

Discourse Function of Grammatical Modifiers in Niyi Osundare and Ray Ekpu's Media Essays

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how grammatical modifiers influence the propositional content of Niyi Osundare and Ray Ekpu's media essays. In order to accomplish this goal, the study applies the experiential and logical functions of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) to examine sixteen media essays that were specifically chosen from Osundare and Ekpu's publications. In order to express their propositional content, the media essays use pre- and post-modifiers. Premodifiers include pronominal references and determiners, participial and attributive adjectives, compound words, and appositives. Relative and infinitive clauses, as well as prepositional phrases, are postmodifiers. Determiners and references serve as deictic elements that are experientially used to characterize and define textual meanings. Adjectives with attributional and participial functions act as epithet to precisely define and enlarge the nominal group head. Appositives and compound words serve as classifiers, elaborating and highlighting the information contained in the nominal group structure. Additionally, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and to-infinitive clauses play supportive and interpersonal functions by defining the non-referent and offering extra details, which are extremely helpful in understanding the propositional content of the media essays. The study concludes that grammatical modifiers help readers access information in media essays quickly and directly.

Keywords: Grammatical modifier, media column, premodification and postmodification

Structured Practitioners Note

The essay is a literary genre distinct from other systematized and conventionalized forms of writing. Despite the accumulation of literary scholarship on the essay demonstrating its position in modern humanities and curriculum, little has been done from literary and linguistic perspectives indicating Niyi Osundare and Ray Ekpu's literary contribution to this discourse genre. Few linguistic research on these essays have looked at graphology (Aluya, 2016), mood system (Aluya and Edem, 2018), figurative language (Aluya, 2020), deviation (Aluya, 2021), lexical repetition and syntactic parallelism (Ogunsiji and Aluya, 2022). In contrast to the above studies, the current study examines these media essays through the prism of the nominal group system to identify the importance of grammatical modifiers in the essays. This will help readers understand and appreciate the role that grammatical modifiers play in literary discourse.

Introduction

The mass media refers to the various forms of communication channels or modalities used to reserve and disseminate information to the general public. It is divided into three broad categories: print media, broadcasting media, and digital media. The print media, which is the subject area of this study, consists of mass communications that come in printed publications such as newspapers, columns, magazines, and other types of printed journals. They are considered one of the first, most effective, and necessary means of public communication (Kipphan 19).

The print media have always been a part of society since its evolution. It has influenced the society significantly through supplying facts that enable the masses to be better informed about topics that concern them; raising awareness by informing the public about current events in society; assisting readers in developing critical thinking skills; holding the government accountable for its actions; and exposing various societal problems. Germane to the aforementioned roles is the fact that print media provide brief and unbiased information about a society's religious, political, economic, and social life (Dominic 35). To this end, they are valued as a backbone of the democratic public sphere because they enable comprehensive public discourse.

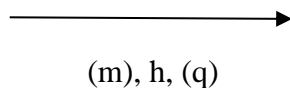
Considering the significance of the print media to humans and the society, journalists, social critics and authors of literary texts like Niyi Osundare and Ray Ekpu use this tool to frame their everyday socio-political lives, present identities of key actors in their socio-political space, and keep the masses informed about the current happenings in the society and nation. Their media essays are filled with patriotic and moral zeal. They can be described as texts that focus on Nigerian politics and address issues of governance. Both essayists demonstrate their creative abilities and rare insights in them. They delve profoundly and eloquently into the heart of the country's most pressing social and political issues (Aluya 8).

The foregoing preliminary discourse forms the foundation for the current study, which examines the discourse function of grammatical modifier in both writers' media essays in order to determine how this linguistic resource influences the propositional content of the medium essays. The study is guided by the following questions: (a) What elements are used as premodifiers and postmodifiers in the selected media essays of both writers? (b) How do premodifiers and postmodifiers influence the propositional content of the media essays? To

answer these questions, the study adopts the experiential and logical functions of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) which is outlined in the following section.

Theoretical Framework

In Systemic Functional Grammar, a group is defined as an “expansion of a word” (Halliday & Matthiessen 362). The four major classes of the group are nominal group, verbal group, adverbial group, and prepositional group. Since the present study dwells on the nominal group, the discussion in this section will focus exclusively on the nominal group system. The nominal group is a group of words which represents or describes an entity. It can operate as subject and complement in a clause and as well the complement of a preposition in a prepositional phrase (Downing & Locke 78). The systemic functional grammar recognises three operational components or meta-functions that are realised in language. These are ideational, interpersonal and textual components. A blend of three different systems evolves from the three different operational parts in the grammar of the English clause (Martin 50). However, on the grammar of the group, Halliday & Matthiessen opine that similar component are depicted as a partial contribution to a single structural line. Consequently, group structure is construed with the ideation component which within this structure is split into two: experiential and logical. The logical part interprets the logical-semantic connection in the group which is that of modification. The elements of the nominal group structure are modifier, head and qualifier (m, h, q). Whereas *h* is a required element, *m* and *q* are elective and dependent. The main elements of the structure of the nominal groups may be registered as



The Nominal Group Structure

where the arrow indicates that sequence is variable, the brackets indicate optional elements and the commas suggest that the list is that of the element of structure and not a structure. The component introducing the *head* is called the *premodifier* and that which appears after it is the *postmodifier* (Wright & Hope). The four structural types of nominal group are: the *h-type* (head only), *mh-type* (head with premodifier), *hq-type* (head with qualifier) and the *mhq-type* (full structure of pre-modification and post-modification).

However, Halliday & Matthiessen (320) identify six experiential functions in a nominal group namely, Deictic, Numerative, Epithet, Classifier, Thing and Qualifier. The functional elements which constitute the premodifier are deictic, numerative, epithet and classifier. The

Deictic element serves to identify a specific entity. Nouns, pronouns or determiners form the deictic element. Numerative function can be realised by the word class *numeral* which includes cardinal and ordinal numbers. Epithet indicates the features of the modified item and is typically realised by adjective. Classifier serves to sub-classify the qualified object into a subclass of such object. Whereas thing conflates with the head and is usually realised by a noun or pronoun, a qualifier (the element which follows the thing) conflates with premodifier and is generally realised by prepositional phrases and embedded clauses.

Research design

Working towards offering an in-depth account of how grammatical modifiers shape textual meanings in media essays, this study adopts a qualitative and descriptive approach. The method is adopted because it encourages richness and detail scrutiny of data, thus providing room to extensively engage the data in terms of the way they deal with complex social situations. The data for this study consists of sixteen (16) media essays sourced from different sources. Ekpu's columns were sourced from several issues of *Newswatch*, a Nigerian weekly news magazine, published by Newswatch Nigerian Communications Limited. However, those of Osundare were extracted from *Dialogue with my country*, a compendium of columns which he had contributed to the same magazine. Osundare's essays selected for this study are "Parable from Koma" (PFK), "Scars of the Seasons I" (SOTS 1), "Scars of the Seasons II" (SOT 2), "The Real Gains of SAP" (TRGOS), "Nigeria Errways" ("NE"), "Nigeria's Image Problem" (NIP), "Abominations" (A) and "Tears for my country" (TFMC) (Osundare, 2011). The selected essays from Ekpu's collection are: "A Hollow Ritual" (AHR), "Day after the Party" (DATP) "Shades of Rainbow" (SOR), "On Eve of Passover" (OEOP), "Dreams, shattered dream" (DSD), "A Time for Peace" (ATFP), "Leadership" the flock or fleece" (LTFOTF), and "We the Untitled" (WTU). To begin the analysis, the nominal group patterns were first studied carefully and examined for the elements which serve as premodifiers and postmodifiers and then subjected to analysis using insights from the experiential and logical function of the group structure.

Textual Discussion

Creative writers make choices from a variety of premodification and postmodification items in order to increase the structural complexity of the nominal group in their texts. This praxis contributes to the general meaning they try to convey. The present study examines the nominal

group system from the perspectives of subject and complement positions. The analysis begins with nominal group at the subject position.

Nominal group as subject

Nominal group functions as subject to effectively explicate the propositional content of the media columns. An instance of this use is provided below with the group enclosed in a slant line, prepositional phrase demarcated in single square bracket and a clause in double square bracket. The analysis begins with Osundare's data.

Extracts:

1. | A |shocking| breed [of such Nigerians] | (PFK, 3).
m m h q
2. | Our |ill-stocked| medieval [hospital] | (SOTS 11, 3).
m m m h
3. | A |tall| wiry| man [in his late forties] | (SOTS 1, 7).
m m m h q
4. | The |government [[brutal clampdown]] | (NIP, 67).
m h q
5. | The| champagne-drenched| party [of the rich] | (TRGOS, 46).
m m h q
6. | The |Nigerian | press | the |honourable | minister | (NIP, 67).
m m h m m h
7. | This |colleague |a | single-minded | professor of literature | (TFMC, 365).
m h m m h
8. | The | number [of aircrafts [in the national fleets]] | (NE, 362).
m h q
9. |This| time |a | man [in his mid-thirties [[looking as pale as wax statute]]] | (SOTS 1, 8).
m h m h q

10. | New| buildings [in different stages [of completion [[with their ambitious structures and futuristic designs]]]] | (A, 328).

11. | This | man [[who had plodded the deathly roads [from the hinterlands [[to see the Magic touch [of an urban hospital]]]]]] | (SOST 11, 9).

12. | Our | once | bustling | markets | (SOTS 1, 7).

13. | That | teeming | tribe [of our forgotten people] | (SOTS 11, 3).

14. | One [of them] Walter | Ofonagoro | our| honourable| minister of information | (NIP, 67).

15. | The| omens [of biblical proportions [[witnessed in this country]]] | (NE, 362).

A close observation of the sample texts will reveal some remarkable premodification and postmodification items deployed by Osundare. First, clusters of descriptive adjectives feature in examples 2), 3) and 10). In such structures, the adjectives perform experiential function. The attributive adjective *medieval* in 2) functions as an epithet to modify *hospital* and it projects the decrepit structures used as hospital in Nigeria. Also, *tall* and *wiry* in 3) equally operate as an epithet to add some quality to *man*. They suggest adverse effect of hardship. The use of compound words as premodifiers also enhances the effectiveness and vividness of description. Such compound words are shown in 2) and 5). For example, *ill-stocked* in 2) modifies *hospital* and *champagne-drenched* in 5) gives some meaning to *party*. While *ill-stocked* indicates inadequate healthcare equipment in Nigerian hospitals, *champagne-drenched* on the other refers to the extravagant spending of nation's resources by government officials.

Apart from the exploitation of compound words, the participles *shocking* as captured in 1), *bustling* in 12) and *teeming* in 13) respectively are modifiers which aid meaning. In these configurations, *shocking* modifies *breed*, *bustling* describes *market*, and *teeming* add some quality to *tribe*. *Shocking* suggests contemptibility of the entity which is being referred; *bustling* captures the setting of commerce in Nigeria, and *teeming* on the other point to ordinary

Nigerians in the rural locale. Osundare's choice of *our once bustling market* in 12) shows his interest in relating the qualities of the entity being describe to those of another. Thus, he compares the present inactivity in the Nigeria market as a result of inflation to when it was active.

However, the following deictic elements: determiners in examples 3), 4), 5), 6) and 8), possessive pronouns in 2) and 4) and as well demonstratives in 7), 9), 11) and 12) etc., are deployed for identification. Whereas the non-specific determiner *a* introduces *breed* in 1) and *man* in 3) respectively, the specific determiner *the* on the other tracks the following referents *government* in 4), *party* in 5), *press* in 6), *number* in 8) and *omens* in 15). These determiners, in conjunction with previously highlighted premodification items, function to supply additional information to the headword in the nominal group structure which, in turn, enables it convey experiential meaning.

Finally, on premodification, examples 6), 7) and 9) are cases of two nominal groups in apposition. In these structures, the nominal group functions as a modifier inside the structure of another nominal group. For example, in 7) where *this colleague a single-minded professor of literature* is the nominal group, *a single-minded professor of literature* defines which colleague is being referred to. Similarly, in *one of them, Water Ofonagoro, our honourable minister of information* as captured in 9), *Water Ofonagoro, our honourable minister of information* defines which of them is being referred to. As seen in 6, 7 and 9), the use of appositives has great discourse values. First, it enhances the principle of clarity by providing further explanations to the reader and helps to achieve economy.

Regarding post-modification in Osundare's data, it should be said that nominal phrases, prepositional phrases, series of rank-shifted groups, and as well as a blend of such groups and clauses function as qualifiers. They perform adjectival and adverb functions, adding to the effectiveness and vividness of description at the subject level. The following rank-shifted prepositional phrases, *of such Nigerians* in 1), *in his late forties* in 3) and *of the rich* in 5) etc., demonstrate the syntactic process of embedding. For example, in 1), the preposition phrase provides extra information to the headword *breed*. In 3), 8) and 10), it functions as a locative complement in the group structure. The expression *brutal clampdown* in 4) is a bare-infinitive clause complementing the group structure. Also, *of aircraft in the national fleet* in 8) illustrates series of rank-shifted groups at qualifier. Apart from this occurrence, the choice of rank-shifted groups alongside a participle clause feature in 10). Here, the blend is exploited to vividly

capture the subject of discourse. A similar blend is observable in 11) where series of rank-shifted groups and clauses are deployed to effectively describe the contemptible life which unemployment and inflation have plunged Nigerians into. In this structure, the qualifiers fulfil complementary role. Whereas the relative and to-infinitive clauses function to describe the nominal group heads, the prepositional phrases on the other operate to locate them. Also, by introducing the relative clause *who had plodded the deathly roads* before the prepositional phrase *from the hinterlands* in 11), the relative clause is downranked or downgraded inside the nominal group.

With the creative exploitation of rank-shifted groups, Osundare attempts to build up much information at the subject level in the nominal group. In all, the effective description at the subject position in Osundare's data is realised through the exploitation of adjectives, compound words, participles, determiners, demonstratives, possessive pronouns, appositive nominal groups, noun phrases, prepositional phrases, series of prepositional phrases and as well a blend of rank-shifted groups and clauses. The next sample texts illustrate Ekpu's use of nominal group for effectively explicate and elaborate on the discourse subjects relayed in the essays.

Extracts:

m m h q

16. | A |mind-boggling| story [of how Nigeria's money] | (AHR, 10).

m m m h q

17. | The |most| vicious |cankerworm [in the country's body politic] | (DATP, 23).

m m m h q

18. | The |long| suffering| people [of Nigeria] | (AHR, 11).

m m m h q

19. | The |past| eight |rulers [of Nigeria] | (OEOTP, 23).

m m h q

20. | The| organized | fraud [of the Shagari era] | (DATP, 23).

m h q

21. | The| architect [[who is already a chief]] | (WTU, 11).

m h q

22. | The| engineer [[who is also a Moslem]] | (WTU, 11).

m h q
23. | The | zealotry [of the police [in the River State]] | (SOR, 13).

m m h q
24. | A | hollow | ritual [of comic tragedy [[which the trial of a president]]] | (AHR, 11).

m m h
25. | The | so-called | judgement | (AHR, 11).

m m h q
26. | These | Ph.D| holders [[who genuinely sweated [for their laurels]]] | (WTU, 11).

m h q
27. |The| story [of the cynical performance [of our high office holders]] | (LTFOTF, 12).

m h q
28. |Young| girls [[who knew next to nothing [about the intricacies [of importation]]]] | (DATP, 21).

m h h
29. |Olusegun | Obasanjo| head of state| (DSD, 15).

m h m m h
30. | Muhammadu |Buhari |the |new| head of state | (DSD, 15).

Premodification and postmodification are also the hallmarks of Ekpu's columns and they are deployed for effective explication at the subject position in the group level. For example, in 17), the deictic element, *the* establishes the relevance of *cankerworm*, the descriptive adjectives *most* and *vicious* function as epithet to indicate some of its quality and finally, *in the country's body politics* is a rank-shifted prepositional phrase functioning as a locative complement. This modification helps to vividly portray the subject of degeneracy which Ekpu refers. Also, it should be noted that apart from the descriptive adjective *most* signalling description, it also functions to indicate Ekpu's interest in viewing things in terms of extremes.

However, in example 16), whereas the compound word *mind-boggling* adds some meaning to *story*, *of how Nigeria's money* is a prepositional phrase in the same structure functioning as a qualifier to complement the modification. Ekpu's choice of *mind-boggling* here suggests astonishment due to the huge amount of nation's resources embezzled by government officials. Also, the participial adjective *suffering* in 18) operates as epithet to modify *people* in the nominal group. Through this modification, the travails of the general masses are captured and projected. Similarly, the headword *fraud* in example 20) is modified by the adjective *organised* and it indicates that most illicit practices in the government are properly planned before being executed. The adjective *young* in excerpt 30), an epithet which is meant to perform a descriptive function, has been deployed here as a deictic element for identification. Hence, it introduces *girls* in the nominal group expression *young girls*. Two instances of nominal groups in apposition also feature in 29) and 30) where the nominal groups are being qualified by other nominal groups in similar structure. In all, *eight* in example 19) is a numerative element indicating some numerical feature of the particular subject of the head being described.

In relation to the nominal group with qualifiers (that is, with post head-word modifications) in Ekpu's essays, group, clause, series of groups and clauses and as well as their blend etc., function as qualifiers and equally perform adjectival and adverbial functions. The following nominal expressions *of how Nigeria's money* in example 16), *in the country's body politics* in 17), *of Nigeria* in 18) and 19) and *of the Shagari era* in 20) etc., are all rank-shifted prepositional phrases which demonstrate the syntactic process of embedding. Whereas the prepositional phrases in 16), 18), 19), and 20) are used for specification and description of the headwords in these structures, the qualifying element in 17) functions as an adverb of place to locate where the corruption is situated. Also, the rank-shifted relative clauses in 21) and 22) have the greater potential as news due to the detailed information they carry. Other qualifiers in Ekpu's discourse include the exploitation of series of rank-shifted preposition phrases in example 24), a blend of rank-shifted prepositional phrases and a single clause in 25) and 26) and as well as a blend of series of prepositional phrases and clauses in 29). The effective description in Ekpu's data is realised through the exploitation of adjectives, numeral, compound words, determiners, demonstratives, prepositional phrases, clauses, a blend of groups and clauses. In all, the deployment of compounds in Osundare's and Ekpu's texts contributes to the degree of description and particles of meaning realised at the nominal group level. This observation is corroborated by Ogunsiji who notes that the use of compound words or expressions as modifiers adds to the effectiveness and vividness of description (101).

Nominal group as complement

‘Complement’ is an element that has the potential of being subject but is not. It is typically realised by a nominal group (Halliday & Matthiessen 122-123). Nominal group as complement aids meaning in the essay texts by the complementary role they perform and they are largely exploited by Osundare and Ekpu. An instance of this use is provided below:

Extracts:

m m h q

31. These are | the| veritable| roost [of those [[whose hands are too short [[to reach an economy now jerked up [to the second tier]]]]]] | (SOTS 1, 7).

m m h q

32. These are |the| so-called |leaders [of tomorrow [[for whose sake the present regime has instituted its severe economic programme]]] | (TRGOS, 46).

h q

33. There are |gains [in SAP [for those [[who looted the country’s treasury and plunged the rest of us [into debt peonage]]]]] | (TRGOS, 45).

m m h

34. It is |an |illegal| operation (SOR, 14).

m m m h q

35. It was |a |sickening |grotesque |display [of ill-gotten wealth] | (DATP, 23).

m m h q

36. There has been |a |surging |wave [of unexpected migration [from the place of regular abode [to the place [of permanent residence]]]]] | (ATFP, 10).

The nominal group as complements in the above examples is conferred interpersonal elevated status of modal responsibility, and therefore carries the nub of the message. To effectively relay the propositional content in each structure, they are modified and qualified. The interpersonal role played by the complements is realised through the combination of premodification and postmodification elements. The items in Osundare’s data that constitute the premodification elements include specific determiner, predicative adjective and compound words while the postmodification elements comprise series of relative clauses and a blend of groups and

clauses. For example, in excerpt 31), Osundare's *the veritable roost* is a nominal group operating as complement in the group structure. It is pre-modified by a deictic element and an epithet. The specific determiner *the* functions as a deictic element to characterise the headword *roost* and the predicative adjective *veritable* on the other functions as epithet to describe it. The following prepositional phrases *of those* and *to the second tier* as well as the relative clause *whose hands are too short* and the to-infinitive clause *to reached an economy now jerked up* are series of rank-shifted groups deployed by Osundare for complementation. Similarly, the headword *leaders* in excerpt 32) is modified by the deictic element and a compound word and as well qualified by a relative clause and a prepositional phrase. The preposition phrase and the relative clause supply addition information to the nominal group head at the complement level.

The effective explication in Ekpu's discourse at the complement level is realised through the use of pronouns, demonstratives, rank-shifted prepositional phrases and clauses. For example, in excerpt 35), Ekpu ridicules the public display of ill-gotten wealth by Nigeria political office holders with the use of nominal group at the complement position. Here, the writer uses two modificatory items, the participial *sickening* and the predicative *grotesques* to modify the headword *display*. This is followed immediately with the prepositional phrase *of ill-gotten wealth* which functions to complement the group structure. However, excerpt 36) shows his use of series of rank-shifted preposition phrases in order to vividly project the message of illicit accretion of wealth by the few in Nigeria. In fact, four rank-shifted prepositional phrases are deployed for this purpose.

From the analysis conducted above, it can be seen that premodifiers and postmodifiers influence textual meanings in media columns. In answering the first question of this study, the elements that constitute premodifiers in the essays are determiners, demonstratives, reference, attributive adjective, predicative adjective and appositives. Those that constitute postmodifiers are prepositional phrases, relative clauses and bare infinitives. Regarding the second question, determiners, demonstratives and pronominal reference operate as deictic elements to identify, characterise and specify textual meanings. Also, attributive adjective, predicative adjective, and participial adjective serve as epithet to clarify and expand textual meanings. Both writers employ premodifiers and postmodifiers to describe and project the propositional contents of their essays which capture a variety of socio-political issues.

Conclusion

This study focused on the discourse functions of grammatical modifier in Niyi Osundare and Ray Ekpu's media essays. The aim was to examine the configuration of nominal group in the

media columns in order to identify the items deployed as premodifiers and postmodifiers and determine how they shape meanings in the essays. To this end, the study analysed sixteen (16) media essays using the experiential and logical function of Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. The result showed that the elements which serve as premodifiers were determiners and pronominal reference, attributive, predicative and participial adjectives, compound words and appositives. However, elements of postmodification were prepositional phrases, relative and infinitive clauses. The items used for premodification serve for identification, characterisation, specification, description, elaboration and classification. Conversely, postmodification elements perform interpersonal and complementary roles such as providing further information which assist greatly in comprehending the propositional content of the media columns. Premodification and postmodification are significant stylistic devices which help readers to comprehend and appreciate the literary significance of the media columns. They provide clarity in the essays by way of supplying additional information to the headword in the nominal group structure which, in turn, enables it convey experiential meaning.

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