Language in the Time of Corona: an analysis of Saudi and British newspaper headlines

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Abstract:

The study explores the linguistic characteristics of headlines about the coronavirus outbreak in four international newspapers: The Times, The Telegraph, Saudi Gazette, and Arab News. The data consists of 374 headlines accessed on the newspapers' online sites; 95 from the Saudi newspapers and 279 from the British newspapers. Some linguistic characteristics, su   ch as present tense favored over past tense, special vocabulary, omission of words, and abbreviations, were widely used in both Saudi and British headlines. Salient elements in British but not in Saudi headlines were the use of metaphors and interrogatives. The findings support past research that the English of newspaper headlines deviates from standard English, and this was found to be the case in both Saudi and British newspapers.

key words: headlines, special vocabulary, abbreviations, tense, metaphors.

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اللغة في زمن الكورونا: دراسة تحليلية لعناوين الصحف السعودية والبريطانية

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ملخص الدراسة:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة الخصائص اللغوية للعناوين التي تتناول موضوع فايروس كورونا في أربع صحف عالمية صادرة باللغة الإنجليزية، اثنتان منها بريطانية وهي ذا تايمز، ذا تيليقراف، واثنتان سعودية وهي سعودي جازيت، وعرب نيوز. وقد تم الحصول على البيانات في هذه الدراسة من المواقع الإلكترونية للصحف. وقد تم جمع عدد ٣٧٤ عنوان صحفي عن فايروس كورونا، ٩٥ من هذه العناوين هي لصحف سعودية بينما ٢٧٩ عنوان كانت من الصحف البريطانية. وأظهرت النتائج شعبية استخدام بعض الخصائص اللغوية بصفة عامة في الصحف السعودية والبريطانية على حد سواء ومن هذه الخصائص: تفضيل استخدام زمن المضارع على الماضي، واستخدام مفردات خاصة، حذف بعض الكلمات واستخدام الاختصارات. وقد تميزت الصحف البريطانية عن نظيرتها السعودية باستخدام التشبيه المجازي وتوظيف الأسئلة في العناوين. وتدعم النتائج التي توصلت لها هذه الدراسة الأبحاث السابقة التي تفيد بأن اللغة الإنجليزية المستخدمة في عناوين الصحف مختلفة عن اللغة الإنجليزية المعيارية الشائعة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عناوين صحف، مفردات خاصة، اختصارات، زمن، تشبيه مجازي.

Introduction

The language style of newspapers is different from the language styles used in other written forms like books, magazines, and scientific articles. The front page usually carries the burden of convincing the reader that the newspaper is worth reading, and if displayed in a shop or newsagent for sale, is worth buying. Indeed, "[t]he popularity and readability of the article often depend on the headline which is its most representative part and can, therefore, be considered as the most important part of the journalistic style" (Rich, 2010, p. 259, as cited in Niedziałek, 2014). Headlines, to Waqar et al (2021), are the entry door of a house. Writing a headline is not an easy task. Olugbenga (2020) points out that journalists have certain methods when using words in headlines. Journalists and editors are aware that good headlines can make a newspaper appealing and, as a consequence, gain a reputation and attract loyal readers. It is also important that headlines are accessible. If a headline is complex and long, the article may be left unread (Maestre, 1996). Headlines also represent a challenge because they should grab a potential reader's attention, yet not reveal all the details covered in the article. A headline may be in the form of an incomplete sentence, serving as an introductory line, usually printed in bold, to an article. A headline is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary as "[a] line of words printed in large letters as the title of a story in a newspaper, or the main points of the news that are broadcast on television or radio". For Reah (1998, p. 13), a headline is a "unique type of text as it has a range of functions that specifically dictate its shape, content and structure." Van Dijk (1985) explains that headlines have a definite thematic function as they refer to the most significant topic of the article. He (1988) considers a headline as having three functions: to summarize news, attract attention by word and font choice, and introduce the style and principles of the newspaper. Dor (2003) considers headlines to be "negotiators between stories and readers" (p. 720), and to have primarily four functions: to summarize the article, highlight its most important point, attract readers' attention, and select a topic to be the theme of the article.

Since a headline acts as the opening to the following detailed article, it needs not be detailed itself. While it should indicate what the text is about, it must do so within a limited amount of space, and thus needs to be specific, short, catchy, yet informative. These features ensure the communicative purpose of the headline, and to do so, the language chosen for a headline is unlike the language found in the article itself. It has been called "block language" (Maestre, 1996) and even "headlinese" (McArthur, 1992). Such terminology suggests that it is usual for the language of headlines to be different from that of other registers, including that of newspaper articles themselves. Mozūraitytė (2015, p. 20) points out that "[S]tyle is created not only by the use of stylistic devices but also by the use of special grammar and lexis." Among the linguistic features that have been identified are: use of abbreviations, special vocabulary, ellipsis, and present tense realizing past time. The language that is used in headlines makes up a rich research topic as it is intriguing to understand how words are chosen to fit in a given limited space to express an event in a way that catches readers' attention. Despite it being common knowledge that the style of a headline differs from that of the following article, it has not been established conclusively that what characterizes headlines styles linguistically is similar across different cultures (Develotte & Rechniewski, 2001). Saudi Arabia, culturally and demographically very different from English-language countries such as the United Kingdom, presents an opportunity to investigate this issue as several English-language newspapers are published there.

Saudi English-language newspapers have received little attention regarding their linguistic features, whether of headlines or of articles. Newspapers such as the *Saudi Gazette* and the *Arab News* are for a readership that potentially comprises both native and non-native speakers of English, the latter both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers. The current study compared the language used in the headlines of these newspapers, which are written by non-native speakers of English, with those in *The Times* and *The Telegraph*, British broadsheet newspapers written by native speakers of English in an attempt to answer the following research question: *What are the linguistic features of headlines in English-language newspapers,*

and are they the same in Saudi and British newspapers? The newspaper articles, and thus the headlines investigated, are concerned with the Coronavirus pandemic.

Literature Review

The language of newspapers in general and of headlines in particular has been of interest to researchers for many years. This perhaps is due to the fact that the nature of newspapers represents a different platform for practicing language. Headlines have gained significance in language research due to their position and function. Given the prominent position yet limited space accorded to them in newspapers, it has been of interest how headlines are made to capture the essence of the story running in the newspaper.

Studies that have researched newspapers headlines have focused on various features. While some investigations analyzed linguistic elements, others looked into how language was employed to reflect certain ideologies. A study by Oloruntobi (2020) investigated the linguistic features of the news headlines on fuel subsidy removal and electricity tariff hike in Nigeria. It was found that headlines used positive adjectives to describe government policies and decisions.

A study by Montejo and Adriano (2018) examined discursive devices and ideologies in five online newspapers published in the Philippines. They found that the newspapers used ten discursive devices in general: evaluative language, vocabulary, intensification and quantification, immediacy, reference to emotion, reference to elite people, role labels, institutional agency, country, and events. They argue that words were chosen to reflect writers' and editors' disposition on certain issues.

Similarly, Cabaysa (2016) studied the headlines of three online newspapers in the Philippines and found that present tense was used to realize past time events; the *to*-infinitive to refer to future events; the comma instead of a conjunction; and the colon to flag direct speech.

Using the ideological framework of news production and reception proposed by Van Dijk (1988), Youssefi et al. (2013) explored how Western newspapers employed language to negatively represent Iran and hence justify the sanctions imposed on the

country. They argued that lexical and grammatical devices in particular were employed to represent a particular political orientation towards Iran.

A study by Timuçin (2010) focused on the use of emotive language in broadsheet and tabloid British newspapers. Based on an investigative framework that takes the linguistic concepts of modality and core vocabulary into consideration, Timucin found that tabloids used more non-core vocabulary when they report news about the same event, and concluded that tabloids used more biased and emotive language than broadsheets. He (2010) found that tabloids tended to employ words that evoke emotions and cause an effect designed to persuade readers to adopt the newspaper's view point.

A study by Niedziałek (2014) compared the headlines of the English and Polish editions of the *National Geographic* magazine. She concluded that English headlines were longer and more descriptive than Polish ones. Bonyadi and Samuel (2013) examined headlines in the *New York Times* and the *Tehran Times*. They found a difference in their use of rhetorical devices, each newspaper drawing on a different set of linguistic devices. For example, puns, testimonials, and out-of-context quotations characterized headlines in the *New York Times*, while headlines in the *Tehran Times* favored allusions, irony, and neologisms. The authors also noted that headlines in both newspapers reflected the newspapers' attitudes towards the reported news.

There is a rich trove of published studies of the linguistic characteristics of headlines that looked into headlines from various angles using different analytical tools. However, there are no published studies of how headlines in English-language Saudi newspapers are constructed and which asked whether Saudi newspapers headlines are constructed similarly to those in British newspapers describing the same events.

Methodology

The present study examined headlines in four popular English-language newspapers, two published in Saudi Arabia (*Saudi Gazette* and *Arab News*) and two in the United Kingdom (*The Times* and *The Telegraph*). The reason for choosing these particular newspapers is that they are all broadsheets, i.e., so-called quality dailies. Linguistically, as well as in terms of content and lay-out, broadsheets are unlike tabloids. As broadsheets aim at delivering news in a professional way, language is used carefully and formally to relate national and international events. Tabloids, on the other hand, which are full of pictures and gossip about celebrities, use language to reflect certain opinions about a topic, usually expressing these in a highly emotive way. Newspapers, of both types, write to inform their readers about what is happening in their world, defined by the country of publication, besides covering international events. While not limited to current news, these are the most important stories. The front page is usually devoted to the most important news and events, while the other pages report less important news and events. In Saudi Arabia, the English newspapers are all broadsheets, and their primary function is to deliver local and international political and social news to educated English language speakers. Entertainment and celebrities are not given prominence. Due to their focus, the selected Saudi newspapers appear compatible with the British ones and so they can be categorized as broadsheets.

The current study is limited to the linguistic structures of headlines during the outbreak of an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus, called Covid-19. News about the outbreak was selected as the resultant global pandemic is a matter of great urgency and importance. News about the spread of the virus is eagerly awaited by readers because it represents a mystery, or did so especially at the beginning of the outbreak, that has affected their health, lifestyles, and economic circumstances. Due to the mysterious nature of the disease, newspapers have a lot to inform people about, from daily case numbers to government decisions about measures to prevent its spread, such as physical distancing and lockdowns of public premises, to the influence of these measure on the economy and health sectors, to the latest developments in

laboratories' work on a vaccine. All these topics represent a rich lode of stories for newspapers to mine and convey to their target audience. Therefore, it was thought that Covid-19 would represent a rich data set for researching the linguistic structures of newspaper headlines. While the present study is limited in space and time, it still fits into the paradigm of quantitative analyses of large data sets, making a contribution to the study of how newspapers focus on a specific issue during a particular time (Develotte & Rechniewski, 2001).

For this study a total of 374 headlines were collected, 95 from the two Saudi newspapers and 279 from the two British newspapers. The difference in the number of headlines constituting the study sample is accounted for in the differences in frequency of usage reported for some linguistic features, and this will be further discussed in the analysis and results section. Headlines were collected over a period of one month, in June-July 2020.

Analysis and Findings

Many of the linguistic characteristics of headlines are sentence or word level features, such as choice of tense and sentence type, use of ellipsis and abbreviations. Others are located at a semantic level, such as the use of emotive language. Some are characteristics of British newspaper headlines and not shared, at least not to a significant extent, with the headlines of Saudi newspapers. These characteristics are illustrated and discussed in the following sections.

Tense

Usually in English the past tense is employed to report past events while the present tense is employed to relate current events and habitual activities. This common understanding is not always followed in newspaper headlines; instead, frequently events that have happened in the past – must have happened in the past because they are reported in newspapers after the event – are often reported in simple present. Of the 374 headlines examined, 123 employed simple present, which was done in all four newspapers. However, the two Saudi newspapers employed simple present in 59 (62.1%) out of a total 95 headlines, while the two British newspapers

employed simple present in 64 (22.9%) out of a total 279 headlines. It therefore is the case that the Saudi newspapers favored simple present to a much greater degree than the British newspapers.

Regarding the frequency of simple present in headlines, researchers, e.g., Hamdan and Qais (2016), have argued that headline writers and editors prefer simple present to indicate to their audience that the news are fresh and new. Simple present emphasizes immediacy, saying that this is the status now even though the incident or event reported has already happened.

Examples

1a Saudi Arabia reopens mosques after 2 months coronavirus lockdown [*Arab News*, 1 June 2020]
1b Harrods reopens after lockdown with a 72-hour quarantine for rejected dresses and a ban on makeovers [*The Times*, 14 June 2020]

The headline in example 1a is an active declarative sentence with the structure subject (noun) + predicate (a verb) + object (a noun) + noun phrase (a preposition, a numeral, and a string of nouns). It is an example of an informative headline as it straightforwardly tells the news and does not require much effort on the part of the reader to work out its meaning. The reported event, i.e., that the government "reopens mosques", has actually occurred. The use of the simple present shows that this action is new and still on-going.

The headline in example 1b is similar to that in example 1a, using an active declarative sentence with simple present. It reports the reopening of Harrod's, a famous department store in London. It may be noted that this headline contains more information than the headline in the *Arab News* in example 1a.

Besides simple present, future tense is employed in 41 (11%) out of a total 374 headlines. However, as the British corpus comprises nearly three times as many headlines as the Saudi corpus, the British headlines in the corpus employed future tense less often than the Saudi ones, with Saudi newspapers employing future tense in 15 (15.8%) of their 95 headlines, and British newspapers employing future tense in 26 (9.3%) of their 279 headlines.

The discourse of newspaper headlines often makes reference to future events differently from other written registers, sometimes opting for the *to*+infinitive structure instead of the auxiliary *will* (*+verb). In doing so, writers or sub-editors delete words that can be intuited from the context. This is illustrated in examples 2a and 2b below.

Examples

2a Coronavirus to slice at least 6% off world economy: OECD [Arab News, 11 June 2020]

2b BP to slash 10,000 jobs as coronavirus hits oil demand [The Times, 9 June 2020]

While both British and Saudi newspaper headlines employed the *to*+infinitive structure in reporting future events, they did so with a different frequency. There was a tendency of Saudi newspaper headlines to use the *to*+infinitive structure more often than the auxiliary *will* (*+verb) to report future events. In the Saudi newspaper future time reference was realized by *to*+infinitive in 11 (73.3%) and by *will* (*+verb) in 4 (26.6%) out of 15 headlines; while in the British newspapers future time reference was realized by *to*+infinitive in 9 (34.6%) and by *will* (*+verb) in 17 (65.4%) out of 26 headlines. Since the choice of *to*+infinitive for future time implies near certainty, as well as formality, it is possible that certainty and formality characterize the news in the Saudi headlines; however, it is also possible that Saudi headlines opted for brevity as the words left out could easily be intuited from the context. The British headlines by contrast favored less certainty and less formality.

Syntactically, examples 2a and 2b are active declarative sentences with the structure subject (noun) + predicate (*to*+infinitive) + object (noun). Example 2b is a compound sentence comprised of two clauses, with the first active clause extended by a second active clause by the subordinating conjunction *as*. The *to*+infinitive is used in these examples to reflect consequences that are likely to happen due to the pandemic.

Examples

3a Coronavirus: National Express will turn away passengers with fever [*The Times*, 19 June 2020]

The headline in example 3a comprises the single noun *Coronavirus*, followed by a colon which flags that something like a comment or explanation will follow. The structure following is a simple active declarative clause with the verb *will* making a firm statement of a measure taken by the National Express Group for its train services. The way it is presented can function as a warning, informing passengers not to be surprised if this happens to them.

3b Contact-tracing app will not be ready until winter, admits health minister. [*The Telegraph*, 18 June 2020]

The headline in example 3b comprises two active clauses, one negative and one positive, both employing future tense. The first (or quoted) clause has the structure subject (noun) + predicate (auxiliary+verb) + adjective + prepositional phrase, and the second (or quoting) clause has the structure predicate (verb) + subject (noun phrase), which is an inversion of the usual order of subject + predicate. In this headline *will…be* realizes part of reported speech, acting as an indication of intention and decision concerning the launch date of the tracking application.

3c After coronavirus: the world will never be the same…in some ways it may be better. [*The Times*, 9 June 2020]

The headline in example 3c comprises a prepositional phrase represents a classic headline- big, bold line drawing readers' attention to what follows, which is an elaboration on the first phrase. The prepositional phrase is followed by an active negative clause, followed by another prepositional phrase and an active positive clause. The headline employs *will* (+*be*) as a predictive to express an expectation about an event in the near future.

Only four headlines in the Saudi newspapers employed the auxiliary *will* (+verb); however, the purpose of *will* in these headlines varied, not necessarily expressing an expectation about an event in the near future.

3d What shape will global recovery from coronavirus crisis take? (*Arab News*, 11 June 2020)

The headline in example 3d uses *will* in an interrogative clause, posing a question about a situation in the future. It is used in a context that necessarily suffers from a lack of information since the crisis referred to is a new and hitherto unknown situation. The function of *will* in this headline is rhetorical, inviting readers to discover the possibilities discussed in the article about the near future.

3e Saudi Arabia will "come out on top" in oil markets, JP Morgan predicts. [*Arab News*, 13 June 2020]

The headline in example 3e has a simple structure of subject (noun phrase) + predicate (verb phrase) + adverbial (preposition phrase). The headline employs *will* to express certainty in a quotation, with the rest of the headline confirming this function. Hameed (2008) points out that in some contexts newspapers employ a particular tense to represent an indirect quote and mark access to another voice, other than the report writer's, for example. In such cases, the quoted words are enclosed in what is known as "scare quotes". By doing so, Hameed argues, the conventions of headlines are loosened and a tense other than the one used in the quoted speech can be introduced. Indeed, in this example the auxiliary *will* is not used to flag a precise quotation of the statement issued by JP Morgan but as a summary of the statement's meaning.

Will and the *to*+infinitive structure are not the only forms that indicate future time in headlines; modal verbs other than *will* are also used for the same purpose. Choosing between a modal verb and an infinitive depends very much on the given circumstances of the news, the attitude of the newspapers, and the impression writers and sub-editors seek to create. Clark (2007) mentions that modal verbs express intuition about particular news and show less commitment to that news.

Example

4 Air bridges for holidaymakers could be restricted to under ten destinations from beginning of July [*The Telegraph*, 20 June 2020]

The headline in example 4 assumes that the resumption of traveling is limited to holiday destinations. The prepositional phrase *under ten destinations* does not provide an accurate number or the names of the destinations. Therefore, the modal verb is chosen as it best describes this situation. Despite the function of this modal verb, it is rarely used in headlines (Clark, 2007). In the study corpus, this is the only context in which *could* is used in a headline that represents a future event. The structure of the above headline highlights the news with no reference to the agent potentially presumably "restricting air bridges". This suggests that the agent is not as important as the told news or because it could be intuited.

Similar to simple present and future, past tense can be found in some headlines. The purpose seems to be to emphasize an event (Clark, 2007).

Examples

5a Isle of Man pulled up drawbridge … and eradicated virus (*The Times*, 22 June 2020).

The headline in example 5a is an active sentence with the two clauses; the first clause has the structure subject (noun phrase) + predicate (verb phrase) + object (noun). The second clause has the structure predicate (verb) + object (noun); the subject is ellipted since it was already mentioned in the first clause. The verbs *pulled* and *eradicated* are used in their past tense form to announce the end of a situation.

The past tense form does not always realize a past event; it can also be used in certain situations as past participle to indicate a passive with the agent omitted. Due to the omission of auxiliaries in headlines, it is not easy to recognize whether a verb is in simple past tense or is a participle as part of the present perfect.

5b Chicken factory closed after 75 staff test positive for Covid [*The Times*, 21 June 2020]

The headline in example 5b describes an action that was taken without reference to any agent who may have performed this action; in fact, it's not clear whether the factory closed of its own accord or if it was forced to close by someone, e.g. a public authority or the factory's management. This is because the grammatical voice of the sentence in example 5b is obscured. Basically, as the headline is formed in example 5b, it entails two interpretations: simple present if the sentence is active, or present perfect if the sentence is passive. Such a headline may be problematic for some non-English native readers. However, being familiar with the language of headlines, if one were to presume that the factory management had performed the action, then present simple would most likely have been used, and the headline would probably have read *Chicken factory closes after 75 staff test positive for Covid.* This suggests that the present perfect is being used in the above headline.

5c Mosques across Saudi Arabia prepared to ensure worshippers' safety [*Arab News*, 20 June 2020]

At first sight, it seems that the headline in example 5c employs a passive structure, with present perfect used to highlight a procedure that was and still is being taken to ensure people's safety. The "lead" or leading paragraph, i.e., the first paragraph of the article, supports this interpretation as it uses the present perfect in its full form to tell the news flagged in the headline. Similar to example 5b, the structure of the headline in example 5c makes readers wonder what is really being said but the lead answers this question.

The grammatical voice of the headline determines which tense was used. Agentless passive voice is used for the purposes of hiding potential agents. To make it more complicated, auxiliaries are sometimes dropped when the present perfect is used in a passive sentence in headlines, especially in one of its functions in reporting news, called "hot news" by McCawley (1971); as a result, a passive sentence could be mistaken for an active one.

Examples

6a The threat has passed, so why are our civil liberties still suspended? [*The Telegraph*, 18 June 2020]

The headline in example 6a comprises two clauses, one active declarative and one active interrogative. The active declarative clause employs present perfect to emphasize that a previous situation is over but, as indicated in the second, the interrogative clause, its effect is still present; however, its presence is questioned by means of the interrogative, requesting that an end be put to this effect.

6b Kingdom has lead [*sic*] regional, global initiatives to deal with coronavirus: Saudi aid chief [*Arab News*, 18 June 2020]

In the headline in example 6b, the present perfect is used as part of quoted speech to imply uncompleted action. It explains that Saudi Arabia leads a group of initiatives on a mission to deal with the coronavirus that has not yet finished.

6c Lockdown a week earlier "would have halved coronavirus death toll" [*The Times*, 11 June 2020]

In the headline in example 6c, the modal verb *would* (+have) asserts the possibility of a particular outcome if a certain decision had been made, flagging the statement as a quotation by enclosing it in quotation marks. However, we are not told who would or should have made that decision, nor are we told who is responsible for the claim, i.e. who is the putative speaker. Presumably leaving open all possibilities is a device to encourage the reader of the headline to proceed to reading the article.

All but one of the headlines that employed present perfect were from the British newspapers. Familiarity with the functions of this tense form may account for the difference between Saudi and British newspaper headlines, i.e. for its almost complete absence in Saudi headlines.

Abbreviations & Acronyms

Headlines should be kept short and simple; therefore abbreviations are a highly valued feature common in headlines. Usually, if the name of an institution or organization consists of a group of words, the name is abbreviated and presented in capital letters formed from the first letter of each word. If the sequence of letters is pronounced as a word, e.g., NATO, it is known as an acronym, while a sequence which cannot be pronounced as a word, e.g., IMDB, is known as an abbreviation.

Examples

7a ME countries continue taking steps to fight COVID-19 [*Arab News*, 1 June 2020]

7b BP to slash 10,000 jobs as coronavirus hits oil demand [*The Times*, 9 June 2020]

Abbreviations such as those employed in the headlines in examples 7a and 7b are commonly found in both Saudi and British newspaper headlines. Another type of abbreviation commonly found in headlines is "clipping", where a word of more than one syllable is clipped to a shorter form, e.g., ad = advertisement, grad = graduate. Clipping is also found in both Saudi and British newspaper headlines.

Nominalizations

Nominalizations are sometimes used in headlines realizing the subject or object in the clause instead of the more common noun. In a nominalization any element which is not a noun, such as a verb, adjective or adverb, and even a clause itself, can function like a noun in the clause.

Examples

8a Marginal decline in new Saudi corona cases [*Saudi Gazette*, 2 June 2020]

8b Dexamethasone: the coronavirus drug 91 years in the making [*The Times*, 21 June 2020]

The headline in example 8b is comprised of a single noun plus colon, followed by a complex nominalization comprising a noun phrase (determiner + noun phrase) and an ellipted clause ([*that has been*] *91 years in the making*). The nominalization, a passive structure, omits the agent which seems insignificant in this situation. The headline follows a structure mentioned several times above: a single noun + colon acting as an attention grabber that requires little in the way of reading. Not being a standard clause, this being obvious by an absence of verbs, this structure is designed for maximum impact; it's informative and easy to follow.

Nominalizations were only infrequently used in the data, with the two Saudi newspapers only having two headlines employing nominalizations while the two British newspapers had four. The topic, coronavirus outbreak, may have inclined editors and headline writers to opt for headlines that spelled out the news to maintain easy processing of information.

Imperative structure

Another headline favorite is to issue direct instructions and requests to readers via an imperative. There are only four instances of this in the corpus, three in British headlines and one in a Saudi headline, such a small number perhaps being due to the newspapers being broadsheets rather than tabloids.

Examples

9a Get out and shop, PM to tell Britain [*The Times*, 13 June 2020]

The headline in example 9a does not so much issue a direct instruction to citizens as to assume that one will be issued by the British Prime Minister, as mentioned in the second clause of the headline. It employs an imperative to underline the power of the PM to issue such an order. The intention is to encourage people to leave quarantine and go shopping as lockdown restrictions are eased in order to bring life back to the economy and to gradually return life to its normal pace.

9b Stay away, says Cornwall as lockdown eases [*The Times*, 16 June 2020]

The headline in example 9b spells out Cornwall City Council's attitude towards visitors and tourists during the pandemic in no uncertain terms, employing an imperative to order them to keep away.

9c Get all children back to school, doctors tell Boris Johnson [*The Times*, 18 June 2020]

The headline in example 9c reports doctors, generally considered figures of unblemished moral stature if not of authority, "ordering" the British PM to open schools for children. It is interesting in that it is seemingly not the newspaper which directs the imperative at the PM but unnamed doctors, yet readers would not fail to recognize the authority of the newspaper behind the order.

9d Work together to overcome global crisis, says Saudi energy minister [*Arab News*, 16 June 2020]

The headline in example 9d employs an imperative form of the verb *work* directed at an unnamed target – which may be a group of policymakers, officials, and scientists – in the form of a quotation attributed to a government minister. The headline stresses the importance of cooperation to achieve a clearly stated goal, namely overcoming a global crisis. This is the only example of an imperative structure found in the Saudi newspaper headlines. Compared to informal words such as *get* employed in the British headlines that denote an urgent command, formal words are used in this Saudi headline to express what seems more like a soft plea than an order.

Ellipsis

Ellipsis is a common feature of newspapers headlines. Biber (1999, p. 230) defines ellipsis as "The omission of elements which are recoverable from the linguistic context or the situation." Clark (2007) points out that the omission of words entices readers to read the article and creates strong headlines. It is believed that ellipsis relies largely on logical inference and awareness of current affairs

(Chin & Tsou, 2000). Ellipsis appears in headlines when it is possible for readers to infer their meaning even if particular words are left out.

A total of 113 (30.2%) of 374 headlines in the corpus newspapers contain one or more elliptical items, with 76 (27.2%) out of 279 headlines in British newspapers and 37 (38.9%) out of 95 headlines in Saudi newspapers featuring ellipsis. The large number of instances of ellipsis in both Saudi and British newspaper headlines suggests that headline writers either have a preference for short structures or for less explicit ones. The former would suggest a preference for impact, the latter for a headline that encourages further reading.

Both the kind of news being flagged in a headline and the style of the headline writer may determine what can be ellipted. Due to the space for a headline being limited by issues of lay-out, it needs to be concise, yet it must get the main news onto the page. As a consequence, content words such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives are given priority when subeditors decide what to have in a headline, while function words such as articles, conjunctions, and prepositions, which do not provide additional let alone essential information, are likely to be sacrificed to space limitations. Most commonly, the omitted items from headlines are articles (*the*, *a*, *an*).

Examples

10a Coronavirus crisis underlines need for new directions in education system: Al-Asheikh [*Saudi Gazette*, 11 June 2020]
10b Tool lets the boss watch staff working from home [*The Times*, 16 June 2020]

Articles are always the first elements to be considered for elimination. Some headlines do not have any articles at all, as shown in example 10a, while in others, as in example 10b, an article may be omitted at the beginning of the sentence but maintained thereafter. This makes the headline "punchy", capturing potential readers' attention. Similarly, auxiliaries may be ellipted in a headline for the same reasons, as illustrated in examples 11a and 11b.

Examples

11a Saudi Arabia among the safest countries for COVID-19: Study [*Saudi Gazette*, 10 June 2020]

11b Boris Johnson facing dilemma over coronavirus second wave [*The Telegraph*, 13 June 2020]

Ellipsis is not limited to articles and auxiliaries, sometimes subjects and objects are omitted from a headline because the meaning is not influenced by such omissions. In such cases, meaning is still retrievable although some of the main words are ellipted.

Example

12 Boris Johnson says summer schools will help children to catch up [*The Times*, 11 June 2020]

In the headline in example 12 the object of the phrasal verb *catch up*, i.e., *learning*, is omitted because it would not add information that cannot easily be inferred from the context.

Ellipsis is not limited to function words; some headlines ellipted essential information from the headline about the news story. In such cases, readers have to go through the article to search for the lacking information.

Examples

13a Coronavirus: Four-year visas needed "to lure students" [*The Times*, 15 June 2020]

The headline in example 13a does not tell us much about the topic, e.g., who made this statement and what the conditions for this visa are, and whether it is for a specific ethnic group. The news given in the headline seems insufficient, thus, it is hoped it will entice readers to go beyond the headline and read the whole article to find out the missing information. Lack of information requires the reader to look further, i.e., to read the article. The story tells the reader that a suggestion was made by the former UK universities minister to the government to offer international students, especially those from India, a new visa route, a four-year post-study visa, as a solution to the anticipated drop in the number of overseas students in British

universities, which has a negative impact on the higher education sector in the UK. Under this proposed new visa, international students can work at the end of their courses. This visa, thus, may encourage more overseas students to apply to British universities.

13b Coronavirus: Covering up "had a bigger impact than keeping apart" [*The Times*, 15 June 2020]

13c Australia lets more people take a seat [*The Times*, 15 June 2020]

Similarly, the headlines in examples 13b and 13c present news that needs further detail as it can appear ambiguous to some readers. They require the reader to make an effort to comprehend the intended meaning; however, the amount of effort needed may vary greatly, depending on the source of the ambiguity. For instance, the headline in example 13b summarizes a scientific conclusion, a provisional one since it is based on limited data, that wearing masks while being outside is more effective in preventing the spread of the virus than physical isolation. Other headlines need further specification. For example, the headline in example 13c suggests that Australia is allowing larger number of people in avenues, but reading the article tells us that this headline is about the decision of two Australian states, namely, Victoria and New South Wales, to ease the rules governing the number of customers in commercial venues, allowing more people in businesses such as salons and restaurants in an attempt to revive the economy of the country and its people.

Some headlines depend largely on the readers being able to

provide cultural context, as in example 13d.

13d Covid-19 could mark the end of the super-jumbo [*The Times*, 28 June 2020]

The headline in example 13d tells us that the pandemic caused by the virus, which has halted most international flights, will likely lead to commercial airlines ceasing to fly the world's largest passenger aircraft today, the Airbus A380. We know this because the headline makes use of the term *jumbo*, commonly applied to the Boeing 747, the largest passenger aircraft for decades, and reworks it as *super-jumbo*, i.e., bigger than the *jumbo*, thus leading us to

interpret it as the biggest aircraft today. What the headline lacks in information, it makes up for by drawing on common knowledge.

Use of figurative and emotive language

Like words, phrases in common use are used to express public attitudes. Headlines sometimes contain specific expressions that are used to create a particular picture in the minds of the readers. Hakobian and Krunkyan (2009) describe how various stylistic devices can be used in headlines to achieve certain goals. Delivering the news with an already familiar expression makes the news easier to process and more appealing. Journalists opt for such imaginative language in order to impress readers, and invite them to read the article. The lexical stylistic devices most commonly used in headlines are idioms and metaphors (Hakobian & Krunkyan, 2009). They are often used to make the headline vivid and to get readers to read the news (Chen, 2018). A metaphor is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "a word or phrase used to describe somebody/something else, in a way that is different from its normal use, in order to show that the two things have the same qualities and to make the description more powerful," while an idiom is defined as "[a] group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words." The corpus data show that the British newspapers made use of metaphors and idioms in 12 (4.3%) out of 279 headlines compared to the Saudi newspapers which employed a metaphor in only one (1%) out of 95 headlines. It is interesting how this stylistic device can paint a picture of an entire situation in a succinct way.

Examples

14a Boris Johnson is tied up in knots over the coronavirus [*The Times*, 14 June 2020]

In the headline in example 14a its writer explains that for the British Prime Minister, things are out of control and that he is as anxious and confused as if he were *tied up in knots* because he seems unable to determine the best solution to solving the difficult situation

of the coronavirus spreading and to stopping the negative impact it has on the economy, on education and on the country as a whole.

14b EasyJet returns to the skies and sets course for summer getaway [*The Times*, 15 June 2020]

  The headline in example 14b reports the news of EasyJet airlines resuming flights by using colorful words to create an appealing future for its readers, i.e., a *summer getaway*. For instance, the phrase *returns to the skies* was used instead of "resumes flights" as it has more positive connotations than the latter. Likewise, the word "holiday" could have been employed instead of the more appealing word *getaway*.

14c Emmanuel Macron throws off the shackles as he says coronavirus crisis is over [*The Times*, 15 June 2020]

  In the headline in example 14c the French PM's decision to ease the lockdown restrictions was expressed in the phrase *throws off the shackles*. In the current pandemic, being in a lockdown resembles being in a prison and returning to normal life is depicted as being released from that prison.

  As noted above, metaphors and idioms are almost totally absent from the Saudi newspaper headlines, with only one headline using figurative language.

14d Up in smoke: Coronavirus pandemic no match for Lebanon's hookah lovers [*Arab News*, 21 June 2020]

  The headline in example 14d tells us that the hookah is back in Lebanese bars and restaurants despite the spread of the pandemic. The phrase *up in smoke* is used to convey a visual image not so much of the smoking of the hookah, but rather of the risk of doing so at a time when such activity poses a risk of spreading and contracting the virus.

Plural pronoun

  The employment of plural pronouns seems to be a feature of British newspaper headlines as none are found in the headlines of the Saudi newspapers. A pronoun connotates belongingness to the same

group and culture. In the context of the pandemic, it seems that the possessive plural pronoun is deliberately used to indicate that "we" (writer and readers) are in this situation together, therefore any suggestions or demands are made on behalf of readers in this case.

Examples

15a Our children's education is being sacrificed on the altar of delusional social distancing [*The Telegraph*, 11 June 2020]

15b Seven etiquette rules for our new post-lockdown world [*The Telegraph*, 11 June 2020]

15c We're off to sunny, sunny Spain after quarantine quashed [*The Times*, 22 June 2020]
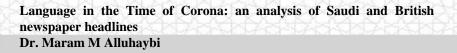
As the above examples show, plural pronouns are used with headlines that seem to convey news of primarily social rather than political import, although the two may be linked, as shown in example 15a, where the possessive plural pronoun represents the voice of a caring parent, speaking on behalf of all parents, yet also implies criticism of political decision makers.

Interrogative structure

The interrogative structure is another feature of newspapers headlines, with Mahmood et al. (2011) pointing out that "[T]he purpose of these headlines is to arouse the feelings of the readers towards an issue" and to entice them to read further. The headline itself does not require the reader to answer the question; it is simply a rhetorical device to get readers to seek the answer to the question posited in the article itself. A total of 21 headlines in the corpus data used the interrogative structure, with 18 (6.5%) out of 295 British newspaper headlines using it, but only 3 (3.2%) out of 95 Saudi newspaper headlines.

Examples

16a Which European countries can British tourists travel to for a holiday? [*The Times*, 16 June 2020]

16b What is the future for smart cities after COVID-19? [*Saudi Gazette*, 18 June 2020]

The headlines in examples 16a/b indicate that questions were used in headlines to introduce either a list of options, as in example 16a, or an explanation of the consequences of a crisis as in example 16b. Some headlines posit even more than one question, as shown in the following examples.

16c Little Britain: where the two-meter rule came from and why it is not actually a rule at all [*The Telegraph*, 11 June 2020]
16d What is a support bubble, and how does it fit into the social distancing rules? [*The Telegraph*, 12 June 2020]
16e What are the new social distancing rules and can I see my family and friends? [*The Telegraph*, 4 June 2020]

The three headlines in examples 16c, 16d and 16e posed rhetorical questions about the social restrictions that had been imposed and left the reader to find the answer in the articles.

A pattern found in British headlines but not in Saudi ones is a combination of clauses of different types.

16f Burnt out by home-schooling? Here's how to keep going until September (and beyond). [*The Telegraph*, 12 June 2020]
16g Corona-cautious or gung-ho … where do you stand on the pandemic Fear-o-Meter? [*The Telegraph*, 16 June 2020]

In each of the above examples, an interrogative was combined with a declarative in a headline. In example 16f, a question describing the status of most parents was used to indicate awareness of what the situation must be and a statement was made proposing a solution to be found in the article itself. The order of interrogative and declarative is reversed in the second example as it starts with a declarative followed by an interrogative. Example 16g thus suggests that the reader has the "choice" of one of two attitudinal situations and posits the question as to which one applies to the reader.

Another structural pattern noted in many British newspaper headlines is that they are complete sentences and even those that are incomplete appear to contain more words than Saudi headlines.

Example

17 Reopening zoos is welcome, but the pandemic still poses a threat to endangered species. [*The Telegraph*, 12 June 2020]

Headlines are the product of an incident in a particular moment in time and in its context, and therefore they frequently deal with the impact of an incident on society. Develotee and Rechniewski (2001) argue that the linguistic features of newspaper headlines reveal something of the social, cultural, and national aspects of their place of publication. Therefore, even if headlines are concerned with the *global* spread of an illness such as Covid-19, we can still expect them to be also *local*.

Discussion

The writers of newspaper headlines, generally sub-editors, may try to reflect the article writers' attitude toward the subject of their article in the headline, but it is just as likely that the headline writer's job, which is to win readers over to their newspaper's side of the argument, as well as to get them to buy and read the newspaper, takes priority. The question the current study seeks to answer is how they do this, and more specifically, how do the headline writers of newspapers published in different countries and for a different readership do this. The research question therefore was: *What are the linguistic features of headlines in English-language newspapers, and are they the same in Saudi and British newspapers?* The analysis of newspapers headlines was conducted on two levels: syntactic and semantic.

The findings suggest that common features such as present tense employed for past time events, modals for future time events, nominalizations, imperatives, interrogatives, and abbreviations, characterized the selected headlines in both British and Saudi newspapers, albeit with different frequency. Beside these features, others appeared frequently exclusively in the British headlines. Figurative language such as idioms and metaphor were creatively employed to express the news, just as figures of speech add color to the language of journalism more generally. Readers are likely to be familiar with the idioms or metaphors used, and therefore they can

be expected to "get" the purpose of their use in the context of newspaper writing.

The interrogative structure was another element employed in headlines. The purpose seems to be to engage readers in the topic and get them to read the article. Questions put readers in an active thinking mode. The interrogative structure was used only three times in the Saudi headlines compared to 18 times in the British headlines, i.e., proportionally twice as often.

Another clause structure used, although infrequently, was the imperative structure. This type of structure was not mentioned in the literature about the language features of newspapers headlines; however, the emergence of the imperative structure is worth mentioning even though it is only used in a few headlines in the corpus. The imperative structure has a directive purpose. The British newspaper headlines show that imperative is used to urge the newspaper readers or the British Prime Minister to take action, and also to instruct the British Prime Minister. The only example in the Saudi newspaper headlines that employed the imperative structure was a quotation directed at policy makers.

It is plausible that Saudi headlines opted for a simpler style because it targets non-native speakers. In Saudi Arabia, English newspapers mainly target expatriates who do not speak Arabic; however, many of those expatriates are not English native speakers either, not to mention that headlines and articles are also written by non-native speakers of English. Perhaps for these reasons, the Saudi newspapers maintain a simple accessible style, i.e., familiar lexis, straightforward structure, informative headlines.

Another feature that accounted for the difference between Saudi and British newspaper headlines is the use of plural pronouns. The possessive plural pronoun was used in British newspapers headlines to construct an ownership shared by writer and readers. Most of the headlines that employed this pronoun were reporting news about social issues such as children's return to school or preparation for life after the lockdown.

The two British newspapers examined in this study are known as standard broadsheets. Being written by native speakers for native speakers and others living in the newspapers' country of publication

may explain the differences between the headlines of the British and the Saudi newspapers.

Summary and Conclusion

The study explored the language of Saudi and British newspaper headlines. The headlines selected were concerned with the global spread of the Corona pandemic during June-July 2020. The analysis revealed that Saudi and British newspapers made use of linguistic features that were identified as common features of headlines such as the use of present tense for a past time event, abbreviation, and ellipsis. However, some characteristics of British newspaper headlines, such as plural pronouns and the interrogative structure, were not common, at least not to a significant extent, in the Saudi newspaper headlines, with factors such as culture (Saudi vs English) and English being / not being the first language of both headline writers and readership most likely accounting for this difference. In sum, the present study supports past research in that newspapers headlines are considered to adopt a special version of the language to serve specific purposes. Whether these purposes are to influence readers, to summarize the article being headlined, or to highlight an important issue, they all depend on the linguistic choices made to serve their aims.

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