



## Analyzing Present Simple in Newspaper Headlines

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the usage of tenses in the names of the Telegraph and The New York Times in English newspapers. The researchers randomly selected 100 headlines from both journals and statistically analyzed them, as the main objective of this study is to observe which tenses are more frequent than others. The researcher has come up with some findings after reviewing the corpus of these two papers, that the present simple tense, whether traditional or historical, is the most frequently used tense as it gives the journalists the ability to make the story fresher and more vivid and thus attract the interest of readers, followed successively by the past tense and the future tense. The paper also argued that rather than the traditional present tense, the historical present tense that has been used to refer to past events with a modern perspective is used. In terms of sentence structure, passivation, the use of articles and conjunctions, the researcher recommends that media discourse requires further investigation. Also recommended is a functional research report about how meanings are filled with media lexis.

### Introduction

A special type of short writing is headline writing; few words have to attract the attention of the readers to the details behind it. The primary aim of a journal's headlines is to draw the interest of readers. In addition, headlines also help to explain events and help readers appreciate the substance of the pages. They help set the newspaper's tone as well. For many linguists and media discourse analysts, news headlines have become an important field because news titles are perceived to have their own special features and position in news discourse. Newspaper headlines are written in a particular language with its own grammar and vocabulary.

Newspaper writing rarely represents common English structures agreed up on by grammarians. Headlines in newspapers, in particular, use specific tenses which may have different grammatical functions. This is attributed to the fact that they are designed to be vivid and to attract readers' attention. One of these rules is the use of the historic present for past events to make the news fresher, more vivid and to give some life to it.

Media language plays a major role in our lives. The dominant media institutions within our society maintain their dominance through the use of language. The present tense is used to refer to the past time (historic present).

Previous studies had focused on headlines in general, its special language, its goals and its grammar, the few studies of tenses in newspaper headlines either concluded that the present simple

is the main tense in newspaper headlines in an attempt to give life to past event or the previous studies analyze the tense system in newspaper headlines. Journalists frequently use the present tense in their English news headlines as a kind of manipulation to make the story more fresh and more vivid to attract readers attention.

A newspaper headline is often the only thing that readers read in a newspaper, or at least, it is the first thing that everyone notices in a newspaper. It serves as a guide for the reader that helps him decide whether to continue reading the whole report or to skip into another one. Each headline should be a summary of the news which follows. A headline should be a sentence, and so it also should have a regular sentence structure containing a subject and a verb with the exception that headlines normally does not contain auxiliaries, pronouns, articles, or conjunctions. It means that only lexical, not grammatical words are used. Even when they put some verbs in headlines the tense is usually a source of confusion for the reader.

It is hard to determine where and when the first newspaper was printed but what is important here is the birth of its language which was in 1851 where the first telegram service was invented in Britain and India. Since then, the telegraphic style of writing emerged.

### **The Telegram style**

A clipped way of writing that tries to abbreviate words and cram as much information into the smallest possible number of words or characters is the Telegram style, Telegraph style, or Telegraphic style. When telecommunication consisted only of short messages sent by hand over the telegraph wire, it started in the telegraph era. The telegraph companies paid the number of words in the letter for their service, with a limit of 15 characters per word for a plain-language telegram, and 10 characters per word for a code-written telegram. The style was created to reduce prices, but still conveys the message simply and unambiguously(7).

Telegraphic style is a technique of eliminating a word or words necessary for complete grammatical construction, but understood in the context. For example, the use of “if possible” instead of “if it is possible”. Typically the articles “a”, “an”, and “the” are frequently eliminated from the linguistic structures of the headlines ( 14).

Financially talking, in American business life has been quoted that the elimination of the word "please" from all telegrams would save the American public millions of dollars annually (7).

The formal or grammatical name for telegraphic style is “ellipsis” or “elliptical” style. The name “telegraphic” is more commonly used because it resembles the construction and sound of the wording typically found in a telegram. Most telegrams have somewhat cryptic worded messages because of the need to save the expense of being charged by the number of words in a message. Telegraphic style can be used in any phrase or sentence construction. Telegraphic has its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that it may produce a speech pattern referred to as staccato. A staccato effect has abrupt, distinct elements or sounds which may give the reader a certain rhythmic momentum to read. Another disadvantage is that it may cause some misinterpretations by the reader of the intended message. Also, some readers may find it too cryptic. A definite advantage is that it saved space, especially in procedure tables, lists, and flowcharts ( 14 ).

### **Hemingwayesque**

**The Nobel Prize for Literature in Literature was awarded to Hemingway in 1954. He was appreciated for his mastery of narrative art and for his influence on modern style (smith.1996; 45). Intricate syntax was avoided by Ernest Hemingway. Around 70% of phrases are basic phrases with a childlike syntax without subordination (15).**

The theory of omission is the [writing](#) style of the American writer, [Ernest Hemingway](#). As a young journalist, Hemingway had to focus his newspaper reports on immediate events, with very

little context or interpretation. When he became a writer of short stories, he retained this minimalistic style, focusing on surface elements without explicitly discussing underlying themes. Hemingway believed the deeper meaning of a story should not be evident on the surface, but should shine through implicitly ( 4).

### Language Alteration

For various factors, language varies. Second, when the needs of its speakers change, it shifts. New technology, new products and new experiences need new vocabulary to simply and effectively relate to them. Consider texting: it was initially called text messaging, since it allowed one person to send another text over the phone instead of voice messages. As it became more popular , people started to refer to both the message and the procedure using the shorter form text, as in: "I just got a text or I'm not going to text Sylvia right" ( 1 ).

Languages change, usually very slowly, sometimes very rapidly. There are many reasons a language might change. One obvious reason is interaction with other languages. If one tribe of people trades with another, they will pick up specific words and phrases for trade objects, for example. If a small but powerful tribe subdues a larger one, we find that the language of the elite often shows the influence of constant interaction with the majority, while the majority language imports vocabulary and speaking styles from the elite language (1).

People tend to think that older forms of languages are more elegant, logical, or 'correct' than modern forms, but it's just not true. The fact that language is always changing doesn't mean it is getting worse; it's just becoming different. By 'correct English', people usually mean Standard English. [Most languages](#) have a standard form; it's the form of the language used in government, education, and other formal contexts. But Standard English is actually just one dialect of English language (1).

Drawing on what has been quoted above, news headlines frequently use the conventional present tense and the historic tense to mean the past. Also, the present tense is sometimes used to mean the future. Actually, news headlines have their unique grammatical rules that distinguish them from other kinds of discourses.

### Telegraphic style

In a block telegraphic format, newspaper headlines are written that sometimes omit the copula, causing syntactic ambiguity. This syntactic ambiguity is often referred to as amphibology or amphibology. It implies that, due to ambiguous sentence structure, a sentence may be interpreted in more than one way.

The term *block language* was firstly introduced by Straumann in 1935 in *Newspaper Headlines that studies the linguistic structure* of media discourse. This [Language](#) structure is characterized by the use of less-structured sentences and made up only of words that are essential to convey a message. It also revealed that the present tense was the most recurring one. ( 9 )

Mencken, (2006:185) criticized this elliptical language by saying that Headlines are one of the evils produced by that passion for compression and compact information which possesses so many ingenious minds in America. Everybody can see how an entirely new system of grammar, syntax and even language has been invented to fit the brevity of headlines. Such brevity, so far from being the soul of wit, is even the death of meaning and certainly the death of logic .

However, Mencken (2006) has been opposed by online readers as well as many media discourse analysts such as (9) when he said that: Newspapers are one of the most popular media omnipresent globally. Their role in informing the public has remained equally important despite the ever-growing popularity of other forms of media nowadays. The writing in newspapers is characterized by a specific language marked by a distinct style and register. This type of language is called block language as used in headlines, or telegraphic speech. A type of structure different from normal clause or sentence structure, but often conveying a complete message. Block language is found especially in notices and newspaper headlines. It sometimes consists of single noun

phrases (e.g. No exit, Essex's snappy reply to a negative image). Other block language has a sort of abbreviated clause structure, with articles, auxiliary verbs, and other minor words omitted. The features of this type of language "are common in certain types of written language, such as notices, headlines, labels, advertisements, subheadings, Web sites and other settings where a message is presented as a 'block'. For example,

- Stolen painting found by tree.

Either a tree found a stolen painting, or a stolen painting was found sitting next to a tree.

- Somali Tied to Militants Held on U.S. Ship for Months.

Either the Somali had been held for months, or the Somali had been associated with militants who had been held for months. There was even rope involved, one might assume, at which stage lexical uncertainty comes into play.

### **Generative grammar**

The system of rules that specifies the sound–meaning relation for a given language can be called the “grammar”, and in a more technical term it is called “generative grammar”. To be more clear, grammar generates a n infinite set of structures using finite number of rules. In news headlines, these finite rules have been minimized (3).

The language of news headline is special and has its own characteristics on the lexical or grammatical level. It is characterized by its brevity, attractiveness, and clarity. The key to a good headline is the use, whenever possible, of strong action verbs. Headline writers use verbs in historical present tense , thus can describe the actions that had happened just now. This tense can express the feel of immediacy. English news headline often use short words, such as abbreviations and acronyms, and the articles, personal pronouns, are often omitted. The new words are very common in the news headline as the technology develop; people have to use new words to describe the new things( 12 ).

### **In Linguistics, Historic Present**

The present tense is used to provide a timeless, enduring perspective to what can also be conceptualized as past events. There are a number of other places in which past times' territory is violated by the present tense.

As a secondary grammatical category that serves to locate an occurrence or a situation in time, the word 'tense' can be described. For example, it accounts for the difference in the phrases that John leaves / John left. It covers two aspects: a morphological aspect, namely a system of tenses encoded in the morphology of the verb, and a semantic aspect, expressed in one or more sentences, dealing with the temporal position of the event or event: the 'meaning' of the various Creating an impression of immediacy is the primary journalistic purpose of using a verb phrase in the present tense to refer to an occurrence that took place in the past. In rhetoric, the use of the present tense to reflect on events from the past is called *translatiō temporum* in Latin, meaning "shift of times" in English. It clearly demonstrates that the historical present occurs only as an expected tropical divergence from the past (9).

In the Living English Language when telling stories about past events, people often switch into present tense, as in : “ I was walking home from work one day. All of a sudden this man comes up to me and says.... “. This phenomenon is called the historical present which has a long history in English and is found in numerous other languages, both ancient and modern. Linguists have sometimes suggested that the historical present makes stories more vivid primarily by bringing past actions into the immediate present (9).

The historical present or historical present in linguistics and rhetoric, also called the dramatic present or narrative present, refers to the use of the present tense when narrating past events (5).

In addition to its use in history writing, particularly in historical chronicles (listing a sequence of events), it is used in literature, for 'hot news' (as in headlines), and in daily conversation. The present tense is commonly used in news headlines (spoken or written) for complex circumstances in the recent past.

The present tense is used for past time situations in informal conversational narration or in fiction. For example, “There was I playing so well even I couldn't believe it and along comes this kid and keeps me off the table for three frames! This can be regarded as a metaphoric use of the present tense, a device conventionally used (in English and a very wide range of languages ) to make the narration appears more vivid by assimilating it to the here –and –now of the speech act. Note that in the above cited example, the speaker switches from preterit (The preterit tense is used to refer to actions that occurred at a fixed point in past time ) in the first two verbs to the present in the last two ones (5).

### 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 with both newspapers. 10 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 Telegram.

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

| <b>Tense Category</b>            | <b>12/21/2005</b> | <b>12/22/2005</b> | <b>12/23/2005</b> | <b>12/24/2005</b> | <b>12/25/2005</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>% of Total</b> |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| 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%                |
| <b>Total number of headlines</b> | <b>10</b>         | <b>10</b>         | <b>10</b>         | <b>10</b>         | <b>10</b>         | <b>50</b>    | <b>100%</b>       |

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**

| <b>Tense Category</b>            | <b>12/21/2005</b> | <b>12/22/2005</b> | <b>12/23/2005</b> | <b>12/24/2005</b> | <b>12/25/2005</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>% of Total</b> |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| 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%                |
| <b>Total number of headlines</b> | <b>10</b>         | <b>10</b>         | <b>10</b>         | <b>10</b>         | <b>10</b>         | <b>50</b>    | <b>100%</b>       |

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

| <b>Tense Category</b>                     | <b>21/12/2005</b> | <b>22/12/2005</b> | <b>23/12/2005</b> | <b>24/12/2005</b> | <b>25/12/2005</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>% of Total</b> |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Present simple used as historical present | 7                 | 4                 | 5                 | 2                 | 5                 | 23           | 79.40 %           |
| Present simple used conventionally        | 1                 | 0                 | 0                 | 5                 | 0                 | 6            | 20.60 %           |
| <b>Total number of headlines</b>          | <b>8</b>          | <b>4</b>          | <b>5</b>          | <b>7</b>          | <b>5</b>          | <b>29</b>    | <b>100%</b>       |

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<br>2005 | 12/22<br>2005 | 12/23<br>2005 | 12/24<br>2005 | 12/25<br>2005 | Total | Of<br>%.<br>Total |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------|-------------------|
| Present<br>simple used as<br>historical<br>present | 9             | 8             | 5             | 4             | 4             | 30    | 69.7%             |
| Present<br>simple used<br>conventionally           | 10            | 1             | 4             | 4             | 3             | 13    | 30.2              |
| Number of<br>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 Historic present is more frequent than the conventional one with percentages: 79.4 and 69.7 successively as the tables and figures illustrates

Simple present used conventionally

Example 1 *How Santa makes money*

The headline in example (1) is on present simple using conventionally now let's take a look at the article to see what tense the editor choose 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 simple present because it is the correct tense, the same thing in example (2):-**

Example 2

**The typical American lives 18 mile 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 present continues just because the journalist is trying to make an image for the reader he completed the article with simple present not because it is the favorite tense in headlines but because it is the correct tens. The headlines in example (1) and (2) is on the present simple used conventionally which is less common, the major grope as the analysis reveals is on the present simple used as historic present as in example (3) and (4) :-

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 but the journalist wrote it in 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. The same thing in example (4) after writing the headlines in historic present the journalist completed the article in simple past :-

Example(4) *Miss universe host Steve Harvey apologizes for blunder.*

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

Reformulating the message beyond the headlines by means of the simple past tense make sense because first it is the correct tens second the reader at this point is reading the article after the headline achieved its goal with its special ornamented language regardless of the wrong tense used to draw attention at the expense of grammatical rules to the extent that this grammatical error has become a common rule in media language.as table (3) and (4) reveals that writing hot news in historic present is so common in headlines to make the news more fresh more vivid and to keeps the past alive see example (5):-

Example (5) *US admits that coalition air strike 'killed Iraqi soldiers*

**Again the article was finished in simple past :-**

About 10 Iraqi soldiers may have been killed by an American air strike as they fought Isil terrorists near the town of Fallujah, the US military admitted on Saturday

5.3 Present simple double use

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

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

This type of headlines usually used in sport news see example (7):-

Example (7) *Andy merry wins sporty as Tyson Fury misses out an award.*



This type of headlines with Present simple double use is only 4% as table (3) and (4) illustrate. But its importance only because it is part of the simple present used in headlines as historic present.5.4 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 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.*

5.6 Future simple, when this is the right tense why not using it, especially because it gives more live 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 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 like 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 killed, 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..

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