

SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES USED IN THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN KENYA'S NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

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ABSTRACT

Media scholars have noted that texts are loaded with ideologies and are therefore never neutral. Yet, the way media texts were used to communicate COVID-19 information in Kenya has been given little attention. Thus, this study examines how syntactic structures in The Standard and the Daily Nation newspapers were used to discursively construct the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study reveals the syntactic structures employed by the newspapers serve important discursive functions. The grammatical processes used in the headlines largely seem to give agency to COVID-19, while Kenyans are presented as grammatical patients. Giving COVID-19 agency, is a way of warning Kenyans against taking the pandemic lightly. The article also shows structures like modality construct the newspapers as having overwhelming authority over readers. Through these syntactic choices, the media wields immense power, and may influence the way people think and act concerning the pandemic.

Keywords: CDA, COVID-19, discourse, newspaper headlines, pandemic, syntactic structures

JEL classification: I1, Y2

1. Introduction

COVID-19 was discovered in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020. It

quickly spread to other countries like Italy, South Africa, and the USA, which were severely affected as the pandemic spread quickly throughout the globe. The pandemic drastically altered social, economic, and political landscapes worldwide, leading to a growing interest by scholars from various disciplines. In economics, Olaniyan (2021), for example, examined the status of the African Continental Free Trade Area in the post-COVID-19 era. On her part, Elu (2022) investigated cryptocurrency returns during the COVID-19 era.

Globally, scholars in linguistics and communication sought to investigate how the pandemic was discursively constructed by the media (Nayab & Dilawer, 2021). As the pandemic continued to spread, Kenyan scholars also began to examine the representation of the pandemic in both mainstream and social media. Ndivo and Kaberia (2020), for example, investigated impoliteness strategies in the communication of President Uhuru Kenyatta and Health Cabinet Secretary Mutahi Kagwe during their COVID-19 updates. This study highlighted the coercive language adopted by the president and his minister.

Similarly, Moinani and Barasa (2021) analysed the words chosen by government officials while giving updates about COVID 19, and how the public reacted to this use of language. The study revealed that the confrontational language used by the government officials during these updates generated distrust and animosity among the public. These studies are important because they revealed how linguistic structures were used by top government officials in Kenya to shape the COVID-19 discourse. However, they examined the utterances of politicians and government officials on television and social media.

The current study's concern is different and significant because, first, it focuses on the print media and secondly, its spotlight is on the newspapers themselves, and how they shaped and influenced public opinion on COVID-19. Specifically, this study was guided by one key research question: How were syntactic structures used by Kenya's print media to discursively construct the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Literature Review

Many approaches to syntax tend to focus on form. Quirk et al. (1985), for example, provide a comprehensive overview of English grammar, focusing on both descriptive and prescriptive aspects of syntax. They describe the structure of a sentence in terms of its constituent elements, such as subject, verb, and object, and provide a detailed analysis of the various types of clauses and phrases found in English. They also discuss issues related to sentence structure, such as word order and coordination, and provide examples of how these structures are used in different contexts. However, this study departs from such structural approaches, and following scholars like Halliday, looks at syntax from a functional and communicative approach.

According to Halliday and Mathiessen (2004), syntactic structures are fundamental to understanding language and the ways in which we communicate. In Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the two linguists describe syntax from a functional perspective. They argue that syntax provides a means of representing the relationship between participants, processes, and circumstances in a clause. They also propose that the structure of a clause is determined by the function it serves in a text, and that the grammatical choices made in constructing a clause reflect the writer's intentions and attitudes towards the subject matter.

In addition, Halliday (2014) builds on his earlier work on SFL, proposing that language is a resource for meaning-making and that syntax is a key element of this resource. He argues that syntax plays a role in construing the experience of reality, and that the structure of a sentence reflects the speaker's perspective on the world. He also proposes that the grammar of a language reflects the social context in which it is used.

Givón's (2001) cognitive approach also takes a functional perspective of syntax. It emphasizes the role of language in human cognition. Givón argues that the structure of a sentence is determined by the conceptual structure underlying the utterance, and that the meaning of a sentence is derived from its syntactic structure. He also proposes that the syntax of a language reflects its speakers' cognitive and communicative needs, as well as their cultural and social contexts.

These approaches are relevant to the current study because they imply that the syntax of newspaper headlines can help us understand the ideologies and communicative intentions of these newspapers. Thus, the way headlines on the COVID-19 pandemic were structured can tell us a lot about the newspapers and the way the pandemic was perceived by society.

We shall now briefly review some studies that have used the functional approach to syntax to gain insights into various social issues. Tareen et al. (2021) investigated the ideological shaping of COVID-19 related headlines within selected Pakistani newspapers. The study employed qualitative methodology, focusing on the English-language newspapers, *Dawn* and *The News*, gathered through purposive sampling. Applying Van Dijk's (2009) socio-cognitive approach, the study revealed that these newspapers' headlines manipulated perceptions of the pandemic by emphasizing the authority of news sources. At the syntactic level, passivization and nominalization established news outlets as authoritative and capable of influencing readers' views and actions.

Doukha and Mansouri (2021), on their part, examined how the online press influenced public opinions during the 2016 United Kingdom (UK) referendum on European Union membership. Their study centred on micro-level analysis to uncover implicit ideologies within newspaper discourse. They used Fairclough's CDA model to examine linguistic elements like vocabulary and grammar. The study found that the use of pronouns like "you" and "we" were linked to power dynamics and solidarity. The inclusive "we" was particularly contentious in editorials, where it was used to represent the editor, readers, and all British citizens. This construction of "we" conveyed editorial authority over readers.

Again, Nguyễn Thị Hạ and Lư Quý's (2019) study on English electronic news reports about environmental sustainability highlighted the presence of relational modality expressed through modal auxiliary verbs, modal adjectives, if-clauses, quasi modal verbs, and modal lexical verbs. Notably, the use of "must" for strong obligation and "should" for dynamic necessity was observed. The study emphasized how "if-clauses" allow speakers to hedge their commitment to events or truth. Moreover, modal verbs like "can," "could," "will," and "would" were found to convey expressive modality. The research concluded that understanding linguistic features in news reports

offers insights into the interplay of ideology, power, and journalistic language use.

Thus, these studies show that functional approaches to syntax are crucial in the current study because they not only demonstrate how syntactic structures employed by newspapers help to discursively construct other social phenomena, but also the COVID-19 pandemic. By analysing the use of syntax in COVID-19 discourse, scholars can gain insights into how the pandemic was framed and represented in Kenyan newspaper headlines.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Model

Fairclough's (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) theory provides a powerful lens through which we can understand the discursive construction of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya's newspaper headlines. At the core of Fairclough's framework lies his profound comprehension of text, discursive practices, and social practices. Firstly, Fairclough views a text not merely as a collection of words and sentences but as a product of social processes and structures. He emphasizes that texts are not neutral; they reflect the ideologies and power dynamics present in society. Thus, newspaper headlines about COVID-19 are not just informative; they are laden with societal meanings and influences.

Moving beyond the surface of the text, Fairclough (2013) delves into discursive practices. These are the ways in which language is used to construct and convey meaning. To him, discursive practices encompass not only the words chosen but also the syntactic structures employed. In our study, we focus on these syntactic structures, recognizing that they are not isolated elements but integral components of how meaning is created.

Fairclough adopts Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach in his CDA model. According to Fairclough (2013), syntactic structures operate under the level of the text, forming the building blocks that connect to construct reality. Fairclough's analysis of these structures reveals that they are not just mechanical tools for language but carriers of ideology.

The choice between Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) and Subject-Verb-Complement (SVC) sentence structures in COVID-19 headlines, for instance, can be ideologically charged. The preference for SVO might imply a more active and agentive role, potentially framing the pandemic in a way that assigns responsibility or blame. In contrast, SVC structures could portray a more passive or neutral stance. Thus, this study considers the choice of syntactic structures in newspaper headlines crucial for our understanding of the media's representation of COVID-19.

Furthermore, Fairclough's (2013) examination of participant types and nominalization demonstrates that even seemingly technical aspects of language are imbued with ideology. Participant types can emphasize certain actors or actions, thereby influencing how readers perceive responsibility and agency in the context of the pandemic. Nominalization, or the transformation of verbs into nouns, can obscure agency or responsibility, making it vital to scrutinize how this process is used to shape the discourse.

Modalities, another aspect of syntactic structure, can also reveal underlying ideology. For example, the use of "is" in a sentence like "she is a doctor" conveys categorical commitment, suggesting a fixed and unchanging identity. In the context of COVID-19, modalities can shape perceptions of certainty, urgency, or necessity, ultimately impacting public understanding and response to the pandemic.

Therefore, by employing Fairclough's (2013) CDA model on media, and specifically on newspaper influence, this research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how syntactic structure is strategically employed in Kenyan newspaper headlines to construct and influence the discourse surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. It underscores the critical importance of understanding the interplay between linguistic choices, media power, and sociocultural factors in shaping public understanding and responses to global health crises.

4. Methodology

This study falls within the qualitative discourse analysis design as proposed by scholars such as Fairclough (2013), Mautner (2008), and Van Dijk (2009). It focused on Kenya's two top newspapers: *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*.

These two newspapers were chosen because they have the widest readership, according to the Media Council of Kenya (MCK) (2022) survey report on *Status of the Media in Kenya*. This has been echoed by GeoPoll's Media Measurement Services survey report. According to the results, the *Daily Nation* is the most widely read newspaper with 70% of readers, followed by *The Standard* with 17%. *The Business Daily* and *The Star* tied for third position with 4% readership followed by *The Taifa Leo* at 3%. With 1% of the readership, *People's Daily* came fourth. *Mwanaspoti*, *Citizen Weekly*, and *Kenya Times* were ranked at 0.5% (GeoPoll, 2022).

In addition, both newspapers have been in circulation for several decades and have established a reputation for reliable and informative reporting. They also have a reputation for providing timely reporting of news and events, hence researchers can rely on them for up-to-date information on current as well as past events.

The dataset for this study consists of 35 newspaper headlines published between March 2020 to December 2020, bearing syntactic structures covering the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was limited to this time frame since this is the period when the highest numbers of COVID-19 positive patients were recorded. Additionally, this time span includes the first and second waves, during which high rates of COVID-19 were detected. Thus, headlines from the two newspapers were purposefully sampled using Mautner's (2008) Top-down Approach presented in Figure 1.

The following steps were used:

- a) Selecting *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation* newspapers
- b) Selecting the headlines
- c) Identifying syntactic structures
- d) Categorizing the data
- e) Analysing the data
- f) Presenting findings
- g) Interpreting the data and drawing conclusions

Further, the data was also subjected to statistical analysis using the Statistical Software for Data Science (STATA) version 15 for descriptive statistics such as frequencies and regression.

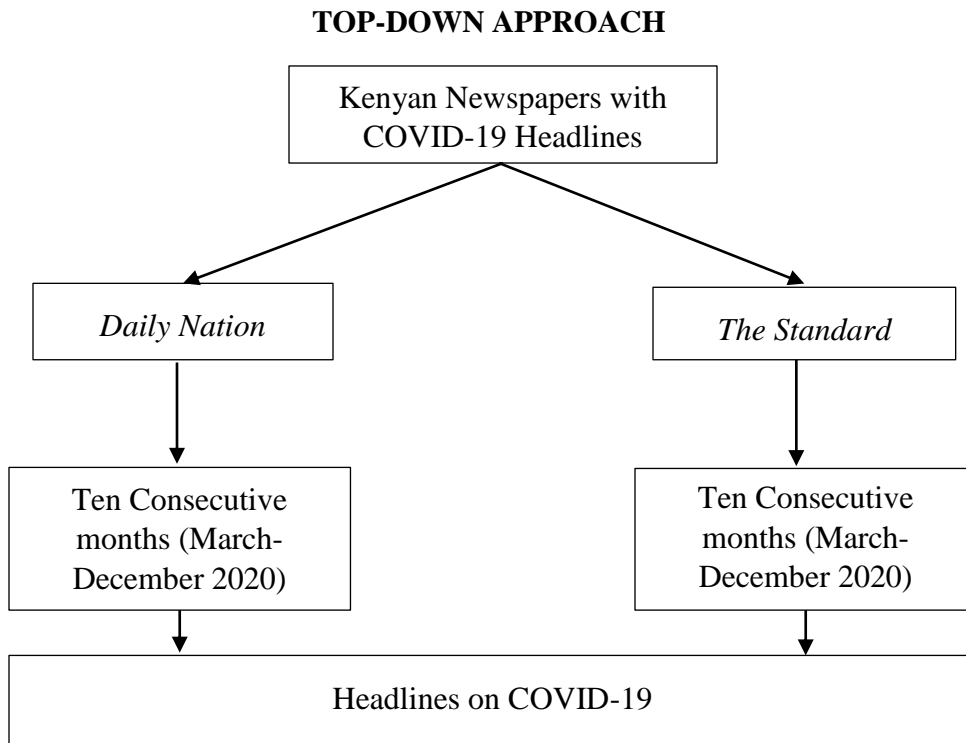


Figure 1: Top- down Sampling of COVID-19 Headlines in Kenyan Newspapers.

Source: Mautner (2008).

5. Results and Discussion

Several syntactic structures have been used to construct newspaper headlines on the COVID-19 pandemic. In this research, headlines from *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation* newspapers were critically analysed based on Fairclough's CDA (2013) framework on syntactic analysis as follows:

5.1 Grammatical process and participant types

The process is a choice between different grammatical processes and participant types, and the selection that is made can be ideologically significant (Fairclough, 2013). There are three types of processes: actions, events, and attributions. Subject Verb Object (SVO) sentences tend to depict actions, Subject Verb (SV) events, and Subject Verb Complement (SVC) attributions. An SVO sentence has an agent and a patient, and the agent acts upon the patient. The following newspaper headlines are in Adverb Subject Verb Object (ASVO) structure. However, in this section, the adverb 'how' is overlooked since it is discussed in the section on expressive modality. In addition, all the headlines were drawn from *The Standard* newspaper only since there were no headlines from the *Daily Nation* with grammatical process and participant types structure.

NHS 10: KCSE, KCPE delay fears as COVID-19 disrupts calendar

NHS 17: How I beat COVID-19

NHS 20: How virus has hit households

NHS 35: How crisis is messing up our children

NHS 47: How corona is robbing Kenyans of their culture

NHS 52: COVID-19 cases surge, Uhuru calls talks

In headline NHS 17, 'I' is the agent and 'COVID-19' is the patient. In this headline, 'I' is represented as having 'beaten' COVID-19. It is also worth noting that agent 'I' is giving a personal testimony about 'beating' the COVID-19 pandemic. This portrays the agent as very powerful. The newspaper is thus giving hope to the readers that COVID-19 is conquerable or eradicable. This is supported by Aldila et al. (2021) and Coelho Paraguassu et al. (2020) who reported that despite the COVID-19's worldwide reach and toll, current advancements have demonstrated that the problems the pandemic has brought about are being addressed.

Indeed, vaccines such as Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna were developed as early as April 2020. Then, Oxford-AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines followed shortly thereafter. In addition, in Kenya, as of 18th June

2023, out of 343,312 confirmed cases, 337,309 recovered while 5,688 (1.7%) people died (Ministry of Health, 2023).

Further, in headline NHS 20, 'virus' is the agent while 'households' is the patient. This is another example of an action process. The newspaper constructs the virus as a powerful agent with the ability to destroy households. The patient 'households' is portrayed as vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. The newspaper is therefore, trying to caution people to be careful since the pandemic has power to claim lives. This finding is similar to the study carried out by Osisanwo (2022). His study highlights COVID-19 as "an economic cankerworm, a killer disease and a threat to humans" (p.64).

Headline NHS 35 also depicts an action process where 'crisis' is the agent and 'our children' is the patient. 'Crisis' in this context stands for COVID-19, thus, it is constructed as having the ability or power to 'mess up our children.' COVID-19 is, for instance, blamed for spiking of teenage pregnancies across Kenya during the 2020 lockdown (Ng'ang'a, 2021; Population Council, 2021; Shikuku et al., 2021; WHO & Ministry of Health, 2020d). This newspaper headline again serves as an indirect speech act. It is a warning to all parents to be cautious concerning the pandemic.

Additionally, headline NHS 47 is an action process where, 'corona' is used as an agent and 'Kenyans' as the patient. Again, the newspaper headline is an indirect speech act. The newspaper is sending a warning to the reader to be cautious about the effects of the virus. The newspaper thus, implies that COVID-19 is a formidable enemy with the power to 'rob' Kenyans' of their culture. A similar finding is reported by Ng'ang'a (2021) and the Population Council (2021) who assert that COVID-19 has not only deprived citizens of their loved ones but also taken away their culture.

'COVID-19' in headline NHS 10 is used as an agent, while 'calendar' is used as the patient. COVID-19 is portrayed as having the power to interrupt the education 'calendar.' The newspaper is thus warning people about COVID-19's ability to interfere with the education system, urging them to take necessary precautionary measures.

Similarly, headline NHS 52 is an event with an inanimate participant. According to Fairclough (2013), if the SV sentence answers the question 'what has happened', then it is an event. In this headline, some elements such

as numbers are missing. This gives the newspaper room to sensationalize or exaggerate the 'surging' of the virus. This again is significantly used by the newspaper to warn the reader about the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.2 Nominalization

Fairclough (2013) argues that in addition to occurring in the grammatical shape of a sentence, a process can occur in the reduced form of nominalization. He further adds that nominalization is a process converted into a noun or a noun phrase. It is reduced because some important information often from a sentence is missing, for instance, tense (thus the timing of the process is not indicated). The other missing information is modality, agent and patient. Newspaper writers have used nominalization in construction of the COVID-19 pandemic headlines in both *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation*. Consider the following headlines:

NHS 1: The corona lockdown

NHS 2: Corona havoc

NHS 4: Shutdown

NHS 6: Uhuru rescue plan

NHS 8: Corona: the grim lessons

NHS 9: Agents of death

NHS 12: A dose of hope

NHS 22: Tragedy of Kenya's empty grain stores

NHS 24: Masks: the truth

NHS 30: Crises that shaped Kenya

NHS 36: The deadly chain of transmission

NHS 40: A budget to the rescue

NHD 9: Curfew nightmare

NHD 10: Measures to save Kenya

NHD 15: Tracking the virus rebels

NHD 21: Ray of hope

The grammatical feature in which headlines NHS 1, NHS 2, NHS 4, NHS 6, NHS 22, NHS 40 and NHD 21 are cast is that of nominalization. Their processes are expressed as noun phrases, as if they were entities and this has an experiential value in the sense that crucial aspects of the processes are left unspecified (Fairclough, 2013). Particularly, it is not known who or what is causing the “shutdown” in NHS 4, “a ray of hope” in NHS 21, “curfew nightmare” in NHD 9 and “a dose of hope” in NHS 12, that is, causality in these headlines is unspecified. Similarly, the processes in headline NHS 22, NHS 30, NHS 36 and NHD 10 are represented without responsible agents which again highlights issues related to the event itself: “what happened?” rather than “who caused it?”

All the above newspaper headlines bear something in common. The fact that important information is missing provokes suspense in the reader. The suspense also has an ideological agenda; it entices the reader to buy the newspaper in order to know what is happening. In headline NHS 30 (Crises that shaped Kenya), for instance, one may ask, ‘what are these crises?’ ‘how did they shape Kenya?’ Similarly, in NHD 21 (a ray of hope), one may ask, ‘what is this ray of hope?’ The absence of crucial details in news headlines compels readers to purchase the newspaper. Consequently, the process of nominalization aligns with the principles of consumerism, aiming to boost sales by instilling a sense of panic in the reader. By withholding information from the reader, through such structures, the newspapers consolidate their power and authority over the reader.

5.3 Modes of sentences

According to Fairclough (2013), there are three modes of sentences, that is, declaratives, grammatical questions, and imperatives. The findings show that the newspaper writers from both *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation* have used various sentence types in constructing COVID-19 headlines, that is, declaratives, imperatives and grammatical questions. This section will address grammatical questions since declaratives and imperatives are discussed under expressive modality and relational modality respectively.

5.3.1 Grammatical Questions

Grammatical questions are of two types. First are the W/H questions that begin with 'Who?' 'What?' 'When?' 'Where?' 'Why?' and 'Which?' Secondly, there are the yes/no questions that begin with the verb 'can,' 'do,' 'would' and 'may.' In a grammatical question, the writer or speaker is asking something of the addressee, in this case, information, and the addressee is in the position of a provider of information (Fairclough, 2013). Further, Fairclough notes that grammatical questions may not be seeking information, but rather, they may be demanding action. Consider the following headlines:

NHD 22: What shall we eat?

NHD 38: Social distancing? What social distancing?

The two newspaper headlines were drawn from the *Daily Nation* newspaper only since there were no headlines from *The Standard* with the grammatical question structure. The newspaper headline "What Shall We Eat?" seeks to influence the readers' perspective and guide their actions by implicitly conveying uncertainty and concern surrounding food availability during the pandemic. It positions readers as recipients of advice, encouraging them to heed the newspaper's implied guidance on food choices and consumption practices. In this context, the newspaper becomes a spokesperson for the larger Kenyan population, suggesting widespread uncertainties and the search for guidance. Also, by addressing the basic necessity of food, it appeals to individual needs and taps into the collective consciousness, reminding readers of the wider pandemic implications. This construction aims to foster a shared concern, nudging readers towards compliance-oriented responses.

Ultimately, the headline's strategic wording functions as a conduit for the newspaper's influence, guiding the reader's thoughts and actions in response to COVID-19 challenges in Kenya. Beyond mere reporting, this headline aims to shape the reader's behaviour by framing the pandemic's impact on a crucial aspect of daily life. This is in line with Van Dijk's observation that newspapers significantly influence the way people think and act.

The headline "Social Distancing? What Social Distancing?" reflects a multi-layered approach to conveying information and opinions. Structured as a declarative sentence, and presented in the form of a question, the headline employs two distinct interrogative components, each with its own distinct purpose. The initial segment, "social distancing?" functions to elicit astonishment or prompt understanding. Meanwhile, the latter segment, "what social distancing?" takes on a more critical tone, appearing to critique rather than genuinely seeking answers. This particular grammatical construction implies a sense of disapproval and scepticism, suggesting that the practice of social distancing may not be as rigorously followed as expected. Through this headline, the newspaper seems to highlight and challenge the perceived lack of adherence to social distancing measures within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya. This simultaneously provokes thought and expresses a certain degree of scepticism regarding societal behaviours. This multiple questioning technique also underlines the newspaper's power and authority. This finding agrees with the study done by König & Siemund (2015) that sentences are not only used as speech act for asserting, claiming and stating, but also for critiquing.

5.4 Use of pronouns

Fairclough (2013) observes that pronouns in English have relational values of different sorts. This study revealed that the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* newspapers used pronouns in construction of the headlines on the COVID-19 pandemic. The following headlines were examined:

NHS 14: Why **you** should be afraid

NHS 17: How **I** beat COVID-19

NHD 22: What shall **we** eat?

NHS 35: How crisis is messing up **our** children

NHS 41: **It's** freedom for now, but what next

In the headline "What shall we eat?", the term "we" is employed to establish a sense of togetherness involving both the reader and the writer. By using this inclusive pronoun, the newspaper aims to create a shared identity with the Kenyan citizens. This choice of language subtly asserts the

newspaper's authority to represent not only its own standpoint, but also the collective perspective of the people. This underlying assertion of authority implies that the newspaper holds the power to speak on behalf of a larger group. This interplay of using 'we' in the headline illustrates the intricate relationship between power dynamics and solidarity, bridging the gap between the newspaper and the readers. This closely aligns with the conclusions drawn by Doukha & Mansouri (2021), whose research discovered that newspapers frequently assume the role of spokesperson for a broader community.

The possessive pronoun “our” in headline NHS 35 is similarly used to include the newspaper and Kenyan citizens. The possessive “our” in this regard helps to create intimacy between the newspaper and the reader; it is like they share the same problem. On the same note, the use of the indefinite pronoun “you” in headline NHS 14 personalises the relationship between the newspaper and the reader, hence creating a kind of solidarity. It is like the headline is addressing a familiar friend about the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, in headline NHS 41, the writer employs the contracted form “it’s”. This informal and familiar use of the pronoun serves the purpose of creating a feeling of closeness between the writer and the reader. This closeness helps in lessening the perceived gap or distance between the two parties, establishing an intimate connection. This is another strategy of the media for establishing a powerful position over the readership.

5.5 Use of modality

Fairclough (2013) argues that modality deals with the speaker's or writer's authority. Following Halliday, he further posits two dimensions of modality, that is, relational modality and expressive modality. News reporters have used these dimensions in the construction of headlines related to the COVID-19 pandemic as analysed below:

5.5.1 Expressive Modality

Expressive modality is the speaker's or writer's authority with respect to the truth. Consider the following newspaper headlines:

NHS 14: Corona: why you should be afraid

NHS 15: Pandemic hits home

NHS 17: How I beat COVID-19

NHS 18: Why doctors are afraid for Kenya

NHS 20: How virus has hit households

NHS 21: Capital city is isolated

NHS 25: Why this will be Kenya's worst year

NHS 28: How police are killing COVID-19 fight

NHS 35: How crisis is messing up our children

All the headlines were drawn from *The Standard* newspaper since there were none from the *Daily Nation* with the expressive modality structure. What is said by the headlines above is presented as if it is factual and incontestable. Fairclough (2013) argues that expressive modality is "a categorical commitment of the producer to the truth of the proposition" (p. 129). The use of the present tense, for instance, "are" in NHS 18, "is" in NHS 21 and the use of the passive construction "has hit" in NHS 20, show the newspaper's authority with respect to the truth.

Expressive modality is also indicated by adverbs, thus, headlines starting with the adverbs "why," "how," and "where" are all examples of expressive modality, as appears in NHS 28, NHS 17, NHS 14, NHS 25 and NHS 35. These headlines construct COVID-19 reality as factual and incontestable. They also have an explanatory function. In NHS 35, for instance, the headline makes the factual assertion that "corona is messing up our children." It further promises to explain to the reader how this is done. This is similar to headlines NHS 28 and NHS 17. In addition, headline NHS 14 uses a factual statement and further gives the reason people should be afraid.

Headline NHS 25 uses the adverb "why", which is also a case of expressive modality. Besides, it also makes use of the modal auxiliary "will" which is mostly used in statements (Fairclough, 2013). The use of the modal auxiliary verb "will" in the newspaper headline gives a strong modal force.

The headline implies that the writer is certain that the year 2020 will be the worst for Kenya. The modal verb in this case allows the writer to present opinion and speculations about “the year 2020” in a way that gives it the status of a fact. The total commitment to the truth, like in the headlines above, significantly influences the way people think (Van Dijk, 2009). The reader’s ability to critique or question such headlines becomes limited. Again, the media’s power is reinforced.

5.5.2 Relational Modality

Relational modality is the authority of one participant in relation to others (Fairclough, 2013). The following newspaper headlines were examined.

NHS 7: Prepare for worse

NHS 11: Lock Kenyans home

NHD 14: Stop dancing with death

NHD 18: Stay safe

The above headlines express the authority of the writers (newspapers) over the readers. The newspapers are discursively constructed as very powerful compared to the reader, whose role is just to comply. Newspapers are constructed as knowledgeable – repositories of knowledge, while the reader is depicted as in dire need of guidance. The use of the imperative verbs, for instance, “prepare,” “stop,” “lock” and “stay” in the above headlines reveal the writer’s authority over the reader. Headline NHS 14 and NHS 11 use direct speech acts where the newspaper is giving an order. The newspaper, for example, commands the reader to “stop dancing with death” in NHS 14. In this headline, the newspaper poses as the custodian of knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic and the reader is constructed as ignorant. Thus, the newspaper has the authority and the reader is the compliant actor. Indeed, the headline sounds as if it is a parent admonishing a child.

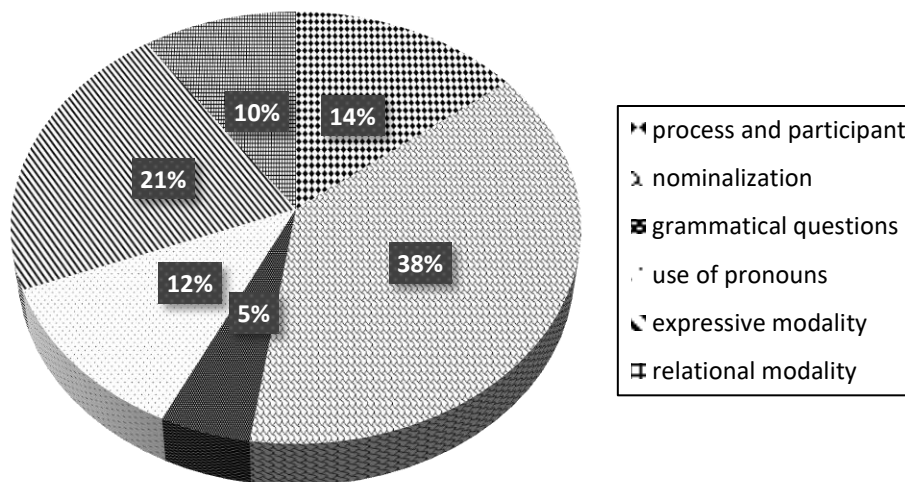
In addition, headline NHD 18 sounds like advice. Again, the newspapers are presented as having the knowledge and authority to advise an ignorant reader to “stay safe and wear a mask.” On the other hand, the reader is

expected to follow the advice given by “staying safe and wearing a mask.” Moreover, headline NHS 7 serves as a warning to the reader to “prepare for the worst” COVID-19 consequences. Again, this headline positions the newspaper as the producer of knowledge while the reader is a passive recipient. Constructing newspapers as the repositories of knowledge affects the way we think and view the COVID-19 pandemic. The reader is likely to be conditioned by such headlines to feel subordinate or powerless in relation to the newspaper (Van Dijk, 2009).

Below is a presentation, using a table and a pie chart, of the way the syntactic structures were used by the two newspapers.

Descriptive Statistics for Syntactic Structures

Syntactic	Proportion	Std. Err.	Logit [95% Conf. Interval]	
Expressive modality	0.2142857	0.0640821	0.1122523	0.3703706
Grammatical questions	0.0476190	0.0332586	0.0112423	0.1802436
Relational modality	0.0952381	0.0458438	0.0346984	0.2356214
Pronouns	0.1190476	0.0505760	0.0485496	0.2635578
Process and participants	0.1428571	0.0546494	0.0633824	0.2910209
nominalization	0.3809524	0.0758412	0.2432425	0.5409005



6. Conclusion

This study sought to investigate how syntactic structures were used to discursively construct the COVID-19 pandemic in both *The Standard* and the *Daily Nation* newspapers in Kenya. The analysis reveals that the syntactic structures employed by the newspapers served important discursive functions.

First, grammatical processes and participant types used in the headlines largely seemed to give agency to COVID-19, while Kenyans were presented as patients (recipients of action). The newspapers constructed the virus as a very dangerous disease, a powerful agent with the ability to destroy society. The virus was, for instance, constructed in some of the headlines, as having the power to 'hit households', 'mess up children', 'rob Kenyans' and so on. Conversely, Kenyans were generally represented by the headlines as vulnerable to the pandemic. The article argues that this construction of COVID-19 aimed to warn people against taking the pandemic lightly.

The study also shows that pronouns, expressive modality, relational modality and grammatical questions recurrently constructed the newspapers as having overwhelming power and authority over readers. Headlines with such structures tended to present COVID-19 information in a factual and incontestable manner. These headlines expressed the authority of the writers (newspapers) over the readers. The headlines warned, ordered, advised, admonished, and the reader's expected role was to comply. Newspapers are thus constructed as knowledgeable and repositories of COVID-19 information, while the reader is depicted as in dire need of guidance. These syntactic structures, the article argues, may have influenced the way people thought and acted concerning the pandemic. Their potential to influence public opinion cannot also be underestimated.

It is hoped that this study provides a deeper understanding of the role of language in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards the COVID-19 pandemic locally and globally. It is also hoped that the article will make a contribution on how syntactic structures help convey information, express opinions, and influence public discourse about pandemics. This, it is believed, has implications for policymakers, journalists, and media practitioners in Kenya and the rest of the world. It is also hoped that revealing the

significance of syntactic structures of COVID-19-related headlines, will lead to the development of more effective and engaging communication strategies for disseminating information about pandemics.

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