

A Brief Study on the Language of Newspaper Headlines Used in “The New Light of Myanmar”

Sandar Moe

Abstract

A newspaper headline is a text which is the summary of the article below it. Headlines in English often use a unique set of grammatical rules. The use of unusual grammar patterns, special vocabulary and humorous devices are important in writing headlines. Moreover, news reporters use the techniques of ellipsis, omitting words that can be inferred because they want compact headlines. In fact, they have pressures of time and space which are the constraints in news reporting. So, the study of the language of news headlines used in ‘The New Light of Myanmar’ is quite interesting and worthy to be analyzed in terms of some linguistic levels.

Key words: Ellipsis, compact headlines, linguistic levels.

Introduction

Language is the main means whereby people communicate. It is also, ironically, the main means whereby people fail to communicate if its nature and background are not examined. Within a language, there are many specialized varieties or fields such as science, medicine, law, religion and mass of communication. These various fields have developed different styles of language. They require to be studied carefully if we want to understand and use them to communicate and exchange facts and information from one person to another. Among several varieties of language styles, the language of newspaper reporting presents a wider range of linguistically distinctive. In order to attract the readers’ attention, newspaper reporters have to use different techniques in writing news reports. The headlines of these news reports are also written in a special style which is different from ordinary language. They are used in unusual ways and some special rules of grammar. They must also appeal to the attitudes and interests of the intended reader because whenever a reader unfolds a newspaper, the very first ones the reader sees are the headlines and the photos. Therefore, the study of the language of newspaper headlines is very interesting and it is worthy to be examined carefully.

Literature Review

According to “The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language” by David Crystal (1987), the world of modern newspaper and magazine publishing presents a wider range of linguistically distinctive varieties than any other domain of language study. Newspaper reporting style is different from other styles of language as there are some fundamental constraints of using language which are the pressures of time and space. Information has to be compressed into a limited space, usually in columns. Interest has to be focused, captured, and maintained through the use of large type, dramatic headlines, short paragraphs, and succinct sentences. In various ways, the occurrence of photographs, the decency of the information reported and the need to maintain human interest will influence the choice of vocabulary and grammar. Therefore a distinctive grammar is used in writing headlines as they are the most prominent features of a newspaper.

Headlines are the titles of a newspaper article printed in large letters. According to “The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language” by David Crystal (1987), most headlines differ from everyday language by omitting many of the less important words in a sentence, to produce an elliptical, ‘telegrammatic’ construction. They also display a very restricted range of sentence structures.

In “Investigating English Style”, David Crystal and Derek Davy (1969) noted that the term ‘journalese’ seems to be restricted to one kind of newspaper-reporting language only. But every newspaper has its own peculiar style of writing while they belong to the same variety.

Similarly, according to the data from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, the term concerning headlines is known as ‘headlines’. It is an abbreviated writing style used in newspaper headlines. It consists of special syntax, short forms and commonly used short words. However, like the language of newspaper reporting, that of the news headlines will be different from one publication to another. According to the facts mentioned in the book “Investigating English Style”, a particularly piece of language, or a text can be studied in terms of a number of interrelated levels of description. The levels which should be considered in the study of the language of newspaper headlines are:

- (1) Graphetic level
- (2) Graphological level
- (3) Phonological level
- (4) Grammatical level
- (5) Lexical level and
- (6) Semantic level

Graphetics is the basic graphic substance of language. It is also a branch of linguistics concerned with the study of written or printed shapes. Different kinds of shapes and type sizes may give a stylistic effect. As the reporters of news articles have to try to catch the eyes of their regular and new readers, they use different shapes, font sizes and even colours in writing headlines.

In terms of graphology, the distinctive uses of punctuation, special symbols, abbreviations and contractions are needed to study as graphology is the study of a language’s writing system. Headlines use many contractions and abbreviations: in the USA, for example, *Pols* for “politicians”, *Dems* for “Democrats”, *Lib Dems* for the Liberal Democrats.

As mentioned in the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1985), phonology is the establishment and description of the distinctive sound units of a language. As the newspaper headlines are only written and printed, their language cannot be studied thoroughly in terms of phonology. However, the reporter may use rhymes and alliterations to attract the attention of the readers. A rhyme is a word that has the same sound or ends with the same sound as another word. For example, a rhyme for “rain” is “pain”. As mentioned in “Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2005)”, alliteration is the use of the same letter or sound at the beginning of words that are close together, as in “sing a song of sixpence” where the /s/ sounds are repeated. The examples of such headlines using alliterations are as follows:

- (1) **P**riate **p**layer **p**redicts insurance

(2) Media makes Madonna Mad

At the grammatical level, as mentioned in the book “Investigating English Style”, the main aim of grammar is to analyze the internal structure of the units called sentences in a language, and the way these function in sequences. In the language of newspaper headlines, the use of simplified but distinctive grammar can be found. According to the facts from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, as the space is limited, headlines are written in a compressed telegraphic style, using special syntactic conventions:

- (1) Forms of the verb “to be” are omitted as in “*model killed by doctor*” instead of “*A model was killed by a doctor*”.
- (2) Articles are usually omitted as in the first example.
- (3) Most verbs are in the simple present tense, e.g. “*Governor signs bill*”.
- (4) The future is expressed as “to” followed by a verb, e.g. “*Governor to sign bill*”.
- (5) Conjunctions are often replaced by a comma, as in “*Bush, Blair laugh off microscope mishap*”.

Headlines use strong syntactic rules because they have evolved to maximize into output and minimize space because this has been optimal for newspapers. In many headlines, as with the example above “*model killed by doctor*”, the verb ‘to be’ is not necessary. It can be used, but in most cases should be avoided. In fact, there are mainly three forms of verbs used in the headlines: Present Tense, Simple Past Tense and To+ V-infinitive form. But “Simple Present Tense” is mostly used to give the readers the sense of immediacy.

According to “Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (1985)”, lexis is the study of the vocabulary of a language. In terms of lexical level, headlines often use extremely short words in unusual ways to save space. For example, the following short words are commonly used in the newspaper headlines:

- quiz (V) meaning “interrogate”
- row (N) meaning “disagreement/ argument”
- wed (V) meaning “marry”

Semantics is the study of meaning. The reporter can also play with the meaning of the language by punning. Pun is the clever or humorous use of a word that has more than one meaning, or of words that have different meanings but sound the same. The need to keep headlines brief occasionally leads to unintentional double meanings. For example, if the story is about the president of Iraq trying to acquire weapons, the headline might be “IRAQI HEAD SEEKS ARMS”. Therefore, such ambiguous headlines may lead to multiple humorous interpretations and they should be studied from the semantic point of view.

Methodology

In order to study the language of newspaper headlines, the daily English newspapers named “The New Light of Myanmar” were collected first. “The New Light of Myanmar” is a government-owned daily newspaper published by the Ministry of Information. The majority of domestic news articles come from the state-run Myanmar News Agency (MNA), while most international articles come from news services, particularly Reuters, which are published after censorship by the MNA.



31 newspapers published in March, 2014 were collected and analyzed thoroughly. The headline language of these newspapers was examined systematically through different linguistic levels: graphetic level, graphological level, phonological level, grammatical level, lexical level and semantic level. Then the terms or usages at every level that are used in analyzing the language of headlines were classified and explained with examples of headlines. For example, the terms in studying the language of headlines at the phonological level, 'the rhyming words' and 'alliteration' were explained with examples again.

Findings and Discussion

According to the findings, the language of newspaper headlines is quite different from other kinds of language.

Study on the Headline Language at Graphetic Level

At the graphetic level, the use of different sizes and shapes is very important to be analyzed. As seen in the following headlines,



the use of different sizes such as biggest, bigger, medium, small and smallest sizes can be found within the pages of “The New Light of Myanmar” newspapers.



The use of different shapes such as capital letters, lower case letters, italic, ordinary and bold letters can also be seen as in the above-mentioned examples of headlines. The distinction in the sizes and shapes of headlines is deliberately made to catch the eyes and attention of the readers. Generally, the most important story on the front page may have a larger headline. The larger size and the more unusual shape the reporter uses in the headline, the more important the contents of the news report will be. Sometimes, especially in sports result headlines such as “Fulham 1-3 Everton”, “Manchester United 4-1 Aston Villa”, the colours, pink, blue, etc are used so as to catch the reader’s attention.

Study on the Headline Language at Graphological Level

In terms of graphology, the use of commas is frequently found in the headlines instead of “and” as in the following headline:

- (1) Japan, China, S Korea hold joint disaster drill (7.3.14)

Facts in the news report: Japan, China and South Korea held a joint drill to study disaster response. Similar headlines are mentioned below:

- (2) Myanmar, Korea discuss promoting bilateral ties (22.3.14)
- (3) Japan, Myanmar to boost good relations (26.3.14)

This finding points out that the comma, in addition to its normal use, can take on the work of the word “and”.

On the other hand, one of the punctuation marks, : (colon) is used in direct quotations in the headlines as follows:

- (1) US sanctions will not deter Russia: former Pentagon chief (11.3.14)
- (2) Pharrell Williams: I’ll never be as big as Jay Z (13.3.14)

In some headlines, “?” is used to ask for the readers’ answers or sometimes to state the events that are not sure as in the following ones:

- (1) Christian Bale to Play Steve Jobs? (27.3.14)
- (2) How low can you go? This whale is the champion of deep diving (28.3.14)
- (3) Bradley Cooper, the new Indiana Jones: just a rumour? (29.3.14)

On the other hand, the symbol & is frequently used instead of “and” due to the space constraint. The following are the examples:

- (1) Myanmar & Thai businessmen meet in Mandalay (6.3.14)
- (2) Rules for Printing & Publishing Law (10.3.14)

According to the findings, some headlines are found to use abbreviations and contractions to quickly and briefly draw the reader’s attention.

- (1) Cambodia, Laos finish 81 *pct* of joint border demarcation (1.3.14) (percent)
- (2) Nepal to host *int’l* trade fair (4.3.14) (international)
- (3) *Interpol* reviewing Red Notice request (8.3.14) (International police agency)
- (4) Union *S & T* Minister (11.3.14) (Union Minister for Science and Technology)
- (5) *Dy* border affairs minister (20.3.14) (Deputy Minister for Border Affairs)
- (6) Morocco gets 205 *mln USD* from Europe (22.3.14) (million US dollars)
- (7) Singapore *PM* to attend nuclear summit (23.3.14) (Prime Minister)
- (8) Philippine rebels forget peace pact with *gov’t* (28.8.14) (government)

While the above-mentioned headlines use abbreviated words, the following use some contracted forms to save more space for adding more news reports:

- (1) Smog *won’t* hurt Beijing’s Winter Olympics bid (8.3.14)

(2) Colin Farrell: Winter's tale *isn't* for everyone (14.3.14)

(3) South Korea *can't* join Pacific trade talks (15.3.14)

Study on the Headline Language at Phonological Level

From the phonological point of view, in some headlines of "The New Light of Myanmar" news reports, the reporters used rhymes and alliterations. The headlines in which the reporters used the rhyming words are:

(1) Taxi *hits traffic* barrier (1.3.14)

(2) Three *die while climbing* Mt Daisen (13.3.14)

(3) Fire *engulfs 16 houses*, leaves 89 *homeless* (16.3.14)

(4) WB, ADB *grant* financial *assistance* (21.3.14)

(5) 66 killed in *attacks* across *Iraq* (25.3.14)

The use of alliterations is also found through the news headlines. Some examples analyzed are mentioned below.

(1) **B**asic **B**uddhist **C**ulture **C**ourse (4.3.14)

(2) CCTV **c**ameras in all **c**ourts in **c**apital (6.3.14)

(3) **S**earch planes **s**cour **s**ea (11.3.14)

(4) Bangladesh's **l**eft-**l**eaning **p**arties **p**rotest **p**ower **p**rice hike (18.3.14)

(5) **M**eals offered to **m**onks to **m**ark 40th Anniversary **M**on State Day
(20.3.14)

(6) **R**ural **e**lectrification, **r**enewable **e**nergy **d**evelopment **d**iscussed (22.3.14)

For the language of newspaper headlines, the phonological level is not stylistically significant because this is the language written to be read, rarely read aloud.

Study on the Headline Language at Grammatical Level

Omission of articles and verb to be, avoidance of prepositions, the use of conjunctions, noun strings and noun phrases without verbs and changes in verb forms are found when the newspaper language is analyzed in terms of grammar. Articles are omitted in the following headlines:

(1) *Murderer* arrested (6.3.14) instead of *A murderer*

(2) *Young* get more reading habits (9.3.14) instead of *The young*

(3) *Retired teacher* died in fire (13.3.14) instead of *A retired teacher*

Verb 'to be' forms 'am, is, are, was, were' are also omitted to save space. The following are the examples:

(1) 21 *killed*, 26 *injured* in Iraq's violence (1.3.14) instead of 21 people *were killed* and 26 others *were injured*

(2) *Murderer arrested* (6.3.14) instead of *A murderer was arrested*

- (3) Bullock carts still *useful* for transportation (8.3.14) instead of Bullock carts
are still useful for transportation

Prepositions are sometimes avoided in such headlines as *Washington talks* instead of *The talks in Washington*, *New York building* instead of *building in New York*, *Senior South Korean advisors* instead of *Senior advisors of the Korea Development Institute*, *Human-trafficking talks* instead of *Talks on Human- trafficking* and *invasion threat* instead of *threat to invade*.

If the conjunctions are needed for clarity, the reporters prefer to use shorter ones such as ‘as’, ‘despite’ and ‘but’ instead of ‘when’, ‘because’, ‘after’, ‘although’, etc. Some examples are:

- (1) Two dead, six missing *as* fishing boat sinks off (12.3.14)
(2) Tomato price drop, *but* seek ways to earn money (14.3.14)

In some headlines, nouns are piled in front of one another and they become noun strings as in the headlines follows:

- (1) *Agriculture sector development* discussed (6.3.14)
(2) *Boat accident death toll* in Western Uganda rises to 107 (25.3.14)

It refers to the number of dead people in a boat accident.

- (3) *Syria refugee crisis* poses major threat (29.3.14)

In this headline, the reporter wants to mention that a crisis of almost 1 million refugees from Syria poses a serious threat.

The use of noun phrases is also popular among the headlines. The examples of such headlines are often found in the headlines of the New Light of Myanmar.

- (1) Free health care at Meiktila General Hospital (3.3.14)
(2) Severe punishment for terrorism (16.3.14)
(3) Elderly health care programme for older persons (29.3.14)

When the headlines of the New Light of Myanmar are analyzed, the changes in verb forms are also found like the other newspapers. Simple present tense is used to describe the past actions. But those actions took place within a few days. Some examples are “Foreign leaders arrive in Nay Pyi Taw” (4.3.14) instead of “Leaders from foreign countries *arrived* in Nay Pyi Taw” and “Uncontrolled groups *kill, injure* civilians in Sudan’s Darfur” (10.3.14) instead of “Uncontrolled groups *killed and injured* civilians in Sudan’s Darfur”. It is also found that the simple present form stands for the recent actions as the facts in the news report are mentioned in the present perfect form. For example, in the headline “Cambodia, Laos *finish* 81 pct of joint border demarcation” (1.3.14) , the verb ‘*finish*’ is changed into ‘*have finished*’ in the news report. Similarly, the verbs in the following headlines

- (1) Two stampedes in Nigera *kill* at least 11 (17.3.14)
(2) Exports of beans and pulses *rise* rapidly (17.3.14)

are changed into the present perfect forms.

Again, auxiliary verbs are dropped in the passive verb forms. For past cases, ‘was’ or ‘were’ are left out and for recent events, the helping verbs ‘has been’ or ‘have been’ are

omitted. The headlines analyzed for such cases from “The New Light of Myanmar” are as follows:

- (1) Japanese woman *killed* in New Jersey hit-and -run (1.3.14)
- (2) Basic Buddhist Culture Course *opened* (4.3.14)
- (3) Murderer *arrested* (6.3.14)

In the above-mentioned headlines, the verb to be ‘was’ and ‘were’ are left out as they are the past actions whereas the omission of ‘has been’ or ‘have been’ is found as in the following headlines:

- (1) National census pamphlets *distributed* to people (13.3.14)
- (2) Two more *arrested* over attack on HK journalist (14.3.14)
- (3) 200 suspected Turkish refugees *found* in S Thailand (15.3.14)

The infinitive form is used to describe the future events as in the following headlines:

- (1) Nepal *to host* int’l trade fair (4.3.14) instead of “Nepal *will host*.....”
- (2) Meiktila dwellers *to get* RC bridge soon (13.3.14) instead of “Meiktila dwellers *are going to get*”
- (3) Pakistan *not to send* troops to other countries (22.3.14) instead of “Pakistan *will not send* troops.....”

The rare use of present participle leaving out ‘has been’ is found in the headline as “N Korea conducting drills with mock-up targets of S Korea” to show the action that has been happening for a long time. On the other hand, to indicate the actions happening at present, forms of the ‘verb to be’ will be omitted.

Among the headlines analyzed, some are complete sentences. According to the findings, such headlines are the direct quotations of some popular people, politicians, celebrities, etc. The examples are mentioned in the following:

- (1) Families of servicemen should do cultivation: Commander-in-Chief (11.3.14)
- (2) Pharrell Willams: I’ll never be as big as Jay Z (13.3.14)
- (3) Colin Farrell: Winter’s tale isn’t for everyone (14.3.14)

Study on the Headline Language at Lexical Level

Concerning lexical level, the use of special vocabularies is found. Headlines often use very short words to make an impact. They save space, and so they are very common in headlines. They become special vocabularies in writing headlines. Some examples of the headlines using special vocabularies are as follows:

- (1) The Report Myanmar-2014 officially *launched* (start an activity) (1.3.14)
- (2) India *ink* (sign) *pacts* (cooperation deal) with Israel (1.3.14)
- (3) Iraq death *toll* (the number of dead people) exceeds 700 in February (3.3.14)
- (4) India to send mission to *probe* (investigate) Sun by 2020 (3.3.14)
- (5) Families *boost* (increase) income through weaving industry (5.3.14)

- (6) Japan to consider financial *aid* (assistance) to Ukraine (8.3.14)
- (7) Three killed in Cairo *clashes* (arguments/ conflicts) across Egypt (11.3.14)
- (8) New gases that harm ozone layer found, despite *bans* (prohibition) (11.3.14)
- (9) Kerry *vows* (promise) US role in rebuilding Japan (13.3.14)
- (10) Firefighters contain Barangaroo *blaze* (a very large fire) in Sydney (14.3.14)
- (11) Peltz *blasts* (explode) PepsiCo again (15.3.14)
- (12) US closely *eyes* (watch) Ukraine (17.3.14)
- (13) Bomb *blast* (explosion) in Medllin kills four, injures 14 (24.3.14)
- (14) Luxottica, Google clinch Glass eyewear *deal* (contract) (26.3.14)
- (15) 3 *cops* (policemen) injured in landmine *blast* (explosion) (26.3.14)

To avoid padding, the famous people are named by only their last names in such headlines as

- (1) *Obama* calls six world leaders on Ukraine crisis (10.3.14)
- (2) *Nadal* and *Sharapova* beaten at Indian wells (12.3.14)
- (3) *Kerry* vows US role in rebuilding Japan (13.3.14).

Study on the Headline Language at Semantic Level

To analyze the headlines of the New Light of Myanmar from the semantic point of view, word play or puns are the most distinctive ones. Especially, the puns with two different meanings are found. For example, in the headline

“Honey, can you pick up a tablet at the grocery store?” (3.3.14)

The word ‘tablet’ refers to tablet computers. But the reader may think that it refers to the pills or small round pieces of medicine. Another example is

“Bayern’s Robben a ‘good driver’, says Wenger” (13.3.14)

In this headline, Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger described Bayern Munich’s player Arjern Robben as a good driver because he won a penalty against his side in the Champions League. After scanning the headline, the readers may assume that Robben is a football player as well as a good driver.

On the other hand, some headlines make the readers puzzled to guess the meaning that the reporter wants to give. For example, in the headline “*The children of Japan’s Fukushima battle an invisible enemy*” (11.3.14), ‘invisible enemy’ refers to danger of radiation from a nuclear plant. Similarly, the headline “*Japanese ‘Thunder’ strikes Taiwan*” (17.3.14) will make the readers very confused. Thunder is a loud noise that you hear after a flush of LIGHTNING, during a storm. So the readers may consider whether there are many kinds of thunder such as Japanese thunder, Chinese thunder, Korean thunder, etc. In fact, the reporter described ‘Japanese thunder’ as ‘Japan’s “Thunder” series of chocolate bars. Japan had to export those chocolate bars to Taiwan very often as Taiwanese liked them very much and they were sold out quickly in Taiwan. In fact, all the above-mentioned headlines can draw the attention of the readers in some ways. Reporters deliberately make the readers

confused about these headlines and arouse their interest to read the news in detail. This is also one of the techniques of writing headlines attractively.

According to the findings, there are different font sizes and shapes applied and each creates a different impact. But the headlines of “The New Light of Myanmar” newspapers are rarely printed in all capital letters from the graphetic point of view. Different punctuation marks perform their duties and save space too. For the phonological level, many headlines using rhyming words and alliterations are found to be analyzed. Also at the grammatical level, so many headlines are analyzed to verify the use of distinctive grammar for the headline language. In terms of lexis, the use of special vocabularies is very prominent through the headlines of “The New Light of Myanmar” newspapers. Some headlines with double meanings provide an analysis of their language in terms of semantics. Of all these levels, the study of the headline language at grammatical level is the most prominent compared to others.

Conclusion

In this paper, the language of news headlines used in ‘The New Light of Myanmar’ are studied through different linguistic levels. The style of the language used in that newspaper is found obviously through its headlines. A headline’s main purpose is to quickly and briefly draw attention to the news report under it. According to the restrictions to use complete sentences to save time and space as much as they can, the reporters invented incomplete but striking sentences or phrases which make the headlines more dramatic. The use of puns, alliterations, distinctive grammar and the choice of emotive vocabulary altogether make the headlines more memorable and effective. Therefore it is hoped that the study of the language of news headlines will be helpful to some extent for the readers of English newspapers both in scanning the headlines and in understanding the headline language.

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Online Materials

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