

Syntactic Empty Categories in Nigerian English newspaper headlines

Taiwo Ehineni

Abstract

Several studies have worked on Nigerian newspaper headlines mostly from stylistic and discourse perspectives but none of these studies have examined the issue of empty categories in the headlines. This study, therefore, examines empty categories in Nigerian newspaper headlines. This is with a view to defining the nature of empty categories and identifying its various manifestations in the headlines. The data for this study are collected from national Nigerian newspapers including 'The Punch', 'The Nation', 'Nigerian Tribune', 'Vanguard' and 'The Sun'. The headlines are analyzed using the X-bar Theory of Chomsky's Universal Grammar. It is discovered that empty categories such as empty subjects, verbs and determiners occur in the headlines. This reveals that the headlines are characterized by syntactic processes of elision and gapping. Elision

generally accounts for the manifestation of all the empty constituents while gapping occurs as a product of elision in the headlines.

Key words: Syntactic analysis, empty categories, newspaper headlines, Nigeria

1.0 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

empty categories in Nigerian newspaper headlines.

2.0 Methodology

The news headlines are collected based on a random sampling from some Nigeria national newspapers. They are analyzed using X-bar theory of Chomsky's Universal Grammar. The X-bar theory is used to identify the heads such as nouns, verbs and determiners that are not projected in the headline structure.

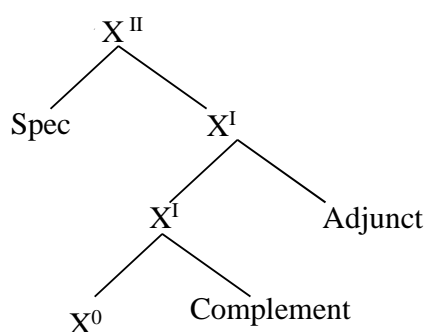
3.0 X-bar Theory

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 lexuality, 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:

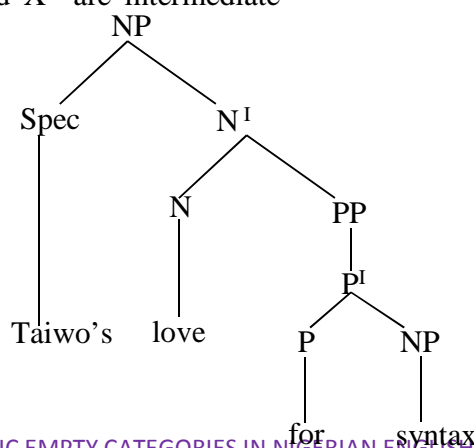
X-bar Schema



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, X⁰ 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:



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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. However, it should be noted that sometimes lexical categories that are necessary in a sentence may not be projected or are 'invisible' in the surface structure of the sentence. When this occurs, such categories or linguistic elements are referred to as **empty categories**. This form of syntactic manifestation is what this study is interested in exploring in Nigerian newspaper headlines.

4.0 Data Analysis

4.1 Empty categories in Nigerian newspaper headlines

Null categories are those that are not overtly realized in a structure. They are identifiable as empty positions or gaps in the surface structure. Radford (2009:271) describes null

categories as constituents which have grammatical and semantics features but lack audible phonetic features and are so silent or inaudible. Also, null categories occur after transformation process or deletion of a constituent in the D-structure, thereby resulting in an empty position in the S-structure. In this study, the null categories identified in Nigerian newspaper headlines are null subjects and null verbs.

4.1.2 Empty Subjects

Empty/Null subjects are constituents that are not phonetically realized (silent or inaudible) but have only grammatical and semantic features of the subject position. Conventionally, they are designated as PRO where the null subject is a noun and as pro where the null subject is a pronoun (Ouhalla 1999). Unlike overt subjects, null subjects are not overtly realized in a structure. In newspaper headlines, there can be finite null subjects (although they are not regular) and non-finite null subjects. A finite null subject

occurs in a subjectless finite clause while non-finite null subject occurs in subjectless non-finite clause. The following is an example of finite null subject in Nigerian newspaper headlines.

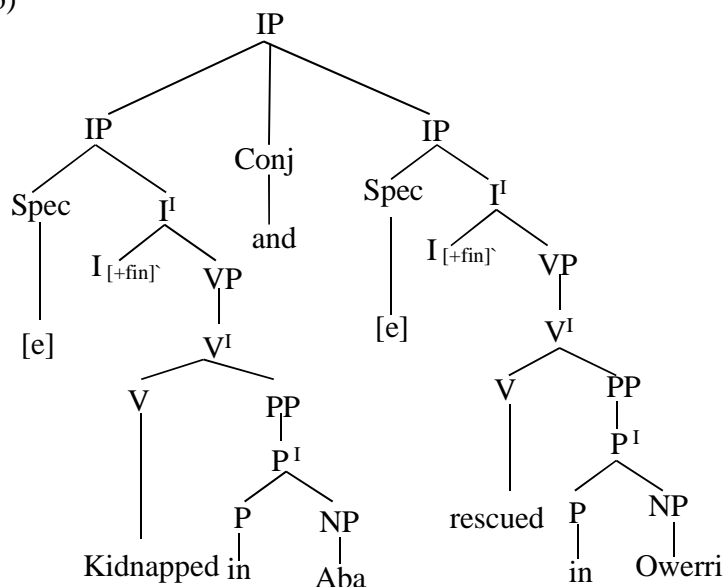
Kidnapped in Aba, rescued in Owerri

(‘The Sun’, March 2, 2013)

There is a null subject in this structure which is represented at the D-structure as: [IP [e]

was kidnapped in Aba and rescued in Owerri]. In this structure, the verb *kidnapped* requires a subject argument which is invisible or null as seen in the headline. This null subject is represented as [e] and represents the name of the kidnapped person that is not supplied at the S-structure of the headline. This is represented on a tree as follows:

1b)

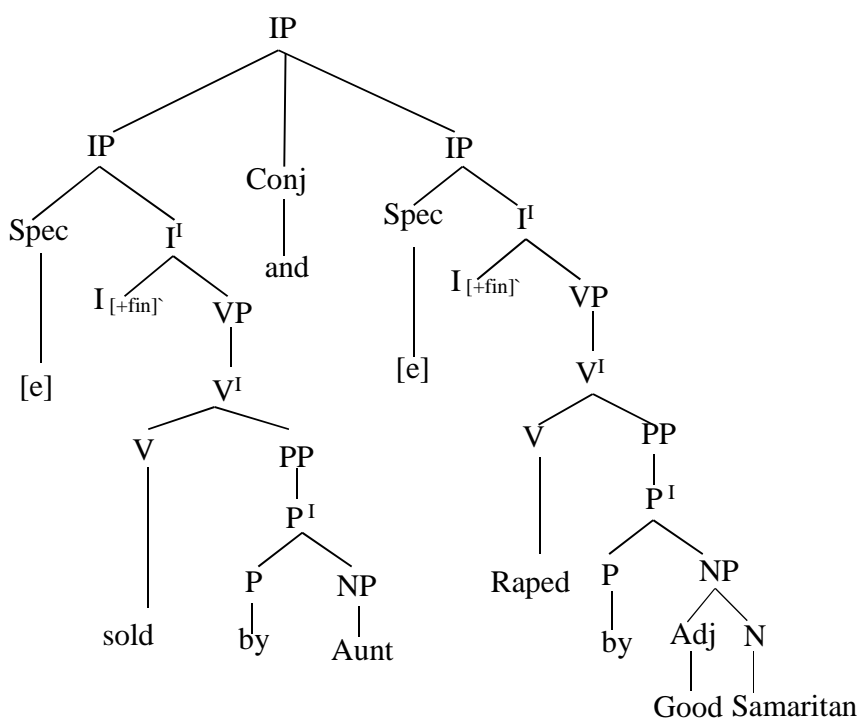


It is important to note here that English finite structures do not systematically allow

null subjects. However, this is possible in the headlines as exemplified above where

the subject is elided at the S-structure. Also, gapping occurs in the structure. (Peterson 2004: 6) explains gapping as an ellipsis mechanism that seems to occur in coordinate structures and that such ellipsis in grammar creates gaps for constituents that are elided. In the above headline, the positions represented by [e], is logically understood to

2) Sold by Aunt, Raped 'by Good Samaritan'
(‘Punch’, Feb. 9, 2013)



In this example, just like the previous headline, there is a null subject which is represented at the D-structure as follows: [IP[e] sold by aunt [IP[e] raped by good Samaritan]. The verbs ‘sold’ and ‘raped’

be occupied by an NP element which is invisible in the structure. This relates to the process of NP elision. The deleted NP occurs in the [Spec, IP] position of the two clauses conjoined by ‘and’ and is marked by a gap, e. Another example of a finite null subject can be seen in the headline below.

require a subject argument which is invisible in the headline. This null subject represented as [e] stands for the name of the sold and raped person which is not supplied in the headline. Also, gapping occurs in this

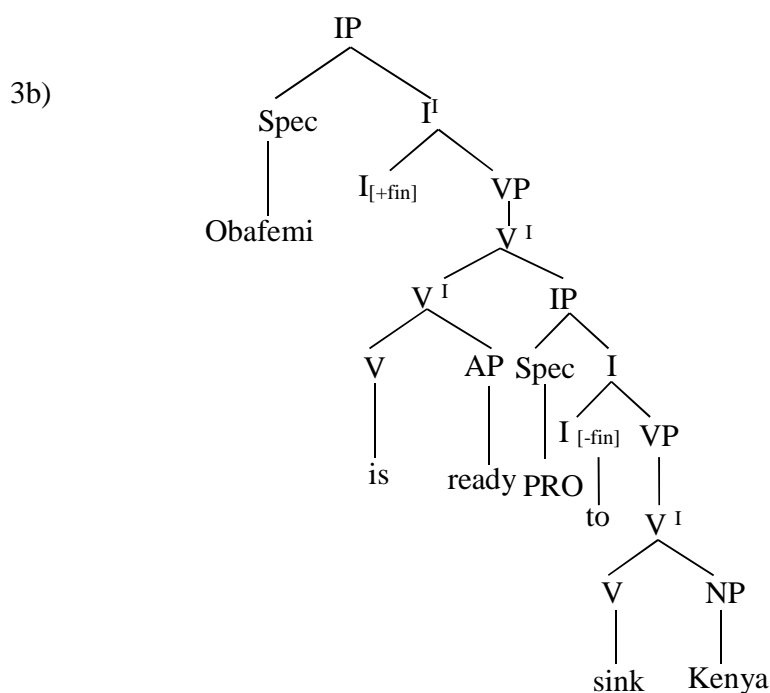
structure. The positions indicated as [e] represents the NP element (the name of the sold and raped person) which is null in the structure. Hence, the elided NP is identified as a gap [e] and like the previous example; the gap lacks an explicit identity.

However, apart from finite null subjects, headlines can also have non-finite null subjects. This can be seen in the following headlines.

3) Obafemi ready to sink Kenya

(‘Vanguard’, March 20, 2013)

The D-structure of this headline is [IP Obafemi is ready [IP PRO to sink Kenya]] which can be represented on a tree as follows:



The above analysis is a D-structure representation of the above headline. Structurally, this headline has a small clause

(Obafemi ready) and an embedded IP clause (PRO to sink Kenya). Haegeman (1994: 50) explains that a small clause is a constituent

that has the same sort of meaning as a full clausal structure but it lacks any verb forms. Thus, the constituent [Obafemi ready] in the S-structure of the headline corresponds to the clause [Obafemi is ready] in the D-structure in which the NP *Obafemi* is the subject of the predicate expressed by the *APready*. Thus, the constituent [Obafemi is ready] is the matrix clause while the constituent [*PRO to sink Kenya*] is the embedded clause. Hence, there is a null PRO subject at the Spec position of the embedded IP clause which is controlled by

the matrix NP (Obafemi). Therefore, there are null subjects in Nigerian newspaper headlines. Other examples of null subjects can be identified in the following headlines.

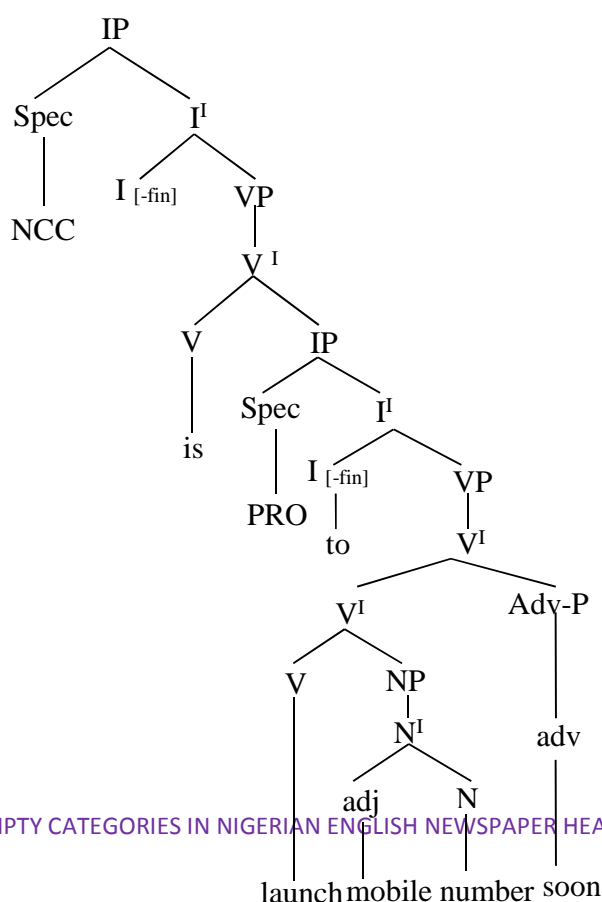
4) NCC to launch mobile number soon

(‘Nigerian Tribune’, March 17, 2013)

The D-structure of this headline is [_{NP} NCC is [_{IP} PRO to launch mobile number soon]] which can be represented on a tree as follows:

4b)

:



In the above analysis, the embedded non-finite clause contains a null subject represented as PRO in the subject position.

This null subject PRO is controlled by the NP 'NCC' which is the subject of the matrix IP. Thus, the structure has a null subject.

This can also be seen in the following headlines.

5) Oyo to introduce 100 new luxury buses

('Nigerian Tribune', Feb 24, 2013)

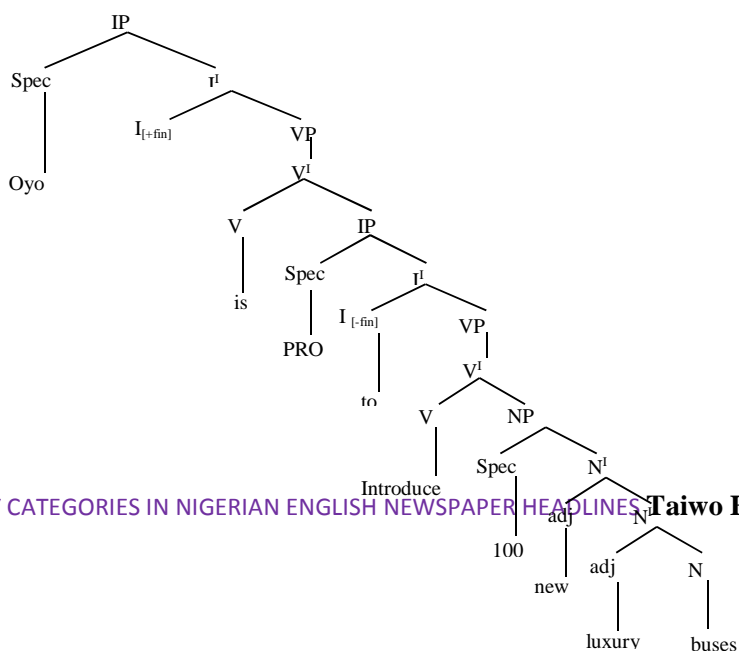
D-Structure : [IP Oyo is [IP PRO to introduce 100 new luxury buses]]

6) Petrol price to go up – Jonathan

('The Punch', March 20,

2013)

(5b)



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D-Structure: [IP Petrol price is [IP PRO to go up]]

7) Police to put ransom on pension chief's head

('The Nation', Feb 21, 2013)

D.S: [IP Police is [IP PRO to put ransom on pension chief's head]]

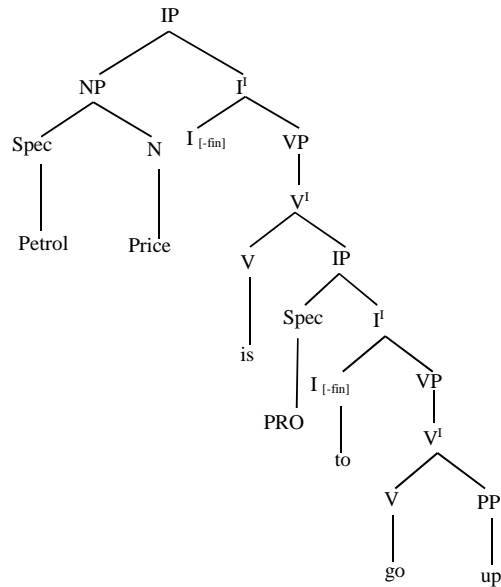
8) Fed Govt to borrow N251bn

('The Nation', March, 13, 2013)

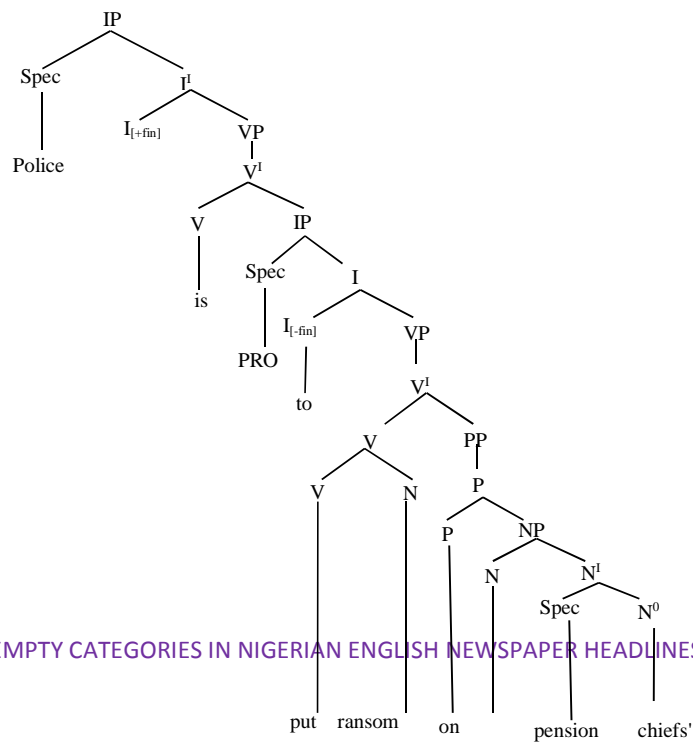
D.S: [IP Fed Govt is [IP PRO to borrow N251bn]]]

All these structures are clearly represented on a tree analysis as (5), (6), (7) and (8) respectively below:

6b)

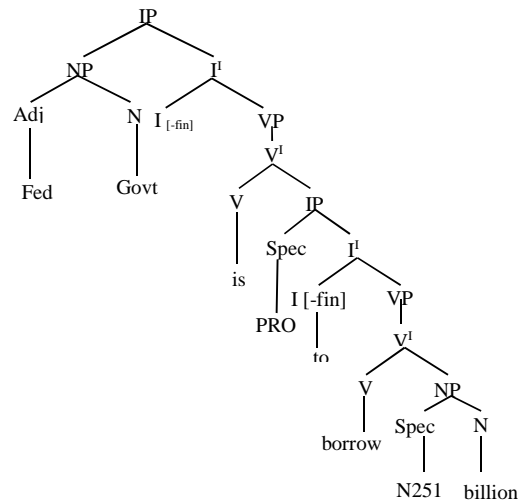


7b)



head

8b)



All the Nigerian newspaper headlines given above have similar structures with the ones previously analysed in this section. Structurally, all these headlines have a matrix NP and an embedded non-finite clause in which there is a null subject represented as PRO. Also, the PRO is controlled by the NP in each of the headlines which relates to obligatory control in control theory. For instance, PRO is controlled by 'Oyo', 'Petrol price', 'Police', Fed Govt' in the headlines (5), (6), (7) and (8). Basically, all these analyses further instantiate the

presence of null subjects in Nigerian newspaper headlines.

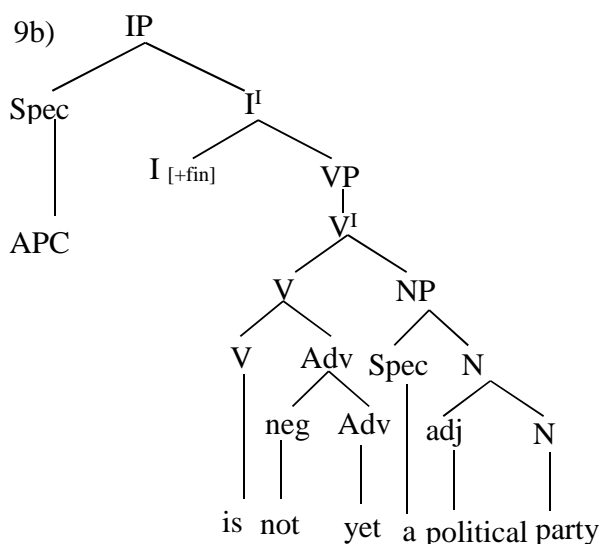
4.1.3 Empty Verbs

Null verbs are those that are not overtly realized in a structure, i.e, they are invisible or silent. It is important to note that a verb is a very important element in every structure. However, in newspaper headlines, verbs can be null in the structure. This is seen in the following headlines.

9) APC not yet a political party

(‘Punch’, Feb 17, 2013)

D.S: [IP APC [VP **is** not yet a political party]]



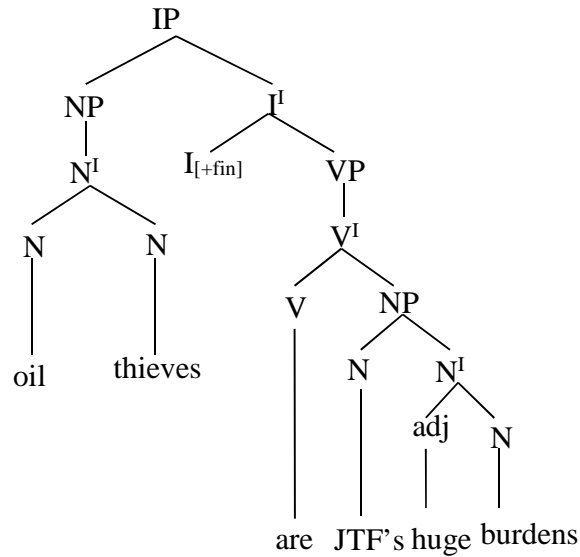
In the above headline, the D-structure has an overt verb (is) which is null in the S-structure of the headline. The surface structure is realized after the verb deletion process where the verb 'is' from D-structure is deleted. In this case, the verb is invisible in the headline structure. Hence, newspaper headlines can have null verbs as seen in the above example.

10) Oil thieves JTF's huge burdens

(Nigerian Tribune, March 13, 2013)

The above headline lacks a finite verb at the S-structure. The headline is a clause with a null verb. The D-structure of the headline is given as [IP oil thieves [VP **are** JTF's huge burdens]]. This can be represented as follows:

10b)



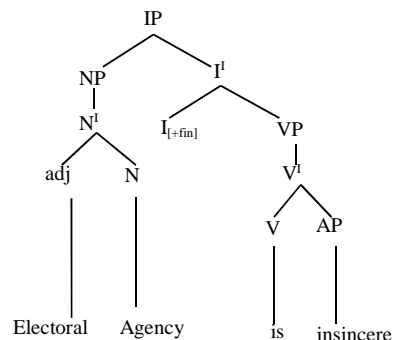
The above tree analysis is the D-structure representation of the headline 'oil thieves JTF's huge burden'. However, the verb 'are' which is shown in this D-structure is null at the S-structure of the headline. Null verbs in

D-structure: [IP Electoral Agency [VP **is** insincere]

newspaper headlines can also be seen in the following headlines from other Nigerian newspapers.

- 11) Electoral Agency insincere
(‘The Nation’, March, 13, 2013)

11b)

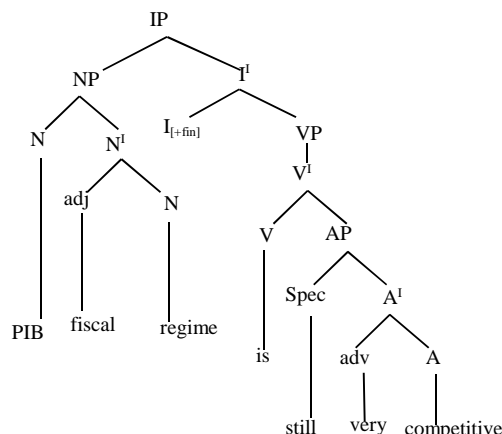


12) PIB fiscal regime still very competitive

(‘Vanguard’, March 26, 2013)

D-structure: [IP PIB fiscal regime [VP **is** still very competitive]]

12b)



From the above analyses, the verb which is overtly realized at the D-structure of the headline is null at the S-structure. Thus, while the D-structure is a full clause, the S-structure of the headline is a small clause. Also, it is discovered in this study that the class of verbs often deleted in the S-

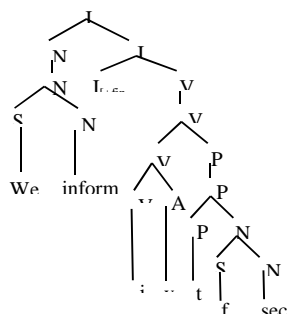
structure of the headlines is the verb ‘to be’, specifically the verb ‘is’ as seen in the previous headlines. This can also be seen in the following headlines.

(13) Weather information vital to food security

(‘The Punch’, Feb 15, 2013)

D-Structure: [IP Weather information [VP **is** vital to food security]]

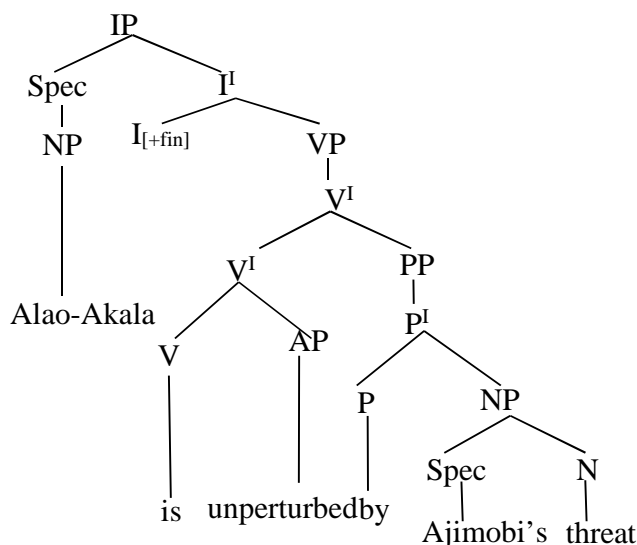
13b)



(14) Alao-Akala unperturbed by Ajimobi's threat
(‘Nigerian Tribune’, Feb 15, 2013)

D-Structure: [_{IP} Alao- Akala [_{VP} **is** unperturbed by Ajimobi's threat]]

14b)



From the two headlines analysed above, it is further established that there are null verbs in Nigerian newspaper headlines. Also, it is discovered that the verb ‘is’ constitutes the class of verbs often deleted in the structure of the headlines.

4.1.3 Empty Null determiners

Determiners are constituents such as articles, demonstrative possessives,

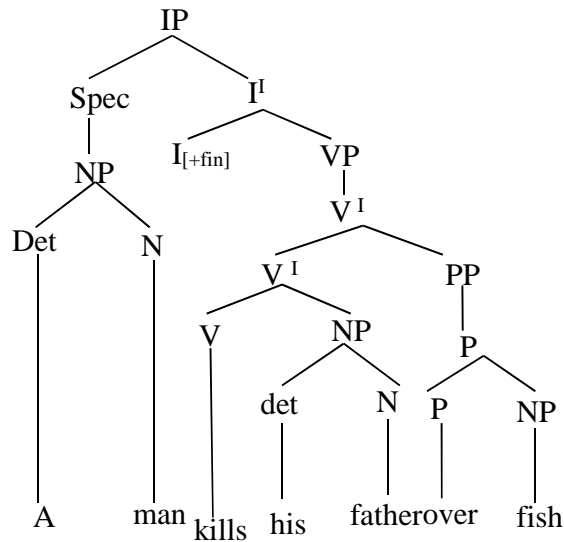
numerals, e.t.c that co-occur with nouns in the noun phrase. They determine the referential properties of nouns (Radford 2004: 33) and thus, are very important in the structure of noun phrases. However, these constituents can be null or invisible in the noun phrase structure of newspaper headlines. This is seen in the following headlines.

(15) Man kills father over fish

(‘The Sun’, Feb 28, 2013)

D-Structure: [IP [NP **A** man] [VP kills [NP **his** father] [PP over fish]]]

15b)

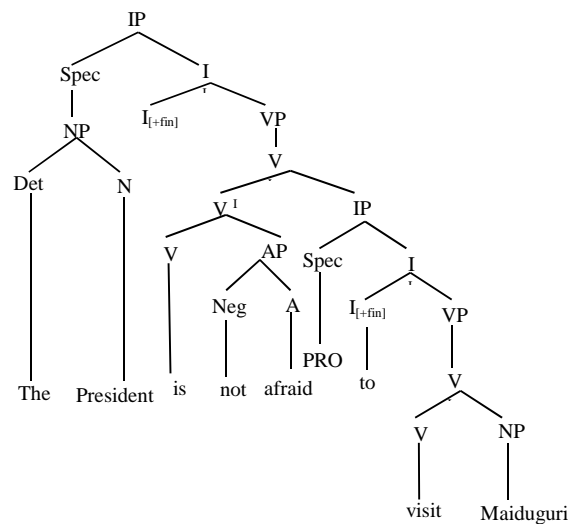


16) President not afraid to visit Maiduguri – Aide

(‘The Punch’, Feb 2, 2013)

D-Structure: [IP [NP **The** President] [NP **is** not afraid [IP PRO to visit Maiduguri]]]

16b)



From the headlines analysed above, it is noticed that there are null determiners in each structure. In the first example, the indefinite article 'a' seen in the [Spec, IP] position of the D-structure is deleted in the S-structure of the headline while the possessive 'his' seen in the [V, NP] position is also deleted in the S-structure of the headline. In the second example, apart from the existence of null subject (PRO) and verb (is) (previously discussed in this study), there is a null determiner. The definite article 'the' seen in the [Spec, IP] position of the D-structure is deleted in the S-structure of the headline. Thus, in Nigerian newspaper headlines, there are not only null subjects and verbs but there are also null determiners in the structure of the headlines. In the above analysis, the class of null determiners identified is articles and possessives in the headlines.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper has examined the nature of empty categories in Nigeria newspaper headlines. It is discovered that empty

categories such as empty subjects, verbs and determiners manifest in the headlines. Notably, this manifestation could be as a result of the fact that newspaper editors/journalists in the process of editing the headlines apply certain transformational processes such as elision which results in the presence of null constituents in the headlines. Similarly, it is discovered that gapping operates in these headlines especially the ones with empty subjects. Furthermore, verbs constitute the highest number of empty categories. This occurs when the verb which is overtly realized at the D-structure of the headline is null at the S-structure. Thus, while the D-structure is a full clause, the S-structure of the headline is a small clause. The class of verbs often deleted in the S-structure of the headlines is the verb 'to be', specifically the verb 'is' as seen in the previous headlines. This study avers that empty categories are main linguistic elements of Nigeria newspaper headlines.

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