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**An Assessment of the Style of Tenses Used in Television News Broadcasts: The Case Of
NTA Jos Network Center**

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication, for reporters, depends largely on proficiency in the use of language, spoken and written. This study examines the preferred tenses used in the English news broadcasts of the Nigerian Television Authority using NTA Jos Network Centre as a Case Study with a view to showing how the station manipulates the tenses for effective information dissemination. The interest in the use of tenses in news reportage is predicated on the role of tenses in conveying the time and sequence of events to the audience. The objective of the study is to assess the tenses that are used in the headlines, the main stories and the news highlights with a view to revealing the prevalent forms in these three segments of a TV news broadcast. Qualitative research method was employed. Two news bulletins of NTA Jos were randomly selected, presented and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings show that each of the three segments of news broadcasts has its peculiar style with regard to the use of tenses. The simple present is favoured in the headlines while the simple past and the present perfect have the highest rate of occurrence in the body of the news stories and the highlights respectively. Each of these tenses creates stylistic effects which enhance the appeal, freshness and relevance of the news to the audience. The study concludes that it is impossible for reporters to limit themselves to the simple present tense in news writing; the present perfect and the simple past are equally important.

Keywords: Communication, proficiency, tenses, television and NTA.

INTRODUCTION

Communication through language transcends the use of symbols, signs, or sounds. How we say what we intend to say is as important as what we say. Thus, the study of language features which aid the effective communication of our intentions is important. In this study, we focus on tenses in the domain of grammar to explore how language users in the

Nigerian ESL context (reporters in this context) pass their message across in particular tenses in television news reportage [1].

Tense shares a close relationship with *time* as it gives an idea of when an action occurred in relation to the time of speaking. It means the form taken by a verb to denote the time of an action. Bussmann defines *tense* as:

A fundamental grammatical (morphological) category of the verb which expresses the temporal relation between a speech act and the state of affairs or events described in the utterance. This places the event spoken of in relation to the temporal perspective of the speaker (50).

Thus, speakers are expected to situate events within appropriate time using appropriate tenses for effective communication. This is particularly important for reporters because inappropriate use of tenses could affect news stories especially with regard to the time of events or even generate ambiguity, misrepresentation and confusion. What is generally considered as 'news' is so characterized based essentially on the time it happens or when it is reported. This study is concerned with effective communication through the choice of tenses by reporters. It is however not an error analysis of wrong use of tenses but a study of tense choice or preference [2].

The language of broadcasting in Nigeria is the English language. Thus, broadcast organizations employ Standard English in information dissemination. There are grammatical rules governing the application of tenses in Standard English. Any misapplication of such rules is termed errors. Murthy captures it thus: "Unless we have mastered grammar, we cannot speak or write English correctly"[3].

However, the way these rules are applied often varies in different social contexts. Thus, the question of which tense is most appropriate for news broadcast forms the basis for this investigation. Before an event becomes a news item, it must have taken place or

happened at a given time. This means that news reporters almost always report events that have taken place and not what is yet to take place. Although some may predict certain likely future occurrences based on the interpretation of present events and their judgments, news usually stems from the past. Thus, to some, it becomes questionable or even objectionable when an event which occurred in the past is presented as though it is taking place at the time of reporting [4].

On the other hand, it may be argued that news reporting is different from historical documentation. As such, some news reporters would argue that when news is presented in the past using the past tense, it would render such a news story stale or as history. Thus, this study is aimed at exploring these two perspectives with a view to taking a position and making generalizations where appropriate. Journalists are often in a quandary regarding what tense(s) should be used for news broadcasts as news stories always have to have a sense of freshness and immediacy even though the events themselves happened in the past. The various ways in which tenses are put to use for effective information dissemination in relation to the standard ways of its usage are the concerns of this research [5].

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative research method. The data for this research is drawn from selected June 2013 News Bulletins of the Nigerian Television Authority, the largest television network in Africa. For economy, two News Bulletins were selected from the Jos Network Centre of the NTA using random sampling. The method of data analysis employed is textual analysis. The choice is because textual analysis describes the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in texts (Frey, Botan, and Kreps, n.p.). Specifically, qualitative content analysis is embraced to elucidate the preferred patterns of tenses used in news broadcasts. The data were labeled Text A and B for easy cross

reference. Each was divided into three segments to cover the headlines, main story and highlights [6].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tenses play an important role in understanding sentences because they situate the action relative to the time of speaking. Tenses relate the time of an action or an event referred to in a sentence to the time of utterance. They are also indicative of person and number. Declerck contends that “tense is a subject on which the last word has not yet been said” [7].

Grammarians have dealt with the description of tenses and their related challenges with time categories. Quirk and Greenbaum (1994) and Afolayan in Tomori (1977)[8] among other traditional grammarians share similar views on English tenses. They are of the opinion that tense is a feature in a clause that relates the organization of the clause to the nonlinguistic concept of time. They hold the view that tense is used to express time and that tense verb forms help in understanding the correspondence between the form of the verb used and the concept of time. Palmer is of the opinion that tenses are verb forms that mostly indicate past and present time in three main ways: mark temporal relations of past and present time; mark relations in sequence of tense of reported speech; mark unreality in conditional clauses and wishes (69). Boadi, Grieve and Nwankwo share the same view with Palmer but contend that tense verb forms can only be determined contextually. They say “English has no future tense but future time reference is made by both the verbal group and the adverbial in a given context” (216). For example, *I will give it* without a context and an adverbial is like saying *I can give it* or *I may give it*. Their view is that a verbal group of itself without regard to a situation does not refer to time and has no meaning [9].

Pryse posits that “tense is a means of differentiating in time the various thoughts and happenings that humans usually chronicle in words” (25). She further asserts that it is the verb or the action word that is affected by the tense. As such, tenses are a part of

English sentences that need to be used accurately as every action happens at a different time. According to Aliyu, "Tense is the means of expressing time relationship through the particular grammatical form of the verb" (58). He further states that there are two basic tenses in English, the past and the non-past. The non-past in this sense is the present tense. The recognition of only two tenses underscores the fact that the verb changes only two times to reflect the time of an action. However, these two basic tenses, present and past, have aspects which indicate whether the action is viewed as being in progress (progressive aspect) or having been completed (perfective aspect) [6].

The style of tenses used in news broadcast has received the attention of linguists. Quirk and Greenbaum say that "in news discourse, the present tense is used conventionally to refer either to events which occurred in the past or to present events" (179). Thus, the present tense is easily manipulated to reflect whatever time the user wishes. Ben Yagoda a freelance writer and media critic says: "writers did not haul out the present, it was for specific ends. Most frequently they have used what has been called the 'historic present' to create a sense of immediacy". Duskova is of the opinion that "the present tense is the fundamental tense in the system of English tenses. In addition to present events, it can also express future and past events" (217). This means a time in the past is presented and referred to as though the event or activity were happening now. As Quirk and Greenbaum put it, "the historic present describes the past as if it were happening now, it conveys something of the dramatic immediacy of the eye witness account" (181). This implies that the present tense is used to portray the urgent nature of the news story which is regarded in terms of its value and worthiness [9].

Some scholars and journalists are however opposed to the style of using the present tense to narrate a past event arguing that it sounds odd. They question why the present tense is used to tell past stories pointing out that besides being grammatically wrong, it is misleading and dishonest. Scott Libin a former news director says, "Try talking to somebody that way and see what kind of funny looks you get." This style of tense usage

has the potential to create a rift between the reporters and the audience because the reporters do not talk like everyone else. One of the major principles of discourse as advocated in the maxims of the Conversational Principles is telling the truth, which is also a principle in journalism. If this is the case why then do journalists tell a story which has already happened using the present tense or be ambiguous about a time reference of a report for the sake of freshness and immediacy when it is impossible in a conversation?

The thrust of this study is to examine how the tense forms used in news broadcast feature in the news bulletin of the Nigerian Television Authority. The study analyzes the tenses that are used in the headlines, the main stories and the news highlights with a view to revealing the prevalent forms in these three segments of a news broadcast [10].

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

TEXT A: NEWS STORIES FROM THE NIGERIAN TELEVISION AUTHORITY JOS (JUNE 20TH, 2013)

TEXT A1: HEADLINES

Major Stories Tonight

Plateau State House of Assembly resumes sitting, announces new legislative calendar.

Registrar-General, Chartered Institute of Certified Secretaries and Reporters inaugurates University of Jos Chapel.

Plus, Royal Father advises Ministries, Departments and Agencies of the Plateau State Government to harmonize their programmes for optimum development.

TEXT A2: MAIN STORY

Now the News in full:

(i) The Plateau State House of Assembly resumed sitting today.

Abdulwahab Babankanti reports that today's session witnessed the announcement of a new Legislative Calendar for the third session of the Seventh Assembly [11].

(ii) Employers of labour have been advised to engage the services of only competent hands as Secretaries, Personal Assistants and Management Aides to enhance productivity and efficiency.

The Registrar-General of the Chartered Institute of Certified Secretaries and Reporters ICSR **said** this at the inauguration of the Chartered Institute of Certified Secretaries and Reporters of the University of Jos Chapel.

(iii). The Gbong Gwom Jos, Da Jacob Gyang Buba, has advised Ministries, Departments and Agencies of the Plateau State Government whose duties **are** interrelated to harmonize their programmes in order to avoid wastages and ensure even development across the state.

The Gbong Gwom **gave** this advice when members of the Board of the Plateau State Water Board led by the Chairman Mr Samaila Danko Makama paid him a courtesy call at his palace in Jos.

(iv). Wife of the Plateau State Governor Ngo Talatu Jang has called on intending couples to know their genotype as a preventive measure against sickle cell anaemia.

The Governor's wife gave the advice at a media initiative for Sickle Cell Awareness Campaign to mark this year's World Sickle Cell Day.

(v). The NASCO Group of Companies has donated some of its Household products to inmates of the Jos Prison.

Bilkisu Nuhu reports that the Administrative General Manager, Alhaji Shehu Sule, **led** the NASCO Team[12].

(vi). The Senator Representing Plateau North, Senator Gyang Pwajok, has extended his goodwill to the Plateau State Union of Journalists with the refurbishing of the conference room of the NUJ Press Centre in Jos.

(vii). The League of Veteran Journalists Plateau State Chapter has paid a condolence visit to the former Deputy Governor of the State Dame Pauline Tallen over the passing away of her father late Miskoom Paul Kattiems.

Correspondent Priscilla Gurumnaan reports that members of the league also **visited** the Plateau State CAN Chairman to console him over the death of his wife.

(viii). The Senator Representing Plateau Central Senatorial Zone, Senator Joshua Chibi Dariye says although the death of the district Head of Mangu Da Michael Hirse **is** a great loss, there are lessons to be learnt from his life style.

The Senator stated this at the funeral of the District Head[13].

TEXT A3: HIGHLIGHTS

That ends the News but for another look at major stories

The Plateau State House of Assembly resumes sitting today and announced a new legislative calendar.

The University of Jos Chapel of the Chartered Institute of Certified Secretaries and Reporters has been inaugurated.

Finally, the Gbong Gwom Jos, Da Jacob Gyang Buba, has advised Ministries, Departments and Agencies of the Plateau State Government to harmonize their programmes for optimum development[14].

TEXT B: NEWS STORIES FROM THE NIGERIAN TELEVISION AUTHORITY JOS (JUNE 24TH, 2013)

TEXT B1: HEADLINES

Plateau State Ministry of Tourism and Culture **scores** itself high in captive breeding of animals.

Senator Dariye continues tour of his constituency with pledge to provide more developmental projects.

Correspondent **has** a report on The World Olympic Day.

TEXT B2

Those **were** headlines. Now details and other stories:

(i)The Plateau State Ministry of Tourism and Culture **says** its captive breeding of animals at the Jos Wildlife Park **has** been very successful.

Acting General Manager of the Ministry Mr John Doy said about ten species have so far been successfully bred.

(ii)The Senator Representing Plateau Central Zone Senator Joshua Chibi Dariye says he will continue to be at the forefront of the struggle for peace in the zone and the entire state.

Chief Dariye stated this in Kanam as part of his interactive meeting with his constituents.

(iii)Commitment to end racism in sports across the world **is** the aim of this year's Olympic Day which has as theme "Racism and Sports".

(iv)The Pioneer Team of a New Parish of the Redeemed Christian Church of God inaugurated at Eliel Centre Gold and Base Rayfield has been urged to work assiduously to attract more worshippers to the church within the shortest time possible.

That was part of the exhortation by Pastor Charles Adegoke who is in-charge of the Redeemed Christian Church of God Region Eight, Plateau Province[15].

(v) As the Nigeria National League enters its twenty-seventh week, Giwa football club of Jos is still topping the Division "A" of the league after the restructuring of the table due to the withdrawal of Zamfara United.

(vi) Chief of staff Government House Jos Mr Francis Bot led staff of the Government House to condole the families of their own who died recently.

The deceased, Mrs Eunice Gotip, was a House Keeper at the Government House while Joseph Datiri was one of the official drivers to the Governor.

TEXT B3: HIGHLIGHTS

That ends the News and now for a recap:

You heard that the Senator representing Plateau Central Zone, Senator Joshua Dariye has pledged to provide more developmental projects for people of his constituency.

The Plateau State Ministry of Tourism and Culture has rated itself high in animal captive breeding.

Our Correspondent also brought you a report on the essence of The World Olympic Day Celebration[16].

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

(a) ANALYSIS OF HEADLINES

Table 1: Distribution of Tenses Used in Text A1

Simple Present	Present Continuous	Present Perfect	Simple Past	Past Perfect
Resumes				
Announces				
Inaugurates				
Advices				

Table 2: Distribution of Tenses Used in Headlines in Text B1

Simple Present	Present Continuous	Present Perfect	Simple Past	Past Perfect
scores				
continues				
Has				

Tables 1 and 2 above show the distribution of tenses used in headlines in television news broadcast. The analysis indicates that headlines are written in the simple present tense as no other tense form was used in the headlines. The choice of the present tense gives the headlines the immediacy and urgency that lend the news attention and gives the story additional freshness. As observed by Reah, “Headlines encapsulate the story in a minimum number of words which attracts the audience to the story and if it appears on the front page, attracts the reader to the paper” (13-14). A well-scripted headline draws attention to a

story but when a headline is weak, there is no motivation to watch, listen or read the news. Besides, since headlines thrive on economy, using the simple present tense which is composed of one word makes the headline brief and punchy.

(b) ANALYSIS OF MAIN STORIES

Table 3: Distribution of Tenses Used in Text A2

s/n	Simple Present	Present Continuous	Present Perfect	Simple Past	Past Perfect	Present Future
i)	Reports			Resumed		
				Witnessed		
ii)			has been advised	Said		
iii)	Are		has advised	Gave		
				Paid		
iv)			has called	Gave		
v)	Reports		has donated			
				Led		
vi)			has extended			
vii)	Reports		has paid	Visited		
viii)	Says			Stated		
	Is					
	Are					

Table 4: Distribution of Tenses Used in Text B2

S/N	Simple Present	Present Continuous	Present Perfect	Simple Past Tense	Past Perfect	Present Future
i)	Says		has	said		
			have			
ii)	Says			stated		will continue
iii)	Is					
	Has					
iv)	Is		has been	was		
			urged			
v)	Enters	is topping				
vi)				led		
				died		
				was		
				was		

Tables 3 and 4 show that the simple past tense is used preponderantly in the main news stories. This choice is not unconnected with the fact that the main stories report past events. Most of these past events would sound odd if reported in the simple present tense. For example, all the verbs in text B2 (vi) are in the simple past given that the news is about the demise of two persons. Though the past tense was used the most in the news stories analyzed, the stories did not lose their freshness and the messages were passed across to the audience effectively. The next prevalently used tense is the simple present tense followed by the present perfect. On the other hand, the present continuous tense and the present future occur only once in the data while the past continuous and the past perfect do not occur at all.

These findings are not in line with popular belief about the style of tense usage in news broadcast. Favouring the use of the simple present in news Quirk and Greenbaum aver that “The historic present describes the past as if it were happening now. It conveys something of the dramatic immediacy of the eye witness account” (181). On the contrary, the simple present tense is used mostly in the introductory verbs while the events being reported are cast in the simple past, to capture their completion in the past, or in the present perfect, to denote that although the actions took place in the past the effects in the present are viewed to be more important than the time of occurrence. The present perfect also denotes a recent past action. However, the use of the simple present tense in the introductory verbs not only creates a sense of immediacy in the news but also allows for the use of any tense the writer wishes to use.

(c) ANALYSIS OF HIGHLIGHTS

Table 5: Distribution of Tenses Used in Text A3

Simple Present	Present Continuous	Present Perfect	Simple Past	Past Perfect	Simple Future
Ends		has been	Announced		
			inaugurated		
Resumes		has advised			

Table 6: Distribution of Tenses Used in Text B3

Simple Present	Present Continuous	Present Perfect	Simple Past	Past Perfect	Simple Future
Ends		has	Heard		
			pledged		

has rated	Brought
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Tables 5 and 6 show the distribution of tenses used in the highlights of the news also called the wrap or the recap. Though there is not much literature on the type of tense used in news highlights, it can be gleaned from the tables that the present perfect tense is used the most. The prevalent use of this tense rather than the others is because a news recap seeks to re-echo and reemphasize the import of past events in the present as well as the fact that the action of news reading which makes the news come alive has just been concluded.

CONCLUSION

The analyses generally show that, despite popular submissions on the prevalence of the simple present tense in news reports, the simple past tense and the present perfect also feature preponderantly in television news broadcasts while the other tenses are rarely used. However, the frequency of these tenses depends on the news segment: the simple present is favoured in the headlines while the simple past and the present perfect have the highest rate of occurrence in the main news stories and the highlights respectively. It could therefore rightly be said that it is odd to write a story or a report conversationally using the present tense for an event which the news reporter knows happened in the past. The study concludes that it is impossible for reporters to limit themselves to the simple present tense in news writing; the present perfect and the simple past are equally important. However, the use of the simple present tense gives the news a sense of immediacy and freshness and also enables the reporters to switch to other relevant tenses within the same sentence as permissible in the sequence of tenses. The present perfect enables the reporter to express that though the news being reported is a past occurrence it still has relevance in the present. Thus, its use re-echoes the effects of past events and lends them freshness.

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