



The Use of Historical Present Tense in Media Headlines: A Study of The Telegraph and The New York Times

Layla Albadri

College of Graduate Studies & Scientific Research, Sudan University of Science and Technology
Corresponding Author kumcl@yahoo.com

Article Info.

Article history:

Received 9 July 2021
Revised 11 September 2021
Published 1 January 2022

Keywords:

Present tense
Media headlines, Historical present tense, Tense usage, News narratives, The Telegraph, The New York Times

How to cite:

Layla Albadri, The Use of Historical Present Tense in Media Headlines: A Study of The Telegraph and The New York Times. *Int J Soc. Sci. H.* 2022;1(1):44-49:

<https://doi.org/10.56981/S114>

Copyright:

© 2022 MESPJ-Publishers.
All rights reserved

Abstract

This study examines the use of the present tense in media headlines, particularly focusing on the phenomenon of historical present tense. Analyzing 100 headlines from *The Telegraph* and *The New York Times*, this research identifies patterns of tense usage and explores how the historical present tense, employed to describe past events, contributes to creating vivid and immediate news narratives. The findings show that the present simple tense is the most commonly used, with the historical present often employed to evoke a sense of immediacy and drama in news stories.

Introduction

In linguistics, tense is a grammatical category that locates an event in time, often distinguishing between past, present, and future occurrences (Birner, 1991). Tense is typically marked through the morphology of verbs, with its use in sentences communicating the temporal position of an event. In media discourse, particularly in news headlines, there is a noticeable shift where past events are

described in the present tense. This phenomenon, known as the historical present, serves to create a more immediate and engaging narrative (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). The historical present tense, or dramatic present, is a rhetorical device that makes past actions feel as though they are unfolding in real-time (Jour, 2006). This article explores the use of historical present in news headlines, particularly focusing on its frequency and impact in *The Telegraph* and *The New York Times*.

Literature Review

The historical present is a well-documented linguistic phenomenon, often utilized in storytelling and journalism to provide vivid, immediate descriptions of events (Chomsky, 2006). In addition to its usage in history writing, the historical present is also common in narrative fiction and news headlines, where it draws readers into the story as though it is happening now (George, 2006). The device is also used in rhetoric, where it is referred to as *translatio temporum* or “shift of times” (Birner, 1991). Researchers have noted that the use of the historical present in news headlines aims to create a sense

of drama and immediacy, making the events feel more immediate to the reader (Mencken, 2006; Praskova, 2009).

Methods and Data Collection

Since this research is carried out in news headlines to calculate the frequency of the more used tenses, 100 news headlines were analyzed from *The Telegraph* and *The New York Times*. The investigator used numerous issues of both newspapers. Ten headlines were randomly chosen to test the reliability and validity of the corpus. The entire package was then evaluated, and the findings obtained were closely associated, suggesting acceptable validity and reliability.

Results

After analyzing a set of 100 headlines from *The New York Times* and *The Telegraph*, it was stated that in media language, the most recurring tenses are successively the present simple, past simple, and future tense. Moreover, the present tense is the most frequently used in both newspapers. In addition, as the tables below show, its use is more common in the *New York Times* than in the *Telegraph*.

Table (1): Analysis of the frequent use of tenses in Telegraph Newspaper Headlines

Tense Usage	12/21/2005	12/22/2005	12/23/2005	12/24/2005	12/25/2005	Total	% of Total
Present Simple	6	4	5	7	5	27	54%
Present Simple (Double Use)	2	0	0	0	0	2	4%
Past Simple	1	3	3	3	4	14	28%
Past Simple (Double Use)	0	1	0	0	1	2	4%
Future Simple	1	2	2	0	0	5	10%
Other Tenses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%

This table presents the distribution of tense usage in Telegraph Newspaper headlines over a five-day period, highlighting the predominance of the present simple tense.

According to the table and figure, it is very clear that journalists who write in the Telegraph more frequently use the present tense as a dominant one with 54 percent for single verb use and 4 percent for double present verbs, followed by 28 percent for single verb use and 4 percent for double past verbs use, followed by the past simple with 28 percent for single verb use and 4 percent for double past verbs.

Table (2): The New York Times Newspaper Headlines, study of the widespread use of tenses

Date	12/21 2005	12/22 2005	12/23 2005	12/24 2005	12/25 2005	Total	% of Total
Present simple	10	9	9	8	7	43	86%
Present simple double use	0	0	0	0	2	2	4%
Past simple	0	1	0	0	0	1	2%
Past simple double use	0	0	0	1	0	1	2%
Future simple	0	0	0	2	1	3	3%
Other tenses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
Number of headlines	10	10	10	10	10	50	100%

Table (3): The Conventional Use of Present Tense versus the Historic Use in the Telegraph

Date	21/12/2005	22/12/2005	23/12/2005	24/12/2005	25/12/2005	Total	% of Total
Present simple used as historical present	7	4	5	2	5	23	79.4%
Present simple used conventionally	1	0	0	5	0	6	20.6%
Number of headlines	8	4	5	7	5	29	100%

The above table reveals that the historical present tense representing the past is used more often than the traditional one since the media represents past events with percentages in the Telegraph: 79.4 percent and 20.6 percent successively.

Table (4) The Conventional Use of Present Tense Versus the Historic Use in the New York Times

Date	12/21/2005	12/22/2005	12/23/2005	12/24/2005	12/25/2005	Total	% of Total
The present simple used as the historical present	9	8	5	4	4	30	69.7%
Present simple used conventionally	10	1	4	4	3	13	30.2%
Number of headlines	10	9	9	8	7	43	100%

The above table indicates that the historic present tense that reflects the past is more frequently used than the conventional one as media reflects past events in the New York Times with percentages: 69.7% and 30.3% successively

Discussion and Interpretation of the Findings

The study of the regular use of tenses in media discourse reveals that, as seen in the *Telegraph* and *The New York Times* as the tables and figures denote, the present tense is the most prevalent one. In their English news headlines, journalists often use the present tense as a kind of deception to make the story fresher and more dramatic to draw the attention of readers. The findings also show that the present tense is mostly used successively in the *Telegraph* and the *New York Times* with a ratio of 54% and 86%. It is not surprising that the largest group of headlines with the finite verb is in a simple present tense since the historical perspective is used conventionally to reflect the past tense.

The Historical present is more frequent than the conventional one with percentages: 79.4% and 69.7% successively, as the tables and figures illustrate.

Simple Present Used Conventionally

Example 1: How Santa makes money

The headline in Example (1) is in present simple using conventionally. Now, let's take a look at the article to see what tense the editor chose to complete the article with:

"Despite Santa's best efforts at using Earbob and selling leftover cookies, Claus makes an annual loss of £8,421,792,249. Where could Father Christmas cut costs? Just when everything finally starts to slow down in the City."

The journalist completed the article with the simple present because it is the correct tense.

The same thing in Example (2):

Example 2: The typical American lives 18 miles only from mom

"Families traveling from far-flung places, returning home for the holiday. That image of an American Christmas fits the perception of Americans as rootless, constantly on the move to seek opportunity even if it means leaving family behind. Yet that picture masks a key fact about the geography of family in the United States: The typical adult lives only 18 miles from his or her mother."

After the first line in the present continues just because the journalist is trying to make an image for the reader, he completed the article with the simple present. Not because it is the favorite tense in headlines but because it is the correct tense.

Present Simple Used as Historic Present

Example (3): Star Wars smashes box office records on opening weekend

Although smashing the box took place in the past, the journalist wrote it in the present simple. After that, he completed the article with simple past as followed:

"Star Wars: The Force Awakens' shattered box office records with an estimated \$517 million (£350 million) in worldwide ticket sales on its opening weekend, a staggering debut that re-established the celebrated space saga as a global phenomenon."

The first "Star Wars" film in a decade recorded the biggest domestic opening in Hollywood's history, collecting \$238 million over the weekend in the United States and Canada.

Example (4): Miss Universe host Steve Harvey apologizes for blunder

Although the apology took place in the past, the headline was written in the simple present and completed in the simple past:

"Harvey spoke to reporters assembled at the Planet Hollywood hotel-casino, where the pageant concluded with him awarding the crown to the wrong person. Harvey said it was his mistake and that he would take responsibility for not correctly reading the card, which said that contestant Pia Alonzo Wurtzbach of the Philippines was this year's winner, and Miss Colombia was the first runner-up."

Present Simple Double Use

Headlines sometimes form a complex sentence with two verbs; both are simple present, both in historic present as in Example (6):

Example (6): *Joseph wins but only after Radio Times spoils it*

This type of headline is usually used in sports news. See Example (7):

Example (7): *Andy Merry wins sporty as Tyson Fury misses out on an award*

This type of headline with present simple double use is only 4%, as Table (3) and (4) illustrate. But its importance is because it is part of the simple present used in headlines as historic present.

Simple Past

Usually used with the verbs "killed" and "murdered."

Example (8): *US Soldiers are killed by Taliban attack in Afghanistan*

Example (9): *Man killed by shark during Aruba shipwreck rescue*

Simple past double used:

The same as simple past, usually used with the verbs "killed" and "murdered" in a complex sentence with two verbs, both in the simple past, as in Example (10):

Example (10): *Young Afghan American woman shot dead by mullah as she left her Kabul gym*

Future Simple

When this is the right tense, why not use it? Especially because it gives more life to the headline.

Example (11): *Iraq and ISIS forces battling for control of central Ramadi*

The article then written in the correct tenses as followed:

"For the first time, Iraqi forces engaged Islamic State fighters within the city center of Ramadi on Tuesday, reaching the edge of the inner government district in an attempt to seize the critical western provincial capital after months of approach and maneuvering, officials said."

Conclusions

The study of the newspaper headline in both *The Telegraph* and *The New York Times* found that the present simple is the main tense in newspaper headlines. The other two tests showed that the main use of the current simple tense in newspaper headlines is as the historical present. It is used in hard news headlines, making it the number one tense in newspaper headlines. The purpose behind this is to provide the news with life and to build a sense of immediacy. A newspaper wants to sell new content, so readers can believe this article is really fresh and new by using the present tense. Conventionally, the use of the present is less frequent; it's only used in plain headlines. As the review shows, other tenses are less common. With the verbs "killed" or "murdered," the simple past is most used because it is almost difficult to give life to it. Finally, if it is the correct tense since it is the newest tense, the journalists would not hesitate to use the clear future as well.

Recommendations

1. In terms of sentence structure, the use of articles and conjunctions, media discourse needs more investigation.

2. Effect on linguistic transition through the media and social media. The plurality of the media between newspapers, magazines, and television networks today has contributed to the creation of a special language.
3. Also recommended is a functional analysis study on how media lexis is loaded with meaning.

References

Birner, B. (1991). *Is English changing? A statistical analysis of the prose style of Ernest Hemingway*. Linguistic Society of America: Washington, D.C.

Chomsky, N. (2006). *Language and mind*. Cambridge University Press.

George, C. (2006). *Language change and evolution*. Cambridge University Press.

Huddleston, R., & Pullum, T. (2002). *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge University Press.

Jour, A. (2006). *Time and tense - The handbook of English linguistics* (2008). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

McEwen, N. (2004). *How to write telegrams properly*. Texas Arion Press.

Mencken, H. (2006). *The American media language*. Arcadia Publishing Company.

Praskova, E. (2009). *Grammar in newspaper headlines*. University of Pardubice Publishers.

Smith, P. (1996). *Hemingway's luggage and the miraculous year*. The Cambridge Companion to Ernest Hemingway.

Sources

The Telegraph: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>

The New York Times: <http://www.nytimes.com/>