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Comparative Discourse Analysis of Meme Tv Headlines

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15 Jul 2022 Linguistic creativity is realised in our everyday text and it allows formulation and expression of ideas. Online content creators (humourists) have created meme tags or headlines posited to done by Nation TV comparing them to other unspecified TV stations. These humourists utilise language. This paper does a comparative analysis of the meme TV headlines to comprehend how language has been utilised in this scenario by determining the structural differences in the process of formation, determining whether the grammar constructed would say practical and sensible things about the written text, identifying figures of speech, and determine the source of amusement in the meme. This paper was guided by functional grammar (Halliday, 1985), a theory that is oriented toward describing how language makes contextual meanings. It analyses the grammatical structure, the communicative situation, participants, and context of the discourse. This paper has identified that the online humourists or content creators have conveyed meaning artistically with creativity by use of figures of correlation such as metonymy, symbolism, figure of comparison, truncation, wordplay and paronyms. The data that was utilised in this paper was collected from Kenyan Facebook fun pages.

Keywords:
*Meme,
Ambiguity,
Vagueness,
Figurative
Language,
Humour.*

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INTRODUCTION

Nation TV, a Kenyan broadcasting station, began its operation as a general entertainment channel in the year 2005 under the Nation Media Group (Musa, 2013). At some point in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, where nothing was joyous, Nation TV was trending because of its hilarious headlines. For example:

News Tag: Ni how China?

This news tag was based on how Africans (Kenyans) were treated during the Corona surge in China. In an interview by Musyoka (2020), Dan Mwangi, a news anchor, explains that the headline was an outcome of wordplay on the Chinese greeting ‘*Ni hao*’ for ‘hello’ and a slang slogan meaning ‘what’s happening?’ In reference to the meaning conveyed by the slang, the news tag, ‘Ni how China?’ was posing a question based on creativity to the Chinese government on their code of conduct in a time of crisis. Notably, Nation TV is a broadcasting station that presents its news with humour established on creativity. On another occasion that the president of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta (UK), sent flowers to the United Kingdom (UK), the Nation TV news tag was ‘UK sends flowers to the UK’. Wordplay, puns, and such creativity suggest that the process of developing and writing news bulletins and tags is a collective effort involving creative thinkers, poets, and writers (Musyoka, 2020). Such news headlines have enabled Nation TV to gain many followers and have sparked conversations on social media, and for this reason, online content creators have created meme headlines comparing other TV stations to Nation TV. From a linguistic point of view, it was essential to determine the language in use in those meme TV headlines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Saxena (2006), headlines are observed as a riveting shortcut to the contents of newspapers. Studies have been carried out vastly on newspaper headlines. This paper has pointed out a few studies relevant to the topic under study. Chiara (2004) analysed forms of linguistic ambiguity in newspaper headlines. The researcher focused mainly on lexical and syntactic ambiguity as sources of involuntary and voluntary humour. The study identified nouns, verbs, and prepositions as the main sources of causes of lexical ambiguity, while syntactic ambiguity relied on class ambiguity and other types of ambiguities. Class ambiguity involved shifts in classes of nouns and verbs. This research has presented a concept that embodies discourse on headline analysis, therefore, being a basis for identifying sources of humour in the meme TV headlines. Recently, Nwala & Umukoro (2017) employed a qualitative method to analyse data collected from three Nigerian Newspapers, namely *Vanguard*, *Guardian*, and *Punch*. The researchers utilised the theory of meaning propounded by Wittgenstein to identify features of language which made the newspaper headlines ambiguous. According to this theory, the meaning of a word is derived from its use in a text. This research identified two types of ambiguities that are lexical and structural ambiguity. From the selected headlines, the researchers identified words, phrases, and sentences which could be interpreted in numerous ways, therefore, blurring the intended meaning. These ambiguities were identified as journalistic marketing strategies, which put the customers in suspense, therefore, provoking the urge to read the story so as to comprehend the newspaper headline. This research was relevant to the topic under study as it analyses headlines in a newspaper which is also an important aspect of television.

Due to advanced technology, headlines are no longer restrained to newspapers. They are found on the internet, radio, and television and are referred to

as news bulletins or tags. These headlines serve the same purpose that is story summarisation, to generate interest, immediacy, satisfaction, and attention direction and are designed to wield enormous influence and power (Scacco & Muddiman, 2015). This research analyses meme TV headlines to determine the source of amusement, figures of language, and structural differences in processes of formation, which turns out to be something novel. According to Castano (2013), a meme is an academic concept coined in 1976 by the biologist Richard Dawkins in his book 'The Selfish Gene'. It was a gene-centred approach to cultural evolution, defined as a unit of cultural transmission or imitation. Nonetheless, today the concept of 'meme' is all over the internet relating to pictures, images, jokes, videos, or trends popular within particular forums. The notion of a 'meme' has been coined as a new form of web or internet communication that no longer denotes the concept created by Dawkins. In Castano's (2013) words:

Meme is now, somehow, related with what Dawkins defines as a meme, but with some special characteristics due to their way of transmission and speed of replication (p. 83)

This study by Castano (2013) is important as it puts the word 'meme' in the right context of the study. More so, the ideas presented here inform the researcher about the research methodology.

THEORY

This paper utilised the tenets of functional grammar to do the analysis. This theory was developed and built on previous works of Bronislaw Malinowski and J.R. Firth by Halliday in the 1960s in the United Kingdom (O'Donnell, 2011). According to this theory, every text, either said or written, unfolds in a specific context of use (Halliday, 1985). Language in use has been shaped systematically by many generations. Therefore, every aspect of language can be expounded and explained by its use. The central tenet in this theory is that meaning in language is a functional component. According to Halliday (1985), language has been organised into ideational, textual, and interpersonal meanings. These components, referred to as meta-functions, serve different purposes. The ideational or reflective meta-function serves to grammatically understand

the environment and how our experiences are construed in the world. Therefore, the interpersonal or active meta-function acts on the others in it (speaker and the addressee) and the textual meta-function breathes relevance in it as it examines how a text is formed and the organisation of meanings to make sense (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

This theory is a means of action which enables the researcher to study wordings recorded in writing and interpret them in reference to what it means. The language in use is interpreted as a system of meanings accompanied by forms through which meanings can be realised. However, this theory has been selected because it enables the researcher to show how and why the text means what it does by revealing alternative meanings, ambiguities, metaphors, metonyms, and similes. More so, the theory enables the researcher to evaluate a linguistic analysis by determining whether the text is perceived as effective or not. These analyses will encompass the environment, context of the situation, and culture.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Technology, globalisation, and media have revolutionised the concept of humour in Kenya. Due to the rapid growth of technology and globalisation, the data utilised in this paper was collected from Kenyan Facebook fun pages. This source was selected purposefully because it is rich in humorous text data and it is easily accessible. It is also a platform that allows its users to create content, share, post, and repost. The data collected was the inform of words and sentences presented in picture forms. This data mainly focused on comparing Nation TV meme headlines to those of other unspecified TV stations. The researcher identified over twenty meme TV headlines and saved the images of the text data on his smartphone. Notably, most of the headlines have explicit or implicit elements of humorous activity on the subject of sex. This can be attributed to the absence of strict anti-adultery laws, which are enforced and upheld effectively. This paper has utilised a few meme TV headlines which were identified as relevant to do the comparative analysis. The data was analysed thematically based on the figures of speech and source of humour.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Occasionally, disasters, catastrophes, wars, and other shocking things are headlines making big stories in the midst of different audiences. As fore-mentioned, most meme TV headlines that were collected talk about sex implicitly or explicitly. This can be attributed to the explanation given by Raskin (1985) that sex is typically suppressed and repressed and humour provides an outlet for its release in a way that may be more appropriate and socially and ethically acceptable than the more direct and natural way. Therefore, humour has permitted the expression of covetous taboo impulses associated with sex by upsetting the pattern and abruptly introducing something inappropriate and absurd.

The mode of interaction of the meme TV headlines collected is written text. Headlines done by the unspecified TV stations are traditional and restrained. This means they follow a restrained fashion whereby it is an overview of the main ideas of a story to be anchored. Meme headlines posited to be done by NTV uses sensational and creative language which involves figures of correlation, comparison, denigration, ambiguity, and vagueness. By doing this, they appeal to curiosity.

Figure of correlation

The following example uses a figure of correlation.

Other TV stations: The day Nairobi’s oldest prostitute retired after servicing over 28,000 men

NTV: City hole closed

Despite that the headline done by other unspecified TV stations is established on the idea of the story, it elicits curiosity since it contains an implicit reference to sexual intercourse. According to Glucksberg & McGlone (2001), figurative language encompasses the usage of words in a more artistic and creative tone to convey complex meaning. Crystal (1999) defines a figure of speech as an expressive use of language where words are used in a non-literal way to suggest illuminating comparisons and resemblances. The figure of correlation used by Nation TV makes the meme headline extraordinary, exciting, and relevant compared to the traditional headline done by the other TV stations. This example uses referential

metonymy; one entity refers to another one. Metonymy comes from the Greek word ‘metonomia’, meaning name or transformation (Campbell & Mixco, 2007). The online content creator refers to the prostitute as a ‘city hole’. The caption “city hole” serves as a subtle attack on the female body through its references to female genitalia and the power it holds, which is like the city hall, the symbol of the power of the Nairobi County government. This is in consideration that she has served many people in the city. The model of the context of the situation used to create the text allows us to know who is being talked about. Littlemore & Tagg (2016) defines metonymy as a linguistic and cognitive process whereby we use one entity to refer to another related entity. The metonymy used in this example does not substitute the prostitute for a city hole but inter-relates them for a novel complex implication.

According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), metonymy is a conceptual phenomenon grounded on our experiences, way of thinking, thoughts, and actions. In Nairobi, a city hall is the home of municipal authority (now the official office of the governor) and is accessible to anyone, large; therefore, it can accommodate those seeking services and is among the oldest buildings. The semantic features of a city hall and a prostitute [in context] can be represented as follows by the use of binary feature notation:

City hall	prostitute
[+ old]	[+ old]
[+ service]	[+ service]
[+ payment]	[+ payment]
[- human]	[+ human]

This basic information has been derived from our experiences (experiential meta-function). The feature values act as a mental bridge between the referential entity ‘city hall’ and the target entity ‘prostitute’. When it comes to semantic features, the city hall and the prostitute have parallelism only to differ regarding possession of life. However, the online content creator has the headline elements formed based on creativity. He uses homophones. Roach (2009) defines a homophone as a word that can be pronounced identically either with the same

or different spelling. The online content creator uses 'hole' rather than 'hall'. The online content creator might have preferred the word hole to the hall to achieve the semantic meaning. A hole refers to a hollow place in a surface or a body in this context. This is interrelated semantically to what the prostitute offers for financial gain. Since it can be accessed by anyone willing to pay, the online content creator referentially refers to it as a city hole. Therefore, the city hole is a conceptual entity that provides the online content creator mental access to another entity, 'prostitute', the desired target.

Figures of Comparison

Figures of comparison seek to give an intense imaginative comparison amongst things that may be similar or different to any degree. Let us examine the following example

Other TV stations: Wavulana wengi wawapa wasichana mimba za mapema [Most girls are victims of early pregnancies]

NTV: Ujana ni more-she [Adolescence is smoke]

According to Dor (2003), news headlines should contain new information. In Kenya, an early pregnancy does not seem to be something novel. Therefore, the headline done by other unspecified TV stations does not vividly state the enduring importance of novelty in the news bulletin compared to the meme headline done by NTV. The meme headline by Nation TV uses proverbial language, 'Adolescence is smoke', to convey a universal truth based on common sense and practical experiences. The word 'smoke' has been used metaphorically with a meaning that is transferred. According to Ulman (1962), a metaphor is a common form of figurative language introduced by Greeks, meaning to 'transfer' or 'carry'. Halliday (1985) explains that in such a situation, we look at how meaning has been expressed rather than how the word has been used. The literal meaning of this headline is that the life of a human is transient and ephemeral. It takes a short while to transit from being a child to youth, and once it happens, it cannot be reversed. Once dissipated, it passes like smoke and can never be brought back.

These headlines have been done in Kiswahili, but the online content creator advances creativity by using code-switching that acts as a homophone. The homophone enhances wordplay. This paper refers to this as homophonic puns (paronyms). They have similar-sounding and its intention is to create humour. The words 'moshi' and 'more-she' have the same pronunciation despite being different. Another notable similarity in terms is the number of syllables. The word 'moshi' has two syllables, while 'more-she' has two syllables. These words have been used artistically. These paronyms do not follow the grammatical rules and if interpreted outside the context, they will not make sense.

The online content creator might have used 'she' in 'more-she' to mark gender. Each element in a language, such as a clause or a phrase, is explained by reference to its function in a linguistic system (Halliday, 1985). However, this is essential as it provides a contextual hint and aids in comprehension. The personal pronoun 'she' has been used since the referent is personified as female. This puts this meme TV headline in context as it refers to girls who automatically transit into adulthood due to early pregnancies. The shortcoming is that Nation TV's meme headline exempts the boy child from the transition, yet they have contributed to girls' transition into parenthood. The online content creator has conveyed a meaning that cannot be evident in the message itself.

Denigration

The following news tag defames a political figure by attacking his reputation.

Other TV stations: Governor Joho exposed for cheating

NTV: Johoe

The Nation TV meme headline has been formed through clipping. Clipping is when two words or more segments are clipped and the chunks are combined to form a word (Brown & Miller, 2013). For example, WI-FI for wireless fidelity. The meme TV headline has been created by putting together chunks of the words 'Joho' and 'hoe'. It is either the word 'Joho' or 'hoe' that has been truncated as a form of playing with words to form a news tag. The meme headline is a source of humour and

information about a repressed event. A leader is perceived as a person of integrity and noble moral character. A person is construed grammatically as a hoe based on our worldly experience only if he gives in to intimacy or flirtation with a stranger, yet they are handcuffed on marital grounds or courtship.

The online content creator has advanced his creativity to make the Nation TV meme headline as short and straightforward as possible by employing lexical cohesion. According to Halliday (1985), a reference is a relationship between things or facts. Initially, the concept of 'hoe' probably originated as 'governor Joho exposed for cheating'. There is a great tendency to occur because of the semantic relationship. The word 'hoe' has maintained cohesion since it has special significance for meaning in the particular written text by other TV stations.

The following are semantic features associated with a hoe:

[± man]

[+cheating]

[±married]

Based on logic: Joho is a man, Joho is married, and Joho is cheating. Therefore: Joho is a hoe. On this basis, you can link a hoe to a person. Halliday (1985) expounds that reference as a means of creating lexical cohesion evolved to link 'outwards' to some person or object in the environment. Semantic relation has created cohesion between the headline by other TV stations and Nation TV.

Ambiguity and Vagueness

The following example utilises ambiguity and vagueness as sources of humour.

Other TV stations: Two people caught having sex at Uhuru Park

NTV: Uhuru fuck

In his summary, the online content creator has involved a name of a prominent person, 'Uhuru'. According to Dor (2003), news headlines should contain names with high news value for their readers (viewers). The online content creator has not

restated the meme headline by Nation TV, but he has summarised it. The word 'fuck' is short, and it stands in for the clause 'having sex'. The word 'Uhuru' in 'uhuru fuck' has been used to put the written text in the place of action to limit the number of interpretations. However, the context cannot help us with disambiguation. The meme headline has some grammatical ambiguity and vagueness. Advertisements, newspaper headlines, and comedy employ frequent use of ambiguity (Kadlub, 2017). According to Brown & Miller (2013), grammatical ambiguity results from a sequence of words being the realisation of two different constructions. This grammatical ambiguity has been used humorously because it entails multiple encodings. Raskin (1985) explains that humour is established on the possible interpretation of more than one semantic script in a specific situation. In our experiences, 'Uhuru' is the name of the president of Kenya. In this case, many misinterpretations arise. We are unsure whether it is the Kenyan President or the 'Uhuru Park' itself. Lack of specificity hampers interpretation, creating vagueness, and leading to ineffective communication. Ambiguity and vagueness act as gaps and have been identified as sources of humour.

Expressive Symbolism

The following example shows how the online content creator has used expressive symbolism to draft a meme headline for the story.

Story: a police officer shoots a cat during curfew hours

NTV: dushNyau

The most common feature of writing news tags or headlines is the usage of loaded words or expressions, such as colloquial terms and slang, which carry particularly strong connotations, therefore attracting attention (Chiara, 2004). The headline by Nation TV utilises onomatopoeic slang. According to Campbell (1999), onomatopoeic words imitate the real-world sound associated with the word's meaning, such as the sound *woof-woof* made by dogs when they bark. The meme TV headline is formed by putting together two onomatopoeic words. The first one is 'dush', an imitation of a process or an echo of sound after triggering a bullet or a burst. The bullet inflicts harm on the innocent animal. Therefore, the cat

experiences pain and produces a desperate sound, 'nyau', slang for the onomatopoeic word 'meow'. Imitation or sounds associated with the referent differ in languages and phonology conforms to a specific language (Brown & Miller, 2013).

The source of humour in this story is an absurdity. What the police officer does is too unreasonable and defies logical expectations. A cat is a domestic animal, not a threat. More so, the state-enforced curfew applies only to human beings. The illogical expectation arouses humour. The word cat causes vagueness in the story since it can refer to a leopard, jaguar, lion, cat (domestic), and cheetah. These lexical items possess a central relation (animals). The meme headline by Nation TV is in context; therefore, it is effective. The word 'nyau' is a referent to the cat. A shortcoming that has been identified is an oversimplification of full texts and over-creativity. Oversimplified and over-creative text is meant to attract a following from the masses and in the end, the audience misses the gist and struggles to comprehend. Oversimplification as well can lead to other complexities.

CONCLUSION

This paper has identified that the online content creator has conveyed meaning artistically with creativity. The meaning that has been assigned to the meme TV headlines is based on context and our worldly experiences. Meaning deduced from this meme, TV headlines are not limited but can differ from one person to another. In this discourse analysis, it is clear that the online content creator must have been a poet as he has employed a figure of correlation such as metonymy, a figure of symbolism, a figure of comparison, truncation, wordplay and paronyms. Functional grammar has enabled us to understand the verbal art in the meme TV headlines. This research identified absurdity, illogical expectations, multiple encodings (ambiguity) and vagueness as gaps that made the meme headlines by Nation TV hilarious therefore eliciting humour.

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 3. Other TV stations: Two people caught having sex at Uhuru Park NTV: Uhuru fuck
 4. Other TV stations: Governor Joho exposed for cheating NTV: Johoe
 5. Story: A police officer shoots a cat during curfew hours NTV: DushNyau

APPENDICES

1. Other TV stations: The day Nairobi's oldest prostitute retired after servicing over 28,000 men

NTV: City hole closed