



# Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 12, Issue 08, 2023: 08-16

Article Received: 30-08-2023

Accepted: 23-10-2023

Available Online: 30-10-2023

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18533/5zyahb39>

## Incipient grammatical variation in educated English use in Nigeria: A decline in the use of the -s third person singular verb inflection in Nigerian newspapers

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### ABSTRACT

In language variation studies, existing literature on domains of English use asserts that the language of English-medium newspapers globally is the educated, acrolectal, Standard English variety and that variation is not found in educated written English. Contrary to these two key assertions, this study notes the copious and progressive use of an unusual verb form in the Nigerian print media. The -s inflection performs two functions in grammatical number. It is a marker of plurality in count-nouns and singularity in lexical verbs. This study observes a decline in the use of the -s third person singular, present tense inflection in lexical verbs in Nigerian English-medium newspapers and investigates this phenomenon to establish its significance. Data collected from news reports and feature stories in a cross-section of Nigerian newspapers over a period of seven years (2015 to 2021) were examined. The study is situated within variation theory; it adopts observational, quantitative and interpretive methods of enquiry. The findings reveal that the use of the -s third person singular, present tense inflection in lexical verbs is declining in new generation Nigerian newspapers and the uninflected verb form is increasingly replacing it. This suggests an incipient, morphosyntactic variation, emerging in the Nigerian print media. The findings of the study counter existing literature which asserts that variation does not occur in educated written English but rather establish that variation can be found in educated written language. Through its findings, the study re-directs research in language variation to hitherto unexploited sources of data.

**Keywords and phrases:** -s verbal inflection, third person singular, incipient grammatical variation, Nigerian print media, educated English use.

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### 1. Introduction

In the literature on domains of English use, English-medium newspapers are described as a domain of educated English use (Bussman 2006: 117; Crystal 2008: 450; Svartvik and Leech 2006: 122). Svartvik and Leech (2006), in discussing varieties of English, submit that the top level variety is retained

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by leading newspapers. Aiyemoni and Akande (2013: 103) also concur with the assertion that the print media in English-speaking communities adopts the standard variety of the language in publications because, as they submit, “news writers and editors are best exemplars of Standard English”. Correspondingly therefore, the language of Nigerian English-medium newspapers is the educated, acrolectal variety.

However, going through the pages of English-medium Nigerian newspapers, this study observes a significant departure in the language used therein from the assertions made in the literature on the language of English-medium newspapers. The observation is on the grammar, precisely, the verb forms deployed in news-reports and feature stories in English-medium Nigerian newspapers. In those newspaper texts, verb form and function deviate increasingly from the acrolectal, Standard English usage.

In English grammatical structure, the -s inflection is a marker of present tense in lexical verbs that describe third person singular nouns and pro-forms in English (Palmer 1965; Quirk & Greenbaum 1973; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan 1999; Huddleston & Pullum 2002; Cater and & McCarthy 2006). The present tense is overtly marked in verbs that describe third person singular nouns through the inflected verb form V + -s which denotes singularity in the verb, while the uninflected form V + -o denotes verbs that describe first and second persons singular and plural also in the present tense. The uninflected form is the plural form of the verb and it is not overtly marked for present tense. The -s inflection therefore is required in lexical verbs in the present tense that describe third person singular nouns and pro forms. Verb form and function is central to grammatical concord or subject and verb agreement and stipulates the relationship between a noun and its describing verb. English grammar stipulates number concord between a noun and its describing verb, and verb number is overtly marked in lexical verbs. When a noun is in the third person singular therefore, its describing lexical verb, if in the present tense, should be inflected with the -s morpheme thus: V + -s (Quirk & Greenbaum 1973; Quirk et al, 1985).

Contrary to the rules of English grammar enshrined in grammar books, this study observes an emerging trend in Nigerian newspapers, specifically in news reports and feature stories, where the use of the -s third person singular, present tense inflection in verbs is declining, and the uninflected plural verb form V + -o is increasingly being used in the place of the inflected form; the uninflected plural verb form is used to describe both singular and plural nouns. This study notes that the observed phenomenon occurs more frequently and systematically in new generation newspapers than the old generation ones and investigates it to determine its grammatical and sociolinguistic significance. The study is situated within variation literature; it seeks to determine the sociolinguistic significance of grammar forms deployed in a specific domain of use.

Another significance of the study is its interrogation of existing assertions in variation literature. Studies in variation literature claim that variation is not found in educated written language (Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog, 1968). These proponents of language variation assert that variation is usually found in non-educated usage or vernacular dialects. This study seeks, however, to demonstrate that variation can be found in educated written English.

Data were collected from a cross-section of Nigerian English-medium newspapers over a period of seven years (2015 – 2021). Observational, interpretive and quantitative methods were deployed in analysis. Observational and quantitative analyses showed that the new generation newspapers deploy the unusual verb form more frequently than the older generation newspapers. Interpretive analysis suggests that the observed phenomenon is an incipient grammatical / morphosyntactic variation, emerging in the Nigerian print media – a domain of educated English use. The findings refute existing assertions in variation literature which claim that variation is not found in educated written English and by so doing, the study re-directs research in variation studies to hitherto unexploited sources of data for language variation.

In section two, variation literature is reviewed briefly to situate the present study within existing literature. Section three discusses the methodology adopted in the study. In section four, a cross-section of sample data are presented and discussed and in section five, the conclusions drawn from the study are stated.

## 2. Descriptive and theoretical background

### 2.1 Language variation

Variation studies have been concerned primarily with speech. The proponents of language variation (Kroch 1994; Labov 1966; 1969; 1971; 1981; 1984; D. Sankoff 1982; 1988; G. Sankof & Labov 1985; Poplack 1993; Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog, 1968; Wolfram 2006) have largely relied on speech as data for language variation studies and ignored written language. They argue that language is primarily speech and that variation cannot be found in written language. Weinreich, Labov, & Herzog (1968) extend the argument further in declaring that the educated written usage of a language is usually a prescriptive, stable form of the language and rarely admits variation. They claim that variation of any sort is usually found in non-educated usage or vernacular dialects which are most often the material for variation studies. Following from this assumption held by the pioneers in the field, language variation scholars have largely overlooked the written variety of English in investigations. This study sees this as a gap in the literature on language variation and undertakes to fill it by investigating a domain of educated written English in Nigeria – the print media. The study aims to demonstrate that variation can be found in educated written language.

Another assertion made in studies on domains of English use is that the language of English-medium newspapers globally is the top, acrolectal, error-free, Standard English variety (Bussman 2006: 1117; Crystal 2008: 450; Svartvik and Leech 2006: 122; Ayeomoni & Akande 2013). The present study however, observes grammar forms in English-medium Nigerian newspapers that defy this assumption.

Poplack (1993), expatiating on the aims of variation theory, declares that it aims to empirically investigate language use and structure as manifested in natural contexts. The present study aligns itself with this particular aim of variation theory; it seeks to investigate the use of specific grammar forms and structure as they manifest in the Nigerian print media. Amplifying the variationist viewpoint further, D. Sankoff (1988: 141), cited in Poplack (1993: 252) avers that the aim is to “account for grammatical structure in connected discourse and to explain the observed deviation in linguistic form-function relations found therein”. In line therefore with D. Sankoff’s position, this study aims to account for the grammatical structure of the verb for describing third person singular present tense in the connected discourse of news reports and feature stories in Nigerian English-medium newspapers.

Poplack (1993: 252), expounding further on the aim of variation studies, submits that “they (variation studies) seek to discover patterns of usage which pertain to the relative frequency of occurrence or co-occurrence of structures, rather than simply to their existence or grammaticality”. Adopting Poplack’s line of argument, this study seeks to discover patterns of usage of the -s third person singular present tense inflection in the news reports and feature stories in new generation Nigerian English-medium newspapers, patterns that relate to its frequency of occurrence in that domain of language use, and to establish the significance of the observed patterns.

Scholars working in the field of variation linguistics point out that language variation occurs at all levels of language structure (Honeybone, 2011; Wolfram, 2006). Variation has been established to exist in phonology (Labov, 1966), syntax (Adger & Trousdale, 2007; Bamiro, 1995) and morphosyntax (Alo & Mesthrie, 2004; Embick, 2008; Kroch, 1994; Taiwo, 2013). In this study, the observed potential variation occurs at the level of grammar; in the sub-level of morphosyntax – the interface of syntax and inflectional morphology.

## 3. Methodology

The study adopts observational, quantitative and interpretive methods of investigation. Observational methods were applied in discerning the phenomenon under investigation. Quantitative methods were applied in quantifying the occurrence of the observed phenomenon and comparing it with its marked form, while interpretive methods were deployed to infer the significance of the phenomenon.

### 3.1 Observation

The researcher observes that the use of the -s third person singular, present tense inflection in lexical verbs in news reports and feature stories in Nigerian English-medium newspapers is waning and the uninflected verb form is progressively replacing it. This phenomenon is noted to occur more frequently and systematically in new generation newspapers than the old generation ones.

### 3.2 Sample selection

The researcher selected ten newspapers from a cross-section of newspapers published in Nigeria to serve as a sample for the investigation of the observed phenomenon. The study was carried out over a period of seven years (2015 to 2021). The stratified random sampling method was adopted. First, all English-medium Nigerian newspapers registered in the country at the time the study was initiated in 2015 were stratified by age into two sub-sets: old generation and new generation newspapers, and five newspapers were randomly selected from each sub-set thus: old generation newspapers– *New Nigerian* (1949), *The Punch* (1976), *The Guardian*(1983), *Vanguard*(1983), *This Day* (1995); and new generation newspapers– *Independent* (2001), *Leadership* (2006), *The Nation* (2006), *NewsDirect* (2010), *New Telegraph* (2014). In the study, old generation newspapers are newspapers that were above 20 years old at the time the study was initiated in 2015 and new generation newspapers are those that were less than 20 years old at that time. Equal numbers of copies of the sample newspapers were examined for the observed phenomenon.

### 3.3 Representativeness of the sample

There were 44 English-medium newspapers registered in Nigeria at the time the study was initiated in 2015. The sample therefore represents 22.7% of English-medium Nigerian newspapers at that time. The study seeks to draw inferences on the language of the Nigerian print media, from the sample.

### 3.4 Data collection

Data were collected from news reports and feature stories in the selected newspapers. The motivation for selecting only news reports and feature stories out of all newspaper content is that these two sections of newspapers are written by educated people: media practitioners, news correspondents, news reporters, news writers and journalists because the study aims to question existing literature which avers that variation is not found in educated written language. All news reports and feature stories in the selected newspapers in the period under review were examined and linguistic features that meet the study's data inclusion criteria were collected. In this study, data inclusion criteria is instances of the deletion of the -s inflection where it is required to form the third person singular, present tense form of lexical verbs. In other words, the use of the plural uninflected verb form V + -o where the singular inflected form V + -s is required. Table 1 below summarizes the details of data collection.

Table 1.

*Details of data collection*

s/n	Old generation newspapers	Average number of data collected per newspaper	New generation newspapers	Average number of data collected per newspaper
1.	<i>Nigerian Tribune</i>	1	<i>Independent</i>	10
2.	<i>The Punch</i>	1	<i>Leadership</i>	6
3.	<i>The Guardian</i>	4	<i>News Direct</i>	12
4.	<i>This Day</i>	1	<i>New Telegraph</i>	8
5.	<i>Vanguard</i>	3	<i>The Nation</i>	6

This table presents the average numbers of the observed phenomenon collected per newspaper: the deletion of the -s third person singular, present tense inflection in verbs in news reports and features of the sample newspapers. The new generation newspapers manifested a higher prevalence of the phenomenon. This study seeks to establish a pattern of the observed phenomenon in the print media, a pattern that correlates with the age of newspapers.

This table is also illustrated in the line chart below.

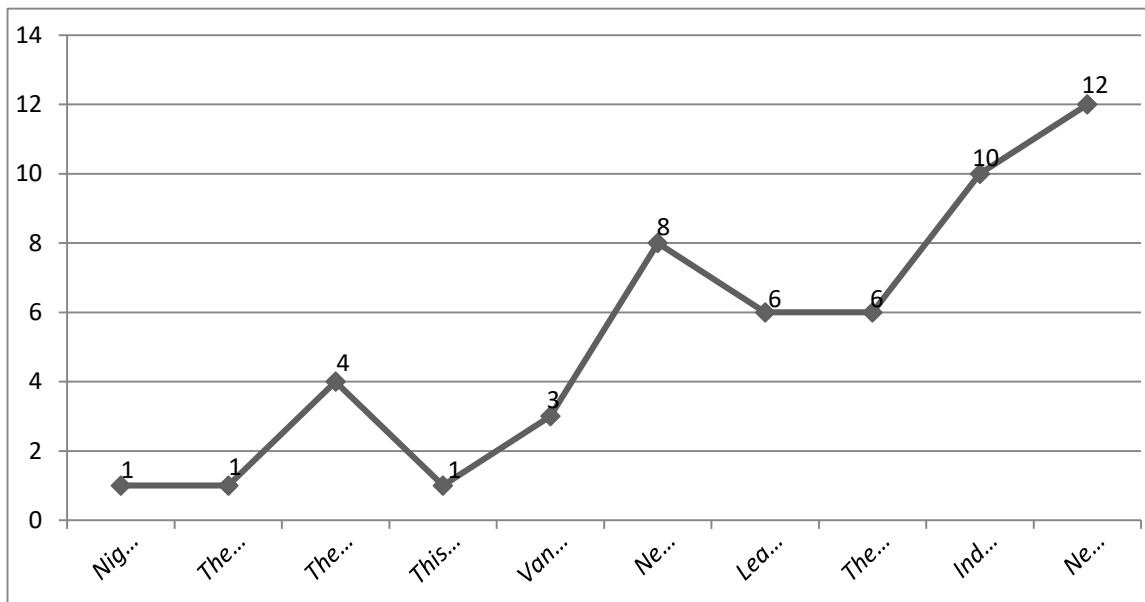


Figure 1: A line chart showing the increasing use of the uninflected verb form in the new generation newspapers.

This line chart illustrates the data collected from the study sample. The new generation newspapers manifested higher numbers / instances of the deletion of the -s inflection in verbs where it is required, than the old generation newspapers. The curve rises steeply with the new generation newspapers which are listed on the right-hand side of the chart. The observed phenomenon occurs more prevalently in new generation newspapers.

#### 4. Data presentation

Some data are presented here, one data sample from each sampled newspaper.

1. "... President Jonathan abhor the shedding of blood ..." *Nigerian Tribune*, 8/1/15; pg. 45
2. "... the nation's political class daily display immaturity ..." *The Punch*, 15/1/15; pg. 18
3. "... Aganga noted that it is the only means that fit into ..." *The Guardian*, 12/1/15; pg. 4
4. "You can encourage private sector who need these processed materials for ..." *This day*, 28/5/21; pg. 48
5. "... an exemplary organization that transform lives..." *Vanguard*, 27/1/17; pg. 17
6. "Hammawa said "...; it provide a veritable platform for SMEs to learn..." *Independent*, 26/1/17; pg. B1
7. "... if we manage it well it become a demographic boom indeed..." *Leadership*, 19/1/17; pg. 28
8. "A good manager need to ..." *NewsDirect*, 29/5/20; pg. 24
9. "... said he want to see more bills ..." *New Telegraph*, 5/1/16; pg. 10
10. "... if your money get there..." *The Nation*, 20/1/17; pg. 5

#### 4.1 Discussion of the data

The function of the -s third person singular present tense inflection is embedded in grammatical concord. When the subject of a sentence or a clause is in the third person singular, its describing verb, if a lexical verb, is inflected with the -s present tense morpheme and takes the structure V + -s. By this rule, the present tense is overtly marked in verbs that describe third person singular subjects and covertly marked in verbs that describe first and second persons singular and plural subjects. Thus, first and second persons singular and plural are described by the uninflected verb form V + -o. In the data samples collected in the study, this rule is ignored. The subjects of the sentences and clauses in the data are in the third person singular, but their describing verbs are not inflected for the present tense. Thus, the uninflected verb form is used to perform the functions of both the inflected and uninflected verb forms. This phenomenon is increasingly becoming standard usage in Nigerian newspapers, with the new generation newspapers manifesting more instances of the phenomenon than the old generation newspapers.

## 5. Potential causes of the perceived variation

This study avers that the potential grammatical variation observed in Nigerian new generation newspapers is engendered by the transfer of the largely uninflected verb structure of many indigenous Nigerian languages into English. This assertion takes its basis from Lado's (1957) language transfer theory.

Lado (1957: 2), proposing the language transfer theory, states that "individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language ... productively..." This assertion is adduced to be the basis of the morphosyntactic deviation observed in this study data. The writers of news reports and feature stories in Nigerian newspapers "transfer" the forms and meanings of the uninflected verb forms of their native languages into English. Contrastive studies of English and Nigerian languages have shown that many Nigerian indigenous languages do not have verbal inflections of person, number or tense as English does. In some Nigerian languages, such as Efik-Ibibio, Hausa, Igbo, Tiv, Yoruba, number, person and tense are realised lexically through the deployment of an ordinal or cardinal noun or an adverbial that occurs pre or post verbal position. In some other Nigerian languages, person and number of the verb are inherent in the verb, rather than in affixes and inflections. A linguistic outcome of the contact between English and Nigerian languages is that writers of Nigerian newspaper news reports and feature stories tend to transfer the uninflected verb structure and meaning of their native languages into English, which results in the deviant verb structure observed in new generation Nigerian newspapers.

Because verb structure and function is contrastive in English and Nigerian languages, mastery of its rules and principles is largely problematic to Nigerian users of English as a second language. Inability to master verb structure and function in English which arises from the contrasts in verb structure and function in English and Nigerian languages gives rise to the unusual verb structure which is progressively becoming the standard usage in Nigerian new generation newspapers.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on observation and the analysis of data collected from a cross-section of Nigerian newspapers, this study avers an incipient morphosyntactic variation, emerging in new generation English-medium Nigerian newspapers. In that domain of use, the -s third person singular present tense inflection is progressively going out of use and is increasingly being replaced by the uninflected verb form V + -o which is now being used to perform the functions of the two verb forms. This occurs through the deletion / dropping of the -s inflection in lexical verbs – an internal process of language change. This study perceives that English verb structure is undergoing an internal process of change in new generation Nigerian newspapers and as a result the -s verbal inflection is gradually going out of use in the written repertoire of that domain of the Nigerian print media.

This study avers the observed phenomenon to be an incipient variation. This position is taken based on Honeybone's (2011: 152) definition of variation thus: "Linguistic variation occurs when one meaning can be attached to more than one form". Applying Honeybone's definition on the data, the study submits that the verb forms for both singular and plural lexical verbs: V + -s and V – -s respectively, have acquired one meaning in the news reports and feature stories of new generation, English-medium Nigerian newspapers. In those texts, the structures for denoting plural and singular verbs are becoming increasingly indistinguishable; the meanings (functions) of the two verb forms are expressed through the same structure and the two verb forms are distinguished only by the number of the noun phrases that they describe. This study therefore concludes that a morphosyntactic variation is evolving in new generation Nigerian newspapers. Going by the observed potential variation, this study counters existing literature which claims that variation does not occur in educated written language and submits that variation can be found in educated written English.

The study suggests that, as a matter of policy, Nigerian news-writers and editors should be proficient in the rudiments of English grammar and its rules. To achieve this, newspaper firms should provide training in English grammar and writing proficiency for their news-writers and editors, the way the electronic media firms (television and radio houses) do in speech competence / fluency for their news-casters.

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## Appendix

A cross-section of the data samples collected for the study is presented here.

s/n	Newspaper	Data sample
1.	“Speaking on transportation, Aganga noted that the current administration was committed to better rail transport, saying that it is the only means that fit into the industrial arrangement of any emerging nation.”	<i>The Guardian</i> , 12/1/15; pg. 4
2.	“Ondo kick off road rehabilitation projects.	<i>The Guardian</i> , 12/1/15; pg. 31
3.	“... Orakwe noted that public relations is how a company ... maintain ties to its communities...”	<i>The Guardian</i> , 12/1/15; pg. 51
4.	“Not only for the purpose of security of inmate but also to ensure that anybody who go to jail does not come out a worse human being than the way he went in.”	<i>The Guardian</i> , 13/1/15; pg. 39
5.	“According to him, to make matters worse, the nation’s political class daily display immaturity in their conduct and utterances to further heat up the polity.”	<i>The Punch</i> , 15/1/15; pg. 18
7.	“He noted that President Jonathan abhor the shedding of blood of any Nigerian, ...”	<i>Nigerian Tribune</i> , 8/1/15; pg. 45
8.	“Hammawa said he want to see more bills being passed by the state assembly...”	<i>New Telegraph</i> , 5/1/16; pg. 10
9.	“Martha told the court that her husband always fight her”	<i>New Telegraph</i> , 19/1/17; pg. 9.
10.	“In our country in particular because of the recurrent fuel scarcity that tend to happen...”	<i>New Telegraph</i> , 19/1/17; pg. 17
11.	“This is just a solidarity as one who believe in the Biafra agenda.”	<i>New Telegraph</i> , 21/1/17; pg. 4
12.	“..., ... the traditional institution occupy in the grand scheme of things in Nigeria...”	<i>New Telegraph</i> , 24/1/17; pg. 10
13.	“In most cases my food is done in less than 45 minutes, which usually take one hour or more when I use kerosene stove.”	<i>New Telegraph</i> , 24/1/17; pg. 31
14.	“The present governor is trying his best but need more action...”	<i>New Telegraph</i> , 25/1/17; pg. 27
15.	“Every religious organization that receive offerings and donations from people ...”	<i>New Telegraph</i> , 27/1/17; pg. 16
16.	“... because if we manage it well it become a demographic boom indeed...”	<i>Leadership</i> , 19/1/17; pg. 28
17.	“Although and to be fair to the incumbent governor, Muhammed Abdullahi Abubakar, who seem to have ...”	<i>Leadership</i> , 19/1/17; pg. 36
18.	“... our continent need to grow out of this...”	<i>Leadership</i> , 20/1/17; pg. 70
19.	“She said “Niger State house a good number of tourism assets...”	<i>Leadership</i> , 20/1/17; pg. 72
20.	“... saying that Nigeria need \$1bn to ...”	<i>Leadership</i> , 29/1/17; pg. 8
21.	“LEADERSHIP recall that ...”	<i>Leadership</i> , 31/1/17; pg. 12
22.	“... if your money get there...”	<i>The Nation</i> , 20/1/17; pg. 5
23.	“Explosion damages property and destroy life...”	<i>The Nation</i> , 20/1/17; pg. 24
24.	“Amaechi represent hope...”	<i>The Nation</i> , 20/1/17; pg. 25



25.	“It calms nerves, reduce spasms and ...”	<i>The Nation</i> , 26/1/17; pg. 32
26.	“When the nose cry...”	<i>The Nation</i> , 27/1/17; pg. 43
27.	“Expert hinge on...”	<i>The Nation</i> , 29/1/17; pg. 44
28.	“The God nature ... which include...”	<i>Independent</i> , 19/1/17; pg. B14
29.	“... only he inspires, give the strength to execute, guide you ... and reward you.”	<i>Independent</i> , 19/1/17; pg. B14
30.	“... the center therefore suggest that ...”	<i>Independent</i> , 20/1/17; Pg. A11
31.	“The Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), which serve as ...”	<i>Independent</i> , 22/1/17; pg. B12
32.	“It cover events, present documentaries..., enable better understanding of the Roman Catholic faith...”	<i>Independent</i> , 22/1/17; pg. C6
33.	“A leading online portal that include...”	<i>Independent</i> , 25/1/17; pg. B10
34.	“It provide a veritable platform for SMEs to learn...”	<i>Independent</i> , 26/1/17; pg. B1
35.	“... that Adeola had no respect for his mother and often quarrel with his mother...”	<i>Independent</i> , 28/1/17; pg. A13
36.	“ONWA, like the other statutes, however provide for compensatory reliefs...”	<i>Independent</i> , 29/1/17; pg. A18
37.	“My source also reason that ...”	<i>Independent</i> , 30/1/17; pg. A12
38.	“That aptly describe the plight of ...”	<i>Vanguard</i> , 22/1/17; pg. 39
39.	“(“It means Fani Kayode don’t even know the history...”	<i>Vanguard</i> , 23/1/17; pg. 16
40.	“... an exemplary organization that transform lives...”	<i>Vanguard</i> , 27/1/17; pg. 17
41.	“... If the management of the institution refuse to pay...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 12/2/2020; pg. 9
42.	“It constitute the main reason why the federal government has not granted ...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 12/2/2020; pg. 12
43.	“More still need to be done ...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 12/2/2020; pg. 12
44.	“... and the government take action on it ...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 12/2/2020; pg. 23
45.	“... as it remain the best way to fish out raw sporting talents...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 2/3/2020; pg. 31
46.	“... because nobody like it being reported that your brother killed his wife...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 2/3/2020; pg. 32
47.	“The Almighty God remain the source of marriage...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 2/3/2020; pg. 32
48.	“As the integration of digital technology in businesses continue to grow, and ...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 3/12/2020; pg. 2
49.	“The tax framework which seek to address the issues of low tax revenue...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 3/12/2020; pg. 23
51.	“A good manager of men need to ...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 29/5/2020; pg. 24
52.	“One therefore need to ...”	<i>NewsDirect</i> , 29/5/2020; pg. 24
53.	You can encourage private sector who need these processed materials	<i>This Day</i> , 28/5/2021; pg. 48
	...	