

Transitivity Analysis of Newspaper Headlines on Terrorists/bandits Attack on Nigerian Abuja-Kaduna train**Umar Ibrahim**Yobe State Teaching Service Board
umarfaruqng@gmail.com /07038389696**Abstract**

This is a qualitative research that presents the results of a linguistic analysis on the newspaper headlines on terrorists/bandits attack on Abuja-Kaduna train. The study examines the application of Halliday's theory of transitivity in the description of terrorists attack on Abuja-Kaduna train in northern Nigeria on the 28th of March 2022. The study aims to explore how such event and the terrorists in particular are described through various uses of language captured by different newspapers on their headlines. The study seeks to provide answer to a question such as how do various newspapers capture and construct the image of the event and the terrorists in their headline using transitivity analysis developed in systemic functional grammar. The research adopts a qualitative approach to explore the process types used, participants and circumstantial elements on the headlines of the selected newspapers to understand how language used in the headlines depicts the event and the actors to convey meanings. The findings of the research show that material process is the dominance process type used in the headlines of the selected newspapers to indicate physical actions, and other process types such as mental process and relational process are also used in relation to the social and government response to the event. The study adds to the understanding on the role of language in media discourse particularly when it comes to the issues of insecurity. The analysis of the study shows material process through which the terrorists are portrayed as the active actors, as the dominant type of process used in the headlines, whereas other processes such as mental and relational highlight responses from the government and the society. The study reveals how language plays a crucial role in media headlines through influencing and shaping public perceptions on insecurity in Nigeria.

Key words: Systemic Functional Grammar, Transitivity, Terrorism and newspapers.

Introduction

Terrorism has been an alarming social issue for many years in Nigeria, particularly in the northern part of the country. Several administrations used various strategies to curve the issue but yet it keeps claiming lives and property of the citizens. Different terrorist groups, such as ISWAP, Boko Haram, bandit groups, kidnappers groups, launch their attack on people in the country to kidnap, enslave or even kill citizens in the country. Such kind of attack was launched by a terrorist group on Abuja-Kaduna train in Nigeria in Katari, Kaduna state Nigeria on the 28th of March 2022. The train was a new development under President Muhammadu Buhari's

administration to ease transportation and bring safety, to especially passengers travelling between the two big cities in the country. It was launched and commissioned for commercial services on July 26, 2016 by President Muhammdu Buhari.

Nigerian and even non-Nigerian media captured this event under different headlines in newspapers with captivating words, phrases, and clauses to hook the readers' mind to such an event. This research examines, identifies, and explains how the terrorists are presented through language as used in the headlines of the newspapers for language is a means through which ideas and experiences are shared and transferred. Halliday postulates that a language is interpreted as a system of meanings, accompanied by forms through which the meanings can be realized and answer the question "how are these meanings expressed?" Van Dijk (2006) observes that Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is an approach to understanding written texts as creating meaning, not just from the rules of grammar but also in the meanings that emerge from the choice of words used to describe the action, the person speaking, or the object and person being spoken of.

In newspapers and other media means, headlines of a news appear at the beginning and mostly on top and give a short summary of the whole news. Case of terrorism and banditry has a firm root deep down in Nigeria. However, the skillful and subtle ways in which newspaper headlines use language to construct this event, to depict the actors involved and convey the underlying ideological point of view on the event have not been thoroughly examined and studied to the best of the researcher's knowledge. This, therefore, calls for a need to go beyond just reading the headlines as news to understanding or grasping these headlines as a form of discourse that defines reality. This study fills this gap via Halliday's transitivity analysis in order to explore linguistic mechanisms and ideological motivation behind the representation of terrorists attack on Abuja-Kaduna Train. This research, however, examines the function of language as a powerful social practice in the newspaper headlines, and the participants and process types such headlines are connected with. The significance of this research lies in its attempt to portray how Nigerian newspapers handle the dilemma of insecurity and the issues of terrorism in the country using Systemic Functional Theory.

The study has main objectives to identify different types of transitivity process, the roles of participants, the functions of circumstantial elements in aiding additional context by describing

the event in the headlines, and to unveil how linguistic choices on the media function to influence public perception.

Literature Review

This section provides literature review on transitivity. The emphasis is on studies on transitivity analysis.

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is the study of the relationship between language and its functions in social settings. SFG treats grammar as a meaning-making resource and insists on the interrelation of form and meaning. This language function, which is referred to Metafunction. Transitivity in this sense, should not be confused with the term used to describe the transitive or intransitive nature of different verbs. According to Beard “[t]ransitivity involves looking at the language used to describe:

- what happens
- who the participants are (both those who do something and those affected by what is done)
- what the circumstances are.

Fowler, in referring to Michael Halliday, explains that “transitivity is the foundation of representation: it is the way the clause is used to analyze events and situations as being of certain types.” (Fowler 1991:71) Transitivity, then, makes it possible to describe an event from different angles and could, therefore, be said to be indicative of different ideological viewpoints.

A research paper titled: “transitivity analysis of W.H. Auden’s poem: in memory of W.B. Yeast” written by Farooq, Akhter, Khan and Tariq, (2024) analyzed the language used by the writer of the poem, revealed attitude, belief, and opinion. Using Halliday’s Transitivity System, the paper presented how different processes shape the different features of characters in the text. It analyzed the participants, processes and circumstantial elements. It also presented the frequencies and percentages of elements used. The research, however, was not able to provide details on what each participant stood for or did in a clause. It only gave examples of the processes but did not give details on participants such as actor, theme, goal, circumstance etc.

Similarly, using SFG Halliday’s (1973) study of William Golding’s *The Inheritors* shows how certain choice of (one set of different) options rather than another can be said to have been motivated by what the speaker (or writer) wanted to mean, to convey or emphasize.

Agbanyo's work (2024) "transitivity analysis of two Nigerian presidential candidates" examines the transitivity processes in the manifestos of two Nigerian presidential candidates using content analysis approach. The study provided information on what kind of process each candidate used most and the reason for such. It also provided linguistic perspective on political discourse by demonstrating how linguistic choices reflect the social and political intentions of political leaders. However, the study is more of presenting percentages of elements used in its analysis. It did not present clauses and what each participant process did or stand for in the clause.

Theoretical framework

SFG approach to discourse analysis is based on the model of "language as a social semiotic" outlined in the works of Halliday. Language is used functionally, that is, what is said depends on what one needs to accomplish. According to Halliday (1985), there are three major functions of language, namely: the ideational, the textual, and the interpersonal.

The ideational function is the use of language to express content and to communicate information. Where content is the focus, the emphasis is on transferring information clearly and effectively so that it can be comprehended quickly and easily. The other two functions of language are the textual and the interpersonal. The textual function is the use of language to signify discourse. Here, language becomes text, is related to itself and to its contexts of use, including the preceding and following text, and the context of situation. The interpersonal function is the use of language to establish and maintain social relations. This function involves modalities so that it is related to modus system. The system is signified by two main elements, namely: mood and residue. Halliday (1985) claims that the three types of meanings presented in language are not accidental but are necessarily in place because we need them to perform functions in social life. In this study, the newspaper headlines on Abuja-Kaduna train attack are analyzed in terms of transitivity because transitivity deals with all the grammatical aspects. Halliday (1981) summarizes transitivity as the basis of the semantic organization of experience'; it subsumes 'all participant functions' and 'all experiential functions relevant to the syntax of the clause'. Transitivity is usually considered to be a property of an entire clause (Hopper and Thompson, 1980). It is, broadly, the notion that an activity is transferred from an agent to a patient. In Halliday's (1973) terms, transitivity is a part of the ideational function of the clause.

The ideational function represents processes or experiences: actions, events, processes of consciousness and relations.

There are three components of what Halliday (1994) calls a “transitivity process”, namely:

- The process itself; what kind of event or state is being described
- Participants in the process; the entities involved in the process, e.g actor, sayer, sensor, goal
- Circumstances associated with the process- specifying when, how, where and why of the process

Halliday (1994) identifies six process categories in his system of transitivity which are summarized in the table below:

Process types	Category meaning	Participants
Material: Action, Event	Doing, Happening-e.g. ruin, bite, chew, ring, swallow, destroy,	Actor, Goal
Behavioral	Behaving	Behaver
Mental: Perception, Affection, Cognition	Sensing, Seeing , Feeling Thinking –e.g. see, hear, know	Sensor, Phenomenon
Verbal	Saying-e.g. say, whisper, gossip, argue, tell, narrate	Sayer, Target
Relational: Attribution , Identification	Being, Attributing, Identifying-e.g. be, have, become	Carrier, Attribute, Identified, Identifier, Token, value
Existential	Existing	Existence

Research Method

Research design

The researcher uses the descriptive method to study the Problem. Descriptive research is used to define characteristics of a phenomenon being studied. The purpose of this research is to describe the process types in Transitivity systems which are contained in the newspaper headlines on terrorism attack on Abuja-Kaduna train and to determine the function of each participant used in the clauses in the headlines.

Source of Data

The data used for the research are obtained from the Nigerian media channels; namely; *Reuters* newspaper, published on 29th March, 2022, *state house news*, published on 29th March, 2022, *Punch* newspaper, published on 30th March, 2022, *DateLine* newspaper, published on 28th March, 2022, *HumAngle* news, published on 29th March, 2022, *Premium Times* newspaper, published on 29th March, 2022, *Alimoshotoday* newspaper, published on 29th March, 2022, *DW.com*, published on 29th March, 2022, *Military Wiki news*, published on 28th March, 2022, International Centre for investigative Reporting (*ICIR*), published on 29th March, 2022, *PM News Nigerian*, published on 29th March, 2022, *Independence Nigeria* newspaper, published on 30th March, 2022, and *Punch* newspaper, published on 28th March, 2022.

Data Analysis

Transitivity analysis of newspaper headlines on terrorism attack Abuja-Kaduna train in Nigeria

Analyzing the newspaper headlines in terms of transitivity patterns highlights the ways the terrorists/bandits are represented in the headlines of newspapers: what they are represented to be doing and to who. The following analysis is in terms of processes (Halliday, 1994; Chen, 2005).

This analysis relates to the ideational Metafunction (Halliday, 1978, Eggins, 2004). The transitivity analysis is applied in the analysis of how terrorists/bandits are represented in the newspaper headlines and the Process types they are associated with.

H.1 from *Reuters* newspaper, published on 29th March, 2022.

H1. *Suspected bandits attack Nigerian passenger train*

<i>Suspected bandits</i>	<i>Attack</i>	<i>Nigerian passenger train</i>
actor	Process	goal

In H1, the actor is “**Suspected bandits**” which refers to the terrorists that attacked the train. The actor is then followed by the verb “attack” to indicate what the bandits have done. The material process verb “attack” has that connotation of the bandits forcing a terrible threat on the live of the train passengers. The goal in H1 is the “Nigerian passenger train” which is negatively affected by the action contained in the process “attack”.

H.2 from *Guardian* newspaper, published on 29th March, 2022.

H2. Rail staff killed in “unprecedented” attack on train in Nigeria.

<i>Killed</i>	<i>Rail staff</i>	<i>in “unprecedented” attack on train in Nigeria</i>
process	Goal	Circumstance

The process “**killed**” in H2 shows how the event of killing affected “**rail staff**”. “**Killed** is a material process verb that affected the rail staff negatively. The goal, however, is followed by a circumstance “**in 'unprecedented' attack on train**”, which contains a qualifier “unprecedented” that describes the nature of the attack, and the noun “attack” that refers or event linked with killing.

H.3 from *state house news*, published on 29th March, 2022.

H3. President Buhari directs immediate implementation of security solution; condemns incident.

<i>President Buhari</i>	<i>Directs/condemns</i>	<i>immediate implementation of security solution</i>	<i>Incident</i>
actor	Process	Circumstance	Goal

The phrase “**president Buhari**” in H3 is the actor. It indicates the performer of the action in the process “**directs**”, a material process which is followed by a circumstance of time “**immediate implementation of security solution**” to indicate how sooner actions must be taken. H3 however, contains another material process “**condemns**” which shows the actor’s state of mind, and is then followed by a goal “**incident**” that suffers negatively the action of condemning.

H.4 from *Punch* newspaper, published on 30th March, 2022.

H4. Buhari, national assembly, governors demand tough actions, survivors recount ordeal

<i>Buhari, national assembly, governors</i>	<i>Demand</i>	<i>survivors</i>	<i>recount</i>	<i>Ordeal</i>
actor	process	actor	Process	Goal.

H4 above is a clause that contains two parts where each part is containing a material process verb. The actor in H4 is “**Buhari, National assembly, governors**” tailed by a process “**demand**” which shows the actors’ great concern on taking action. The second part of the clause also contains an actor “recount” which shows action done by the survivors narrating their story “ordeal”.

H.5 from *HumAngle* news, published on 29th March, 2022.

H5. Terrorists abduct passengers in Abuja-Kaduna train attack.

<i>Terrorists</i>	<i>Abduct</i>	<i>Passengers</i>	<i>in Abuja-Kaduna train</i>
Actor	Process	goal	Circumstance

The actor in the H5 above is the “**terrorists**”. It is the initiator participant and doer of the action. The actor is then followed by a process “**abduct**” which is a material process verb portraying an action done or carried out by the actor “**terrorists**”. There is also a participant that suffers and is negatively affected by the action of the terrorists “passengers”, which is the goal of the material process. “**in Abuja-Kaduna train attack**” is another participant, a circumstance that tells us specifically where the action takes place.

H.6 from *Premium Times* newspaper, published on 29th March, 2022.

H6. Terrorists attack Abuja-Kaduna train in northern Nigeria.

<i>Terrorists</i>	<i>attack</i>	<i>Abuja-Kaduna train</i>	<i>in northern Nigeria</i>
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Actor	Process	goal	Circumstance
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In H6, “**terrorists**” is the actor participant. It is the performer of the action. It is then preceded by a material process “**attack**”, which shows the physical action done by the actor, and which action also transfers to another entity “**Abuja-Kaduna train**”. This entity “**Abuja-Kaduna train**” is the participant that serves as the goal; it is affected by the attack. The phrase “**in northern Nigeria**” is a circumstance that specifies the scene of the action.

H.7 from *Alimoshotoday* newspaper, published on 29th March, 2022.

H7.1 Terrorists attack Abuja-Kaduna train with 970 passengers onboard,

<i>Terrorists</i>	<i>Attack</i>	<i>Abuja-Kaduna</i>	<i>with 970 passengers onboard</i>
Actor	Process	goal	Circumstance

H7.2 killed some, kidnapped others.

<i>Killed</i>	<i>Some</i>	<i>Kidnapped</i>	<i>Others</i>
Process	Goal	process	Goal

H7 has two parts, and each part of the clause contains participants with their various roles. “**Terrorists**” in H7.1 is the actor. It performs the action in “**attack**”, which is a material process that indicates what the actor has done. The goal is “**Abuja-Kaduna train**”. It is the sufferer and is affected by the action contained in “**attack**”. “**with 970 passengers onboard**” is a circumstantial element. It adds information about the setting of the material process. In the second part of the clause, H7.2, “**killed some**” is an entity that shows yet another material process that involves a different action. It contains another action performed by the terrorists that affects “**some**” (passengers), which is the goal an entity that is affected negatively by the action

of the terrorists. In addition to this, H9.2 again contains another material process "**kidnapped**" which is an action performed on "**others**", another group of passengers, and the goal also in the clause.

H.8 from *DW.com*, published on 29th March, 2022.

H8. Nigerian train attack leaves several dead

<i>Nigerian train attack</i>	<i>Leaves</i>	<i>Several dead</i>
Agent/actor	Process	Goal

"**Nigerian train attack**" in H8 above is a nominal phrase that serves as the Actor or Agent of the sentence. It represents the event. What comes after it is a material process verb "**leaves**" that indicates an action with consequence. The material process shows factual effect that result from the event. "**several dead**" is a participant entity that shows the result or outcome of the material process. It is the sufferer that is affected by the action in the verb "**leaves**".

H.9 from *Military Wiki news*, published on 28th March, 2022.

H9. Passengers killed after Nigeria gang hits rail link.

<i>Passengers</i>	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Nigeria gang</i>	<i>hits</i>	<i>rail link.</i>
goal	process	Actor	Process	goal

H9 above contains two material processes each with a goal that suffers from an action. "killed" is a process that suggests action done on the "passengers", which is the goal and sufferer of the action. The phrase "Nigeria gang" in the clause describes an actor that performs an action "**hits**", a material process verb which action is transferred to "**rail link**"; the goal that is affected negatively.

H.10 from International Centre for investigative Reporting (*ICIR*), published on 29th March, 2022.

H10. All Kaduna-Abuja commuters to travel by road.

<i>All Kaduna-Abuja commuters</i>	<i>To travel by road</i>
Carrier/actor	Process

In H10, "**All Kaduna-Abuja commuters**" is a participant group and serves as the Actor or Carrier in the clause. It is an entity that will perform the action in the clause. This is followed by a process "**to travel by road**", a material process that describes the action the commuters will perform. It implies the future action to be taken by the commuters of travelling by road instead of train.

H.11 from *Premium Times* newspaper, published on 29th March, 2022.

H11. Timelines of events three weeks after incident without decisive action by government.

<i>Timelines of events</i>	<i>Three weeks after incident</i>	without decisive action by <i>government</i>
Theme	Process	Circumstance

The nominal phrase "**Timelines of events**" in H11 is the entity that serves as the main theme. It refers to a series of events. It is then followed by a relational process "**three weeks after incident**" that specifies when the timeline relates to. "**without decisive action by govt.**" is a circumstantial element. It describes a condition or period within which government has not yet taken any action or made any decision.

H.12 from *PM News Nigerian*, published on 29th March, 2022.

H12. Kaduna government, NRC speak on Abuja-Kaduna train attack.

<i>Kaduna government, NRC</i>	<i>Speak</i>	<i>on Abuja-Kaduna train attack.</i>
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Actor/sayer	Process	theme

In H12, "**Kaduna government, NRC**" are the participants Sayers or Actors. They are involved in the process of speaking. "**speak**" is a verbal process. It indicates the act of communication or speech performed by the Kaduna government and the Nigerian Railway Corporation (NRC). "**on Abuja- Kaduna train attack**" is the theme or topic of the verbal process. It specifies what the participants are speaking about.

H.13 from *Punch* newspaper, published on 28th March, 2022.

H13. Kaduna Government confirms attack on Abuja-Kaduna train.

<i>Kaduna government</i>	<i>Confirms</i>	<i>Attack on Abuja-Kaduna train .</i>
sensor	Process	phenomenon

In H13 above, "**Kaduna government**" is a Participant that acts as the Senser in the clause. It is the entity that perceives. The process "**confirms**" represents the cognition and also acknowledges action by the government. So it is a mental process. The phrase "**attack on Abuja-Kaduna train**" is the content of confirmation. It is the phenomenon that is being acknowledged as having happened.

H.14 from *DateLine News*, published on 28th March, 2022.

H14. Abuja-Kaduna train comes under attack.

<i>Abuja-Kaduna train</i>	<i>Comes under attack</i>
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Goal	Process
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The participant that acts as the goal or carrier in H14 above is the phrase "**Abuja-Kaduna train**". It is the entity that undergoes the process of being attacked. What comes after it is a material process "**comes under attack**" that describes the event of being attacked. It indicates that the train is the target, the recipient of the action.

H.15 from *Independence Nigeria* newspaper, published on 30th March, 2022.

H15. Workers union blames railway management.

<i>Workers union</i>	<i>Blames</i>	<i>railway management</i>
actor	Process	Goal

In H15, "**Workers union**" is the participant serves as the actor. It performs the action of blaming. It is followed by material process "blames" which shows a concrete action carried out by the union. "**railway management**" being an entity that is being blamed, an entity that is affected by the action of the union, is the goal.

Discussion of results

Analysis of this study, a transitivity analysis of Nigerian newspaper headlines on the Abuja-Kaduna train attack, shows that material processes has the dominance representation of terrorists/bandits. Through these material processes, the terrorists/bandits are consistently portrayed as the active "Actors" of violent actions such as attack, kill, and abduct. The victims on the other hand are grammatically described as passive "Goals" who suffer the consequences. Government and institutional responses, in contrast, are represented through a wider range of process types including mental in terms such as "confirms", verbal in terms such as "speak", and reactive material processes such as "directs, condemns". This describes the country, Nigeria, as responsive and communicative rather than preventative. Circumstantial elements function to present the violence in specific Nigerian contexts through spatial and temporal markers, and also

shape interpretation of the public in evaluative terms such as "unprecedented". These systematic linguistic choices across the newspaper headlines collectively convey ideological weight. They describe the terrorists as threatening agents, victims as vulnerable sufferers, and government as reactive rather than proactive. This influences public perception of terrorism and institutional response in Nigeria through grammatical patterns that go beyond just reporting to active reality construction.

Conclusion:

This study, transitivity analysis of Nigerian newspaper headlines on the Abuja-Kaduna train attack examines, identifies, discloses, by segmenting the clauses contained in media (newspapers) how language functions as a powerful instrument in influencing public perception, how language is used ideologically to position terrorism events. The material processes which dominate the headlines of the selected and examined newspapers depict intensely the violent actions of terrorists/bandits and the negative consequences of their actions on the victims. These material processes also demonstrate the severity of insecurity in Nigeria. In Addition, responses from government and public are reflected in study through the use of other processes. This study also emphasizes the significance of Systemic Functional Grammar as an effective framework for dissecting media discourse. It is used to reveal how linguistic choices in news headlines are strategically employed to create meaning, influence opinion, and transmit socio-political realities.

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