

## **A Study on the Grammatical Features of Newspaper Headlines Found in 'The Global New Light of Myanmar'**

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### **Abstract**

A newspaper headline is a very short summary of a news report. It normally appears in large letters above the report, giving the gist of the story or article that follows. The grammar of headlines is often non-standard and they are difficult to read. The journalists of English newspapers, in particular, use different grammar rules rather than everyday English for the sake of brevity and readers' interest. This research aims to investigate the significant grammatical features of newspaper headlines and to find out their general peculiarities. The research focuses on an analysis of the newspaper headlines from 'The Global New Light of Myanmar'. The sample headlines are collected from the newspapers published during January, 2022. The framework offered by Phil Williams is used to analyze the grammatical features of the headlines. The findings of the study reveals that the selected newspaper headlines in 'The Global New Light of Myanmar' have distinctive grammatical features, written in a special kind of language with its own grammar rules.

Key Words: newspaper headline, English newspapers, grammatical features

### **Introduction**

The present study is aimed at exploring the grammatical features of newspaper headlines. An attempt is made to highlight the grammatical structure of headlines and to find out the differences between the language of headlines and the ordinary language. A newspaper headline is often the most important element on a page as it gives the reader an overall picture of the news. Headlines should be clear and specific, telling the reader what the story is about, and be interesting enough to draw them into reading the subsequent reports or articles.

In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, a headline is defined as a title of a newspaper article printed in large letters, especially at the top of the front page. According to Practical English Usage by Michael Swan (1995), headlines are the short titles above news reports. English news headlines can be very difficult to understand. One reason for this is that headlines are often written in a special style, which is very different from ordinary English. Therefore, readers should be familiar with the special grammatical features of headlines. Without knowing these special grammatical features it can be difficult for readers to understand the headline and interpret its meaning until the whole report or article is read.

### **Literature Review**

Halliday (1985) refers to headlines as "little texts" and since they have to convey more through few words due to limited space, they have their own grammar. This special language is called 'block language'. Block language means a type of structure different from normal clause or sentence structure, but often conveying a complete message.

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According to Bedrichova (2006), headlines perform four basic functions. These functions are to summarize the news, to grade the importance of stories, to act as clear elements in the design of a page and to persuade the reader into becoming a reader. Van Dijk (1998) highlights three important functions of newspaper headlines: “Firstly, it provides a brief summary of the main news to the reader; hence, readers do not have to read the whole story to capture the point. Secondly, it attracts attention by various font sizes and vocabulary used. Thirdly, provides an initial indicator of the content and style of the news values of the newspaper”. It seems that headline is the heart of newspaper, because it conveys brief information and catches readers’ attention simultaneously.

According to Phil Williams (2013), reading newspaper articles is an excellent way for foreign learners to build vocabulary and practice comprehension using real material. It can expose the reader to different topics, and a variety of language that is rare in spoken English. However, newspaper writing is rarely a representation of common English. Headlines in newspapers, in particular, use different grammar rules to everyday English. This is because they are designed to be short and to attract attention. To achieve this, 8 grammar rules for newspaper headlines are often used. They are as follows:

- (1) Using present simple tense for past events
- (2) Leaving out auxiliary verbs
- (3) Using infinitives for future events
- (4) Leaving out articles (a, an, the)
- (5) Leaving out “to be”
- (6) Leaving out “to say”
- (7) Replacing conjunctions with punctuation
- (8) Using figures for numbers

There are some previous researches related to the present research. Emenike (2020) carried out a research entitled “A stylistic study of selected headlines of the Nigerian *Vanguard* newspaper”. The study investigated the stylistic features of Nigerian *Vanguard* headlines. To identify and explain style features in the selected newspaper headlines, Halliday’s functional stylistic theory was applied. The study analysed the graphological, grammatical, lexical and other notable language features to establish elements constituting the style of *Vanguard* Newspaper headlines. The findings showed that certain linguistic features were highlighted for the functions they were made to perform in the headlines. Such notable features included the use of certain punctuation marks, capitalization, colours; choice of lexical items, grammatical categories and structures; and others such as the use of elision, acronyms, fronting, amongst others.

There is another research paper entitled “Exploring the linguistic features of Philippine headlines in on-line newspapers” conducted by Cabaysa (2016). This paper was a study of the linguistic features of Philippine English headlines published online by three of the country’s national newspapers. Using the framework offered by Mardh (1980) and Mouillaud and Tétu (1989) on the typical features of news headlines, a sample of 82 headlines were chosen from the newspapers’ online sites from July 21 – 29. The findings of the study revealed that the typical linguistic features of English headlines in the country include the use of present tense for the past tense, the use of to+ infinitive for future tense, the use of main verb + infinitive, extensive use of abbreviations, omission of words, the use of colon to introduce direct speech, the use of comma to replace the conjunction “and”, and the use of loaded words enclosed in scare quotes.

Analysis of the findings showed that the language of headlines deviates from the grammar and norms of Standard English.

In the research “Grammar in Newspaper Headlines”, Praskova (2009) studied newspaper headlines, namely of their grammatical features and structures. It is based on the analysis of a corpus which consists of 200 randomly chosen newspaper headlines from 6 different British newspapers. As the results of the analysis showed, a great number of headlines were abbreviated in comparison with the common core structures. The headlines often lacked articles, determiners or auxiliary verbs – a characteristic feature of the language variety called block language. Concerning the structures of headlines, headlines with a verb form – either finite or non-finite definitely predominated over purely nominal headlines.

### **Methodology**

The research is based on the newspaper headlines taken from the local news section of ‘The Global New Light of Myanmar’ in the period from January 1, 2022 to January 31, 2022. This particular newspaper has been chosen because it is the only newspaper published in English in Myanmar.

The study is carried out, based on Williams’ (2013) 8 grammar rules for writing newspaper headlines, which include: (1) using present simple tense for past events (2) leaving out auxiliary verbs, (3) using infinitives for future events, (4) leaving out articles (a, an, the), (5) leaving out “to be” (6) leaving out “to say”, (7) replacing conjunctions with punctuation and (8) using figures for numbers.

The headlines randomly chosen from the newspaper are read thoroughly and their different styles of writing are categorized according to the features listed by Williams (2013). Then a few comments are made about the use of headline language. In this study, the characteristics which are not part of the features provided by Williams (2013) are left out.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the study reveal that the grammatical features of English headlines in ‘The Global New Light of Myanmar’ newspapers create a unique and distinctive use of language in its own, deviating from the grammar and norms of Standard English. Headlines try to compress as much meaning into as few words as possible so they are nearly always going to be missing words that would be present in everyday English. Therefore, the language of newspaper headlines can be seen as a variety of the English language, compared with the grammatical rules of the Standard English.

#### **(1) Using present simple tense for past events**

According to Halliday (1985), one of the distinctive characteristics of the register of news headlines is its widespread use of the present tense. When the headlines of ‘The Global New Light of Myanmar’ are analyzed, it is found that present simple tense is used for past events. The following are some examples of headlines with the use of the present tense of the verb.

Fisheries export to Bangladesh earns over \$6 million within 2 months (2.1.2022)

Cambodian PM visits construction site of Mara Vijaya Buddha Image in Nay Pyi Taw (8.1.2022)

Government of the People's Republic of China donates US\$200,000 to Ministry of Border Affairs (13.1.2022)

Myanmar Red Cross Society holds workshop on performance assessment and recognition (19.1.2022)

Youth and literature festival continues its second-day in Nay Pyi Taw (31.1.2022)

It is found that the headlines of "The Global New Light of Myanmar" adhere to the special tense system of headline writing in English which allows a writer to use the present tense of the verb in reporting past actions. In fact, this is a specific use of the verb tense known as the historical present, which means using a verb in the present tense to refer to an event that has already happened. In writing a narrative of a past event, the use of the present tense gives the reader a more immediate sense of involvement. Newspaper headlines are narrative hooks to draw the reader into a story or report, not purely descriptive text.

## (2) Leaving out auxiliary verbs

Headlines are usually skeletonized sentences. Auxiliary verbs are left out in headlines. The auxiliaries dropped out in the headlines from 'The Global New Light of Myanmar' are as follows:

Kayin new year day ceremony *[was]* marked in Patheingyi (3.1.2022)

Illegal goods *[were]* seized at various checkpoints (7.1.2022)

More than 1,000 golden deer *[are]* conserved in Kanbalu Chatthin wildlife sanctuary (13.1.2022)

Royal Thai Armed Forces Day *[was]* celebrated in Yangon (21.1.2022)

Coordination meeting *[was]* held to discuss implementation of China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (28.1.2022)

It is found that auxiliary verbs are usually dropped from passive structures, leaving only past participles. The reason for leaving out auxiliary verbs in headlines may be that they take more space without adding any new meaning.

## (3) Using infinitives for future events

Newspaper headlines often use the to-infinitive form to refer to future events and they are not always complete sentences. When using the infinitive, a future time is not always necessary to demonstrate the future tense in headlines and likewise, other future tense verbs are not needed. The following are some headlines which use infinitives for future events.

Announcement for ethnic armed organizations to ensure State stability and peaceful living of ethnic people (1.1.2022)

Three new stamps commemorating 74th Anniversary of Independence Day to be on sale (3.1.2022)

Kanmalay solar-powered pumping for irrigation project to cover 300 acres of summer crops in Magway Region (9.1.2022)

Four new hydropower projects to implement in Taninthayi river basin (11.1.2022)

Public rental housing projects in Nay Pyi Taw, Mandalay to complete in March (13.1.2022)

More than 4,000 acres of salt farm in Mon State to produce over 40,000 tonnes of salt in 2022 (28.1.2022)

When the news story refers to the future plans of the subject, the headline usually uses a verb in the infinitive form, which is not usually used in Standard English.

#### (4) Leaving out articles (a, an, the)

The three articles – a, an, the – are very important parts of grammar. Regarding articles, headline writers may drop them for brevity if the meaning remains clear. The omission of articles does not impact the meaning of the headline as exemplified by the headlines below.

Union Industry Minister inspects *[the]* factories in Mandalay Region (3.1.2022)

Palm oil price surges in *[the]* domestic market (9.1.2022)

Union Industry Minister makes *[an]* inspection tour in Mon state (19.1.2022)

MoE holds *[the]* 3rd day coordination meeting on higher education sector (20.1.2022)

Union Tourism Minister attends *[the]* opening ceremony of basic Japanese cooking course (23.1.2022)

It is found that the omission of articles in the headlines does not affect the decoding of the message and readers can still easily recover the original structure.

#### (5) Leaving out “to be”

Auxiliaries, according to Halliday (1985), are usually left out and the verb ‘be’ is considered the most omitted auxiliary. Thus any form of ‘to be’ is usually eliminated in writing headlines as exemplified by the headlines below.

Maha Bandoola Park *[was]* crowded with visitors on Independence Day (5.1.2022)

Onion prices *[were]* in bear market even when winter growing season starts (17.1.2022)

Picturesque view of Inlay Lake captivates visitors after hyacinths, debris *[was]* under control (19.1.2022)

Marble business *[was]* high again in Sagyin (23.1.2022)

Drivers with CPC *[are]* eligible for YBS vehicles (25.1.2022)

Reah (1998) considers the language of headlines as compressed and condensed because they aim to give the gist of the news in few languages. This allows headline writers to omit words such as auxiliary verbs.

#### (6) Leaving out “to say”

Headline writers usually replace the attributive verbs such as ‘say’ or ‘state’ with colon. According to Quirk et al., a colon is typically used to introduce lists or texts, give emphasis to a word, clarify composition titles and present dialogue. The headlines analyzed for such cases from “The Global New Light of Myanmar” are as follows:

All the people need to consider the protection, uplifting and contributing to the restoration of peace, socio-economic development, and human rights based on the rule of law: Senior General (23.1.2022)

The Government set aim for ensuring prosperity and food sufficiency: Senior General (24.1.2022)

If efforts can be made for production of steelwares to be used in construction projects in States and Regions, import of steelwares can be cut: Senior General (25.1.2022)

The programme would comprise the conveyance of the Union Flag, which has been staying at the Yangon City Hall since 2016, from Yangon to Nay Pyi Taw: Vice-Senior General (26.1.2022)

It can be said that dropping the attributive verbs such as 'say' or 'state' in newspaper headlines is one of space saving methods. It is found that such headlines are the direct quotations of heads of state, popular people, politicians, celebrities, etc.

### **(7) Replacing conjunctions with punctuation**

As with newspaper headlines, commas, colons, semi-colons, hyphens and so on can replace all conjunctions to join clauses. Commas may also be used to join nouns. The use of commas is frequently found in the headlines instead of 'and' as in the following headlines:

Drugs worth over K1 billion seized in Kyaukse, Mahaaungmyay townships (3.1.2022)

Events, sports competitions commemorate 74th Independence Day (5.1.2022)

Full-time courses of Universities, Degree Colleges, Colleges opened (7.1.2022)

Deputy commerce minister holds meeting with Mandalay industrial entrepreneurs, business owners (10.1.2022)

COVID-19 vaccine drive continues in various states, regions (27.1.2022)

The reason for replacing conjunctions with punctuation may be a limited space provided for headlines in newspapers. According to Saxena (2006), comma plays a special role in headlines since this mark is used to take the place of the conjunction *and* while at the same time saving space.

### **(8) Using figures for numbers**

Style guides present different advice on writing numbers as digits or words. AP style recommends using numerals (figures) for numbers in writing headlines. This applies even for numbers under ten and when a number appears at the start of a headline. For example,

79 new cases of COVID\_19 reported on 2 January, total figure rises to 531,025 (3.1.2022)

Over 49 tonnes of illegal timber seized in Bago (18.1.2022)

Mandalay Region Consumer Affairs Department resolves 13 out of 14 complaints in mini-budget period (22.1.2022)

The reason why figures are used for numbers may be that they are easier to grab the attention of the reader. In addition, in the era where everything needs to be short, a numeral is much shorter and takes up less space in the headline. Thus, journalists use a numeral rather than spell out the number in writing headlines.

### Conclusion

In a newspaper, headlines play an important role in news reports, summarizing a whole article in a few words and providing readers with the major information. It is essential for readers to be familiar with the writing style of a headline because it is a gateway to understanding the whole news and promoting their communicative skills. In this research paper, the grammatical features of news headlines found in 'The Global New Light of Myanmar' are studied and analyzed in terms of 8 Grammar Rules for Newspaper Headlines presented by Williams (2013). Through the analysis, the findings show that the language and grammar used in headline writing often deviates from the usual norms and standard of English language. The grammatical features of newspaper headlines in 'The Global New Light of Myanmar' create a unique and distinctive use of language in its genre, meaning newspaper headlines are written in a special kind of language with its own grammar rules. The data gained from the study conform with many scholars' view of writing headlines. Therefore, it can be assumed that the language of headline, similar to the language of literary texts, is indeed distinct in its own type.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Soe Myint Aye, Rector of Sagaing University, for allowing me to submit this research paper in Sagaing University Research Journal. I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Htay Htay Thein and Dr. Htwe Htwe Yin, Prorectors of Sagaing University, for their constant encouragement to conduct this research. My grateful thanks also go to my colleagues of Department of English, Sagaing University for their kindness and help while going through this research.

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