

# **The Incidence of Message Pollution in a Communication Channel: A Pragmatic Analysis of Nigerian Newspaper Reports**

*Oteri, John Mosemofa*

*Ugwu, Esther Nkiruka*

*Dr. E. N. Ugwu,*

*Department of English and Literature,*

*Faculty of Arts,*

*University of Benin,*

*Benin City.*

E-mail: [nkyugwu@yahoo.com](mailto:nkyugwu@yahoo.com) Tel. Phone: +2348023367830

## **Abstract**

Message pollution has been described as any form of interference with any of the factors in a communication process that is capable of impacting negatively on individual or on the society. This paper examines the linguistic acts of prevarication, sensationalism, embellishment of facts and concealment of viewpoints as instances of message pollution. It also states that these linguistic acts are manipulations or interferences in the language used in a communication process which are capable of producing negative effects on addressees. These negative effects range from negative reaction such as anxiety and from to confusion and riots. The data for our analysis were taken from newspaper headlines and body news of current happenings in the country between 2003 to 2005. These data were analysed from purely pragmatic point of view.

**Key Words:** Pollution, prevarication, sensationalism, proposition, ambiguity, signification, perlocutionary effects, illocutionary force.

## **1. Introduction: The Concept of Pollution in Linguistics**

Generally, pollution is understood to mean the contamination of the elementary resources of life such as water, air and soil usually with substances that are toxic to both human and animal life (Otto H. James et al 519). The physical deterioration of these resources due to their contamination has continued to have serious implications for human beings. Consequently, summits upon summits have always been held both at the local and international levels with a view to finding definitive solutions to the ecological problems of pollution (the *Awake* issue of November 22 2003 and June 8, 1996). However, the implications of environmental degradation for man are not sufficient to account for all the important causes of the constraints continuously placed on our quality of life. The incidence of message pollution in a communication process is also capable of impacting negatively on our conditions of living (Posner 290). Meanwhile, while the word “pollution” is a very common word, its use in linguistic studies is relatively very new. Its origin may be traced to Roland Posner, a semiotician, who used “semiotic pollution” as a concept in an article published in the *University of Tartu Journal (Sign Systems Studies)* in 2000 to mean any form of interference with the complex interpersonal sign-processes (Semiosis) that is capable of producing “stress for human beings in current societies” (291-295).

Generally, human communication is a complex process. It is characterized by the sender of a message, the message sent, the signal used to encode the message, the channel of transmission of the message, the receiver of the message and the context of situation (Lyons 36-37; Harris 1-21; Eco 7-8; Ndimele 123-132). Essentially, Posner regards all these factors of communication as semiotic resources and says that each of them is susceptible to pollution in a communication process (294-5). For example, the sender and the receiver of a message can be considered polluted in the event that they are unable, due to some deficiencies in them, to use the necessary channel or code, or to assume the correct context. Secondly, in a situation where noise, excessive or otherwise, obscures the recipient’s perception or understanding of the signal transmitted, and hence his correct interpretation of the message transmitted, the channel can be considered to be polluted. Thirdly, whenever the message transmitted fails to correspond to its signified or to the context of situation, it can be considered polluted. Importantly, at whatever level pollution takes place in a communication process, it will always have some untoward consequences. Notably, Posner’s focus was on the sensory mode of hearing as a form of patterned human communication using a semiotic approach. The focus of this research work however is on the instances where the language used in a communication process can have negative perlocutionary effects on the addressees due to pollution. In essence the researchers’ main emphasis is on message pollution in a communication process.

### **1.1. Message pollution in a communication channel**

The message in a communication process can be described as the actual physical product or the substance of the ideas, thoughts, information, and so on that a sender often encodes by the use of appropriate signifiers and passes on through a channel to the receiver for him to decode. As it was mentioned in the previous section the message in a communication process is considered polluted where “it does not easily correspond to the signified or apply to the semiotic- partner’s context” (Posner 295). In other words where, usually due to some forms of interference, there is a linguistic gap between the signifiers and the signified in a communication process, the product of this which is the message transmitted, is said to be polluted since it can no longer be said to be reliable.

In the opinion of Thouless for instance, there is a condition which words have to fulfill in order to be useful for the purpose of “describing reality outside us or our own

thoughts and feelings, and for directing our own and other people's actions". According to him that condition is that the words "must correspond in some ways with the facts we are trying to describe" (86), and where for any reason "there are differences in our language which do not correspond to differences in the word of facts, then our use of language is unskillful and is liable to lead us into muddled thinking" (87). Against this backdrop, message pollution may be seen in respect of how the use of language in a communication process may impact negatively on individuals and consequently on the society. The use of language as referred to here can include cases of ambiguity, prevarication, sensationalism, concealment of viewpoints and so on.

## **1.2 Theoretical background**

The Speech Act theory is considered particularly useful to our analyses of data in this work which, as it is obvious from the above explanation of the concept of message pollution, involves the stating of values for certain utterances.

### **1.2.1 The speech act theory**

The Speech Act theory, which has a way of relating utterance meaning to context, was first developed by J. L. Austin (1962) and later by J. R. Searle (1969). It derives from the notion that when utterances are made, those who make them sometimes correspondingly perform acts of various kinds such as the act of promising, asserting, condemning, warning, ordering, apologizing and so on. Apart from performing various acts, such utterances are also capable of producing certain effects on the addressee. In general therefore, a Speech Act is seen as a communicative activity defined with reference to a speaker's intention while speaking, referred to as the illocutionary force of his utterance, as well as the effects his utterances can have on his listener, referred to as the perlocutionary effect of his utterance (Crystal 328; Hurford and Heasley 232-249; Leech and Short 290- 294). The distinctions often made in this theory between perlocutionary acts and illocutionary acts, direct and indirect speech acts, sentence meaning and utterance meaning are all vital to the explication of the concept of message pollution.

## **1.3 Scope and methodology**

The entire work covers only newspaper reports. Meanwhile we consider all the print media to be operationally similar and for this reason, all reports administered as data in the work are selected at random from different newspapers published between 2003 and 2005. Again, the data that form the units of our analysis are in the range of main news headlines, crossheads, sub-headlines or single assertions about some subjects of interest. Importantly, we maintain that the choice of newspaper reports as the focus of our investigation is highly motivated. The choice derives from the assumption that there is a very high incidence of message pollution in most media reports in Nigeria. Meanwhile, in comparison to radio and television broadcasts, newspaper reports lend themselves more appropriately to the kind of investigation we carried out more especially because of their graphological features and the presentation of the current affairs at the stated dates.

The newspaper reports which form the primary material of this work are selected at random based on the use of language in presenting the news. After the selection of the appropriate data, they are critically examined for instances of message pollution. All the analyses are carried out with references to the news headlines and the relevant information material in the main stories. Sometimes too, consideration is given to the stylistic features of the headlines in addition to their semantic implications.

## **1.4 Review of related literature**

Message pollution has been described as any form of interference with any of the factors in a communication process that is capable of impacting negatively on individuals or society (see 1. and 1.1). Significantly, this paper expresses the view that pollution is often generally a product or an outcome of man's interference, overtly or covertly, with any of the resources that God has placed at his disposal for his survival, and which is capable of endangering his life. Contrary to general expectation however, such interference is not limited to the elementary resources of life but it often extends to other equally important non-material resources such as language as well as other signalling-systems employed by human beings for the transmission of information. For reasons that are very obvious, language has come to be regarded as a social necessity, that is, a kind of natural resource made available to man to enable him satisfy his higher needs such as mutual interaction, the organization of his world into meaningful forms and interpretation of same, his pursuit of education as well as socio-political ideals, and so on and so forth (Potter 160; Halliday 4; Harris 12-14; Hartley 1-5).

Fundamentally, men have always had the tendency to interfere with or manipulate the language used in a communication process in order for him to achieve some desirable or undesirable effects. M H. Abrams, for example, defines figurative language as "conspicuous departure from what the users of a language apprehend as the standard meaning of words, or else the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect" (96). Generally too, style in literary studies is sometimes viewed as a kind of infraction or the transgression of some linguistic norms (Chatman 30). Now, usually underlying the incidence of departure or infraction which Abrams and Chatman talk about here is the factor of interference or manipulation which may be intentional or unintentional. Certain other ways in which language may be manipulated especially in literature have often had their explanations in literary principles such as foregrounding, linguistic highlighting, poetic license, and so on (Leech and Short 75 – 110, 139 – 48; Halliday 103 – 121). Prosodic features like stress, rhythm and intonation are also sometimes used as prominent instruments of manipulation of speech patterns in our everyday use of language in order to achieve certain effects (Peter Roach 163-8; Lyons 57-63). Without doubt, the manipulation of language in some cases as in literature is often a conscious effort to achieve some desirable effects, for example the production of some aesthetic appeals (Abrams 94-9, 102-103; Leech and Short 10ff; Leech 1969 23ff).

However, there are equally numerous instances where the manipulation of language usually has some untoward consequences. For example, language can be used to stimulate aggressive impulses which in turn can lead to "a terrible distortion of behaviour" (Thouless 14). Thouless also maintains that emotional language used in 'political thinking and communication' can possibly blow up the whole of civilization (22-4). The holy Bible of course recognizes this fact when in describing the human tongue it refers to it as 'a fire', 'a word of iniquity', and 'an unruly evil, full of deadly poison' which is "so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature..." (James 3 v. 6-8).

Based on our appreciation of the collocation link between the lexeme 'tongue' and the act of speaking a language, what the Biblical passage above says could be understood to encapsulate the notion of message pollution. Moreover, Norman Solomon, in his criticism of the role of the press in modern societies, states that language can be used as an instrument of oppression or of subjugation of the masses by the political elites. According to him, language is often used in the press to confuse the masses about the issues of politics and power in order to perpetually subject them to control. As he argues, "No one is more controllable than a confused person; no society is more controllable than a confused society. Politicians know this better than anyone and that is why they use innuendos, veiled references, and out-and-out lies instead of speaking clearly and truthfully" (5, emphasis ours). So far, the point we have

been trying to establish is that there are certain contexts of situations where, instead of being used merely to convey information, or to induce pleasure as the case may be, language can be used to subject addressees to a considerable amount of stress. This paper therefore, identifies using a pragmatic approach, some acts of prevarication, embellishment of facts, sensationalism and deliberate concealment of viewpoints, as instances of message pollution in a communication process with emphasis on newspaper reporting.

## **2. Prevarication**

Prevarication may be defined simply as the act of using a semiotic system to deceive or misinform addressees. This act of using a signalling-system to deceive addressees can occur in the form of outright lies. It can also occur in the form of the misrepresentation of issues or events. In a way the misrepresentation of issues can happen inadvertently as in when one makes an assertion which one believes is true whereas this is not the case. In some cases though, the misrepresentation of events or facts occurs deliberately. In agreement with this line of reasoning, Lyons (1977) points out that prevarication is not necessarily a property of a semiotic system, but a feature of the behaviour and intentions of those using the system. In other words, prevarication is often a product of interference or manipulation of a signalling system generally by the user of the system in a context of situation. Significantly, it is assumed in this work that prevarication is a common feature of newspaper reports. Meanwhile, as it is shown in the analyses below, the incidence of prevarication can be approached from two main dimensions, that is, from the dimension of propositions without truth-values as well as from the dimension of lexical or grammatical ambiguity.

### **2.1 Propositions without truth-values**

According to Crystal, the term proposition refers to “the unit of meaning which constitutes the subject-matter of a statement in the form of a simple declarative sentence” (288). Essentially, propositions are valued in pragmatics only in terms of their truth conditions. In other words, for a proposition to be considered as appropriate, it has to be seen as making a statement of facts that is necessarily true. Meanwhile, as the following examples show, we have a lot of propositions in newspaper reporting without the basic constitutive condition of truth.

#### **(1) FG Scraps NEPA July**

##### **Following the restructuring activities currently going on in the National**

*Electric Power Authority (NEPA), the Bureau of Public Enterprise (BPE), has disclosed that the organization would cease to exist by July 2002....*

(Abass Dan Subar, the Nigeria Tribune, Wednesday, April 10, 2002)

From what we can see, the headline, “FG scraps NEPA July”, is a summary of the lead paragraph, and what it signifies in terms of its semantic information is not, in any way, ambiguous. The acronyms or abbreviations-‘FG’ and NEPA’ – are socially relevant to Nigeria and so pose no problem to our interpretation, even if the headline is considered in isolation. Beyond its semantic information however, the headline can be critically examined for its pragmatic force or properties. First and foremost, it has a propositional content of a commissive illocution. It expresses the intention of the source, that is, the federal government to scrap NEPA, one of its public utility outfits. Again, looked at from the perspective of the traumatic experiences of the Nigerian citizens due to incessant power outage, as well as that of the employees of NEPA, the headline can duly be regarded as a proposition with an indirect illocution of promising and warning respectively. In any of these respects, the impact of the utterance as a speech act can never be undermined. It can be argued from the

perspective of the suffering electricity consumer for instance, that 'FG scraps NEPA July' conversationally implicates:

(a) The fact that a much more efficient power management outfit was going to be put in place, as of course was stated in the main news story, and this in turn implicates:

(b) The fact that the condition of living of the masses was going to improve.

In other words the utterance – 'FG Scraps NEPA July' – cannot be said to be inconsistent with (a) nor can (a) be said to be inconsistent with (b). Meanwhile, as a proposition with an indirect illocution of promising improved condition of living, the utterance is capable of having other subtle implications such as fostering the belief of the masses that government is concerned about their plight, and this would in turn produce greater respect for the government.

Meanwhile, to the employees of NEPA, the same utterance can be taken to conversationally implicate:

(c) The fact that many of them, that is the employees, are about to lose their jobs.

Since the loss of one's job always has some unpleasant consequences, we can begin to appreciate the stressful conditions of fear and apprehension that the utterance will subject some of its likely addressees to.

However, to the extent that from April 2002 when the statement was made to the early part of 2006, NEPA was still in full operation in Nigeria, the utterance, 'FG Scraps NEPA July 2002', has no truth-value. Secondly, as a proposition with an indirect illocution of promising and warning, it lacks the basic constitutive conditions, that is, felicity and sincerity conditions, in the social context in which it was used. When the utterance was made in 2002, and even up till now, not much in terms of logistic planning, was on ground to completely discontinue the operations of NEPA in Nigeria. What happens, in terms of making the utterance in question, is therefore a very good example of semiotic pollution, a case, for example, of prevarication, where language is not a true representation of reality.

## **(2) 39 Killed, 45 Houses Razed as Warri War Rages**

The latest round of fighting in Warri, yesterday, left about 39 people dead and about 45 houses razed in areas such Odion road, Pessu, cemetery road, Miller Waterside, Ekurede Itsekiri and NPA. The deaths included a police inspector and a sergeant who were killed in an encounter with the warriors at cemetery road junction. The senate is already considering wading into the problem.

(Shola Adebayo, Hector Igbikiowubo and Habib Yacoob. Vanguard, Tuesday, August 19, 2003).

The newspaper headline above, "39 Killed, 45 Houses Razed as Warri War Rages", is obviously a categorical statement. It is a proposition with a direct illocution of informing as well as an indirect illocution of warning about the intensity of the crises referred to. To say that 39 persons were killed and 45 houses burnt in a communal crisis is an indication that the crisis is very serious. This explains why the National Assembly was already planning to intervene as we are told in the body story. However, whereas the newspaper headline is categorical about the number of persons killed as well as the number of houses burnt in the crises, the statement about the same figures in the body story is equivocal. For example, the statement:

(a) '39 people were killed and 45 houses were razed' cannot be said to be consistent with the statement:

(b) 'about 39 people were killed and about 45 houses were razed'.

It is glaring, from the use of the word 'about' in (b) above, that it is a mere assumption

of facts. Essentially, the inconsistency between (a) and (b) is an indication that Grice's maxim of Quality has been contravened. In other words, in the event that a mere assumption cannot be taken as a categorical statement of facts, we have a clear case of prevarication in this report.

## 2.2 Ambiguity in newspaper reports

Apart from proposition without truth-values, prevarication can also be implicated in ambiguity. Generally, a word or a sentence is considered ambiguous if it has more than one meaning. Notably, any utterance that is capable of two or more interpretations is as good as not having truth-value. Meanwhile, the major difference between propositions without truth-values and ambiguous utterances is the fact that, unlike propositions without truth-values, ambiguity is normally traced to syntactic or lexical errors as can be seen from the examples 3-9 below.

### (3) Ondo Communal Clash Claims 25

(Dayo Johnson Saturday Vanguard 7 May, 2005: 5)

The above headline is administered along with the main body of the story as a text for our analysis. This is done for reasons that will be made obvious. Meanwhile for ease of reference, the paragraphs in the main body of the story are numbered 4-9 as individual examples.

(4): **At least 24 persons were feared killed in a communal clash between communities in Ese-Odo and Okitipupa Local Government Areas of Ondo State and another auto crash along Akure – Ore expressway.**

(5): **During the week, 25 persons also died in an auto crash along Akure-Owo expressway including three corps members.**

(6): **Fifteen other persons were injured in a communal clash which started on Wednesday.**

(7): **Saturday Vanguard learnt that a couple scheduled to get married this weekend also lost their lives in the crash along with sixteen others.**

(8): **Details of the accident remained sketchy yesterday as at the time of filing in the report.**

(9): **It was gathered that six persons died during the communal clash between the two warring communities (all emphases ours).**

According to Quirk et al, there are some syntactic devices as well as other factors such as implication in the semantic content and lexical equivalence, all of which are supposed to interact with one another in pointing to links between sentences in any given text. Most importantly, taking it for granted that a connection exists between "sentences that occur sequentially in speech or in writing", a reader would search for "relationship implied by the juxtaposing of sentences with their semantic interpretation" (653). However, in the text administered above, the relationship, whether syntagmatic or paradigmatic, among the different sentences/paragraphs as well as some of the lexical items, is completely muddled up.

Syntactic as well as coherence devices are either wrongly used or missed altogether and this seriously interferes with the signification process in the context of situation.

To start with, in the entire data, that is, from example 3 to example 9, there are apparently several elements of self-contradiction and ambiguity. Beginning from example 4 (the lead paragraph), these elements are underpinned by the irregular transposition between two unrelated events – the communal clash and the auto crash – whereby a wrong logical connector- ‘another’- used supposedly to link the two events paradoxically obfuscate any systematic relationship between them and the semantic interpretation of the whole sentence/ paragraph. For instance, after reading the lead paragraph, one is immediately confronted with the problem of determining whether the 24 persons categorically specified in example 3 (the headline) as casualties of a communal clash are actually all casualties of the communal clash supposedly referred to. There is also no definable lexical equivalence among some expectedly relevant lexical items repeated in the text. It is difficult to link the auto crash referred to in 4 with the auto crash referred to in 5 and 7. This is owing to the conflict in the number of casualties mentioned in relation to each of them. In 5 for instance, twenty-five casualties are mentioned. This conflicts with whatever number of auto crash victims that may be inclusive in the twenty-four casualties mentioned in the preceding paragraph that is if that number is actually believed to include some accident victims. In 7 particularly, the definite article ‘the’ used with the nominal item ‘crash’ as its modifier gives the impression that there is an anaphoric intra-textual reference to the word or to the same event that could have been mentioned previously. But, a total of eighteen casualties (a couple along with sixteen others) are reported in this case, and this conflicts with the number of casualties mentioned in any of the previous cases in 4 or 5.

Similarly, no logical connection may be established between the communal clash referred to in 3 (the headline) and the communal clash mentioned in 4, 6, or 9. For instance, twenty-four casualties are specified in the communal clash in 3. In 4, as it has been argued, the number of casualties can reasonably be said to be indeterminate. In 6, fifteen casualties are mentioned, while in 9, six casualties are mentioned.

Obviously, the above crisscrossing transposition between different events and mathematical figures seriously undermine the success or the signification process in the context of situation in question and so is a very good example of message pollution.

### **3. Embellishment of facts**

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines embellishment as the act of making a story or a statement more interesting by adding details that are not true. As Wynford Hicks observes it the striving for effects by journalist that makes every rescuer ‘a hero’ every disturbance ‘a fracas’, every confusion ‘chaos’ and every fire ‘inferno’(66). No doubt what Hicks says here underscores major point about embellishments in newspaper reporting. Meanwhile, according to Lyons(38), mass media reporting is not channel dependent. In other words, the messages could be sent simultaneously along several channels, or they could be transmitted along one of several alternative channels. As a result of this fact, embellishment of facts can be done through different devices. In newspaper reporting, it is often particularly done through the mechanism of overstating of events (exaggeration) as well as stylistic designs.

#### **3.1.Exaggeration of Events**

**(10) Obasanjo's Inauguration:  
TERROR ALERT!  
Police fly in Operatives from Israel  
Shagari summons peace meeting  
Handover under threat**

(Kingsley Omonobi and Habib Yakoob, Sunday Vanguard, May 25, 2003)

In example 10, the constituent elements, the structure, as well as the staccato arrangement of the headline and its various subheadings notwithstanding, they can very much pass for a text because they are linguistically unified in purpose in terms of their semantic information of a threat to peace. The first nominal phrase, 'Obasanjo's Inauguration', introduces the subject of discussion while the other four utterances present the issue of a threat to peace in relation to the subject matter. For example, the utterance, 'TERROR ALERT!', conversationally implicates the fact that:

**(a) Danger was Imminent.**

In other words the utterance has an illocution of warning, and this semantic information is tactically accentuated by the bold typeface of the utterance as well as the exclamatory mark used to punctuate it. The next utterance, "Police fly in Operatives from Israel", overtly reinforces the illocutionary force of the previous utterance. Apart from that, it has a subtle pragmatic implication. For example, the following implication can be deduced from it:

**(b) The Situation Has Gone Beyond the Control of the Nigerian Police.**

The fourth utterance, "Shagari summons peace meeting", also covertly reinforces the illocutionary force of the second utterance. Like the other utterances before it, it apparently suggests the fact that was a moment of crises and the last utterance, "Handover under threat", makes this meaning very obvious.

Of great importance to us here is the perlocutionary effect of the utterances. Without doubt, any utterance that has a direct or even an indirect illocution of a threat to peace has the probability of producing to the target addressees a very high apprehension of the breakdown of law and order. This will consequently lead to the withdrawal or restriction of some of their constitutional rights by themselves or by the government as the case may be. For example, the citizens may begin to restrict their movement from place to place or in some cases, as experience has shown, there may be mass movement of people from different parts of the country to their hometowns for security reasons.

Significantly, the data administered above have to be analyzed for their truth-value in some sense of 'truth', as well as their tendency towards the factors of the 'superlativeness' in order to make a case for message pollution in the presentation of the news. To begin with, against the backdrop of the peaceful inauguration of Obasanjo's second term in office in May 29, 2003, the newspaper message in question can be regarded as an alarmist report. It is in this case a very clear example of an overstatement, and hence from the point of view of pragmatics, it contravenes Grice's maxim of Quantity which stipulates that one should not make one's contribution in a general language event more informative than is required.

In a way too, the newspaper report also contravenes Grice's maxim of Quality. This, of course, states that the sender of a message must state what he believes to be true, or what he has enough evidence to prove. In our opinion, the truth-value of any proposition or message is often overshadowed in an instance of over exaggeration or embellishment of the actual facts. In other words once there is evidence that a fact has been over exaggerated, that fact can no longer be accepted as correctly asserting the truth about any issue. Interestingly, as

it has been shown in our analysis, the inclination towards overstatement and embellishment of the news story is evident in these data administered for investigation, and as long as this happens, the language cannot be seen as true representation of reality outside it.

### **3.2. Stylistic features of news headlines**

In most cases the overstating of events in newspaper reporting is augmented with the stylistic features of the main news headlines as well as photographs or cartoons. The headlines, according to Danuta Reah, are usually designed to attract the attention of the reader through the selection of words that often “carry an emotional loading beyond their literal meaning” (18). The following example can be used to substantiate this fact.

**(11) WAR ON LAND,  
WAR IN THE AIR  
THE GULF  
IS ON  
FIRE!**

*The 14<sup>th</sup> world youth championship opens in the united Arab Emirates on Tuesday with the young footballers dreading the possible rain of George Bush’s mortars on their heads. Ademola Olajire looks at the history of the championship, from the First session in Tunisia 26 years ago, and captures the others aspects of FIFA’s second most important competition... (44+).*

(Ademola Olajire, Weekend Vanguard, March 22, 2003).

The emphasis here is on the news headline. It is beautifully designed in very bold black and white typeface that covers half of page 44 of the newspaper . The lexical item ‘war’ is repeated twice and the phrase, ‘the Gulf is on fire’ is used to reinforce its semantic information. Meanwhile, at the background, we have a FIFA emblem with the inscription, “Emirates 2003” and the photograph of two footballers in action. At the top of the page we have “Weekend Sports” also written in relatively bold black and white typeface. No doubt, these stylistic features are intended to give the news headline a lot of eye-catching effects.

Unfortunately this particular newspaper headline has no relevance beyond its graphological features. In the first place, against the backdrop that the Gulf region in the Middle East is constantly engulfed in warfare, its semantic information is unmistakable. What it is most likely to signify to an addressee is the fact that another round of fighting must have erupted in the gulf region. Incidentally this was case, as the football event that forms the subject matter of the report, as we can see in the lead paragraph, coincided with attack of George Bush and his British allies on the gulf in March 2003. The report that the World Youth Championship which started in the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday, March 25, 2003 notwithstanding, it can be argued that the headline carries an emotional loading far beyond its literal meaning. Importantly, the headline is considered outrageous for three principal reasons. First, there is no correspondence between its semantic information and the FIFA emblem as well as the photograph of the footballers in the background. Second, the semantic information is completely inconsistent with the subject matter of the main news. Third, it is capable of producing the wrong perlocutionary effects in its addressees. For example, it can create in them fear and anxiety. Although it can be argued that the lexical items ‘war’ and ‘fire’ may have been used in this context metaphorically, the metaphor, in the circumstance that the Gulf region has always witnessed instances of warfare, can possibly be extended

beyond its limits. It is a most unusual thing therefore to compare the game of football with the entirely wicked act of warfare.

#### **4. Sensationalism**

Sensationalism refers to the deliberate use of shocking language or exciting stories in order to provoke public interest or reaction. In the way the term is normally used it is very easy to see a direct connection between it and the embellishment of facts. Indeed, as we know, embellishment of facts often implicates sensationalism. In some cases, some utterances can create a sensation by being merely suggestive. In other words, it is possible to see elements of sensationalism in utterances that are devoid of embellishment or exaggeration of facts. So we have two types of sensationalism- sensationalism through the exaggeration of facts and sensationalism through suggestive utterances. The former is incorporated in example 10.

##### **4.1.Sensationalism through Suggestive Utterances**

In very many cases sensationalism consists in exaggeration of the details of events. There are however some instances where negative sensational feelings about certain situations or persons can be created by the mere use of certain words or expressions that are highly suggestive, that is, words or expressions that are capable of putting certain ideas or associations in the minds of addressees in a communication process.

Examples 12-17 are taken from the This Day newspaper report entitled:

##### **Why I Resigned, by Ogbeh**

This Day, January 11, 2005

In this analysis, we critically examine Chief Gani Fawehinmi's reactions to the resignation in January, 2005 of a one-time chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria, Chief Audu Ogbeh. The paragraphs, which are quoted directly from the body of the story, are numbered as separate examples administered for traces of message pollution.

**(12) ....Chief Gani Fawehinmi, SAN, said Ogbeh's resignation has confirmed the fears of many Nigerians that PDP is not a democratic party.**

**(13) Fawehinmi stated that he would have expected Ogbeh to fight it out with President Olusegun Obasanjo in the party 'rather than throwing in the towel at this crucial stage.'**

**(14) While commending Ogbeh for his recent face- off with Obasanjo, the NCP (National Conscience Party) leader however said by resigning 'Ogbeh has only scratched the issue at stake.'**

**(15) According to him, the underlining factor in the Ogbeh/Obasanjo face- off is the third term agenda of Obasanjo.**

**(16) His words: "Obasanjo is an epitome of crude dictatorship. He wants to turn himself to a sit-tight president through his [third] term agenda and he believes Ogbeh will not be there to carry out his whims and caprices and so he decided to do away with him".**

**(17) Fawehinmi however expressed fears that it will be a tragedy if PDP should succumb to Obasanjo's pressure to muffle varying opinion in the party as a result of his third term agenda.**

A good starting point in our investigation here should be an analysis of the conversational implicature of most of Fawehinmi's utterances in this context of situation. No doubt his utterances here conversationally implicate the following facts:

- a. that the issue which led to Ogbeh's resignation was more or less a personal issue between him (Ogbeh) and the president rather than a party affair;
- b. that in the supposed issue, the president is totally blameworthy while Ogbeh can be absorbed of all blames;
- c. that Ogbeh resigned in share deference to the president who should in this case be considered as an oppressor.

However, against the backdrop of allegations of ineptitude and financial misappropriation leveled against Ogbeh prior to his resignation as the national chairman of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in January 2005, the information here can be said to be misleading. Notably, the conversational implicatures of Gani's utterances analysed above as well as the modality in examples 13 and 14 are very significant for their trappings of sensationalism. According to Fowler, modality is the "comment' or 'attitude' ascribable to the source of the text, and explicit or implicit in the linguistic stance taken by the speaker/writer" (85).

The modality in example 13 is that of obligation. Here, Fawehinmi explicitly suggests that Ogbeh ought to have performed some actions—"Fight it out with President Olusegun Obasanjo...." In example 14 however, the modality is that of desirability in which case he indicates approval for Ogbeh's "face-off with Obasanjo". All these are evidence of over-reactions as well as personalization of the national issue at stake. Meanwhile, elements of sensationalism are also clearly evident in examples 15, 16 and 17. Reference to the supposed third term bid of the president in 15 as the major cause of the face-off between him and Ogbeh is aimed at eliciting some reactions of condemnation from the public. Again, particular note should be taken of the invective in example 16—"Obasanjo is an epitome of crude dictatorship". In this respect he should be intolerable to the people. Finally, the subtle information in 17 cannot be lost on us. There is a clarion call on the PDP as a political party to curtail the activities of the 'dictator' in order to avoid a tragic situation that may occur in the country.

Notably, the kind of message pollution we have here always has potential catastrophic effects. Utterances in examples 12 – 17 are capable of making a leader lose his credibility and when a leader loses his credibility, his followers can no longer believe in him. There is no doubt that the speaker's intention in the context of situation here is to make people lose confidence in the president. What do you expect from a people when you inform them for instance that their leader is irrational, despotic, and unjust, or that his actions are always vindictive? In this circumstance you will be asking his followers to pass a vote of no confidence on him. In most cases it does not even stop just at that. Other negative reactions are likely to follow.

## **5. Concealment of viewpoints in a communication process**

There are instances in a communication process when the speaker deliberately transmits certain messages to the addressee in a very subtle manner. The message is transmitted in a subtle manner in the sense that the speaker often does not intend the addressee to take the signalling-system involved at its face value. In other words, in such instances the speaker relies on the addressee's reasoning power to decode the message sent and to interpret it correctly.

In some cases the speaker in a communication process may transmit some messages unintentionally. For example, Lyons (34) observes that all utterances normally contain a certain amount of information which has not been intentionally selected by the speaker for

transmission, but which all the same, is commonly reacted to by the speaker in one way or the other. One point we need to make clear here is that the message transmitted unintentionally by a speaker in a communication process is often an extra message to his original message, and except the addressee is very attentive, it can even pass unnoticed. This is however not the case when the transmission of a subtle message is deliberate. In this situation, the subtle message is usually the original message except that in this case, the speaker usually relies on the ability of the addressee(s) to decode it appropriately.

Essentially, we believe that the transmission of subtle messages is very common in newspaper reporting, and whether such message are transmitted consciously or unconsciously they can be examined for traces of pollution in terms of the kind of impact they have on the addressee. In view of this belief, the examples below are administered for our analysis. No attempt is made to analyse the subtle messages as either deliberate or unintentional. This is not necessary since it is not always easy to make this distinction.

### **(18) Alamiyeseigha:**

#### **Untold stories of plots to nail him**

**Governor Diepreye Alamiyeseigha has denied reports that he escaped charges of money laundering in the UK by disguising himself as a woman.**

**However he told the BBC that he could not remember other details of his journey back to the oil-rich southern Bayelsa State.**

**He insisted that he was innocent and that the £1.8m (\$3.2m) found in cash and bank accounts was not his.**

(Emma Amaize and Sam Oyadonghe, Saturday Vanguard, November 26, 2006).

The extracts from the body news are to serve as a backdrop against which we make this analysis; otherwise our primary concern here is about the main news headline with emphasis on the use of the words, 'plot' and 'nail'. The subject matter of the report, Alamiyeseigha, does not need further introduction other than that he was the former governor of Bayelsa State impeached for charges of money laundering.

As we can see in the extract from the body story, the governor had been arrested for allegedly committing the crime of money laundering in the U. K, and had jumped bail in London before the newspaper report was done. However, the main news headline-Alamiyeseigha: Untold stories of plots to nail him – can be seen as an utterance with the illocution of *informing* the public in a subtle manner that the governor may not have done anything wrong. The subtlety of this message is underpinned by the use of the word 'plot' in conjunction with the verb 'nail' in the headline. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the word, 'plot', in the sense in which it is used above, as "a secret plan made by several people to do something, usually something wrong or illegal." The 'something wrong' in this case should be the bid to impeach the governor. If for example the governor did not actually commit the crime he had been accused of then,

- i) the plan to impeach him must be wrong, and
- ii) such a plan must have been contrived by his opponents.

Notably, it is evident from some of the statement in the body news that this is the line of reasoning of this newspaper report. For example quoting, Prince Tony Momoh, a former minister of information, the paper in page five describes the ordeal of the governor as politically motivated. On the same page, the paper reports that seven members of the Bayelsa

State House of Assembly had alleged that the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) made them endorse under duress the impeachment notice served on the governor at that time. Again, on page eight of the paper, we have this headline, “Foes plot to nail Alamieyeseigha” written in very bold typeface.

From the analysis above, it can be strongly argued that this report intended the public to see the governor’s ordeal, though subtly, as the handiwork of his political opponents or adversaries. However, in view of the facts about the corrupt practices of the governor that were already known to the public, this particular newspaper report cannot be said to be a true representation of reality. Importantly, some of the crises we have in society are not unconnected with this maneuvering of events through the use of language, especially in newspaper reports. In the opinion of Thouless for instance, there is a condition which words have to fulfill in order that they may be useful for the purpose of “describing reality outside us or our own thoughts and feelings, and for directing our own and other people’s actions.” According to him that condition is that the word “must correspond in some way with the fact we are trying to describe” (86), and where for any reason “there are differences in our language which do not correspond to differences in the word of facts, then our use of language is unskillful and is liable to lead us into muddled thinking” (87)

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper presents the view that there have often been instances of manipulation or interference with the users’ uses of language used in a communication process. Meanwhile in respect of the argument that language is an indispensable non-material resource placed at the disposal of man to enable him satisfy some of his needs in life, the paper maintains that there are occasions where such acts of interference are capable of impacting negatively on individuals and on the society. Significantly, a new concept, message pollution, had been used to describe the undesirable effects that language may produce on addressees in a communication process. In order to explicate this new concept, examples were drawn from newspaper reports and subjected to pragmatic analysis.

Most importantly, there are some findings in this work. These are summed up below.

1. The linguistic acts – prevarications, sensationalism, embellishment of facts, and the concealment of viewpoints always involve the violation of the Gricean maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner as well as a disregard for the conditions of appropriacy (Felicity condition, Truth Condition, and Sincerity Condition) proposed for the validation of utterances by J. L Austin in his Speech Acts Theory.
2. As a result of the violation of the pragmatic principles mentioned in (1) above, the linguistic acts identified in this work, that is, prevarications, sensationalism, embellishment of facts, and the concealment of viewpoints are found to be valid not only for their semantic information of illocutionary force but also for their negative perlocutionary effects on their target addressees. For example, we found out through our analysis of the data collected that the linguistic acts identified in this study are capable of producing the following negative effects on addressees:
  - a) provoking negative reactions from them against some individuals, the government or events as well as issues of private or public concerns;
  - b) misinforming or misleading them concerning some state of affairs;
  - c) subjecting them to a state of confusion, and
  - d) unnecessarily inducing in them anxiety and fear (see examples 1 to 18).
3. As a result of the negative perlocutionary effects of prevarications, sensationalism, embellishment of facts, and concealment of viewpoints pointed out in (2) above, man’s quality of life can be reduced. When, for example we do not receive the right information about certain things or issues, we are most likely to act wrongly.

Meanwhile, every step we take in the wrong direction usually leads us to places we often do not intend to be. This goes to show that the pragmatic principles studied in this work are appropriate typologies of message pollution in a communication process.

4. In as much as all the data used for our investigation in this study are collected with ease from media reports, our work confirms the assumption that there is very high incidence of message pollution in such reports. It is needless to emphasize this point because the fact that all the linguistic acts identified in this work as instances of message pollution in a communication process are regular features of media reports is incontrovertible.

On this basis one would like to suggest that all human beings should be conscious of the way they use language so as not to subject others to stress. In this way society will be a better place to live in.

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