

African Print Media Misuse of the English Definite Article 'The': A Content Analysis of Seven Nigerian Newspapers' Lead Items

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ABSTRACT

The nature, distribution and significance of Nigerian newspapers misuse of the English Article 'THE' are isolated and discussed in this article. Spanning the period January, February and March, 1986, a total of 78 lead articles (including front and back page news items) from seven Nigerian private and government newspapers are scanned.

The results show that *The National Concord* has the highest manifested frequency of occurrence of the misuse of the definite article "THE" in its lead, including front and back page stories. (There were 78 copies of the paper in three months of publication and not less than 78 errors).

The National Concord was followed by the *New Nigerian* newspaper which in 78 issues had 49 errors of the

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misapplication of the English elliptical rule. The paper with the lowest incidence of the misuse of 'THE' was the *Daily Star*. It was virtually free of the error in question (only 2 errors in 78 issues).

The position of occurrence of the linguistic error discussed and their distribution, have a number of implications for the training of the African journalist and for his mastery of the intricate art of writing for effective newspaper communication.

**Mauvais usage de l'article défini "THE" dans la presse
écrite africaine: une analyse du contenu des titres de 7
journaux nigériens**

RESUME

Le nature, le distribution et l'importance du mauvais usage de l'article anglais "THE" sont isolées et analysés dans cet article. Couvrant la période de Janvier à Mars 1986 un total de 78 articles (des pages Une et dernières) de 7 journaux privés et gouvernementaux du Nigeria sont passés en revue.

Les résultats montrent que le "National Concord" a la plus forte fréquence d'occurrence manifeste du mauvais usage de l'article défini "THE" dans ses leads, y compris dans les articles à la Une et en dernière page. (Sur 78 numéros du journal sur 3 mois de parution il n'y avait pas moins de 78 erreurs).

Le "National Concord", est suivi du "New Nigerian" qui en 78 numéros avait 49 erreurs de mauvais emploi de la règle elliptique en anglais. Le journal ayant la plus faible incidence du mauvais usage du "THE" est le "Daily Star". Il ne comportait presque pas d'erreur sur le sujet (seulement 2 sur 78 numéros).

La position de l'occurrence de l'erreur linguistique analysée et sa distribution ont des implications dans la formation du journaliste africain et sa maîtrise de l'art difficile de la rédaction pour une communication effective.

Introduction

In the interest of economy in written communication, especially in newspaper reporting, good usage of English accepts the omission of certain words from the sentence pattern. Such linguistically ethical omissions are called Ellipsis. However, words necessary for the effective communicating of clear meaning must never be omitted. Such deviations from accepted linguistic practices become errors.

The newspaper is, by its nature, process, and use, communication in a hurry: communication governed by time (deadlines... timelines...), and space (story size... and item position...). A consequence of the time, space and market factors of this media is the observable mistakes or errors that increasingly creep into the news, the features, and other items of news paper copy. Two broad types of errors - typographic and linguistic - are easily discernible.

Typographic errors are usually non-human errors, and, while being unavoidable in any normal mechanical process of newspaper production, do often depict some degree of carelessness in type-setting, paste-up, proofs and editing. Typographic errors may frustrate attempts at high visibility and readability.

Linguistic errors, on the other hand, are more subtle and, unlike typographic, less glaring (except to those who by training and experience have learnt to be linguistically wary). Linguistic errors are deviant linguistic structures. When not deliberately and creatively used, to constitute distinct newspaper style, they invariably depict the attitude of the media house, and probably point to the level of communicative competence of the journalist.

The feeling runs high among Nigeria's educated elites, among language teachers in institutions of higher learning and among communication specialists that the Nigerian

newspaper today has very little to offer the student learning to write better and communicate with readers more effectively (Ogunseye, 1986).

There are charges (Adesanoye 1973; Odejide 1986) to the effect that Nigerian newspapers offer no admirable precepts nor practices for learning the mastery of writing for effective communication because numerous linguistic errors clutter the face of daily newspapers and especially the front pages. Besides, many Nigerian print media journalists appear, from their writing, not adequately equipped with the skill of the profession, and in particular writing to be emulated.

Of all the emphases of the different pages, of the newspapers, the lead articles (on the front page) presents three interesting peculiarities. Its spatial prominence, its compelling timeliness, and its agenda-setting effect set it apart from other news items.

The lead story also has a specific readership and goal. Depending on editorial or gatekeeping policies, it is quite often written and projected to for various reasons one of which is newspaper sales or circulation. It is equally aimed at a larger or smaller proportion of the paper's reading public than usual.

The Problem

The front and back lead stories of Nigerian newspapers are replete with errors in which the definite article THE is often, and wrongly, omitted from sentence structures. The social and psychological effects of such deviations could be unsettling because the newspaper and the journalist are often unconsciously taken by many readers to be models of linguistic excellence. Very few Nigerians qualify as models.

When the spatial prominence to the lead, and its media effect (or of the reader-effect on it) are considered; when it is recognized that every newspaper needs to maintain a good corporate image before her varied reading publics, then the lead item, like the editorial, cannot afford not to be well written.

Effective newspaper writing is that which produces more than merely interesting and understanding reading. It is writing which stimulates the reader without actually offending his sensibility. It is not writing that flays the

nerves on account of innocuous-looking linguistic errors that have become quietly fashionable, either because they have not been openly challenging, or because the society at large has acquiesced in them.

A good newspaper article, therefore, ought first of all to catch the reader's attention before inducing him to read on. Errors, whatever is the type, can quite easily put one off at the first, crucial state.

Attitude

The misuse of THE occurs basically in two ways. It could be inappropriately omitted (its appropriate omission in language circles is rightly an ellipsis). On the other hand, it could be inappropriately included. The following examples are from Nigerian newspapers:

1. *Trial of those involved in last December's abortive coup began in Lagos yesterday behind closed doors.(Daily Times, 23.1.1986, Front Lead)
2. Federal Government has approved a maximum increase in newspaper cover price to 30 kono per copy. (New Nigerian Newspaper, 15.3.1986, Front Page Story).
3. *Federal Commissioner for Local Government in Oyo State, Alhaji Busari Adelakun convicted for corruptly enriching himself to the tune of about N1m. told * Justice Bello Review Panel yesterday that he received the money as *gift. (National Concord, 21.2.1986, Front Lead).
4. Security men at *domestic wing of the Murtala Muhammad Airport broke an age-long tradition ... (The Guardian, 13.2.1986, Front Page Story)
*(position of error)

The mis-use of THE in the sentence structures of newspaper writing, must be seen partly in the context of language transfer or mother-tongue interference, and partly in that of inadequate linguistic exposure, and of previous defective methodology.

The increasing spate of the criticism of Nigeria's media style, coupled with the sheer frequency of the occurrence of patterns of linguistic deviations in the written

communication of newspapers, indicates a crying need for decisions about change. The change is mainly attitudinal and to some extent pedagogical.

The acquisition, by the Nigerian journalist, of a high degree of communicative competence in English as a result of adequate motivation, will greatly reduce the incidence of performance errors. Unfortunately, however, the use for communication, of English in Nigeria at all educational and social levels suffers a number of set backs:

English remains, for Nigerians, a foreign language (in so far as it is neither Nigerian or African); it never was freely adopted by the people as *official* language. The circumstances of its imposition are generally well known to merit further discussions here.

A national reawakening, epitomized by the 1977 World Bank and African Festival of The Arts and Culture (FESTAC), which was held in Nigeria, inevitably ensured that a silent hostility by Nigerians, to English, has taken roots.

The long-term deleterious effects of this national attitude are only beginning to show on the linguistic horizon. According to Ikiddeh (1986):

English is not taken half as seriously as it was twenty years ago ... In vain, we blame poor teachers of English, lazy students, inadequate text-books and teaching aids... Even among the educated, the grammatical use of the language is today the exception rather than the rule.

Experience shows that nationalism notwithstanding, English has come to stay, and has taken firm roots as a Nigerian phenomenon. Yet the people, the country, must evolve a truly national language because a refusal to do this will continue to sear the nation's conscience and leave citizens in a perpetual mental state of varying degrees of cultural alienation.

Scope and Purpose of Study

Our aim in this paper is to highlight the alarmingly increasing occurrence and frequency of the misuse, in our newspaper communication, of the English definite article THE.

The media, of which the newspaper is a prominent category, have very powerful effects on readers. As Baran (1973) has observed, there is a strong tendency to ignore the scope, direction and effect of the constant barrage from the mass media. In time, however, resistances wear thin and media norms, whether good or bad, are internalized by the young and old.

This study, which is an exercise in newspaper linguistic error analysis, sought to find out objectively how many copies of selected English-medium Nigerian newspapers had the error of the inappropriate non-use of the definite article. It also sought to know its actual frequency of occurrence and in what page-positions of the selected newspapers.

Five research questions were posed:

- 1) Do the front and back pages of Nigeria newspapers manifest the misuse (or inappropriate non-use) of the definite articles THE?
- 2) Are the lead stories of Nigerian newspapers replete with the anomalous use of THE in the opening sentences / paragraphs of the items?
- 3) Are the errors - misuse of THE - consistent for each newspapers house over time, in structure, pattern and position of occurrence?
- 4) Is the frequency of occurrence of the misapplication of the ellipsis rule (of THE) higher in government -owned newspapers than in private newspapers?
- 5) Do newspapers with the highest circulation figures display a greater lack of obedience to the linguistic rule of propriety in the use of THE in the front and back news items?

Limitations of the Study

The content-analysis of copy was confined to seven daily newspapers published in English. There were about 19 Nigerian newspapers as at December 1986 - January 1987, when the data for this study was collated. Today there are over 28 English language dailies in Nigeria and as such a selection of only seven may appear not adequately representative of all the newspapers. Most papers are government-financed and chiefly megaphones of the owners.

In any case, the need not to confine the selections to too few linguistic and geographical areas of the country was an important consideration, hence the deliberate choice of:

1. *The New Nigerian* (Kaduna / North / Hausa-speaking Area / Federal Government-Owned).
2. *The Daily Times* (Lagos / South / Federal Government owned / oldest paper).
3. *The Sketch* (Ibadan / South / Yoruba-speaking Area / State-Government owned).
4. *The Daily Star* (Enugu / Igbo-speaking Area / East / State-Government owned).
5. *The Nigerian Herald* (Ilorin / North-South Boundary / State-Government owned).
6. *The Guardian* (Lagos / Private / Youngest paper).
7. *The National Concord* (Lagos / Private / South).

As at December 1986, there were no privately-owned daily newspapers based in the north of the country, nor in the East. Apart from the National Archives (Ibadan), it was not easy to obtain complete sets of past copies of Nigerian dailies elsewhere, not even at the University of Ibadan with its excellent deposits of old copies.

More disturbing was the restriction imposed on the researcher by library protocol: one could not officially be allowed to take old newspapers outside of the archives or library grounds. This apart, one was not allowed more than one or two sets of any old copies, for study, at any time. The implication was that there was a limit to how many sets one could look through and complete in a given span of time.

Methodology

Copy Selections

Seven Nigerian newspapers (excluding the Sunday editions) were used in this study. They are:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1) <i>The Daily Times</i> | (DTN) Fed. Government-owned |
| 2) <i>The New Nigerian</i> | (NNN) Fed. Government-owned |
| 3) <i>The Guardian</i> | (GDN) Private Newspaper |
| 4) <i>The National Concord</i> | (NCD) Private Newspaper |

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|------------------------|
| 5) <i>The Daily Sketch</i> | (SKT) | State Government-owned |
| 6) <i>The Nigerian Herald</i> | (HLD) | State Government-owned |
| 7) <i>The Daily Star</i> | (STR) | State Government-owned |

For each newspaper, all the daily copies for the months of January, February and March 1986 (excluding Sundays) were made a part of the experiment. Sunday editions have different editors and often different staff and policies. Besides, Sunday newspapers are not 'dailies', hence their exclusion from this study.

Newspaper Profile

All the newspapers used in this study are tabloids. Two of them, as indicated on the previous page, are *private* because the ownership and control are by private citizens of Nigeria. The other five newspapers are owned and controlled either by the Federal Government (or its agency), or by some State Government (or its representatives). *The Sketch* has a peculiar management. Three State governments own the company.

The oldest newspaper establishment included in this experiment is the *Daily Times*. Founded in 1926, it has over 60 years of publishing experience. The youngest newspaper selected is 'The Guardian'. It is less than five years old but has begun strongly to compete with the circulation figure of the 'Daily Times'.

Not all the newspapers are members of the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC). It is therefore impossible to state validly which paper has what circulation figure. But if experience is anything to go by, it would appear that the *Daily Times* has remained for many years quite popular in most parts of the country. It is thus a national newspaper in the sense in which the *Daily Star*, the 'Nigerian Herald' and *The Sketch* are regional newspapers.

The New Nigerian is based at Kaduna. It is the oldest and most popular newspaper in the north of the country although it has a nation-wide circulation. The debut of *The Guardian* about five years ago, in Lagos, elicited general comments about the beginning of "newspaper elitism", and also suggestions and opinions that it probably was the only Nigerian newspaper with the highest educationally exposed staff, and with the best written communication style.

Certainly, its tabloid shape, its peculiarly attractive logo and masthead, make-up, lay-out and body-type were rather different from all other Nigerian newspapers.

The headline display for most newspapers in Nigeria is usually in type-faces of not less than 96 points, all capitals or banner headlines. For 'The Guardian', the display headline is never in caps nor of banner format. It seems by this, to exude a confidence in its ability to sell rather than get attention by banner headlines.

The search for the occurrence of linguistic errors was restricted to that of the definite article, THE, as contained in or missing from the opening sentence/paragraph of the particular story scanned.

Most text-books on English recognize that there are two types of articles - the definite and the indefinite. Many writers also use the word "determiner" for *the*, *a*, *an*, the definite and indefinite articles.

The content analysis was confined entirely to two prominent pages of each of the seven newspapers selected: (1) The Front Page, (2) The Back Page.

News items, news-stories etc scanned on each of the two pages were of the following types:

- (1) Front Lead items
- (2) Back Lead items
- (3) Front page news items (apart from the lead)
- (4) Back page news-story (apart from the lead)

A total of 78 copies of each of the seven papers was scanned to determine its performance level in the use of THE. In other words 546 newspaper issues were content-analyzed.

The total number of copies per month which contained any number of THE error, for each newspaper was recorded 'B'. The frequency and distribution of THE error for each copy was ascertained 'C'. The total number of lead articles containing errors of the misuse of THE was noted 'D'.

'B', 'C' and 'D' (see Table 1) were then reduced to percentage scores for ease of interpretation.

TABLE I
NEWSPAPER MISUSE OF 'THE': DISTRIBUTION AND FREQUENCY

													%		
Number of Issues Containing Errors B					Frequency of Errors C				Lead Having Errors D				Copies With Errors	Ratio of Errors	Error of Lead Alone
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total	B	C	D
DTN	7	7	4	18	7	7	6	20	3	1	0	4	13.8	10.2	5.6
NNN	9	8	15	32	11	10	28	49	4	3	7	14	24.6	24.9	19.7
GDN	9	6	6	21	9	6	7	22	3	3	0	6	16.2	11.2	8.5
NCD	17	15	17	49	27	25	26	78	10	16	18	44	37.7	39.6	62
HLD	2	2	4	8	2	2	4	8	0	0	0	0	6.2	4.1	0
STR	0	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	1.5	1.01	2	0
SKT	4	6	2	12	5	10	2	18	0	3	0	3	9.2	9.1	4.2
130					197				71				Summary in %		

***Note:** $\frac{78 \times 7}{78 \times 7} = 546$ copies consulted.

Findings and Discussions

Results

Of the 546 copies from seven Nigerian newspapers whose front page, back page and lead items were scanned, *The Daily Star* a state government-owned newspaper, was the only paper that was virtually error-free, i.e. free of the error of the inappropriate non-use of the definite article THE. It had only two 'article' errors in three months of daily publications. This figure is insignificant when compared to the 'Concord's'.

Furthermore, in *The Daily Star* all the lead items for the period under study and where definite articles occurred, were free of its misuse unlike in other newspapers.

In rather sharp contrast to the *Daily Star*, *The National Concord* a private newspaper, manifested the largest distribution as well as the greatest frequency of occurrence of the misapplication of the article THE. Approximately 63% (or 49 of the 78 copies of all the three months' issues) were not without the error of the wrong ellipsis of THE.

Of the lead stories scanned, *The Concord* again displayed the highest proportion of the misuse of THE (see Table 1). From the results obtained, it becomes clear that not all Nigerian newspapers depict evidence of the misuse of THE in the opening sentences of lead, front, and back news items. Actually, most did. This means that written communication in our newspapers can, without doubt, be improved upon. This can only take place when there is a deliberate planned effort.

The usage or abuse, in the lead stories of the papers studied, is consistent for each newspaper house over time, in pattern, and distribution (see Table 1). The opening sentences are usually the positions of occurrence of the inappropriate non-use of THE. Therefore, the offending of the linguistic sensibility of the reader takes place at the beginning of the lead item even when the body of the story is interesting, understandable, and the facts well presented.

The size of THE error distribution for each newspaper varied with the degree of the occurrence of the error. It was highest in the *National Concord* and lowest (or non-existent) in the *Daily Star*, and in the *Nigerian Herald*. The Range was 39.6% to 1.01% (as shown in the Table). The results also give room for elucidating on some other interesting points.

The *Nigerian Herald*, The *Daily Star*, and the *Sketch* are regional newspapers and owned by state governments. From the data obtained, we deduce that all the three newspapers (with the exception of the *Sketch* in the month of February) had no lead stories in which the rules of the ellipsis game was flouted.

Furthermore, these three newspapers, together, stand clearly apart from the other five used in this study. The three together form only 17% of the total number of copies that contained the definite article error. Secondly, together they form less than 15% of the actual sum of errors manifested in the 130 copies that were not error-free. Thirdly, they hold no more than 4% of the total published lead stories containing the THE error.

The findings indicate that the greatest culprit is a private newspaper - The *National Concord*. And the best performing, a government newspaper. To argue that only state-government newspapers care about their style of written communication, especially in respect of the linguistic appropriateness in the usage or abuse of THE, would probably be far from reality because there were only two private newspapers analyzed. But the fact is: The two private newspapers lag behind either the two Federal government papers or of three state-government-controlled newspapers, in their conformity with the linguistic rule of the use of THE.

The state government papers performed better than the Federal government media. And yet the personnel in a state-government-controlled newspaper house cannot actually be said to be different from the writers and other staff of a federal-government-owned media, or of a private newspaper enterprise. The thought makes one wonder: Is the Nigerian journalist not a product of the society in which he lives, influencing and being influenced upon by the society? And is the print media in Nigeria not operating in an English-As-A-Second Language setting where the writer has to grapple incessantly with interference or transfer problems and culture conflict?

These are excuses often bandied about in order to escape the charges of bad journalistic style, and bad writing. The performances of *The Daily Star* and of the *Nigerian Herald* make the English-as-a-non indigenous language excuse untenable. The media has the social responsibility of not

only watching, informing, educating and entertaining the society in which it is allowed to operate, but doing so in an accurate as well as linguistically appropriate medium. We cannot pretend not to know that the power of the press in shaping certain attitudes especially of the youth, is great.

Implications

The definite article THE is, in itself, meaningless except in the context of its use with nouns and noun phrases. A study of THE of its absence, is, in reality, an excursion into the realm of nouns.

There are singular and plural count nouns, and non-count or mass nouns in the English language (Hornby 1975; Quirk and Greenbaum 1979). Other categorization abound in the literature.

The definite article does not exist in all languages although there is nothing in other languages quite like the distribution of THE in English (Adams 1962). Russian, Polish and other Slavonic tongues have no articles (Kaluza 1963). Finnish, unlike Swedish, has no articles. Persians tend to omit THE ... Italians on the other hand use THE everywhere (Adams 1962, Jafarpur 1979; Lott 1983).

Some languages e.g. French, Spanish, Arabic, Hausa, do have structures such that the definite article rather than existing as distinct lexical item is embedded within some other linguistic units of the language, or takes on what linguists call the "zero" determiner, i.e. 'no-the'.

According to Adeyanju (1979), the equivalent of the English determiner THE is found in Hausa as a noun suffix -n or -r. But experience indicates that the non-linguistically trained will deny that THE exists in the language.

The Oxford Dictionary of The Yoruba Language (2 Edition) translates the definite article THE as *nā*, and tags it an adjective. THE in Yoruba is actually signalled by *nā*. It also takes on the zero determiner status. Positionally, it comes after the noun or noun phrase, and forms a part of it.

THE, in Igbo, does not exist as a distinct lexical item. It is also not bound in any affix position. It has a "zero determiner" or finds a weak substitute in the demonstrative pronoun that.

Consider:

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1) Nyem mma ahu | = | Give me knife that
(i.e. Give me the knife) |
| 2) Nni di n'ime ulo | = | Food is inside house
(i.e. The food is in the house) |
| 3) Nwanyi ona arahu ura? =
Woman is she sleeping? | | (i.e. Is the woman asleep) |

The above pictures show that the Nigerian students consciously and formally ought to learn the rules of the use of the definite article (or its non-use) in sentences, otherwise transfer or mother-tongue interference problems will take their toll on his speech and writing.

In order to effect this, so that incomplete learning of the definite article is reduced, the indicting by Ngara (1983) of various persons involved in Education should be noted:

There are areas of English grammar which receive insufficient attention from text-book writers and teachers. These include the article (which is dealt with superficially).

In addition to faulty texts and defective methodology, we need to recognize that the linguistic problems of the journalist-in-training (and of any Nigerian student regardless of his discipline) can be made less worrying through 'strong national motivation'. As Nickel (1971) puts it.

Motivation is one of those major factors in language learning likely to reduce problems of difficulty in the light of some pedagogical optimism.

When the search for a truly indigenous national language eventually begins, and it is important that Nigeria evolve one, the subtle pervasive hostility to English should, at any rate, now, be discouraged through strong, unrelenting, national motivation. We should deliberately create favourable conditions for the healthy linguistic growth of individuals whose mother-tongues are not English but who must live in a world and technology where English is, for now, inevitable.

Finally syllabuses and language programmes of Nigerian institutions of higher learning (Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Universities) should be reviewed to include *writing*

courses as distinct from *English Language* or *the use of English* as at present obtains.

Apart from this, all first year students of post-secondary schools should be made to take courses in the use of English irrespective of their disciplines. This will serve as a language remedial programme. It will also ensure an uninterrupted linguistic exposure which students in Nigeria need.

Notes

The definite article has three distinctions: It is specific it is generic and it occurs in a 'zero' form. The zero form is a no-the form. With definite specific reference, the definite article is used for all noun classes (i.e. of count and non-count) e.g.

- Where is the pen I bought? (singular count)
- Where are the pens I bought? (plural, count)
- Where is the ink I bought? (non-count)

But with indefinite specific reference, non-count and plural count nouns take the zero article (Quick and Greenbaum 1979). When they have generic reference, both concrete and abstract non-count nouns, are used with the zero article (o).

1. He likes wine/wood/cheese (concrete non-count)
i.e. He likes (o) wine/wood/cheese (generic)
 2. He likes history, long-walks, games ... (abstract)
i.e. He like (o) history, long-walks, games. (generic)
- p.72

THE, forms part of the noun head, and normally appears in two positions in a given linguistic structures. *Initial position* e.g. *The* Chief of General Staff ... *The* Head of State ... *The* President of Nigeria ... *The* Olu of Warri ... *The* Queen of England ...

The second position where THE occurs is within the sentence or the linguistic structure, (as in this sentence you have just read).

In either of the two positions, THE plays a prominent role. It particularizes or specifies the noun i.e. it distinguishes it from all other classes or categories. There are never two 'Olus'

of Warri and it is unthinkable to have two Queens of England at the same time.

Hornby (1975); Quirk and Greenbaum (1979); Zandvoort (1980) and other writers show variously that the definite article has many functions:

1. It identifies or acts as a signal of specification
2. It indicates definiteness, uniqueness peculiarness
3. It emphasizes the idea of collectivity suggesting that of 'the whole body of'.
4. It sometimes has a weakly demonstrative force corresponding to THIS or more frequently THAT.

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