

An Analysis of Grammatical Characteristics and Lexical Features of Online News Headlines in English Language Newspapers

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Abstract: *Owing to the advent of the Internet, nowadays traditional newspapers are accessible anywhere online and become print-media-turn-online. This is a cause for concern about the declining circulation of traditional newspapers in print. This study aims to investigate grammatical characteristics and lexical features of 525 online news headlines of the Bangkok Post website, and to compare the grammatical characteristics and lexical features of online news headlines with headlines on the same issue which were published in printed version. The analysis of sample headlines reveals that both online headlines and headlines in print are mainly in the simple sentence structure using the present simple tense followed by headlines of other constructions. Regarding the lexical features of lexicon in both types of headlines, they employ short words such as abbreviations, acronyms and clippings. In addition to this, they employ various stylistic devices, foreign words, idioms and expressions, jargon and reporting verbs. As for the comparison of online news headlines and headlines in print reporting the same issue, the online news headlines are generally longer than the headlines in print. This is because they are different in grammatical structures, lexicons and details. Generally speaking, the print-media-turn-online maintains the writing style that is up to journalism standards.*

Keywords: Online News Headlines, Grammar of Online News Headlines, Lexical Features of Online News Headlines, English News Headlines, Print News Headlines and Online News Headlines

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the current media are not only communications that reach a large number of the general public via radio, television, magazines and newspapers but also the World Wide Web. Van Dijk (1988: 150) states, 'With the introduction of modern technology and the existence of print press, electronic or online newspapers have marked a milestone in media and become very popular to the public in modern life.' Newspapers nowadays rush their news to readers using the Internet; therefore, the language used in headlines is changing in many ways. First, most online headlines in sentence construction of the present simple tense are generally longer than headlines in print. Second, the online headlines prefer longer words rather than short words and jargons. Finally, the writing style of online headlines such as the attribution of details of figures, the reporting of full proper nouns and quotes and source attribution of these two types of headlines are also imminent factors that cause online headlines longer than headlines in print. Modern journalists have applied a new writing style when writing online news headlines; therefore, the researcher is interested in studying the grammatical characteristics and lexical features of online news headlines in order to expand the knowledge in this field. As a headline has its own grammatical and lexical features, readers should pay attention to these features in order to fully understand the headlines. Besides this, those who are interested in journalism writing should also study more about these linguistic characteristics of news headlines in order to enhance their writing proficiency.

2. Literature Review

Newspapers can be generally divided into broadsheet newspapers or 'quality press' which normally present

intellectual news content, therefore, the language used in broadsheets has a formal and serious tone and the vocabulary is standard English, another kind of newspapers is tabloids which present sensational issues such as scandals, celebrities and human-interest news with a lot of pictures and simpler style of language than broadsheets. The current trend of publication in the digital age has transformed newspapers into printed-newspapers which can be either broadsheets or tabloids and online-newspapers which are web newspapers which exist on the Internet for easier and speedy access. The characteristics of language used in online newspapers are somehow interesting and they are worth investigation to compare them with their counterpart, printed-newspapers. This study focuses on the analysis of grammatical characteristics and lexical features of online news headlines in order to discover new findings which widen the knowledge about the typical characteristics of headlines which are changing due to the need to attract the target groups.

Headlines are written in different grammatical structures to serve different functions; that is, to attract attention, to signal urgency, and to signal significance. (Clark 2007: 42) In contrast, Morley (1998: 31) defines the functions of news headlines exclusively by identifying five principal functions of newspaper headlines, namely, to attract the reader's attention, to summarize the content of the article, to indicate the writer's attitude to the story, to indicate the register of the article, and to indicate the focus of the article.

1) Grammatical characteristics of news headlines

The language used in headlines or block language is 'the typically common language used by the printing media' (Bram, 1995: 107). This kind of language contains its own specific grammatical characteristics such as shortened syntactic structures (usually in phrases and words, rather

than clauses and sentences). (Bram, *ibid.*) Therefore, it might be challenging for readers to understand block language used in headlines due to its non-standard grammatical characteristics and lexicons.

a) Sentence constructions of headlines

As far as sentence structure is concerned, there are two main types of sentences-simple and multiple sentences. (Crystal, 2003: 216) The most natural sentence structure; that is to say, the first kind of sentence children learn to speak, is the simple sentence structure or a sentence with just one independent clause (Leech, 2006: 104). A multiple sentence is a sentence with two or more clauses that are linked either by coordination or by subordination (Crystal, 2006: 226). According to the type of the linking word, Crystal (*ibid.*) further classifies multiple sentences as compound sentences and complex sentences.

b) Ellipsis in headlines

Biber et al. (1999: 156) defines ellipsis as the omission of elements which are precisely recoverable from the linguistic or situational context. The missing word or words can be inserted without changing the meaning and without producing ungrammatical structure. Its main purpose is to condense the same meaning into smaller number of words. The ellipsis can be classified in clausal units within a sentence as *initial*, *medial* and *final* ellipsis.

c) Tenses in headlines

Even though headline writers can use different tenses in reporting the event that happened in the past, the imminent tense that is used in headlines is the present tense. As Reah (1998: 13) points out that newspaper are ephemeral text; that is, they are intended only for the day they are delivering the news. Therefore, the widespread use of the present tense in headlines is one of defining characteristics of register of news headlines. (Chovanec, 2016: 83) When a verb in the present tense is used in a headline, it refers to the current action and helps emphasize the action happening rather than its completion. The use of the present simple tense to report the events that happened sometime in the past not only makes the readers feel the relevance of the current events but also conveys the news element of immediacy which is the most prominent characteristic of news reporting-yesterday's news is not news. A present tense headline is the most common as it creates an increased level of immediacy, relevance, and regency and thus contributes to the greater and more active engagement of the readers.

d) Other grammatical characteristics in headlines

Besides tenses, headlines writers also consider writing news headlines in other grammatical constructions such as passive voice, infinitives, modal verbs, direct speech and indirect speech and noun phrases due to the efficiency of the constructions in reporting the events. For example, Clark (2007) indicates that passive voice is frequently found in news stories. The passive form is one of the prominent grammatical features used in headlines to report the news where the emphasis is on the agent of the event. Mostly, auxiliary verbs in the passive form are omitted to save space. For example, 'is' and 'are' are omitted in headlines that report events that are going on at the moment of the reading, 'was' and 'were' are omitted in headlines that report past

events, whereas 'has been' and 'have been' are omitted when reporting the headlines with emphasis on the current effects of the events. The writer uses only participial verb in the construction of the passive voice. This may confuse the readers with the headline in the past tense unless they observe 'who' the conductor of the event is.

The choice between using the active voice or the passive voice depends on 'who' or 'what' is emphasized as the agent of the sentence. The subject or 'who' will appear before the main verb at the beginning of the sentence. If it is seen as the direct responsibility or a participant, the active form may be used. If the effects or the results of the action are more important, the passive form will be used. The passive form is used mainly for three reasons: unknown agent, redundant agent and when interest is in what happened.

2) Lexical features of English news headlines

Headline writers employ specific headline lexis in writing headlines to enable them to perform their functions effectively. Reah (1998: 18) suggests that, in order to make headlines attract the attention of the reader, headline writers may select words that carry particular strong connotation; that is, carry an emotional loading beyond their literal meaning. In addition to this, Chovanec (2014: 120) proposes that in writing an effective headline, long words have to be replaced by short ones and the most important words should be put at the beginning, as in the following example.

Fed waits for job market to perk up

'Fed' in the above headline is shorted from 'Federal Reserve System', the central banking system of the United States of America. The word used in the above headline is jargon, words and expressions used in a particular profession or by a particular group of people, which are difficult for other people to understand, so its explicit meaning may be generally known among that particular group.

It is noticeable that the topics concerning the studies of lexical features used in headlines are numerous and difficult to cluster. For better understanding, the lexical features in headlines in this study will cover the following topics:

a) Abbreviations

Abbreviation is very common in news headlines because of its advantages in saving space by reducing letters to avoid crossing the lines.

The use of abbreviations enables the writer to compress words into a small space. There are mainly two forms of abbreviation: acronyms and alphabetisms, and clipping. (Crystal, 2009)

b) Headlines / short words

Headlines is an abbreviated form of news writing style used in newspaper headlines. By definition, headlines means the condensed, elliptical, or sensationalist style of language characteristic of (especially newspaper) headlines (www.oxforddictionaries.com). Because space is limited, headlines are written in a compressed telegraphic style, using special syntactic conventions; for example, with the ellipsis of verb to be and articles, the use of the present tense to report past events and the use of the infinitive to signify

the future. Journalists have invented space-saving words that appear frequently in headlines but not so often elsewhere; for example, bar, bid, clash, hail, halt, loom, mar, opt, spark, vow and the like. These vocabularies are generally found in news headlines.

3) Stylistic devices

Stylistic devices describe things relating to the methods and techniques used in creating a piece of writing, music, or art. In literature and writing, stylistic devices are the use of any of a variety of techniques to give an auxiliary meaning, idea, or feeling to the literal or written (www.wikipedia.org). They are also called rhetorical devices or figures of speech. Generally speaking, stylistic devices are used in speeches, essays, writings etc. to make them more interesting and livelier, as well as attractive.

Concerning linguistic devices used in writing news headlines, Reah (2002: 16-19) classifies them into four main groups as follows:

Group 1: Word and meaning

The stylistic device in this category plays on the potential for ambiguity that can exist in the relationship between word and meaning.

Group 2: Intertextuality

Reah (1998: 18) points out that writers employ a range of words and expressions that are culturally-specific and can't be understood without reference to other texts like: proverbs, sayings, book titles, songs and even shops' names. The intertextuality in this category makes use of ambiguity of the familiar and sayings in a particular culture, therefore, the headline may not be understood by people from other cultures. On the other hand, the headline which uses intertextuality from popular songs, films, book titles etc. which are globally well-known can convey its message successfully.

Group 3: Phonology

Even though a headline is supposed to be read, not spoken, headline writers make the headline memorable by the use of the awareness of the sound.

Group 4: Loaded words (strong connotation words)

Reah (2002: 18) defines loaded words as words which carry strong connotations; they "carry an emotional loading beyond their literal meaning". Loaded language (also known as loaded terms or loaded words) is rhetoric. This study will cover the study of online news headlines and headlines in print aspects in the aforementioned aspects.

3. Methodology

Objectives of the Research

This study is a qualitative and quantitative analyses of the language used in news headlines. The objectives of the research are: to investigate the grammatical characteristics of online news headlines of the *Bangkok Post*, to analyze the lexical features of online news headlines of the *Bangkok Post*, to compare the grammatical characteristics and lexical features of online news headlines with headlines on printed issue.

Analysis and Interpretation

The subjects of this study comprise 525 online news headlines in www.bangkokpost.com and 114 headlines of online headlines and headlines in print version of the *Bangkok Post* which report the same issue. This study is quantitative and qualitative research and purposive sampling is used in this study.

Analysis of grammatical characteristics

The analysis of grammatical characteristics such as tenses and other grammatical constructions from the data of 525 online news headlines of the *Bangkok Post* reveals the findings as indicated in Table 1:

Table 1: The distribution of grammatical constructions in the headlines

	Constructions	No. of headlines	Percentage
Sentence headlines (without ellipsis)	Present simple	295	56.19
	Present perfect	1	0.19
	Past simple	7	1.33
	Future	3	0.57
Sentence headlines (with ellipsis)	Present simple	51	9.71
	Present continuous	14	2.66
	Present perfect	2	0.38
	Passive voice	93	17.71
	Infinitive	24	4.57
Phrase headlines	Noun phrase	34	6.47
	Verb phrase	1	0.19

According to Table 1, the analysis of data reveals the following findings:

- 1) There are 306 sentence headlines without ellipsis (58.28 %) in different tenses; namely, 295 headlines in the present simple tense (56.19 %), 1 headline in the present perfect (0.19%), 7 headlines in the past simple (1.33%) and 3 headlines in the future simple (0.57%).
- 2) There are 184 sentence headlines without ellipsis (35.04%) in different kinds of ellipsis, e. g., ellipsis of auxiliary verbs, articles, conjunctions. These headlines are in different tenses; namely, 51 headlines in the present simple (9.71%), 14 headlines in the present continuous (2.66%), 2 headlines in the present perfect (0.38%), 93 headlines in passive voice (17.71%), and 24 headlines in infinitive (4.57%).
- 3) There are 35 headlines in phrase headlines (6.66%); namely, 34 headlines in noun phrase (6.47%) and a headline in verb phrase (0.19%).

Analysis of syntactic structure of headlines

The analysis of syntactic structure of the headlines reveals the findings as indicated in Table 2:

Table 2: The distribution of syntactic structure in the headlines

Syntactic structure	No. of headlines	Percentage
Simple sentence	455	86.66
Compound sentence	14	2.66
Complex sentence	21	4
Phrase	35	6.66

The analysis of syntactic structure of the headlines in Table 2 reveals 455 headlines in simple sentence (86.66 %), 14 headlines in compound sentence (2.66%) and 21 headlines

in complex sentence (4 %) and 35 headlines in phrase (6.66%).

Analysis of lexical features

Regarding the analysis of lexicons of online news headlines, it can be summarized that the headlines writing styles are applied in the sample headlines in order to make them shorter and more appealing to the reader. The shorten words found in the sample are abbreviations, acronyms and clipping in names of organizations, political groups, countries, titles, forms of address, scientific and technical terms, political groups, and institutions involving the news story.

As for the analysis of lexicons in headlines following Reah’s model (2002), the findings in this study also confirm that the following features are employed in headline writing:

Group 1: word and meaning. The stylistic devices such as metaphor, metonymy and simile are employed to make the headlines more colorful.

Group 2: Intertextuality. Many of intertextuality come from popular songs, films, book titles etc. which are well-known globally.

Group 3: Phonology. The stylistic devices using rhyme of words such as alliteration, assonance and pun are used in headlines.

Group 4: Loaded words. Words with strong connotations are used in headline to make the headlines more colorful and appealing.

The analysis of the sample reveals that the most frequently used lexicons in headlines is loaded words since they are wording that attempts to influence the readers by appeals to emotion or stereotypes which is the main objective of headlines. In addition to the aforementioned features, the analysis reveals that other types of lexicons such as foreign words, idioms and expressions, jargons and reporting verbs are also employed in the sample headlines.

The comparison of online news headlines and news headlines in print

The analysis of grammatical characteristics of online news headlines and headlines in print reveals the findings as indicated in Table 3:

Table 3: The distribution of grammatical constructions of online news headlines and headlines in print

	Constructions	No. of online news headlines	Percentage	No. of headlines in print	Percentage
Sentence headlines (without ellipsis)	Present simple	35	61.40	36	63.15
	Present simple	5	8.77	2	3.51
Sentence headlines (with ellipsis)	Present continuous	1	1.75	—	—
	Passive voice	8	14.04	14	24.56
	Infinitive	3	5.26	3	5.26
Phrase headlines	Noun phrase	4	7.02	1	1.75
	Verb phrase	1	1.75	1	1.75

According to table 3, the analysis reveals the following findings.

- 1) There are 57 online news headlines in different tenses, which can be classified as 35 sentence headlines without ellipsis (61.40%), 17 sentence headlines with ellipsis (29.82 %), and 5 phrase headlines (8.77%).
- 2) There are 57 headlines in print in different tenses, which can be classified as 36 sentence headlines without ellipsis of verbs (63.15%), 20 sentence headlines with ellipsis (35.08%), and 2 phrase headlines (3.50%).

Both online news headlines and headlines in print use a variety of constructions. The majority of both types of headlines are sentence headlines without ellipsis (61.40% and 63.15%), followed by sentence headlines with ellipsis (29.82 % and 35.08%), and phrase headlines (8.77% and 3.50%)

The findings indicate that headline writers prefer using sentence headlines without ellipsis for both online and in print when it is possible, followed by sentence headlines with ellipsis and phrase headlines.

Analysis of syntactic structure of headlines of online headlines and headlines in print

The analysis of syntactic structure of online news headlines and headlines in print reveals the findings as indicated in Table 4:

Table 4: The distribution of syntactic structure of online headlines and headlines in print

Syntactic structure	No. of online headlines	Percentage	No. of headlines in print	Percentage
Simple sentence	48	84.21	50	87.71
Compound sentence	1	1.75	-	-
Complex sentence	3	5.26	5	8.77
Phrase	5	8.77	2	3.50

According to table 4, the analysis of syntactic structure of 114 online news headlines and headlines in print reveals that 57 online headlines comprise 48 headlines in the simple sentence (84.21%), 1 headline in the compound sentence (1.75%), 3 headlines in the complex sentence (5.26%) and 5 headlines in phrase (8.77%), whereas 57 headlines in print comprise 50 headlines in the simple sentence (87.71%), 5 headlines in the complex sentence (8.77%), and 2 headlines in phrase (3.50%).

The analysis also reveals the following findings.

The majority of online news headlines and headlines in print are in the simple sentence. The preference syntactic structure of headlines in print is in the simple sentence. There are more headlines in print (87.71%) in the simple sentence than online news headlines (82.45%). Besides this, there is not much difference in the number of both types of headlines in the compound sentence, complex sentence and phrase.

Regarding the length of headlines which report the same issues, the online news headlines have the average length of 7 words per headline which is considered longer than headlines in print which have the average length of 6 words per headline. Generally speaking, online news headlines are longer than headlines in print.

4. Conclusion

- **Analysis of grammatical characteristics**

Regarding the analysis of grammatical characteristics of news headlines, it can be concluded that the present tense is mainly used in headlines whereas other grammatical structures are used sporadically depending on the context of the news story. As Chovanec (2000) points out, the present simple tense in headlines is considered as 'historical present' and is 'unmarked'. The use of tenses other than the present simple in hard news headlines in quality press (like the *Bangkok Post*) may thus be seen as a departure from specific headline conventions, and labelled as marked use against the background of the conventional headline present tense. This is clearly seen in the minority of headlines with other tenses in this study.

- **Analysis of lexical features**

Regarding the analysis of lexical features of news headlines, it reveals that the headline writers employ headlines writing styles to make them shorter and more appealing to the reader. The lexicons in headlines following Reah's model (2002) and loaded words are also used to make the headlines more stylistic and attractive. Besides, the analysis reveals that other types of lexicons such as foreign words, idioms and expressions, jargons and reporting verbs are also employed in the sample headlines.

- **Analysis of online news headlines and news headlines in print**

The analysis of online news headlines and news headlines in print reveals the following grammatical characteristics and lexical features:

- 1) Regarding the length of headlines, the average length of online headlines is longer than the headlines in print due to three main reasons. Firstly, they are different in grammatical structure, Secondly, they are different in lexical feature e. g. there are cases when the online news headlines employ short words. Finally, they are different in detail. e. g., in some cases, the online headlines provide more information than the headlines in print.
- 2) Regarding the quotation of figures, the online news headlines are more specific about figures than those in headlines in print which generally provide approximate figures.
- 3) Regarding the report of proper nouns such as names of individuals and names of organizations and companies,

online news headlines provide full names of proper nouns, whereas the headlines in print save more space by using abbreviations and reducing proper nouns.

- 4) Regarding idiomatic expressions, both online news headlines and headlines in print use idiomatic expressions to make headlines catchy.
- 5) Regarding source attribution in indirect quote, both types of headlines put the emphasis on the source and quote differently. Some headlines put the emphasis on the source, therefore, the source appears before the quote, whereas their counterparts put the source after the quote because they emphasize 'what is said'.

To sum up, even though the online news headlines are generally longer than the news headlines, some of the online headlines and headlines in print are different in grammatical characteristics and lexical features. The findings in this study can be generalized only in the case of the newspapers which report the majority of news as updated news and report some news with different headlines in print version, called printed-media-turn-online. It is generally accepted in journalism that the constraint of page space limits the length of words used in headlines. Another reason is the requirement of speed in reporting information in printed-media-turn-online to cover the incidents before its rival, therefore, the details reported in both types of headlines may be different due to time limitation in working online.

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