

## **SEMANTIC PROPERTIES OF NEWS HEADLINES**

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### **Abstract:**

*The special language features of headlines are used in order to make newspaper articles more attractive and striking. The headlines have the important function of grabbing the readers' attention and giving them an idea of the news story's content and tone, so that they can decide whether it is worth reading or not. The focus of the paper is on headlines and their grammatical characteristics, and the rhetorical strategies used to create them in print and online news, with many examples provided, but the main characteristics of leads and body copy are also examined.*

**Keywords:** news, headlines, language, media, newspaper, features, stylistic.

### **Introduction**

The paper deals with powerful, and commanding properties of news headline. This paper attempts to account semantic properties of headline discourse, and examine manifestations of headline in terms of schematic features and specific syntactic structures, namely markers that occur in sentence-initial position. This theoretical study of headlines will then be applied in an analysis of English headlines. Earlier research that dealt with the theoretical notion of semantic properties of headline discourse has depended primarily on content analysis. More importantly, it has been quite unsystematic and sometimes confusing. Various levels of description have been conflated, reflecting the lack of explicit, adequate, and independent criteria for headline analysis.

However, newspaper headlines should be seen as a text type in their own right, for the following two reasons:

- Firstly, articles and headlines differ in form and function at least partly (Brandt, 1991, p. 216).
- Secondly, headlines of newspaper articles are said to be distinguishable from other titles, such as film titles or titles of paintings, because they are usually recognized as such by their characteristic features (cf. Gerretz 1994: 17).

It should be emphasized, however, that the second argument does not apply to

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all sorts of newspaper headlines, particularly those in the focus of the present paper. As a first step, a limited number of relevant terms as well as their definitions and delineations will be given at this point, before moving on to the functions and characteristics of newspaper headlines.

The term we have decided to use in this context is headline, which often constitutes a short summary of the article. The headline is only one type of head, a superordinate term for headline, heading, and crosshead. Headings differ from headlines in that they do not give information on the content of the article, merely serving the purpose of grouping the news in a more convenient way, and crossheads do not appear at the beginning of an article, but are usually heads for paragraphs. A term closely linked to headlines is the lead, which directly follows the headline and has often been used as a short contextual clue. The lead virtually lends itself to this usage because it is supposed to present all important pieces of information, including all the questions. Even though no longer obligatory today, it serves as a pre-orienting device, is independent from the article itself and is meant to spare the reader a perusal of the whole article. Only a few headlines consist of one line (usually in short news); longer news and particularly comments are commonly introduced by two, sometimes by even three headlines. In order to understand why headlines display certain linguistic and typographic features, we need to take a look at their diverse functions. Essentially, two major functions can be selected from among the numerous, partly overlapping minor ones, i.e.

1. providing (simplified) information and
2. arousing curiosity

In this sense, headlines not only indicate the topic of an article, but also attempt to persuade the reader to read on. This function makes headlines in some ways similar to adverts, whose main goal is also persuasion, and which resort to similar mechanisms. Hence they could actually be considered as advertisements for texts. Consequently, a headline has to both attract the reader's attention and arouse continued interest, a function that is particularly relevant for news.

Unlike the lead, the headline is a stand-alone unit. It simply abstracts the story, it does not have to begin it. The two functions of headlines are partly linked to the typographical appearance of headlines:

- Firstly, headlines combine paragraphs into articles and therefore help to organize the newspaper page (structural function).
- Secondly, depending on the size of the fonts used for the headline, the reader can also infer how important the news presented might be, which facilitates selection.

Although numerous other minor functions could be pointed out here, a short

enumeration of a restricted sample will suffice for the present purpose: headlines are supposed to display features that are characteristic of the editorial department of a specific newspaper, the corporate identity function. They also constitute an occasion for image-work and enable the paper to give a first interpretative evaluation of the news, to include their own opinions. Finally, headlines can serve as a thought-provoking device and be meant to create a feeling of familiarity among the readership.

It is generally assumed that the headline can be shorter when the reader is familiar with a specific topic. In order to avoid unnecessary “word material”, headlines are known to have a tendency for telegraphic style, such as omitting copula. In addition, it has been assumed that determiners are often omitted in headlines.

As the headlines are one of the most important elements of the newspaper, special attention is paid in order to make them more colorful, intriguing and catching. To do so, different stylistic means are used. L. Hakobian and K. Krunkyan (2009:25) notice that expressiveness in headlines is achieved with the help of various phono-aesthetic devices:

- Alliteration: *Wham Bam Sam Cam to be Mam.*
- Rhyme: *Dirty Dealing in Cleaning. Swatchata Abhiyan.*
- Rhythm: *My vote is NOTA: Ola, Uber drivers send message in poll-bound Telangana*
- Hindi: *Trump Modi ki Chemistry ki mystery.*
- *Ab ki bar Diwar ki par.*

All of these examples draw attention as they sound more poetic. The usage of phonetic devices makes the headline pleasant to read. Above all, they have the effect of stirring the reader’s emotions. It creates a musical variation which can be humorous or disturbing.

- Emotive syntax includes such elements like parallel constructions: *What counts isn't how you look but how you behave.*
- As well as antithesis: *Setting foot on the moon may be a small step for a man but a giant step for mankind.*

The headlines when using parallel constructions together with antithesis become like the vivid pictures and are very illustrative. Contrasting two different ideas or repeating of the same patterns of words or phrases in the headline forces the reader to pay attention as they have the aim to shock the reader. Besides the phonetic and syntactic constructions, Hakobian and Krunkyan (2009, pp. 26-27) mention one more group of devices which are used in the creation of the headlines, i.e. lexical stylistic devices:

- Various epithets (word and phrase epithets, sentence epithets): I'm Dead Angry With My Ban; No More Nagasaki's Call.
- Metaphors: Hope Fades with Every Hour, Us-Peace Plan Hides Iron Fist.
- Metonymy: Greenham Goes to Moscow; (British women peace fighters from Greenham Common have returned from the recent world congress in Moscow with some positive images of Russia). Glass Goes at the Old Bailey. (Hundreds of glass carafes and tumblers used in the Old Bailey's courtroom and eating areas have been replaced by plastic containers following an attack on Judge Ann Goddard by an accused man, who threw a carafe at her – which narrowly missed and shattered against a wall).
- Simile: The-Knyzak Problem | For the Rich Smells like a Rose to Seniors
- Allusion: A Tale of Two Germanys from Russia without Love. The most typical usage of stylistic devices has been illustrated above. However, it does not cover the great variety in headline structures.














Stylistic devices are used for the purpose to impress the reader. The headlines become more fun and attractive. The factor of surprise is being created and the reader is interested in reading of the whole article. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that stylistic means sometimes create the uncertainty of meaning as firstly the connotation of those devices has to be revealed. Headlines have special grammatical features. Allan Metcalf in the article *The Grammar of (Newspaper) Headlines* published in the newspaper *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2013) presents such basics of the grammar of headlines:

1. Use present tense for past events: Columbus Discovers New Route to India.
2. Use to for future events: Sun to Burn out in 6 Billion Years.
3. Omit the, a, an: Cow Jumps over Moon; Dog Watches, Laughs.
4. Use comma for and: Jack, Jill Fall from Hill; Confusions Possible.
5. Never spell out numbers: Virgil Guides Dante Past Levels of Hell.
6. Use colon for said or says: Galileo:- I Confess Earth Stays Still.
7. Use single quotation marks: Ceasar To Brutus: —Et Tu?! Falls by —Unkindest Cutl.
8. Omit be in its various forms: Candide, Pangloss Happy Cultivating Garden, except when emphasized: Hamlet Asks, To Be or Not? Ponders, Decides To Be.

These are the usual peculiarities and special rules of the headlines grammar.

Journalists use them in order to make the headlines more attractive and intrigue people to read the article as well as for limited space in the newspapers.

Without knowing these special grammatical features it can be difficult to understand the headline and interpret its meaning until the whole article is read. In order to catch the reader's attention, headlines have to be as simple as possible and appropriate to the style a newspaper represents. Znamenskaya (2005, pp.151-153) divides the newspaper's headlines features. The linguist not only distinguishes the patterns of headlines, but also gives the examples from well-known newspapers:

-  Full declarative sentences [e.g., Allies Now Look to London'(The Times)].
  -  Interrogative sentences [e.g., Do you love war? '(Daily World)].
  -  Nominative sentences [e.g., Gloomy Sunday'(The Guardian)].
  -  Elliptical sentences:
    -  with an auxiliary verb omitted (e.g., Yachtsman spotted' (Morning Star));
    -  with the subject omitted (e.g., Will win' (Morning Star));
    -  With the subject and part of the predicate omitted (e.g., Still in danger'(The Guardian)).
  -  Sentences with articles omitted (e.g., \_Blaze kills at Party'(Morning Star)).
  -  Phrases with verbal's—infinitive, participial and gerundial (e.g., To get US aid'(Morning Star), Keeping Prices Down'(The Times)).
  -  Questions in the form of statement (e.g., The worse the better? '(Daily World)). Complex sentences (e.g., \_Army Says It Gave LSD to Unknown GIs'(International Herald Tribune)).
  -  Headlines including direct speech:
    -  introduced by a full sentence (e.g., \_Tell Margaret I love her' he said and then he died (Sunday Express));
    -  Introduced elliptically (e.g., \_New rate support system best in Europe—Minister'(The Guardian)).
- The classification provided by Znamenskaya is very explicit. She identifies a number of different lexical and syntactical categories by which the headlines are subdivided. Another classification is given by I. Mardh (1980:183). Unlike the previous categorizations, this one is not divided into special parts by the use of lexical, phonetic, grammatical or syntactical means and this distribution is more generic. She identifies the following linguistic features as typical of headlines in English newspapers: (1) the omission of articles;
- (2) The omission of verbs and of auxiliaries (e.g., the verb \_to be');

- (3) Nominalizations;
- (4) The frequent use of complex noun phrases in subject position (in theme position);
- (5) The use of short words (‘\_bid’ instead of ‘\_attempt’);
- (6) The widespread use of puns, word play and alliteration; the structures which represent different patterns of headlines have been listed above. The special language features of headlines are used in order to make newspaper articles more meaningful.

### **THE LANGUAGE OF HEADLINE:**

The headline has the important function of grabbing the reader’s attention and giving them an idea of the news story’s content and tone, so that they can decide whether it is worth reading or not. The headline is generally one line long, printed in large type and written in a telegraphic style. Headlines are generally not written by the reporter, but by the sub-editor, who decides on the page layout and chooses the wording and the type font and size that can best fit the design of the page. Thus, they are often written after the story, and are extracted from its lead or based on its main points. They must sound interesting and appealing, while respecting strict space constraints. Because headlines need to be concise, informative and at the same time attractive, headline writing is considered one of the most creative aspects of media linguistics.

In headlines, the need to use condensed, highly synthetic language has led to the development of a specific syntax, which preserves lexical words, but omits function words: those that serve a grammatical function, such as determiners (i.e., the, a, an, this that) or auxiliary verbs (i.e., forms of the verbs be, have, do). The headlines below illustrate this.

- Scheduled cast girl alleges unfair treatment.
- Hotel bars cricket fans.
- Trade unions call for strike.
- India signs nuclear deal.
- India Pakistan edge towards war.
- PM Modi firm on demonetization.

Another grammatical feature exploited in headlines is the use of nominalizations (nouns derived from verbs or adjectives, with a change in the word ending). A few examples are shown below. In the last three there is no change in the word ending.

- departure from depart
- difficulty from difficult
- arrival from arrive
- difference from different
- expansion from expand
- depth from deep
- exclusion from exclude
- sensitivity from sensitive
- eating from eat
- redness from red

Nominalization has the effect of presenting events and properties as if they were things or concepts. By making the action or quality reported more abstract, nominalizations provide media person with a powerful tool to increase the perceived level of objectivity and formal distance of their news.

Stylistically, nominalized forms can be used as nouns which can be placed in different positions in the sentence (for example, they can be preceded by adjectives or prepositions, or they can be used as subjects or direct objects), and thus give the media person a high degree of flexibility in creating the headline.

In many newspapers or online news sites, a secondary headline is also found, called a deck head, summary line or summary blurb, which, together with the headline, provides a short summary of the main story facts.

### **INFORMATIVE HEADLINES**

Headlines can also be written in a way that privileges the informative, descriptive element, by appealing to reason rather than emotions. Informative headlines are favored in authoritative papers and are suitable for tragic stories, where wit or double meanings that create puns or humorous effects would be considered inappropriate. More importantly, informative headlines are favored in online news, because they tend to be descriptive and contain keywords. This makes them more retrievable by online search engines than witty headlines, and so they can appear high in search rankings. At the same time, because reading patterns on the web differ from reading patterns on paper, informative headlines appear more suitable to the needs of online users who scan pages and rapidly decide whether headline links are worth clicking on or not. In general, informative headlines are characterized by simple, straight direct sentences and active verbs in the present tense. Here are some examples.

- वो पाकिस्तानी लड़की, जिसकी अजीबोगरीब पर टली  
समझौता ब्लासोट की सुनवाई
- आकाश अंबानी श्लोका मेहता की शादी, वेडिंग रिसेप्शन  
के **LIVE** अपडेट्स
- 10 बड़ी वजहें, आखिर क्यों? फिर जीत की ओर  
अग्रसर है? **PM** मोदी
- खुद इमरान खान की आर्थिक स्थिति बिगड़ी, **PAK** पहले  
से बदहाल
- जानिए आपके शहर में कब है वोटिंग, देखें  
सभी **543** सीटों की लिस्ट

Informative headlines may also provide information on the tone of the article.

### **THIS HEADLINE IS BOTH IRONIC AND WITTY.**

It provides an interpretative key to the tone of the news story, which one may expect will be ironic too. The sense of irony in the headline stems from the contrast between the colloquial words (Lads' mages) chosen to introduce the topic (men's magazines) and the rather formal expression inflict curse. The choice of the word preening to describe men's care of their bodies is also ironical. Finally, the expression info it preening curse is uncommon and rather anomalous, and certainly not obvious. The lead explains the expression, specifying that it refers to a newly discovered condition affecting men reading men's magazines that promote an obsession with exercise.

### **CONCLUSION**

The main purpose of the newspaper headlines is to reach the audience. People who buy a newspaper firstly look at the headlines so they have to be capturing attention. The impact of headlines on the readers is likely to be stronger as certain stylistic features used in headlines make them particularly memorable and effective. The use of stylistic features in the newspaper headlines creates expressiveness, attractiveness and interest in reading them. Sometimes headlines create humorous effect by the use of certain stylistic devices in order to catch the reader's eye.



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