



A Multimodal Study of the Online Versions of Three Nigerian Dailies

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Abstract. This paper carries out a multimodal analysis of the homepages of the online versions of *The Nation*, *The Guardian* and *Nigerian Tribune*. Each of the newspapers is published in Nigeria, dominating the Nigerian news scene. The texts are representative of the current wave of online newspaper publishing, which is gradually edging out the print medium. Most researchers have concentrated on the print versions of newspapers with many researchers paying little attention to the online versions. This paper notes that the online versions are different in many important respects from the hard copies. The online medium incorporates many modes which interact to construe meaning. With the foregoing, the multimodal nature of texts observed in the data calls for further inquiry into the way writers and newspaper publishers have deployed various resources to communicate and interact with their audience. The data collected are sourced online and printed in hard copies to facilitate analysis. Observations are interpreted using Halliday's model for semiotic studies. Attention is given to the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings constructed by the newspaper publishers. The study concludes that publishers deploy a combination of verbal resources and images to construe meaning. Furthermore, newspaper publishers use the texts to achieve social functions by creating a platform for social interaction, a purpose achieved through the interactive design of the homepages.

Moreover, thumbnail images are deployed to relate the stories with the social actors identified in them. With the new art of newspaper publishing through a multimodal approach, the linguist is faced with a new challenge of developing more adequate tools for studying this *new* text.

1. Introduction

Technological innovations have brought about revolutions in all spheres of human endeavours that would have been unimaginable about a century ago, thus enhancing and hastening the globalization process. The global interaction and tremendous expansion being witnessed in the areas of business, education, medicine, culture and journalism are traceable largely to the influence of the internet. One area in which the internet has occasioned remarkable changes is the media and communication. Certainly, the contemporary news media, having benefited immensely from radical technological innovations, have inexorably undergone changes that have had telling effects on their form and content. It is observed that the internet does not just expand the medium of communication; it alters its modes as well.

This paper highlights and scrutinizes the distinctive features of the home pages of three Nigerian dailies (*The Nation*, *Nigerian Tribune*

and *The Guardian*) subjecting them to a critical multimodal analysis. It is an effort in exploring how multiple modes are exploited to construct and mediate meaning. The novelty and creativity involved in the choices of the online medium command attention. Beyond the conventional texts and images noticeable in newspapers, the internet affords the publishers a combinatorial possibility of multiple modes while creating their texts. The ever dynamic influence of this communicative reality makes a multimodal approach an attractive one.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multimodal Analysis

Jewitt (2009) refers to multimodality as a field of application which studies how people communicate and interact with each other, not just through writing but also through speaking, gesture, gaze and visual forms. Constituted of only one mode, written communication may be accompanied and complemented by other signs, symbols, and images. As the name suggests, *multimodality* involves multiplicity of modes in the creation of texts, with the modes complementing, enriching and clarifying each other. The increasing availability of and access to multimedia composing software have almost made the employment of a variety of modes for the purpose of communication a routine exercise..

Leading theorists in multimodality, Kress (2001), Van Leeuwen (2001) and Jewitt (2009) have drawn attention to the necessity for and expediency of a multi-layered model of communication, suggesting that communication and understanding will be enhanced when many modes are allowed to interact and complement each other. Enunciating what may be considered the basic principles of multimodal communication, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) are of the opinion that similar semiotic principles function within and across different modes. For them, therefore, it is quite possible for music to encode action, or images to encode emotion. They further noted that these features used to be constructed with the

cooperative efforts of specialized professionals. Today, digitization allows a writer to combine these modes in the development of a text.

Multimodal analysis is cognizant of all communicative signals in a text, noting among others, images and the way they are positioned, colour or lack of it as well as the organization of the content in the creation of meaning. Kress (2010:79) emphasizes this while asserting that a mode 'is a socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning,' arguing that every mode has a different modal resource, as well as historical and cultural explanations. Modes are capable of being subjected to further subdivisions as, for instance, writing can be further analysed into syntactic, lexical and graphic resources.

Digitization of texts has initiated a novel relationship between the writer/speaker and the audience, causing a shift from the mono-modal composition of texts to a more popularized multimodal creation of meaning. Multimodal composition of communication has become pervasive, seen in such textual forms as literature, social media, journalism and advertising. Following logically the emergence of multimodality, multiliteracy accounts for the ability to read sounds, images (motion and still) alongside a given text.

2.2 Image- Verbiage Relations in Newspapers

In noting the multiplicity of modes in a text, Lemke (2002:302) suggests: "the fact that all signifiers are material phenomena means that their signifying potential cannot be exhausted by any one system of contrasting features for making and analyzing meaning." The emphasis here is on the importance of the complementary roles played by different modes in making meaning. Two of such key modes usually combined are language and image. To produce meaning, both language and image interact within the text. For instance, in newspapers, none of the modes generates meanings independently.

Previous studies in image-verbiage relations in newspapers have shown that images are combined with texts to establish the ideas conveyed through the texts. Images connect the reader to the text through a bonding that allows the reader to believe what he reads. Macken-Horanik (2003) observed that images were used to found a false story as the writer manipulates a homogenous image by selective framing of the image, negative portrayal and accentuating the publisher's voice above reality. This agrees with the view that, press photographs aid evaluative opinions (Economon, 2006).

Furthermore, Knox (2007) observes a gross reduction in the length of news texts. He states that a typical homepage is clustered with many stories. The design and style of each homepage is created according to the publisher's taste. With the style of a single webpage-cum-homepage, each news headline is followed by a few lines, thus giving less information about the story. Meanwhile, the reader is simultaneously engrossed in each story on the homepage. Each short story is often ended with a link to longer version of the stories on pages *deeper* in the hierarchy of the website. Thumbnail images also featured on the homepages. The miniature images, which are usually decontextualised convey no more information than can be found in the text. They are often devoid of the human experience conveyed through the text.

2.3 Online Newspapers: Moving From Front Page to Homepage

The need for compliance with 21st century business practices has driven newspaper publishers to the online market. Interestingly, online newspapers are not simply an electronic reproduction of their hardcopy counterparts. Though they manifest similar lexical and grammatical properties, there are obviously clear differences in their presentations as texts. Bateman et al (2006) and Knox (2007) have observed that online newspapers differ both syntagmatically and paradigmatically from stories in the hardcopy edition, even when they have identical wording.

Being the online point of entry into the online newspaper, the homepage subsequently connects the reader to the news stories which also carry hyperlinks to other stories. This is in contradistinction to the conventional page-by-page flipping of the hardcopy. The online text necessarily enters into syntagmatic inter-textual relations which are different from the syntagmatic relations for the reader of the hardcopy edition, and which therefore positions the reader differently in relation to the text.

Paradigmatically, the online news story is a set of network of visual, verbal and visual-verbal relations which give each text a worth beyond mere words. Since the online and hardcopy newspapers are different, the worth in the same story but different texts would be different. The texts are not the same and as such cannot be received the same way. The semantic of the texts differ since the mode of presentation has been changed.

Online newspapers have evolved two new genres, namely news bites and news bits. Newsbites consist of the one-paragraph headline + lead + hyperlinks. News bits consist of the headline+ hyperlink. Both appear on the home pages. As a social practice, the act of reading newspapers means different things to different readers of either the online version or the hardcopies. The consumers have different places and timing for their reading. Their purposes and activities are different. All these differences account for the difference in the design of online newspapers as texts in their own right.

2.4 Thumbnail Images in Online Newspapers

A thumbnail is a miniature representation of a large image. Studying online homepages, Knox (2007) concludes that the use of thumbnails has become a more predominant feature. This assertion is attributed to the varied practices of online news reporting which computer-mediated communication affords. The evolving practices of online news discourse are combining with evolving features of written language to organise information on the homepage.

In creating a text, the writer can afford to personalize the text. This can be achieved through the combination of images, symbols, sounds and verbal text. Homepages are expected to sustain the readership. Thumbnails are well-suited for the task of sustaining the interpersonal exchange between the newspaper publishers and its readership. To this end, they play a textual role in the visual organisation of information, while punctuating the page interpersonally.

Individual news stories are texts just as homepages. Simultaneously, they play a role in the entire newspaper. Martin and Rose (2003) identify another linguistic function of thumbnail image in individual news stories. They call this interpersonal Hyper-Theme. According to them, a Hyper-Theme has relevance at the level of discourse, through a prediction of the text that follows an antecedent. At the level of the paragraph, the topic sentence functions as the Hyper-Theme, thus giving an insight into the reader's expectation. Thumbnails work together with the headlines as a visually important hyper-theme, foregrounding the interpersonal aspect of the story in particular. Knox (2007) concludes that thumbnails represent an expansion of graphology. While agreeing that this view cannot be generalised for all websites, he suggests that their roles would continue to vary according to the communicative demands of the persons enacting the multimodal genres in which they are found.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Halliday's social semiotic theory of 1978 is the groundwork for the study of semiotic resources beyond language. Other resources that collaborate with linguistic symbols include images, architecture, and music. The combination of these different modes has opened up the field of discourse analysis to what is referred to as multimodal analysis. Frontiers of this field include Jewith (2009), Machin (2007) and O'Halloran (2011). According to Halliday and Hasan (1985: 4), culture is 'a set of inter-related semiotic

systems.' Multimodal studies have evolved from the assertion above.

With Halliday's theory, linguistic analysis can be based on empirical evidence. The theory addresses itself to the design of meaning-making resources and choices available to the writer. It further examines the combinatory possibilities of the multi-varied choices. In essence, the theory stands on the following three points:

- To construe our experience of the world (experiential meaning)
- To create social relations (interpersonal meaning)
- To organize meanings into coherent messages in a text (textual meaning)

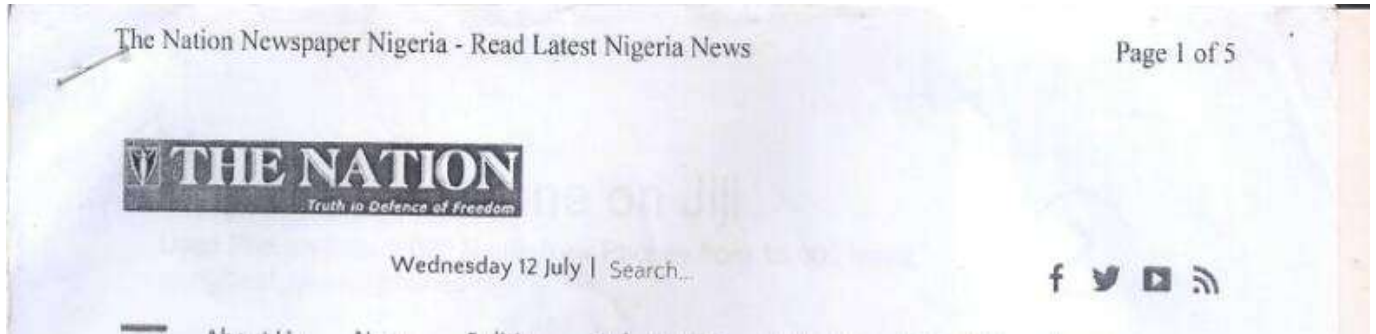
Following this model, the linguist can draw a multi-level conclusion with semiotic resources and their modeling systems as the tools for creating meaning.

Apart from this, the framework allows researchers to observe meanings within a single semiotic resource as well as across different semiotic resources. More so, the investigator can observe semantic shifts and metaphorical elaborations of meaning which take place as multimodal resources combine to make meaning.

3. Data Presentation and Analysis

Following Halliday's theory which identifies ideational function of texts, we analyse the features of the texts under examination. The purpose is to unravel the underlying design of the semiotic resources found in the texts. We thereafter discuss the interrelatedness of the systems which in turn help to shape the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings of the texts.

3.1 Headings and Symbols



In *The Nation*, the top header on the left hand side is the name of the newspaper, having the caption *truth in defence of freedom*, written below it. Though this is similar to what is found on the hard copy, the text serves an ideational function in that clicking on it redirects the reader to the homepage. Hence syntagmatically, the text shows us the name of the page, while paradigmatically, the reader is redirected to the page through a click. It is observed that the *Nigerian Tribune* shares the same features as discussed above. In addition, *Nigerian Tribune* features the maxim *Nigeria's most informative newspaper*. The headings of each homepage are strategically placed such that they catch the readers' attention first. The bold characters assert the prominence of the texts as the pivot of the homepage.

Each of the three home pages fields a search bar. In *The Nation*, this comes immediately to the right of the date of publication; *The Guardian* has it to the left of the home button, while *Nigerian Tribune* has it below a list of menus outlined horizontally below the logo. The search bar affords the reader the opportunity to browse the websites for news stories by keying in the words. It is represented generally by a lens as seen in the three texts. Apart from the search bar, *The Nigerian Tribune* also spots a button named *Ask Now*. The idea underlying the use of these texts is that readers can literally interact with the page and get real time feedbacks. At the interpersonal level, readers have a shared relationship with the text as clicking on them means communicating with the newspaper publisher. The lens which depicts the search bar has been accorded the function of browsing the webpage for further inquest. This social function corresponds with the laboratory use of the magnifying lens as a tool for increasing the view of miniature object.

The homepage also features the symbols of the major social media networks. These are strategically placed to the right of the home page. Paradigmatically, clicking on each redirects the reader to the social media pages of the selected networks. Here the readers are given live updates of news directly in their own pages on the selected social media networks. Two recurrent symbols are found among the three texts. These are 'f' representing facebook and a flying bird, which represents twitter. The triangle leaning towards the right side as seen in *The Nation* and *The Guardian* represent YouTube. Others are feed burner, (the last symbol on *The Nation*), Instagram (the last symbol on *Nigerian Tribune*).

Iconic Beats



Newspaper publishers often organise the news stories in beats. A beat is a news territory, a term used by journalists to describe news reports that discuss stories of similar interest. In other words, there are beats for politics, world news, sports etc. While this is delineated by page and sections in the hard copy, the online versions of news present the opposite. As seen in the texts, the beats are listed across the homepage horizontally. Each homepage begins its list with the home/ *about us* icon which naturally redirects the reader to the homepage when clicked. The beats are listed based on the newspaper publisher's news value. However each begins with the local news. Politics, sports and business are also featured in each. Ideationally, each *icon-beat* links the reader to the news stories under each beat.

One point of special focus is the TV beat observed in *The Guardian* and *Nigerian Tribune*. Newspaper publishers have hitherto been content with still pictures. However the affordability of a multi-varied mode in newspaper reporting accommodates video clips. Therefore the inclusion of the texts *Tribune TV* and *Guardian TV* is of analytic interest. News reportage, in both television and radio often includes sound bites. These texts suggest the idea of watching the news rather than reaching it. At the paradigmatic level, the texts, once clicked, link the reader to the online videos which convey the news. Essentially, the reader moves from reading the texts to viewing the action as described in its verbiage

News bites/ News bits

Hard copies of newspapers often feature large one-page front pages with the headlines and leads spread over them. Though this is largely imitated by the online versions there is a strategically different approach to this. It is observed that the lead stories of each newspaper consistently change with time. Their headlines, leads and images are strategically designed in a square shape. Readers are attracted to the moving headlines as five of them are accessed within a short period. The ideational function of this mode is to present an overview of the main news items to online readers, who usually cannot afford the time to flip through the pages. At the level of interpersonal meaning, the mode is interactive such that the reader clicks on the square box to access the full content of the story. The structure adopted imitates the shape of the computer screen. From this observation, it may be suggested that the form usually dictates the content. Furthermore, readers can view real time news updates. They do not have to wait till the following day to get updates.

In *The Guardian* and *The Nation* two headline stories stand out on the home pages they are headlined

Supreme Court declares Markati as authentic PDP chairman (The Nation)



Osinbajo holds secret meeting with Buhari in London (The Guardian)



Each headline above is followed by a lead and a hyperlink which directs the reader to the full story. The texts have functional, structural and intertextual functions. Taken collectively, the newsbites function to highlight the stories valued by the institution of the newspaper as most important. Socially they present the focal point of the news story with immediacy and impact. The publishers are able to visually evaluate the stories in terms of their comparative importance. The design is aimed at catching the readers' interest. Each click on the newsbite leads to the full story which often has other newsbites at the end of each page. This creates an intertextual relationship with other texts on the webpage

3.4 Thumbnail Images

Studying thumbnails in the homepage of online newspapers, Knox (2009) observe that the thumbnail images in websites typically depict a social actor identified in the verbiage as the story. Usually human actors, thumbnails could also depict social groups, companies, elements in the urban environment element in the natural environment, and social institutions. Functionally, thumbnails are part of the meaning-making devices developed by the journalists. They function as an expanded graphology, by extending the potential of language rather than interacting with it as a separate mode. There is a relationship of componential cohesion which according to Royce (2002) relates participants, processes, and circumstances, or components in images and texts or between leads and images.

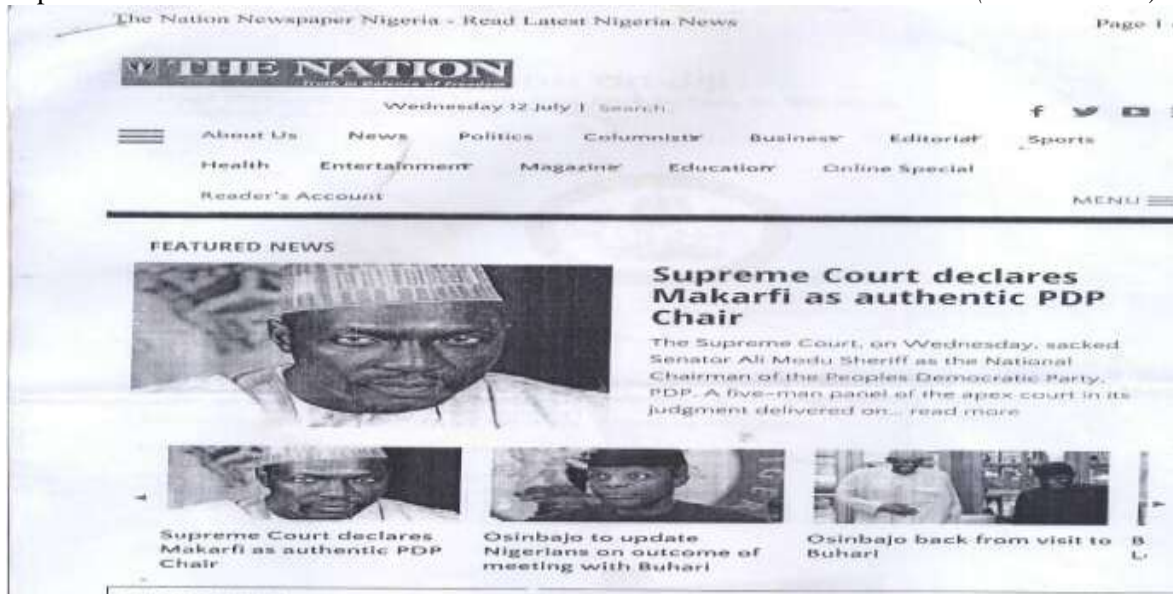
As an illustration, the thumbnail images in the following headlines are related to their grammatical participants:

Dangote invests \$4.6b in farming (*The Guardian*)

Trumps defends son as innocent bashes media (*The Guardian*)



Supreme Court declares Markarfi an authentic PDP chair (*The Nation*)




Etisalat Nigeria says change of name won't affect operations (*The Nigerian Tribune*)




Only Senate can determine Malaye's fate – Saraki (The Nigerian Tribune)


Home - Tribune



I managed to lose 26 kg in 7 DAYS! It's easy! Step by step instructions HERE >>>


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 US ambassador


AGRICULTURE

 29 rice farmers' cluster groups benefit from CBN grant in Abia

investigator

 We'll work with Makarfi to end APC reign in Oyo —PDP

 Autonomy for LGs, state assemblies 'll dominate constitution amendment —Ekwe remadu

 Only Senate can determine Melaye's fate —Sarakogi

Aliko Dangote, Trump and Markarfi, Etisalat and Dino Melaye whose images accompany the news stories are the social actors of the headlines above. Grammatically, Dangote, Trump and Etisalat are the subjects of the sentences in the headlines above. Dino Melaye and Makarfi are the

objects of the verbs in the examples cited above. We observe further that the human images are significantly more frequently used than non-human images. The institutional symbol of Etisalat Nigeria represents it in the story. The images serve a social function by intimating the readers with the knowledge of the persona of their stories.

Apparently, thumbnails represent visually a central element in the verbal story. This semiotic device is deployed to bring the subject of the story to the front. The underlying objective is to orient the readers to the news bite. Though thumbnails complement the verbal mode in news reporting, Knox (2007) argues that they limit the choices available to photo editors and page designers. As observed, most images are decontextualised. The choice of visually situating actors in relation to different contexts is not available. All contexts are provided by the verbiage. However, two thumbnail images that are different from the observation stated above are those of Aliko Dangote and Donald Trump in the headlines:

Dangote invests \$4.6b in farming

Trumps defends son as innocent bashes media (*The Guardian*)



The business tycoon is posed in corporate attire, speaking and making gestures. That picture depicts him in a formal discourse, probably addressing a gathering. Dangote is depicted to be in a discussion, supposedly on the subject matter. The report is said to have been made five minutes before the time it was published. Donald Trump's image depicting him angry and combat ready with his clenched fist collocates with the words "defends" and "bashes" as used in the text. The report was supposedly posted fifteen minutes before its publication.

3.5 Thumbnails as Graphological Devices

It is observed that thumbnails are a radical departure from the practice and

conventions of photo journalism and much more from the historical development of typography and punctuation. They nevertheless expand the graphology of the text compositionally. In *The Nation* and *The Guardian* thumbnails are placed above the headlines. *The Nigerian Tribune* has them placed by the headlines. Technically, the images have been given more prominence and focus than the text. Furthermore, this suggests that thumbnails are related to their verbal texts in a way similar to the enlarged initials in printed newspapers.

4. Conclusion

Online publishing presents the reader with a new task in newspaper reading.

Apparently different from the hard copy, the online newspaper has the homepage as its only entry point. It is designed and so called as it sensitizes the potential reader on the content of the newspaper. Homepages are so organized that the necessary navigational information and links are provided. Interpersonally, home pages establish the authority of the voice of the newspaper, value the context presented visually and verbally and establish a community among the authors and readers. Basically, homepages serve a social function by building familiarity through the design of the texts. This happens as the readers and the newspaper publishers are connected through the social media. Instant news updates can reach the reader while the reader in turn can make instant comments, thus using real time feedback to the newspaper publisher.

Home pages of online newspapers offer the readers links to story pages. This is presented in textual forms on the classification of news on sports, business e.t.c. The text of a story page may be verbal-visual or oral-visual. The homepages observed have a multi-modal feature. Each has a complex design combining a range of visual and visual-verbal signs. All these combine to form coherent structural elements. The publishers deploy the other resources like colour, sound, image, animation, video, and verbal texts. As highlighted, these are the elements of hypertexts which interact with other comparable units on the page, thus performing the act of communication and meaning making.

Thumbnails are also deployed in the homepages of the three national dailies studied. Publishers use them to create a graphical representation of the social actors mentioned in the news stories. Furthermore, thumbnails extended the graphology of the texts. This is enacted through highlighting the focus of the texts before the reader. In addition, they

perform a function similar to the large initial letters found in the print versions of the newspapers.

From the foregoing observations we conclude that newspaper publishing in Nigeria has experienced a paradigm shift over the last decade. Meaning making in newspaper reporting has been expanded beyond the use of texts and still images. Newspaper readers do not have to wait till the following day to have the current news. We observe here that there is an ever rapid and radical evolution of semiotics in the new media. This new meaning-making process has constantly questioned the stability of the understanding of language and specifically, the multi-modal approach to meaning making. Consequently the dynamic changes observable in the texts studied call for an extensive work, especially in the field of multimodal studies. Also, linguistic studies should tend towards developing computer modulated tools for the study of computer-mediated linguistic data. When these areas are explored, linguistic analysts would retain their relevance, while expanded existing theories remain basic to the study of the nascent corpus of linguistic data available over the internet.

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