

A Syntactic Analysis of Lexical and Functional Heads in Nigerian English Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract

Nigerian English newspaper headlines have been examined mostly from stylistic, pragmatic, critical discourse analytic and critical linguistic perspective but not from a syntactic perspective in terms of lexical and functional heads. This study, therefore, examines lexical and functional heads in Nigerian newspaper headlines. The data for this study were collected from Nigerian national newspapers including ‘The Punch’, ‘The Nation’, ‘Nigerian Tribune’, ‘Vanguard’ and ‘The Sun’. The study uses the X-bar theory of Generative Grammar to syntactically analyze the data. It is discovered that both lexical and functional heads are projected in Nigerian newspaper headlines. However, their representation depends on the syntactic configuration of the headlines. Sentence type headlines have more heads than phrasal headlines. While both heads occur in the headlines, lexical heads have more projection than functional heads.

Keywords: Syntactic analysis, lexical and functional heads, Newspaper headlines, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Today, newspapers are widely read by a good number of people across the world. In the Nigerian society, a lot of people, most especially the elite, read the newspapers to get adequate updates concerning events and happenings in the society. Consequently, this has led to the evolution of a plethora of more newspapers in the country over the years. Also, these newspapers are characterized by headlines which project the gist of the stories and events in them. Newspaper headlines are often constructed in certain structures to specifically capture the highlights of news and stories in the newspapers. The headlines are often constructed to capture the interest of the readers since they determine whether people will eventually read the stories in the newspaper. Ungerer (2000: 48) notes that ‘a headline describes news story in a few words, informs quickly and accurately and arouses the readers’ curiosity’. Similarly, Tiono (2003) argues that in order to attract readers’ attention, journalists make the headlines

eye-catching so that readers become curious to know the content of the whole story. Also, newspaper readers often see the headlines before they read the news details of the events captured in the newspapers. Thus, the way language is used and certain linguistic structures are constructed in newspaper headlines often have a great influence on the readers. Also, it is important to note that factors such as house style of the publishing industry, the reasons of space and the intention to inform quickly about the relevant facts influence the way linguistic expressions are constructed with a deliberate reduction of the full syntax of the structures. Hence, a careful syntactic study of the Nigerian newspaper headlines is needed to examine their structure which will ultimately aid the understanding of the headlines. This paper, therefore, examines lexical and functional heads in Nigerian newspaper headlines.

2. Methodology

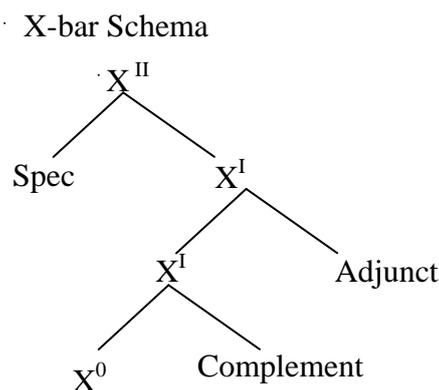
The headlines are collected from different Nigeria national newspapers through a random sampling method. They are analyzed using the X-bar theory of Generative Grammar. This theoretical framework is used for the study because the notion of head categories (including lexical and functional heads), which this study examines in the data, was developed within the framework of Generative Grammar. Specifically, the study deploys X-bar within the GG to identify the lexical and functional heads in the selected headlines and explain the peculiar syntactic nature of the headlines.

3. Literature Review

3.1 X-bar Theory

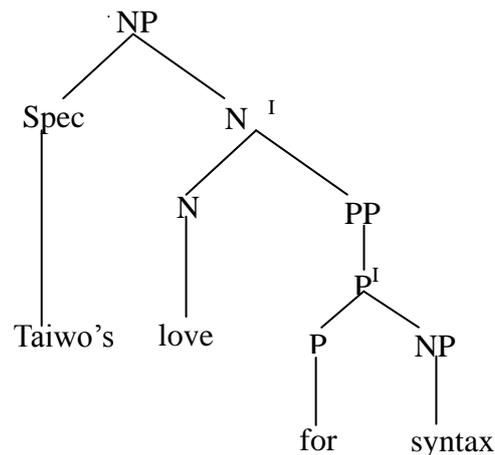
The X-bar theory is a substantive theory of phrase structure properties and lexical categories. Pullum and Komai (2003: 67) note that ‘the primary defining property of X-bar systems is lexicality, which requires all phrasal categories to be projections of lexical categories’. They substantiate that the bar-level originates as a notation for phrasal category labels that make it clear how they are based on lexical category labels. Ouhalla (1999: 110) claims that the X-bar theory was developed as an alternative mechanism to phrase structure rules (PS rules) to determine the structural representation of lexical categories on the basis of their lexical properties. Furthermore, he explains that X-bar also considers how complements are structurally represented in relation to the categories which sub-categorize for them as well as how non-complements such as adjectives and adverbs are structurally represented in relation to the categories they modify. Thus, X-bar is a theory based on the structural representations of categories. This is more adequately explained in the schema below:

Fig. ii



From Jackendoff (1977: 17) and Lamidi (2008: 155)

The above schema explains how the X-bar theory operates. The X is a variable which stands for any lexical category. Also, X^0 stands for the head, Spec stands for the specifier while X^I and X^{II} are intermediate and maximal projections of the head. This can be explained using the expression, *Taiwo's love for Syntax* as an example. This is presented on a tree analysis as follows:



Here, the constituents of the expression are considered as lexical categories being structurally represented where *love* is the head (X^0) of the NP, *for syntax* is the complement while *Taiwo's* is the specifier. Thus, the head is a fundamental category in the X-bar theory. It is the head that all other elements converge around in the X-bar theory of the phrase structure. Heads also include functional categories such as determiners, complementizers, etc which are also fundamental linguistic elements in the structure of a language.

3.2 Language and Structure of Nigerian Newspaper Headlines

Chiluwa (2005) examines pragmatic processes and social meaning in the news headlines and lead stories of three major Nigerian news magazines. He underscores that language in the news media is a representation of a particular ideological position. He identifies the 'context of situation' as essential to the understanding of language in a news text. That is, the interpretation of a linguistic expression depends on the context in which these words are used. In his study of news headlines, Chiluwa (2005) identifies discourse strategies that have been used in them. He also adopts pragmatic, sociolinguistic and ethnographic approaches in his study of news headlines and lead stories. Taiwo (2007) studies the relationship between language, ideology and power relations in Nigerian newspaper headlines. This study examines how ideology plays a vital role on the construction of newspaper headlines. Working within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, Taiwo (2007: 243) argues that beyond the generally observed rhetorical and graphological devices employed in Nigerian newspaper headlines, there are also hidden ideological meanings behind the headlines which are clearly expressions of the representation of opinions of the people in the society – that is those whose interests are being served and those whose interests are being undermined. His

study observes that, on some rare occasions, people may be united ideologically especially on issues that foster nationalism. On such occasions, almost all the newspaper headlines are singing the same tune, since they have to reflect the views of the society. Alabi (2012: 36) identifies lexical choices in selected newspaper headlines which are deletion, special use of tenses, the use of acronyms and abbreviations, ambiguity, premodification and capitalization.

The focus of this study differs from all the studies identified above even though they also examined Nigeria newspaper headlines. While Chilwa's (2005) work relates to the pragmatics of Nigerian newspaper headlines, Taiwo (2007) and Alabi (2012) examined the headlines using critical discourse analytic approaches; this present study explores the syntax of Nigerian newspaper headlines with a view to identifying the lexical and functional heads. By analyzing the lexical and functional heads, this study seeks to provide more structural understanding of Nigerian newspaper headlines.

4. Defining Lexical and Functional Heads

The head is the obligatory category in a phrase and it is the primary element on which all other elements (its satellites) converge in the phrase structure. In the X-bar (X^1) theory which is deployed for analysis in this chapter, the head is X^0 where X is a variable representing N, V, A or P, each of which functions as the head of phrases such as Noun, Verb, Adjective and preposition phrases. Similarly, the I^0 (inflection) is considered to be the head of the inflection phrase (IP) which represents a sentence in the X^1 theory. Basically, there are two types of head categories. These are lexical heads and functional heads. It is important to note that lexical heads are different from functional heads. Lexical heads are usually content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives and prepositions. They often have substantive descriptive content unlike functional heads. Functional heads, on the other hand, are usually grammatical words such as determiners, complementizers, inflection (Infl), particles like infinitival 'to', etc. (Radford 2004: 33) Functional heads have an essentially grammatical function. Thus, the head is a very important element in a structure and this is why the projection principle states that each head must be represented at all levels of analysis (Lamidi 2008: 153). This study, therefore, examines both lexical and functional heads in selected Nigerian English newspaper headlines.

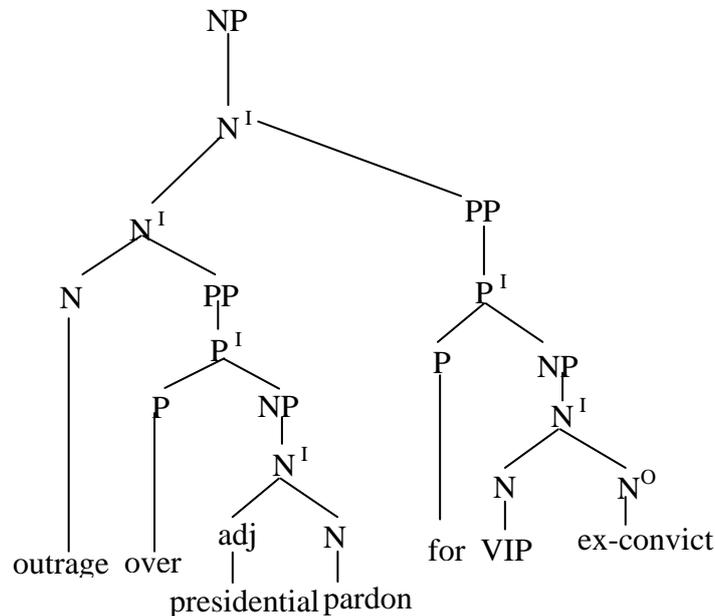
4.1.1 Lexical Heads in Nigerian Newspaper Headlines

Lexical heads are content words. They are head categories with substantive descriptive content. According to the projection principle, heads must be represented at levels of analysis (Lamidi 2008:153). These levels of analysis include the D-structure, S-structure and LF. Hence, based on the Projection Principle, lexical heads are projected in the structure of Nigerian newspaper headlines.

1) Outrage over presidential pardon for VIP ex-convict

(The Punch, March 15, 2013)

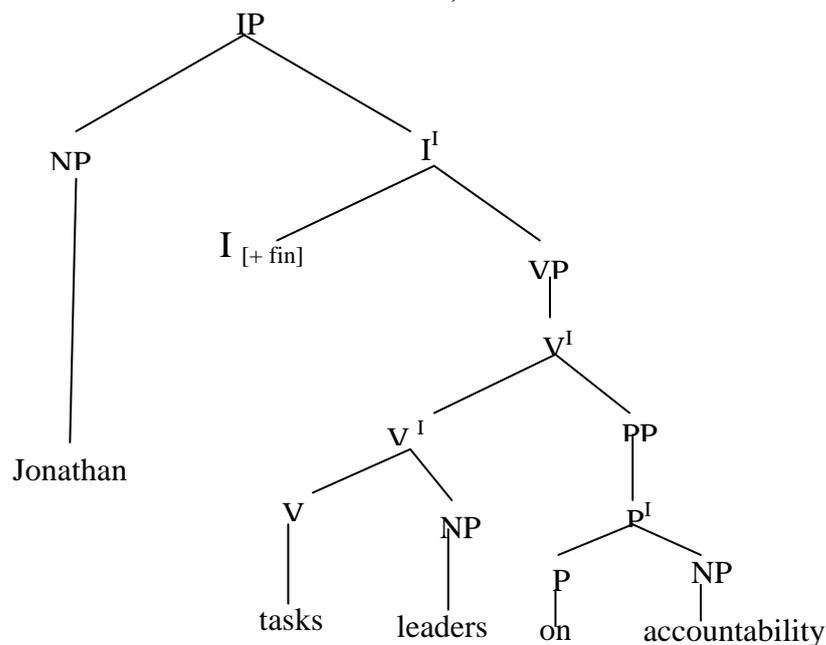
1b)



This headline is a noun phrase headed by the noun ‘outrage’. Structurally, it subsumes two prepositional phrases headed by the prepositions ‘over’ and ‘for’ respectively. In this headline structure, the lexical heads are nouns (outrage, pardon, and ex-convict) and prepositions (over and for). Thus, five lexical heads are projected in this headline structure.

2) Jonathan tasks leaders on accountability (Vanguard, March 17. 2013)

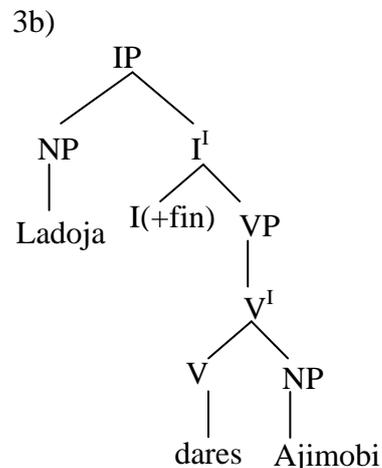
2b)



This headline is a sentence type construction unlike the previous headline. Principally, the headlines has five lexical heads which include the nouns ‘Jonathan’, ‘leaders’ and ‘accountability’, the verb ‘is’ and the preposition ‘on’. Thus, lexical heads such as noun, verb

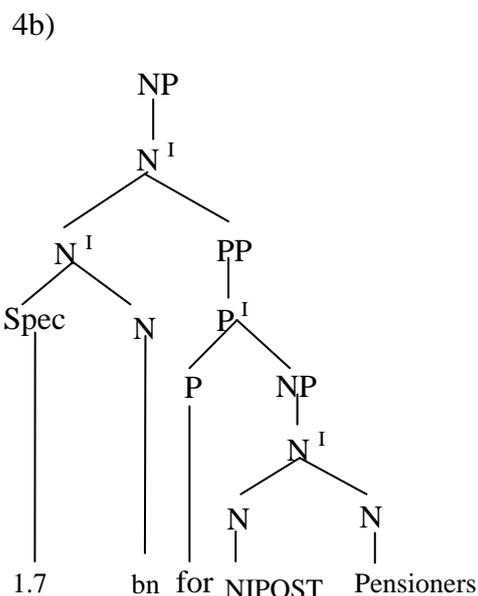
and preposition are projected at the D-structure and S-structure of this headline.

- 3) Ladoja dares Ajimobi (The Sun, Feb 5, 2013)



Also, this headline is a sentence type construction in which only three lexical heads are projected in this headline both of the D-structure and S-structure. This lexical heads are nouns (Ladoja and Ajimobi) and verb (dares).

- 4) N1.7bn for Nipost Pensioners (The Nation, Feb 25, 2015)



This headline has a phrasal structure. Also, five lexical heads are projected both at the D-structure and S-structure of the headline. These lexical heads are noun and preposition. The noun heads are ‘N I.7 ‘billion’ and ‘pensioners’ while the preposition head is ‘for’.

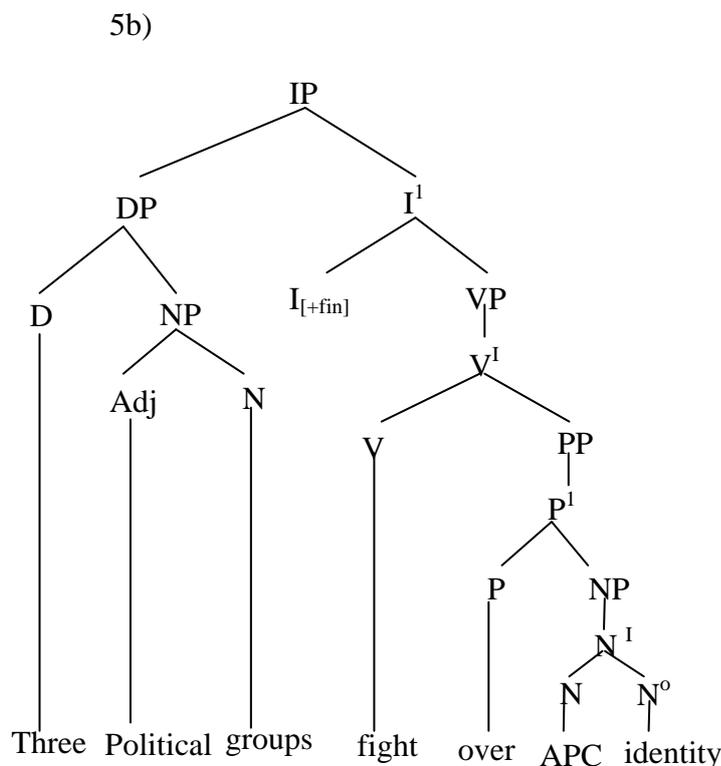
It is important to note that the lexical heads represented in Nigeria newspaper headlines vary from headline to headline. This variation depends on the headline structure whether it is a phrase type or sentence type. Usually, as seen in this study, more lexical heads including

nouns, verbs, prepositions etc. are represented at the structure of the newspaper headlines when they are sentences unlike when these headlines are phrases. Phrasal headlines often have lesser representation of lexical heads.

4.1.2 Functional Heads in Nigerian Newspaper Headlines

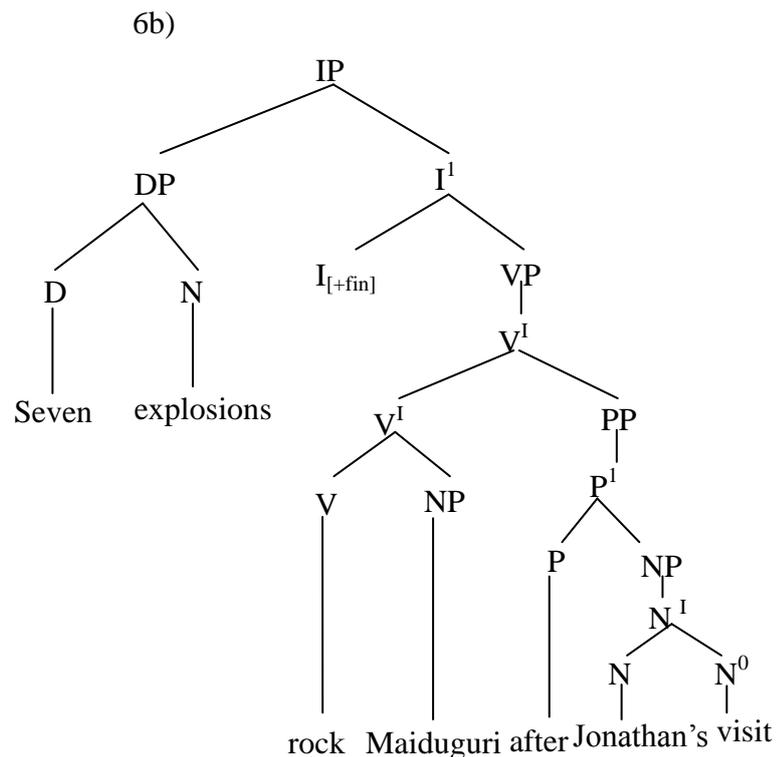
Functional heads lack substantive descriptive content unlike lexical heads. They are usually grammatical words including determiners, inflection and complementizers. (Radford 2004: 33) It is important to note that functional heads are also projected in Nigerian newspaper headlines both at the D-structure and S-structure.

- 5) Three political groups fight over APC identity (The Punch, March, 16, 2013)



The above headline is structurally in a sentence form. Also, unlike the previous headlines, functional heads are projected in the structure of this headline. These functional heads are determiners (three) and inflection (I (+FIN)) while there are also lexical heads such as nouns (groups, APC, identity), adjective (political), verb (fight) and preposition (over). Thus, this headline has both lexical and functional heads.

- 6) Seven explosions rock Maiduguri after Jonathan's visit (The Nation, March 9, 2013)



Also, the above headline has functional heads with some other lexical heads projected in the structure. The functional heads are determiner (seven) and inflection (I (+fin)) as while the lexical heads are noun (explosions, Maiduguri, Jonathan, visit), verb (rock) and preposition (after).

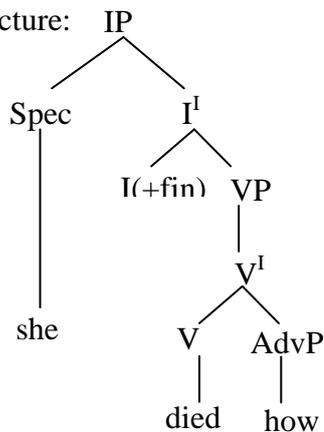
7) Goldie: How she died – Kenny Ogunbe

(*Vanguard*, Feb 15, 2013)

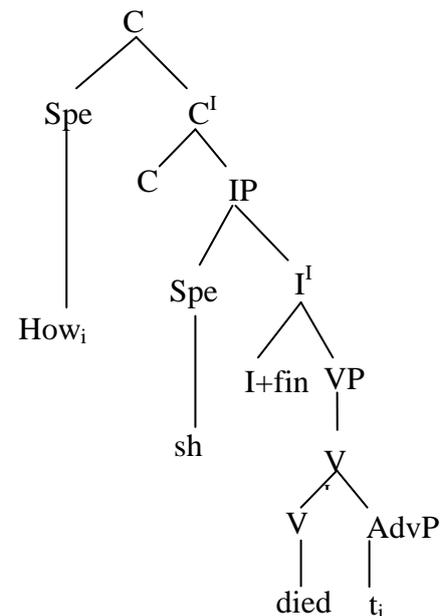
The D-structure and S-structure of this headline can be represented graphically below:

7b)

D-Structure:



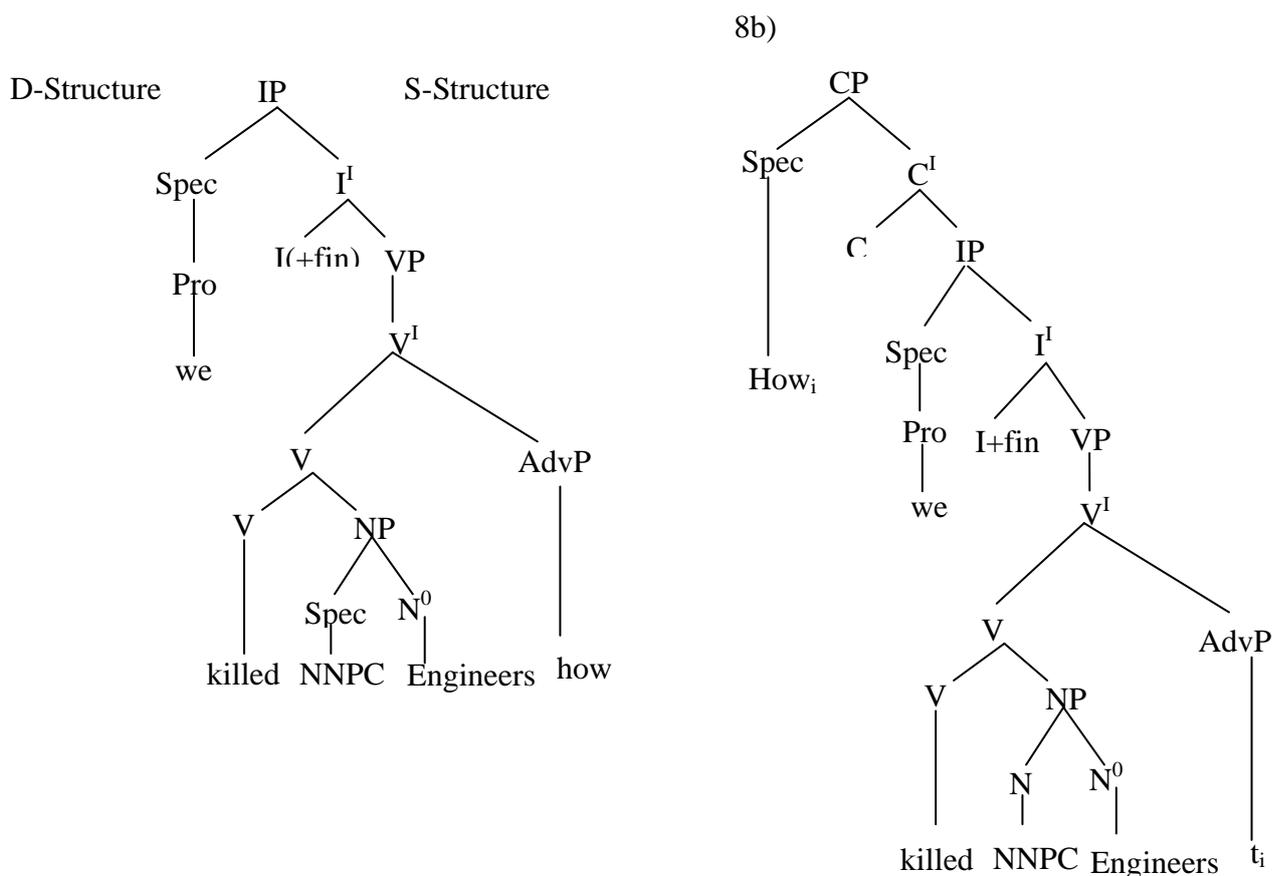
S-Structure:



Thus, the S-structure of the above headline is realized as a result of A¹ movement which is the movement of 'how' to the [Spec, CP], position of the headline leaving a trace (t_i) at its previous position. Hence, this headline has both functional heads and lexical heads. The functional heads include the complementizer and inflection heads as seen above while the lexical head includes 'she' and 'died'.

8) How we killed NNPC engineers - Pipeline vandal (The Sun, March 11, 2013)

Also, the D-structure and S-structure of this headline can be represented below as follows:



Similarly, in this headline, the element *how* is moved to the [Spec, CP] position of the headline. Thus, this headline does not only have lexical heads (*we*, *killed*, *NNPC* and *engineers*) but functional heads such as the Comp *how* and inflection (I_{+fin}).

Distribution of Lexical and Functional heads in the Headlines

The frequency of the heads projected in the Nigerian English newspaper headlines is summarized below:

Table 1.

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Lexical heads	36	78.3
Functional heads	10	21.7
Total=	46	100

From the results above on the frequency of the heads projected in the selected headlines, it is clear that the lexical heads have more frequency of projection than the functional heads. Functional heads lack substantive descriptive content unlike lexical heads. Lexical heads have more descriptive content (Radford 2004: 33). This accounts for the projection of more lexical heads in the Nigerian English newspaper headlines.

5. Conclusion

Hence, this study argues that both lexical heads and functional heads are projected in Nigeria newspaper headlines at D-structure and S-structure. The lexical heads include nouns, verbs, adjective etc. and the functional heads include determiners, complementizers, inflection. However, it must be noted that the representation of lexical and functional heads in the headlines also depends on the structure of the headline. For instance, as seen in this study, phrasal headlines accommodate lesser linguistic elements than sentence type headlines.

Furthermore, it is discovered that there are usually more lexical heads than functional heads projected in the headlines of Nigerian newspapers. Significantly, the preponderance of lexical heads (which are essentially content words) in the headlines avers that newspaper headlines are uniquely constructed to primarily convey information to the readers. The lexical heads, as content words (Radford 2009), are more capable of conveying information to the public or newspaper readers.

Finally, this study underscores that heads are generally significant in newspaper headlines. They are projected to reveal the main highlights of the stories in the newspaper. Lexical heads such as nouns portray the news agents/participants; the verbs describe the action/activity in the headlines. The nominal heads often capture political figures, celebrities, criminals or accused, victims or witnesses, government officials, public figures and other classes of people in general as the news agents. Functional heads such as inflection heads inform the readers about the temporal setting (past or present) while the complementizers ‘why’, ‘what’ among others are used in the headlines to provide the rationale behind certain actions in the news stories captured in the headlines. Hence, heads (lexical and functional) are very important elements of Nigerian newspaper headlines.

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