. It validates the expressive nature of news commentary as a unique genre of radio broadcasting that deals with topical national issues with a view to sensitizing, educating and shaping the views of the massive audience. With such enigmatic goal in view, the writer painstakingly makes linguistic choices, fully aware of the power of language to influence the audience and induce them to take action. This lends credence to Darbyshire's assertion that style acts as a means of persuasion as well as a means of discovery (4). Style is then a purveyor of purpose in that what a writer says and how he says it are complementary. Each shapes the other. However, style may improve or impair content making it crucial to the realization of the discourse goal.

As observed by Schröder, we live in a 'mediatized society' - a society in which the media affect our thinking in whatsoever social roles we have to fill in everyday life and where the meaning processes, or discourses, provided by the communication media play an overwhelming role not only in the general organization of society but also in the way individuals and groups think about everything (584). This underscores the agenda-setting role of the media as the pivot of what we think and how we think about virtually all life phenomena. Unarguably, the level at which a person understands the plethora of discursive meaning churned out by the media daily determines the degree of acceptance or rejection of the ideologies overtly or covertly peddled.

Promoting a linguistic enquiry into media discourse, Schröder declares that it has gradually become accepted in principle to also consider the production and reception processes

involved in media text in order to understand the workings of a mediatised society (584). Thus, a stylistic investigation of the language used in radio news commentaries to influence people's perception of societal issues and inculcate a sort of attitudinal change in them is a worthwhile exercise.

This paper therefore examines the salient stylistic features that characterize radio news commentary and exposes the communicative effects the stylistic devices provoke.

The Concerns of Linguistic Stylistics

Linguistic stylistics is concerned with the way language is used distinctively in a text. Azuiké defines stylistics as "all the elements of language that aid a writer or speaker to achieve a pattern of writing or speaking identifiable as unique or peculiar to him" (79). A stylistic analysis therefore is expected to highlight a writer's idiosyncratic use of language that makes him distinct from other writers. As the definition advocates usages that form a pattern, consistency and conspicuousness determine what is stylistically significant. To achieve such an analysis, the stylistician's task is "to interrelate his observation within the framework of some theory, and thus piece together any general pattern of linguistic variation which may exist" (Crystal and Davy 12).

Wales believes that stylistics "characteristically deals with the interpretation of texts by focusing in detail on relevant distinctive linguistic features, patterns, structure or levels and on their significance and effects on readers" (1046). This definition additionally recognizes that the writer's linguistic choices affect the reader or hearer as the case may be quite significantly. The goal of Stylistics is therefore functional given that it analyzes texts not for

their own sake but with a view to identifying their functional significance (437-438).

Although most works done in stylistics are based on literary texts (literary stylistics), current trends in the discipline have expanded its scope to capture general linguistics and sociolinguistics. As Wales puts it, increased attention is being drawn cross modally to media discourses as stylistics has begun to place emphasis on language and texts located and functioning in particular social, ideological and political practices (1046-7). Consequently, the current foray into the stylistic peculiarities of radio news commentary is not out of place.

Brook and Warren see style as a product of the working together of sentence structure, vocabulary, figures of speech, rhythm and many other elements (312). Thus, the researchers have employed the above stylistic parameters and others devices in analyzing the corpus.

Methodology

The paper is based on a corpus of five news commentaries of the Radio Nigeria focused on topical issues that bother on nation building. The commentaries are drawn from *Pendants of Rhythm: A Selection of Radio Nigeria Network News Commentaries*. Although the book covers commentaries broadcast between 1991 and 2009, the study is limited to 2008 and 2009 commentaries, being the most recent in the collection. The researchers' recourse to the book is induced by the transient nature of the spoken mode to which commentary belongs. The method of selection is non-random purposive sampling as the paper is limited to nation building commentaries. The selected ones are listed below and labeled alphabetically for easy reference in the analysis:

Text A: “The Role of the Family in Nation Building” Focus of May 14, 2008

Text B: “The Need for Accountability among Public Office Holders” Focus of August 27, 2009

Text C: “Sustaining Nigeria’s Leading Role in Africa” Focus of Oct. 2, 2009

Text D: “Fighting Ignorance in the System” Focus of November 4, 2009

Text E: “The Immunity Clause and Good Governance” Focus of November 13, 2009

It may be argued that the above commentaries do not overtly capture ‘nation building’ as part of their titles, except for text A. It should however be noted that nation building is a multi-faceted concept which covers all societal phenomena that cumulatively moves the nation forward. Thus, the theme of nation building is either implicitly or explicitly addressed in the chosen commentaries as all of them are geared towards building a better Nigeria.

Stylistic Analysis of Selected Radio Nigeria News Commentaries

1. Diction

The diction is generally simple and controlled by the subject matter. A few examples will suffice, using texts D and E which deal with ignorance and governance respectively:

Text D: knowledge, low literacy level, narrow world view, liberty, deprivation, jump queue, illicit, greedy, accumulation of wealth, wreck vengeance, traffic jams, submerged, authority, breaking point, etc (418-9)

Text E: criminal, instituted, compelled, applauded, abysmal, corruption, restore, sanity, scenario, expunged, arrested, charges, imprisoned, projects, development, governance, etc (421-2).

The vocabulary although rich and varied is drawn from everyday language, making it easy for the audience to grasp the message without recourse to the dictionary. This is not surprising in oral discourse where far-fetched expressions can easily constitute a barrier to communication. The simplicity of the words is further enhanced by some lexical relations noticed in the corpus such as antonymy, synonymy and hyponymy.

Antonymy: Some words opposite in meaning are juxtaposed to underscore their contrastive import:

- Parents spend time on *real* and *phantom* business trips. (Text A, 362)
- To the ignorant man, life *starts* and *ends* with him.(Text D, 419)
- It also has the capacity to *reduce corruption* and *entrench good governance*. (Text E, 422)
- The constitutional provision has been *applauded* or *condemned* depending on which side... (Text E, 421).

Synonymy: Besides placing words opposite in meaning together, words similar in meaning are coordinated to emphasize their meaning and also enable easy remembrance: *Shielding and protecting* (Text E), *logical and convincing*(Text E), *information or knowledge*(Text D), *regulate and monitor*(Text E), *volatile and crisis-ridden*(Text C), *orderly and peaceful* (Text C), among others.

Hyponymy: A further type of lexical relation noted is hyponymy in which the meaning of a lexeme is included in the meaning of

another term. Word relations at this level reflect the hierarchical organization of the lexical system. The occurrence of hyponymy in the corpus enables listeners to understand the components of a super-ordinate term. This in turn enriches the informative propensity of commentaries.

- "...most families are beset with problems of hunger, poverty, HIV/AIDS, and general lack of peace and love in most homes." (Text D, 419)

In the above sentence, *problem* is a super-ordinate term while *hunger*, *poverty*, *HIV/AIDS* and *lack of peace and love* are its hyponyms as their meanings in the context are embodied in the meaning of the term *problem*. A few of the sentences that situate this feature are:

- Other serious crimes in the society such as armed robbery, kidnapping, abduction, prostitution, and cultism... (Text B, 402).

In the sentence, the lexemes *armed robbery*, *kidnapping*, *abduction*, *prostitution*, and *cultism* are the hyponyms specifying the super-ordinate term *crime*.

- The government should robustly galvanize and step actions to improve considerably infrastructural development like electricity, water supply, roads, accommodation, health care delivery system, education, employment and security (Text C, 409).

The hyponyms intensify and provoke higher information density by way of enumerating the constituents of the super-ordinate term *infrastructural development*.

2. Figures of Speech

The corpus yields a rich stock of figures of speech out of which metaphor is the most conspicuous.

Metaphor: Metaphor draws a subtle comparison between two dissimilar things. It is used in the commentaries to create images that appeal to the imagination of the audience more potently than literal language. In other words, it creates pictures of ideas which potentially linger in the mind more than mere words. Examples include:

- Ignorance is not only a disease, it also promotes other diseases. (Text D, 419)

Here ignorance is the tenor that is compared with the vehicle – a disease. The writer succeeds in painting an ugly picture of ignorance by drawing an implied comparison between it and an odious phenomenon that no right thinking person wants to be associated with. Thus, the metaphor forcibly but subtly persuades the listener to eschew all forms of ignorance.

- A brief journey down memory lane will remind people of the abysmal performance of many top public office holders some of whom belong to the category that the Immunity clause is shielding and protecting. (Text E, 421)

Two images are created above metaphorically: the image of journey and shield. *Journey* may imply that the abysmal performance of top public office holders in Nigeria has continued for a long time unchecked and has become so entrenched on the memory of the citizenry that recalling it is effortless like a brief journey. The image of *shield* brings to the fore the absolute protection top public office holders enjoy even in the face of gross misappropriation of public funds. Comparing Immunity Clause

with a shield, the metaphor connotes that the Immunity Clause is a hiding place outside which most of these top public office holders will face the wrath of the law.

Other instances of metaphor in the corpus are:

- The ongoing crackdown on advance fee frauds and corrupt citizens should be maintained before men in their ignorance capsize the ship of state. (Text D, 419)
- ...little did people know that Nigeria will rise to become the giant of Africa.(Text C, 408)
- Let there be a collective resolve to flush out selfish individuals irrespective of their standing and political leaning. (Text B, 402)

Metaphorical expressions not only intensify the points made but also make them vivid as the vehicles are drawn from familiar concepts to describe the less familiar tenor. Other metaphors in the corpus are *crippled the national economy* (Text B, 402), *descended heavily on faceless looters* (Text B, 402), *entrenchment of a new political paradise* (Text C, 409), *battered image of the country* (Text C, 409), *submerged in a pool of ignorance* (Text D, 419), *The family is the nucleus, the home is the cradle* (Text A, 362).

Besides metaphor, there are instances of other figures of speech that add aesthetic, emotive and informative value to the commentaries.

Simile: Most family units have failed...as the children behave like sheep without a shepherd (Text A, 362).

Personification: Ignorance does not observe the rule of law nor does it respect the rights of other people. (Text D, 418-9),

Hyperbole: The ignorant man is greedy and stuffs his mouth with food until his stomach inflates to breaking point. (Text D, 419).

Synecdoche: So much money has entered into many wrong hands. (Text D, 419).

The non-literal use of language advances the discourse goals of the texts by enabling a more persuasive, emphatic, informative and emotive appeal.

3. Rhetorical Question

The corpus contains a number of rhetorical questions which seemingly appeal to the audience for approval and covertly request them to take a stand in support of the writer's view. Examples are

- Would it not be better, more cost effective and less stressful to put in place a mechanism to regulate and monitor the trend of public expenditure while the public office holder is still in office? (Text E, 422)
- How many of those who performed credibly in those positions found themselves in court? (Text E, 421)

The above rhetorical questions sensitize the audience to disagree with the proponents of Immunity Clause. Thus, the writer does not want to be a lone voice in the criticism so he indirectly urges the audience to join the criticism vanguard.

4. Alliteration

Alliteration occurs when the initial consonants of words are repeated in succession. Its use creates a musical effect that draws

attention to the words that alliterate. Examples are *deep seated violence in Sudan, Somali; Nigerian nation* (Text C, 408); *political paradise*(Text C, 409); *low literacy level*(Text D, 418); *turn round to wreck*(Text D, 419); *fee frauds*(Text D, 419); *delays in disposing cases*(Text E, 421); *in court on corrupt charges* (Text E, 422).

5. Repetition

Expressions are repeated to show emphasis, foreground the term or enliven the discourse. For example in text D, ignorance is repeated ten times in four short paragraphs. Other instances are *the ignorant man's world is a world...* (Text D, 419); *armies of armed robbers* (Text A, 363); *a hungry man they say is an angry man* (Text A, 363); *on the one hand...on the other hand* (Text C, 409); *Nigerians must not....Nigerians must therefore...* (Text C, 409).

6. Balanced Construction

This involves placing similar grammatical structures together to achieve symmetry and equilibrium in the exposition and consequently attract attention.

- While the family is the nucleus, the home is the cradle.... (Text A, 362)
- ...ravages of hunger and pangs of anger. (Text A, 363)
- Ignorance does not observe the rule of law nor does it respect the rights of the poor. (Text D, 418)
- The person shall not be compelled to appear in court nor should he be arrested or imprisoned while in office. (Text E, 421)

7. Sentence Types

The corpus is composed of a variety of sentence types among which the complex sentence ranks highest followed by the simple sentence. This stylistic salience is not unconnected with the fact that both favour embedded structures that flesh out information. The table below captures the distribution of sentence types and paragraph in the corpus.

| Text | No of Paragraph | Simple Sentence | Complex Sentence | Compound Sentence | Compound-Complex |
|-------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| A | 4 | 6 | 11 | NIL | NIL |
| B | 6 | 11 | 10 | NIL | 1 |
| C | 9 | 10 | 12 | NIL | NIL |
| D | 4 | 10 | 5 | 6 | 3 |
| E | 4 | 8 | 15 | 3 | 1 |
| Total | 27 | 45 | 53 | 9 | 5 |

The simple and complex sentences are marked by complex phrases and long dependent clauses with multiple embeddings.

The Simple Sentence: The simple sentence contains only one finite verb. Its brevity draws attention and creates a sense of urgency and speed in the discourse.

- The scenario appears to be playing out again. (Text E, 422)
- Contracts worth billions of naira are being awarded almost on daily basis. (Text E, 422)

However, the need to drive the point home more convincingly disposes the writers to lend complexity to simple sentences. Thus,

the frenetic impact is traded off in favour of the need to supply enough details that clarify the information being conveyed.

- In other words, accountability and decency in governmental affairs has continued to diminish in recent times, especially among public office holders. (Text B, 401)
- Apart from dispatching a sizeable number of military personnel to most of those volatile and crisis ridden countries, Nigeria has generally maintained the status quo of sending humanitarian and relief materials to African countries devastated by artificial and natural disasters. (Text C, 409)
- Many Nigerians have held positions in town unions, in social, business, educational and corporate organizations. (Text E, 421)

Complex Sentence: This is made up of one main clause and at least one subordinate clause. The preponderance of this sentence type is born out of the need, in this genre, to elucidate the few main ideas rather than giving so many without explication. The style also highlights the hierarchical relationship of ideas within the clause structure.

- **It is important to mention** that because of her economic fortunes Nigeria contributes more when it comes to financing and support to various social, economic and political organizations in Africa. (Text C, 408)
- **A brief journey down memory lane will remind people of the abysmal performance of many top public office holders** some of whom belong to the category that the Immunity clause is shielding and protecting. (Text E, 421)

In each of the two examples, the main clause in bold is followed by trailing constituents which are two dependent clauses. However, sometimes the main clause is preceded by anticipatory constituents to create suspense and also sustain the interest of the listeners. At other times, the main clause is centralized as the hub flanked by both anticipatory and trailing constituents.

- Although skirmishes sometimes do arise among communities, states and local governments mostly over land, religion and political matters, **it does not take time** for such situations to be adequately taken care of compared to deep seated violence in Sudan, Somalia, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo and Guinea. (Text C, 409)

The pre-modification of the noun and verb phrases in some of the text have stylistic significance. This is illustrated using Text C:

Complex Noun Phrases in Text C: The head of the NP is in bold face. Examples are *capital intensive **technologies**, bloody civil **war**, volatile and crises-ridden **countries**, battered **image**, global **competitiveness**, oil-producing **country***. Sometimes the complexity is induced by both pre and post modification of the head, as in: *the socioeconomic **wellbeing** of the nation, one fundamental **objectives** of the Umaru Musa Yar'adua administration, the **impact** of the poverty eradication programme*.

Complex Verb Phrases also abound in text C. They are *remarkably demonstrated, significantly contributed, adequately taken care of, robustly galvanize, adequately curtail, grossly undermine, considerably recovered, among others*.

The effect of the modification is that it specifies the head and enriches its information density. Besides, the modifiers reveal the attitudes and emotions of the writers towards the subject matter.

8. Tone

The writers' tone reflects their attitude and disposition towards the audience as well as the subject matter. The tone is encapsulated in the writers' choice of words and expressions which often suggests how the writers want the audience to react to the subject matter. For instant, the tone in **Text A** depicts that the writer frowns at negligence of parents and advocates the fulfillment of parental responsibility and family unity as the bedrock of nation building. This is inferred from these expressions: *closely knit relationship, without which the survival of norms and moral values of the community would hardly subsist, abandonment of God-given duty of child upbringing to house-helpers and domestic servants, cracks in family relationship* (362-3). By equating 'healthy families' with 'a harmonious society' and suggesting that all 'social organizations and institutions should put their house in order', the writer clearly suggests that everywhere one finds oneself is a family and its wellbeing has a cumulative effect on the progress of society.

The writer's tone in **Text B** reveals his disenchantment with the lack of accountability among public office holders in Nigeria. This is evidenced by such expressions as *clearing of the Aegean stable in the economic sector, salvage the situation, excesses of individuals, crippled the national economy, faceless looters of our treasury, crusade against corruption*, among others (401-2). However, in **Text C** the tone shows the writer's positive disposition towards Nigeria's leading role in Africa. This attitude is conveyed by the profuse pre-

modification of the verb with positive adverbs: *remarkably demonstrated, significantly contributed, adequately taken care of, robustly galvanize, adequately curtail* (408-9).

The writer's tone in **Text D** portrays that ignorance is a cankerworm to national development which should be avoided like a disease while in **Text E** the tone conveys the writer's indignation and protest against Immunity Clause. The protest is reflected in these expressions: *it does not hold water, It is the guilty that are afraid, abysmal performance of many top public office holders...the immunity clause is shielding and protecting, there's no arguing the fact that the removal...will restore sanity, the immunity clause should be expunged, yearnings* (421-2).

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that radio news commentary employs the stylistic features of written language in that, although it is of the spoken medium, the commentary is first crafted in the written mode before broadcast. The complex and simple sentences in the corpus are stylistically marked, having been used profusely to reflect complexity of thought, internal structure dependencies and frenetic appeal. The positioning of embedded structures has the stylistic significance of creating suspense in other to sustain interest or giving prompt release of the information. Figures of speech especially metaphor are used to thrust the arguments into sharper focus and to spice up the discourse. Sound devices such as alliteration and repetition give the texts musical effects as well as draw audience attention while the simple and varied vocabulary enhances easy grasping of the message. The writers' tone encapsulated in their choice of words and expressions reflects their attitude and disposition towards the audience as well as the subject matter.

The paper concludes that stylistic devices are deliberately employed in the corpus to essentially contribute to the success of creating persuasive, inspirational, emotive and informative commentaries.

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