

SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF VERB COMPLEMENTATION IN NIGERIAN NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a syntactic analysis of verb complementation in selected Nigerian newspaper headlines. The objectives are to describe patterns of verb complementation used by editors in Nigerian newspaper headlines, identify the most prevalent verb subcategory in the headlines, and determine whether the grammatical features of headlining affect the application of VP Phrase Structure Rules (PS-Rules) for complementation. Using an eclectic theoretical approach—Systemic Functional Linguistics and Transformational Generative Grammar—the study employs both qualitative and quantitative research designs. Data consist of 130 headlines drawn from *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *The Guardian* editions for May, June, and July 2019, using random and purposive sampling. The data were analysed using the Subject Verb Object Adjunct and Complement (SVOAC) taxonomy, labelled bracketing, and tree diagrams to show hierarchical organization and interrelationships using the X-bar theoretical model. The findings show that transitive verbs are the most used subcategory in headlines (73.85%). Ditransitive and copular verbs tie for second (9.23%), followed by intransitive verbs (7.69%). Transitive verbs are often used intransitively and vice versa, with editors omitting function words in line with the economy principle of headlines. When adherence to PS-Rules competes with the economy principle, the former is traded off for brevity. The study concludes that complementation deviations do not amount to linguistic aberration because the context licenses such deviations, and grammar interfaces with normative social context.

KEYWORDS: Verb complementation, Newspaper headlines, Syntactic analysis, Transitive verb, Economy principle.

INTRODUCTION

Syntax, in simple terms, is the study of the rules guiding the formation of words. Language is used to carry out different activities and for communication. The combination of signs and symbols without considering their relations to behaviour is ineffective. Syntax addresses the combination of signs and symbols to create meaningful communication. Matthews explains that the term "syntax" comes from the Ancient Greek word *syntaxis*, which means 'arrangement' or 'setting out together.' Traditionally, syntax is the branch of grammar that deals with how words, with or without appropriate inflections, are arranged to show connections of meaning within a sentence (Cited in Robert I).

Syntax, as a subfield of linguistics, has received attention from several linguists based on different theories and approaches. According to Chomsky, a linguistic theory must contain a definition of grammar, and it is descriptively adequate if it makes a descriptively adequate grammar available for each natural language (24). It is important to review the different scholarly conceptions of syntax.

Syntax may be defined as a subfield of grammar that concerns itself with the structure of a sentence (Aarts 4). Roberts argues that syntax is the study of the form, positioning, and grouping of the elements that make up sentences (3). Syntax is concerned with how words and other components of language are put together to form meaning, distinct from a single word in isolation.

Koopman views syntax as the set of rules or principles that govern how words are put together to form phrases and well-formed sequences of words. Almost all the words in it have some common-sense meaning independent of the study of language, underscoring the importance of rules or principles in the study of syntax (1). Words cannot be written randomly without putting them in some relational sense that conveys meaning to the hearer. For example, "come man has the" has little to no sense in English, whereas "the man has come" sends a message to the listener because we assume that both the speaker and listener know the English Language.

Carnie says that syntax studies the level of language that lies between words and the meaning of utterances: sentences. It mediates between sounds that someone produces (organized into words) and what they intend to say, underscoring the importance of knowing the rules that govern the arrangement of words to convey meaning (4). What an individual intends to say should have a structure in the mind or a phenomenon from the point of view of their usage properties and processes. In other words, syntax is the study of the relationship between language words and

meaning that are relevant to the use of grammar. The definition would include the study of the rules of language use that can be shown to have effects on the grammar of languages. Linguistics is one of the important sub-disciplines of cognitive science.

Sentences are how we express abstract thoughts, processes, and understand how we communicate and interact with each other as humans (Carnie 5). In linguistics, syntax is the set of rules, principles, and processes that govern the structure of sentences (sentence structure) in a given language, usually including "word order". The term also refers to the study of such principles and processes. The goal of many syntacticians is to discover the "syntactic rules common to all languages" (Chomsky 15).

Different conceptions of syntax fail to draw attention to the unifying characteristics of syntax phenomena, implying that there is an overlap in the meaning of syntactic rules. The process of any syntactic communication lies in its descriptive and interpretive potential of analysing distinctive features in a language, taking cognizance of the syntax-semantics relation, where meaning could be generated from the lexical makeup of sentences.

Furthermore, the concept of syntax only in terms of its rules and principles undermines the fact that aspects of linguistic structure sometimes directly or indirectly interact with features of the context-independent grammar (competence) and context-dependent interpretation (performance). Chomsky observes that linguistic theory is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is infected by grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. To study actual linguistic performance, we must consider the interaction of a variety of factors, of which the underlying competence of the speaker-hearer is only one (3).

We must take cognizance of different factors and make a distinction between competence and performance in a concrete language situation. Syntax goes beyond simple rules and principles if different factors are considered, because if language is an abstract phenomenon, then how can we measure the level of performance and competence of a speaker?

If we tie the conception of syntax only to the rules and principles guiding the arrangement of words, then we should take cognizance of the fact that the words should be meaning-dependent. This view is captured by Einstein (324) and Russell (328) as quoted by Oller that language is related in knowable ways to objects, events,

and relations in the perceived world, contrary to Chomsky's view that grammar is independent of meaning and that questions concerning the 'appropriateness' of sentences to situations are outside the realm of linguistics (3).

Contrary to Chomsky's view, Oller argues that syntax is not independent of meaning and that the meaningfulness of syntax is always dependent upon a relaxing of certain syntactic and semantic restrictions, which shows an interdependence of meaning and grammar rather than an independence (4). In his approach to the study of syntax, Oller identifies three concepts open to linguists in their quest for a more broadly conceived, more comprehensive, and perhaps more satisfying purview of meaning in language: these are syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

Language remains one of the most intricate systems of human cognition, serving as both a medium of thought and a primary tool for social interaction. The study of language structure and meaning has long preoccupied linguists seeking to explain how humans organise, interpret, and communicate ideas. Despite the apparent simplicity of everyday communication, the mechanisms that underlie linguistic expression are profoundly complex. This complexity often manifests in the misinterpretation of meaning, ambiguity, and communicative breakdowns-issues that underscore the necessity for a systematic understanding of how language operates at different analytical levels.

The motivation for this study stems from the need to elucidate the relationship between form, meaning, and use in linguistic communication. While speakers intuitively produce grammatically acceptable and meaningful utterances, a deeper understanding of how these utterances acquire syntactic structure, semantic, and pragmatic relevance remains central to linguistic inquiry. These are the fundamental dimensions that this study aims to explore, to clarify how syntax, semantics, and pragmatics interact to shape human language and communication. In a nutshell, we note as follows:

- i. Syntax is defined as "the sequencing of language elements in time".
- ii. Semantics is defined as "the selection from among the contrasting elements of a given syntactic and/or pragmatic type ranging from the atoms to the molecules of language structure.
- iii. Pragmatics is defined as "the dynamic interaction between the speaker's knowledge of the world (including immediately perceived information) and the syntactic-semantic dimensions. Even though these dimensions are by no means independent, they can be visualized in terms of an abstract conceptual space

within which linguistic units are produced and understood by speakers (Cann, Kempson, and Marten 5).

MOTIVATION/PROBLEM OF THE STUDY

Many studies have been carried out by some scholars on the use of verb complementation in different media in relation to the errors speakers make in using verb complementation. However, specific attention is yet to be given to the analysis of verb complementation patterns in Nigerian newspaper headlines using the Phrase Structure Rule as a frame of analysis. One of the primary functions of headlines is to inform the readers, tell the story precisely, and not to misinform the readers. However, most headline writers deliberately manipulate the structure of their headlines in their attempt to get the attention of the audience without regard to the challenge their preferred syntactic structures might pose to the reader. Therefore, the study investigates how different verb complementation patterns are used in headlines to encode messages to newspaper readers as well as to draw their attention forcibly to the encoded messages. The study examines whether the succinctness characteristic of headlining has any effect on the complementation patterns adopted in headlining. It thus seeks to find out if the patterns of verb complementation in Nigerian newspaper headlines are structurally in conformity with the phrase structure rules and if this accounts for any observable deviation from the norm.

The research aims at presenting a syntactic investigation of the patterns of verb complementation in Nigerian newspaper headlines. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

1. To describe the patterns of verb complementation employed by editors in Nigerian newspaper headlines.
2. To identify the most prevalent verb subcategory in the Verb Phrase of the headlines based on complementation.
3. To ascertain whether the grammatical features characteristic of headlining affect the application of the Phrase Structure Rules for verb complementation in the headlines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The core theories applied in the main document are:

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL): As proposed by Michael Halliday, SFL views language as a resource for making meaning. It emphasizes the social functions

of language and how grammatical choices reflect and construct social contexts. SFL posits that language is structured along three meta-functions: ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (enacting social relationships), and textual (organizing information) (22).

Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG): Introduced by Noam Chomsky, TGG seeks to model the underlying structure of language and the rules that generate grammatical sentences. It posits a set of transformational rules that operate on deep structures to produce surface structures (16).

Studies on Newspaper Headlines: Muhammed and Adeyemi examined the syntax of verb complementation in Nigerian English. They analysed 100 sentences from Nigerian newspapers and found that verb complementation patterns in Nigerian English are influenced by the speakers' linguistic and cultural backgrounds (10). Their study revealed that Nigerian English often employs verb complementation patterns that deviate from standard English.

Olawale investigated verb complementation in Nigerian newspaper headlines. He analysed 200 headlines from Nigerian newspapers and found that verb complementation patterns in Nigerian newspaper headlines are characterized by a high frequency of infinitive complements (20). Their study also revealed that Nigerian newspaper headlines often use verb complementation patterns that are not typically found in standard English.

Ezeora and Ogbonna explored the syntactic analysis of verb complementation in Nigerian English language. They analysed 150 sentences from Nigerian newspapers and found that verb complementation patterns in Nigerian English are influenced by the speakers' cultural and linguistic backgrounds (12). Their study revealed that Nigerian English often employs verb complementation patterns that are not typically found in standard English.

Okoro examined the syntax of verb complementation in Nigerian English. She analysed 100 sentences from Nigerian newspapers and found that verb complementation patterns in Nigerian English are characterized by a high frequency of complement clauses (15). Her study also revealed that Nigerian English often employs verb complementation patterns that are not typically found in standard English.

Oloyede investigated the use of verb complementation in Nigerian newspaper headlines. He analysed 150 headlines from Nigerian newspapers and found that verb complementation patterns in Nigerian newspaper headlines are often used to convey complex meanings and attitudes (20). His study revealed that Nigerian newspaper

headlines often employ verb complementation patterns that are used to express modality, aspect, and voice.

These studies demonstrate that verb complementation patterns in Nigerian newspaper headlines are influenced by the speakers' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The studies reveal that Nigerian English often employs verb complementation patterns that deviate from standard English and that these patterns are used to convey complex meanings and attitudes.

Furthermore, Previous studies on verb complementation in Nigerian English and newspaper headlines have largely focused on describing how linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence the structure and meaning of headlines. These studies have shown that Nigerian English often deviates from Standard English in its use of verb complementation, reflecting creative and context-driven uses of language by Nigerian speakers and writers.

However, most of these studies have:

- i. Not specifically analysed verb complementation within newspaper headlines as a unique linguistic genre with its own grammatical constraints and stylistic conventions.
- ii. Focused more on general varieties of Nigerian English rather than exploring how journalistic writing norms interact with verb structure.
- iii. Lacked systematic syntactic analysis of the patterns and rules underlying verb phrase construction in headlines.
- iv. Overlooked the relationship between the grammatical patterns used and the communicative or stylistic goals of headline writers (e.g., brevity, emphasis, persuasion).

The present study fills the identified gaps by:

- i. Conducting a syntactic analysis specifically focused on verb complementation patterns in Nigerian newspaper headlines, providing detailed structural insights.
- ii. Identifying and classifying specific verb subcategories used in headlines, thereby expanding understanding of headline grammar in Nigerian English.
- iii. Examining whether the grammatical features of headlining (such as ellipsis, omission, or compression) affect the application of VP Phrase Structure Rules.

- iv. Providing empirical evidence that links syntactic structure to communicative function, showing how deviations from Standard English are motivated by stylistic and pragmatic needs.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

This study adopts a descriptive design, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse verb complementation in Nigerian newspaper headlines. The qualitative analysis explores the syntactic structures and patterns of verb complementation, while the quantitative analysis examines the frequency and distribution of different verb subcategories.

Data Collection

Data were collected from three Nigerian national dailies: *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *The Guardian*. The selection of these newspapers ensures a broad representation of perspectives and styles in Nigerian journalism. Issues in the May, June, and July 2019 editions were selected, providing a snapshot of contemporary news reporting. A combination of random and purposive sampling was used to select 130 headlines. Random sampling ensured a diverse representation of headlines, while purposive sampling targeted headlines that exhibit clear instances of verb complementation.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved several stages:

Syntactic Analysis: Headlines were analysed using the SVOAC (Subject-Verb-Object-Adverbial-Complement) taxonomy to identify the basic sentence elements. Labelled bracketing and tree diagrams were used to illustrate the hierarchical structure of sentences and the relationships between constituents, following the X-bar theoretical model.

Quantitative Analysis: Frequency counts and percentage scores were calculated to determine the prevalence of different verb subcategories (transitive, intransitive, copular, and ditransitive) in the corpus.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis was conducted within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG). SFL was used

to examine how grammatical choices reflect the social and communicative functions of headlines. TGG was applied to model the underlying syntactic structures and transformations involved in verb complementation.

ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

Transitive Verbs

A verb in this subcategory obligatorily occurs with a noun phrase (NP) to its right in which case the action of the verb passes over from the subject to the object. This implies that the predicator (the verb) requires one participant to realize a grammatical sentence. This single participant is criterial for the complementation of the verb. This grammatical bond is captured in the phrase (constituent) structure rule thus:

VP → V NP

The verb phrase (VP) rewrites underscore NP, which means verb followed by an NP. The underscore represents the position of the verb being considered in the sentence, in this case a headline.

The following patterns of transitivity occur in the data.

a. Simple Structure with NP complementation

Each of the headlines under this heading is a simple sentence and thus has one verb phrase in which the V subcategorizes for an NP. The NP complement (object) may be followed by an optional adjunct or not.

H1. EFCC arrests Covenant University accountant over N180m diversion (*Punch*, May 10, 2019).

[VP [v arrests] [NP object Covenant University accountant] [PP Adjunct over N180m diversion]]

H2. NCC audits MTN, Glo, others on SIM card registration (*Punch*, May 10, 2019).

[VP [v audits] [NP object MTN, Glo, others] [PP Adjunct on SIM card registration]]

H3. Protesting Abuja residents block Osinbajo's convoy (*Punch*, May 8, 2019)

[VP [v block] [NP object Osinbajo's convoy]]

H4. Insecurity: PDP govts demand establishment of state police (*Punch*, June 8, 2019)

[VP [v demand] [NP object establishment of state police]]

H5. Court orders forfeiture of Diezani's jewellery, gold iphone worth \$40m (*Punch*, June 8, 2019).

[VP [v orders] [NP object forfeiture of Diezani's jewellery, gold iphone] [AP adjunctWorth \$40m]]

H6. Stock market loses N291bn in four days (*Punch*, July 5, 2019)

[VP [v loses] [NP objectN291bn] [PP Adjunct in four days]]

H7. Goje's eminent entry brings new twist (*Daily Trust*, May 4, 2019)

[VP [v brings] [NP object new twist]]

H8. Makinde proscribes NURTW (*Daily Trust*, June 1, 2019)

[VP [v proscribes] [NP object NURTW]]

H9. Bokkos youth reject Ruga (*Daily Trust*, July 10, 2019)

[VP [v reject] [NP object Ruga]]

H10. EFCC arraigns Lawyer for Stealing N188.7m (*Guardian*, May 18, 2019)

[VP [v arraigns] [NP object Lawyer] [PP Adjunct for Stealing N188.7m]]

H11. Wellbeing Foundation expands Antennal programme to favour LGAS (*Guardian*, May 18, 2019)

[VP [v expands] [NP object Antennal programme] [Adjunct to favour LGAs]]

H12. OMEP Marks Children's Day (*Guardian*, May 18, 2019)

[VP [v Marks] [NP object Children's Day]]

b. Complex Structure with Clause (CP) Complementation

Another pattern of verb complementation found in the data under the transitive subcategory is:

VP → V CP

In this pattern, the VP consists of the lexical head V(represented by the underscore) followed by a finite noun clause which Carnie identifies as a CP (Complementizer Phrase or embedded sentence) (183), as seen in the following headlines:

H13. I never imagined I'd be in police (*Daily Trust*, May 4, 2019)

[VP [V imagined] [CP object (that) I'd be in police]]

H14. PFN warns Nigeria is heading for 'revolution' (*Guardian*, July 5, 2019)

[VP [V warns] [CP object (that) Nigeria is heading for 'revolution']]

H15. Oloja, other stakeholders say fake news undermined 2019 polls (*Guardian*, July 5, 2019)

[VP [V say] [CP object (that) fake news undermined 2019 polls]]

H16. Shareholders insist SEC has powers to hire, fire board of listed firms (*Guardian*, June 3, 2019)

[VP [V insist] [CP object (that) SEC has powers to hire, fire board of listed firms]]

c. Compound Structure

Headlines in this category have two or more main clauses, thus two or more finite clauses for analysis. In view of the style of headlining, coordinating conjunctions linking the clauses are traded off in favour of commas to achieve succinctness as seen in the ensuing analyses:

H17. Atiku, PDP [vp dismiss INEC's denial, demand access to server results] (Punch, May 10, 2019).

[Main Clause 1 [NP Subject Atiku, PDP] [VP [V₁ dismiss] [NP object INEC's denial]]

[Main Clause2 [NP Subject Atiku, PDP] [V₂demand] [NP object access to server results]]

H18. Police [vp intercept 303 cartons of tramadol in Kano, arrest five] (Punch, May 18, 2019).

[Main Clause 1 [NP Subject Police] [V₁intercept][NP Object303 cartons of tramadol] [Adjunct in Kano]]]

[Main Clause 2 [NP Subject Police] [V₂ arrest] [NP Object five]]

FINDINGS

The findings provide insights into the distribution and usage of verb types in a corpus of 130 headlines. Transitive verbs dominate, making up 73.85% of the corpus, which suggests that most headlines involve actions that directly affect objects or entities. This prevalence could be attributed to the nature of news headlines, which often report actions or events that have a direct impact on subjects or objects.

In contrast, ditransitive and copular verbs each constitute 9.23% of the data, indicating that these verb types are used less frequently but still play a significant role in conveying complex relationships between entities or describing states of being. The relatively low frequency of intransitive verbs at 7.69% suggests that actions or events described in the headlines usually involve some form of direct interaction or effect.

The qualitative analysis of transitive verbs reveals that certain predicates, such as arrest, audit, block, demand, order, lose, bring, proscribe, reject, arraign, expand, and mark, impose restrictions on the argument structure of headlines. These restrictions often involve concrete or abstract entities, highlighting the structured nature of headline construction.

The economy principle is also at play, as evidenced by the omission of copular verbs, which is a stylistic deviation from traditional prescriptive grammar rules. This deviation likely aims to make headlines more concise and direct. Furthermore, the findings indicate that transitive verbs are often used intransitively and vice versa, with editors omitting certain words to adhere to the economy principle. This flexibility in verb usage suggests that headline writers prioritize brevity and clarity over strict grammatical adherence, potentially enhancing the impact and readability of the headlines.

Overall, the findings suggest that the verb usage in headlines is characterized by a predominance of transitive verbs, a strategic use of other verb types, and a tendency to deviate from traditional grammatical rules in favour of conciseness and clarity. These patterns reflect the functional and stylistic demands of headline writing, where conveying information efficiently and effectively is paramount. From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), this demonstrates how language choices in headlines are shaped by their context of situation—specifically, the field (news reporting), tenor (editor–reader relationship), and mode (written medium).

The predominance of transitive verbs fulfills the ideational metafunction by representing concrete actions and events that engage readers' attention. The omission of copular verbs and the flexible use of transitive and intransitive structures reflect the textual metafunction, ensuring that information is organized succinctly to meet the constraints of space and immediacy. Furthermore, the stylistic manipulation of grammar underscores the interpersonal metafunction, as editors use concise, impactful verb structures to project authority, urgency, or engagement.

Thus, the study underscores the relevance of SFL in explaining how linguistic structures in headlines are not random or erroneous but are functionally motivated choices aimed at optimizing meaning, efficiency, and communicative impact in Nigerian newspaper discourse.

The findings of this study align with previous research by Adegbite (45), Akinwotu (102), and Adedeji (67), which reported that Nigerian newspaper headlines frequently employ non-standard or elliptical structures to achieve brevity and emphasis. The predominance of transitive verbs (73.85%) in the present study corroborates earlier observations that headline writers tend to favour verbs that express clear actions and direct impacts, reflecting the action-oriented and event-focused nature of news discourse.

Similarly, the stylistic omission of copular verbs observed here supports findings by Banjo and Dare, who noted that Nigerian editors often deviate from traditional grammatical norms to achieve the economy of expression—a feature that Halliday describes as a manifestation of the textual metafunction of language in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Banjo 45, Dare 112, Halliday 101).

However, this study extends previous work by quantitatively identifying the proportion of each verb type and qualitatively analysing how transitive verbs are used intransitively and vice versa to serve communicative goals. Unlike earlier studies that only described structural patterns, the current research demonstrates how these deviations are functionally motivated, showing that Nigerian editors manipulate syntax not out of error, but as a deliberate strategy to achieve clarity, brevity, and impact.

Therefore, while the findings agree with previous studies regarding non-standard usage and stylistic economy, they differ by offering a more systematic, corpus-based account of verb type distribution and by situating these grammatical choices within the functional framework of SFL.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided a syntactic analysis of verb complementation in Nigerian newspaper headlines, revealing insights into the patterns and preferences of language use in this specific context. The analysis of 130 headlines from three national dailies (*The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *The Guardian*) has shown that transitive verbs are the most prevalent subcategory, reflecting a tendency to focus on actions and events involving clear agents and objects. Other verb subcategories (ditransitive, copular, and intransitive) also play a role, each contributing unique syntactic structures and semantic nuances to the headlines.

The study also highlighted the influence of the economy principle on headline construction, leading to deviations from standard grammatical rules, such as the omission of copular verbs and the flexible use of transitive verbs. These deviations, however, do not compromise the understandability of the headlines but rather contribute to their concise and attention-grabbing nature.

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