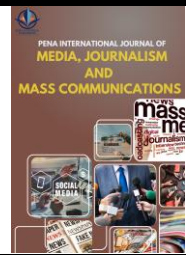




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# Words that Shape News: Exploring the Language Use in News Headlines

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### ABSTRACT

In this digital age, the world has undergone massive transformations, shaping various aspects of modern life, including the mass media. Mass media play an essential role in shaping people's lives, where newspapers remain as one of the types of mediums that can engage readers through language use. A variety of printed as well as online newspapers are easily available to attract a wide range of readers, including English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Nevertheless, ESL learners often find it confusing to understand English newspaper headlines due to their language use and unique structures. Words play an important role in shaping news, whereby editors and writers use words to engage well with readers. Thus, this study aimed at examining the language use of selected English newspaper headlines, focusing on their lexical features and functional types. To conduct the study, nine headlines from the Sun, collected for the Monday issue for a two-month period (January and February 2024) serve as convenient sampling. This study employed both quantitative and qualitative research approaches whereby the analysis of lexical features used was drawn from the Tense System in Headlines Analysis by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985), while the functional types of headlines were analyzed using Mardh's model – Typical Linguistic Features of Newspaper Headlines (1980). The results suggested that the usage of nouns and statements outnumbered other forms of lexical items and functional types in the selected newspaper headlines of the Sun for those two months. Another significant finding would be the ellipsis or omission of lexical items in the selected newspaper headlines. The findings of the study may contribute to the broader understanding of lexical features, stylistics, and language as well as the media, offering valuable insights that can be useful in helping ESL learners in their academic context and intended readers of English as well as researchers who are interested in studying the language used in newspaper headlines.

## 1. Introduction

In today's digital world, mass media have experienced significant changes, shaping various aspects of modern life in many ways. Mass media play a vital role in shaping people's lives where newspapers, printed or online versions, remain a powerful tool to engage with a wide range of readers through language use. The media, particularly newspapers, use words as tools or weapons to attract readers. Editors and writers could be considered as experts that are able to engage and

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influence readers around the globe by using words. A variety of printed as well as online newspapers are available which are convenient for all ages. These days, the availability of online newspapers has brought a new page in engaging with readers as they are convenient and meet the needs of today's world, where people will choose the easiest way to keep updated with the world's news. There are many parts of a newspaper, but the most important would be the headline as it functions as the main element in attracting readers [18]. According to the Longman Dictionary online, the headline refers to the title of a newspaper report, which is printed in large letters above the report. Headlines have become an interest of many linguists due to their distinct features and characteristics [3]. The distinct features and characteristics of news headlines have shaped people's perspectives when they come across the news. This is supported by Reah *et al.*, (1998) [17], as news headlines are produced in a different language which refers to 'block language' and have their own grammatical pattern and vocabulary which may differ from common language. Hence, she also claimed that headline language has its own features in terms of syntactic, rhetorical levels and lexical choices that might provide conciseness, clarity, and attractiveness messages towards intended readers. These also contribute to people's views on the use of words in shaping the news to engage with readers. For ESL learners who are less proficient, poor written headlines could lead to ambiguity and misinterpretation compared to well-written headlines, which may give a clearer picture of the story or message in the news. Omission of certain lexical items in the newspaper headlines might affect the interpretation and understanding of the said ESL learners when they read the English newspaper headlines.

Moreover, there are several variations of types of headlines in the 'newspaper language' register, i.e. statement, command, question, and exclamation [5,9]. These registers could be considered as other factors that contribute to the engagement of readers to start browsing or reading the newspapers. Another variation falls in terms of the lexical items used to convey meanings, such as noun, verb, adjective, and so on. However, these variations may differ depending on the type of newspaper. Van Dijk *et al.*, (2013) [5] added that headlines are particularly significant for the audience to comprehend headlines as they serve as markers that monitor intended readers' attention, perception and understanding of the news. Mardh *et al.*, (1980) [8], who conducted a study on the distinct features of English newspaper headlines, concluded that the omission of articles, verbs and subjects, and the frequent use of complex phrases like noun phrases are usually associated with newspaper headlines. Omission or ellipsis is one of the features that is usually associated with newspaper headlines, in which the grammatical patterns of the headlines are a bit different from the common language, whereby they are acceptable in the context of representing news to readers, even though if it is used in common language context, it would be considered as containing grammatical errors.

### **1.1 Statement of Problem**

Studies on linguistic aspects in mass media communication have evolved over the years. The distinct features of the 'newspaper language' register have attracted many linguists to conduct studies to examine the news headlines, focusing on its stylistics, grammatical structures and so on. Furthermore, newspaper readers, especially English language learners (ESL), might have difficulty understanding newspaper headlines not only because of the lexical features used, but the complexity of the syntactical, structural, omission of words as well as rhetorical styles of the newspaper headlines also contribute to the matter. It could be said that the headlines serve as an interesting item to be studied as a set of words which are able to engage readers. Therefore, there is a need to conduct more studies in this area to provide more insights into the language used in selected English newspaper headlines specifically in the context of Malaysian tabloid.

Aside from that, Mardh *et al.*, (1980) [8], who conducted a study on semantic analysis, identified some linguistic features of newspaper headlines, such as the frequent use of nouns and adverbs in headlines. This is supported by Khodabandeh *et al.*, (2007) [6], who conducted a study on contrastive analysis of the English and Persian newspaper headlines and found that there was a dominant use of nouns which outnumbered other parts of speech in both news headlines. On the other hand, in terms of functional headlines, the use of statements or declarative sentences was the most frequent compared to any other types of function, such as questions, commands and exclamations. Similarly, in a study conducted by Sulaymonova *et al.*, (2021) [13] focusing on the characteristics of headlines in newspapers, they suggested that the way news headlines are written is usually in a sensational way, and they make use of a few words only to make them more economical. Their findings also concluded that these features are usually associated with English newspaper headlines, which include the omission of articles and verbs, frequent use of nouns and short words. Thus, with the distinct features mentioned, the headlines created would have an impact on tackling and influencing readers' understandings, especially ESL learners. In the context of this study, Malaysian tabloids have rarely conducted studies focusing on lexical features and functional types of newspaper headlines, which might enhance the understanding of researchers and ESL learners who are interested in the lexical and functional types used in print media discourse focusing on the selected newspaper headlines.

## *1.2 Objective of the Study*

The objective of the present study was to examine the use of language in selected newspaper headlines of The Sun (a Malaysian daily tabloid), specifically focusing on its lexical features and functional types.

## **2. Review of Related Studies**

Printed or online newspapers contain news, stories or information about any events that happen locally or around the globe. Through online newspapers, readers can know what is happening around them with just a single click of their mobile phones or laptops. The language used in newspaper headlines acts as a tool that may attract readers to read through the whole news in the newspapers. Several studies have been conducted in analyzing news headlines. Tiono *et al.*, (2003) [21] stated that linguists are interested in studying the newspaper language due to the way headlines are presented or written may have the power to attract readers. Reporters or journalists will use lexical items, expressions or styles that may have the power of influencing readers to read the whole news instead of just browsing it. Thus, the stylistic features and language used in headlines might have different impacts depending on how intended readers perceive them. In another study conducted by Mozuraityte *et al.*, (2015) in analyzing the stylistic features of the headlines suggested that the use of omissions, short words, loaded words and nominalization as well as noun phrases are found in the Telegraph headlines [12]. Hence, this feature might be interesting to look at in the context of Malaysian tabloids.

Moreover, Abdullayeva, in her study on the specific language of newspaper style focusing on headlines, concluded that headlines are usually associated with short words and are written in concise, brief and precise language as readers intended for newspapers are targeting a broad audience [1]. Similar findings could be obtained from Bonyadi *et al.*, (2013) [4], who conducted a contrastive study on headlines in newspaper editorials between the New York Times (NYT) and Tehran Times (TT). Their findings suggested that the NYT would use short punchy headlines compared

to TT, which would rather use longer sentences which make the headlines less catchy and interesting.

Nonetheless, Wannakan *et al.*, (2022) [22], who carried out a study to analyze the grammatical and lexical features of news headlines in English language newspapers, found out that both printed and online newspapers mainly used simple sentences and simple tense structures in constructing the intended headlines. The results also indicated that short words i.e. abbreviations, acronyms and clipping were being used in those headlines. Meanwhile, in another study done by Khodabandeh *et al.*, (2007), it focuses on contrastive analysis between Persian and English newspaper headlines [6]. The findings for the 1-week data suggested that both headlines were similar in using verbs, short words and statement or declarative sentences. However, different results were shown in other features like the tense forms, types of headlines and omission of words [6].

Karunakaran *et al.*, (2023) [7] conducted a comparative study between The Star and Reader's Digest magazines focusing on the use of adjectives in those printed media. The findings suggest that both print media preferred descriptors and adjectives in constructing the headlines and most of the adjective's function as attributive adjectives compared to other types of syntactical functions.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The present study uses quantitative and qualitative approaches in analyzing the selected newspaper headlines. This study aimed at examining the language use of selected news headlines in the local newspaper – the Sun (a Malaysian tabloid), specifically focusing on its lexical features and functional types used for the Monday issue collected for two months. The analysis of lexical features used was drawn from the Tense System in Headlines Analysis by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik (1985). Meanwhile, Mardh's model, Typical Linguistic Features of Newspaper Headlines (1980) [8], was used in analyzing the functional types of news headlines.

#### **3.2 Sample and Data Collection**

A sample of the data was gathered from the Sun website (a Malaysian tabloid) for the electronic paper. This study employed convenient sampling of the Sun news headlines for January and February 2024, for the Monday issue. A total of nine news headlines were chosen depending on the availability of the sampling. As this study aimed at analyzing the language used in selected newspaper headlines of the Sun, focusing on the lexical features and functional types used for the headlines, the identification and selection of the newspaper headlines were first carried out. The Sun headlines were conveniently chosen for the Monday issue for two months (January and February 2024) based on the availability of the samples. Then the selected headlines were tabulated onto a table within an Excel document, followed by the quantification using descriptive statistics of raw frequency was carried out. The analysis of the headlines began with the classification of the lexical items according to their category (noun, verb, adjective, preposition, determiner, pronoun and adverb) using a framework proposed by Quirk *et al.*, (1985) whereby the quantification of the headlines' using frequency was carried out [16]. Analysis of the structure of headlines was also carried out by looking at the grammatical pattern of the selected news headlines in which the structure of each headline was analyzed by looking at the structure as a whole sentence. Lastly, the analysis of the functional types of the selected headlines was carried out using Mardh's model (1980) in which, after looking at the grammatical patterns of each headline, it is thus followed by the functional types that each headline portrays.

## 4. Results

**Table 1**

The distribution of lexical items in the selected Sun newspaper headlines

Category	No of words	Lexical items						
		N	V	Adj.	Conj.	Prep	Det	I
HL1	5	3			1			
HL2	4	2				1		1
HL3	3			2	1			
HL4	2		1	1				
HL5	3	2	1					
HL6	4	2		1				
HL7	3	3	1					
HL8	3		2		1			
HL9	3	2					1	
		14	5	4	3	1	1	1

As shown in Table 1, in general, the number of words used in selected newspaper headlines of the Sun ranges between two and five words. For example, HL4 [Be vigilant] consists of only two words and the shortest headline, meanwhile HL3 [Overworked and underpaid], HL8 [Sell or swap] and HL9 [Pressure on wallet] each of them consists of three words. 'No' to RM 30,000 fine (HL2) and Net zero emission achievable (HL6) have four words each and HL1 [Death knell for 'Ali Baba' businesses] has the highest number of words, five words. The total number of words used in the selected news headlines is 30. Based on the results, it shows that the selected newspaper headlines of the Sun (January and February 2024) for Monday issues are written in a few words, but they reflect the key message of what the news is all about. A few words are used in shaping the headlines serve the purpose to engage better with readers.

Based on Table 1, the results also showed that a noun was frequently used in the selected newspaper headlines of the Sun with 14 words, followed by a verb with five words, then an adjective with four words and a conjunction with three words, respectively. For the remaining lexical items, there was only one word for each lexical category, i.e. preposition, determiner, and infinite. Overall, it can be said that the selected headlines of the Sun, gathered for the Monday issue for January and February 2024, are highly in favour of nouns. The noun category has outnumbered other lexical items categories in shaping those selected newspaper headlines to attract readers.

Based on the findings in Table 1, the selected headlines for the Monday issue of the Sun in general are constructed using a smaller number of words, ranging between two and five words. These findings of this research are consistent with the findings of Abdullayeva *et al.*, (2021) [1], Sulaymonova *et al.*, (2021) [13] and Bonyadi *et al.*, (2013) [4], which suggest that headlines are usually written in a brief and concise manner with a smaller number of words. The number of words in the headlines would make them look catchier and appealing to the intended readers, as they are one of the first elements that readers come across when they browse any newspaper.

As mentioned in the related review of literature, news headlines are in favour of using nouns compared to other lexical items' categories. Based on Table 1, the selected newspaper headlines for the Monday issue of the Sun collected for two months would use more nouns than other lexical items' categories. The findings agree with Sulaymonova *et al.*, (2021) [13], Khodabandeh *et al.*, (2007) [6] and Mozuraityte *et al.*, (2015) [12] findings, which showed that the noun category is the most frequent lexical item to be used in shaping newspaper headlines, regardless of which types of newspapers.

**Table 2**  
Distribution of functional types of  
selected The Sun newspaper headlines

Functional Types	Number of headlines
Statement	6
Command	2
Question	1
Exclamation	0
Total	9

Based on Table 2, the findings indicate that the functional types used in selected news headlines about the Sun are generally in the form of statements. From a total of nine headlines, six were written in statement or declarative form, one was using questions and the remaining two were using commands based on the functional types of the newspaper headlines. Statement or declarative type refers to a headline that interprets actions, beliefs, situations, and feelings. HL1 (Death knell for 'Ali Baba' businesses), HL3 (Overworked and underpaid) and HL9 (Pressure on wallet) are examples of headlines that were constructed in the form of statements. On the other hand, a command headline may describe advice or request, whereas a question headline is addressed to an audience and asked for an opinion, expression of fact and belief. HL2 ('No' to RM 30,000 fine) and HL4 ("Be vigilant") respectively were written using commands for functional types. For the question type, only HL8 (Sell or swap) was constructed using the said type. Among the collected data, none of the sampling was written using the exclamation form. It can be said that the selected headlines of The Sun for the Monday issue of January and February last year generally use a statement form in delivering and constructing the headlines to reach readers. The other types are rarely found in the newspaper headlines for Monday issues in the said months.

As stated earlier, newspaper headlines can be segmented into four functional types: statements, questions, commands, and exclamations [5,9]. The above findings seem to support the previous findings of related studies. It could be concluded that the selected headlines of the Sun for Monday, an issue in January and February 2024, would use a statement form in constructing the news headlines to engage with readers. Similar results could be found in the study conducted by Khodabandeh *et al.*, (2007) [6] where Persian and English newspapers were also in favor of using statements in shaping the headlines.

- i. HL1 Death knell [omission V] for 'Ali Baba' businesses (1 January 2024).
- ii. HL2 ([omission V] 'No' to RM 30,000 fine (8 January 2024).
- iii. HL 9 [omission V] Pressure on wallet (26 February 2024).

The results of the study also indicated that the omission of a lexical category (words) was also shown in the selected newspaper headlines of The Sun for the Monday issue in January and February 2024. One of the significant findings indicated that the omission of the verb category was presented in the data. In HL1 Death knell for 'Ali Baba' businesses was written with the omission of verb. The headline was written using statement type. Thus, even with the omission of a verb, it did not affect the news headline. Following that, for HL2, the omission verb also appeared in the command type of headline. Similarly, for HL9, another statement type of headline (pressure on wallet) was written with the omission of verb category too. It could be said that the omission of lexical may appear in newspaper headlines, despite the number of words used in constructing the headlines. The findings seemed to be consistent with the results of Mozuraityte *et al.*, (2015) [12], that ellipsis is commonly found in newspaper headlines.

- i. HL5 (TMJ [omission 'to be' verb] appointed [omission prep] [article] Regent of Johor) (29 January 2024).
- ii. HL6 Net zero emission [omission 'to be' verb achievable (5 February 2024).
- iii. HL7 Mum-daughter duo [omission 'to be' verb hailed (12 February 2024).

In shaping the news headlines, omitting does not only limit to verb category, however, the omission of the lexical 'to be' verb category is also presented. This study also found that HL5, HL6 and HL7 were constructed by omitting the 'to be' verbs. This omitted lexical item does not affect the meaning of the intended newspaper headlines. This finding is consistent with Reah *et al.*, (1998) [17] mentioning that the headlines are constructed with their own grammatical patterns. That means the omission of certain lexical items like verbs is acceptable in constructing newspaper headlines, whereby they do not affect the intended meaning, although in common language ellipsis of verb would be considered as committing grammatical errors. Amongst the selected headlines, the use of acronyms was also found. Based on the results, only one acronym was found in HL5 (TMJ – a short form of Tengku Mahkota Johor).

- i. HL3 [omission of N] [omission of V] Overworked and underpaid (15 January 2024).

The results of the study also indicated that the omission of another lexical category (words) was also shown in the selected newspaper headlines of The Sun for the Monday issue in January and February 2024. In HL3, the noun category was omitted in the said headline together with the verb category. In shaping the news, even though two-word categories are omitted in the headline, it does not affect the intended news, it gives a sense of catchiness to readers with the use of parallelism in shaping the headlines to attract readers to start reading or browsing the news.

- i. HL4 [Imperative – no N] Be vigilant (22 January 2024).
- ii. HL8 [Imperative – no N] Sell or swap (19 February 2024).

In shaping the newspaper headlines, the study also found that the selected headlines are constructed with the use of imperative. In HL4 and HL8, these two newspaper headlines were constructed using an imperative where there is no need to include nouns or doors of action, but through the words used in shaping the headlines, it does give a clear message about what the news is all about. The finding is supported by Reah *et al.*, (1998) [17] as the headline is constructed using its own grammatical pattern, but it does not affect the news to intended readers.

The present findings of omission lexical (word) categories seem to be consistent with other research findings done by Wannakan *et al.*, (2022) [22] and Khodabandeh *et al.*, (2007) [6]. The omission of words does not limit themselves to the noun category only but also appears in other lexical item categories in shaping the newspaper headlines. Based on the results, one may conclude that the omission of lexical items does not affect the intended meaning of the headlines, but it serves as an engaging tool to attract readers. However, in terms of abbreviations, only 1 acronym was found in the sampling. It could be said that The Sun (a Malaysian tabloid) for Monday issues collected in January and February 2024 might focus on other lexical item categories like nouns and verbs in the construction of the headlines.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the results and findings, it can be concluded that the selected newspaper headlines of the Sun for the Monday issue that were conveniently chosen for 2 months (January and February 2024) would use a statement form in constructing the headlines compared to other forms of functional types. The findings also show that most headlines use nouns to shape the headlines to represent the whole event. It could be said that lexical items used in the selected news headlines might have the 'essence' that could represent the whole news or intended event of the selected news. By constructing the headlines using those lexical items chosen, the said headlines might attract and influence them in shaping intended reader engagement to start reading the news as they can browse it on an online platform. Hence, the short number of words used in the newspaper headlines serve the purpose of attracting intended readers to read the news. The presence of omission of lexical items could also be found in the results to shape the selected headlines together with the use of parallelism in the data gathered. Based on the findings, the omissions of those lexical items do not hinder the meanings of the selected headlines to readers. However, it might create a little confusion for certain ESL learners who are less proficient, as the language used in English newspaper headlines might be different from the common language used on other platforms due to the use of omissions. As this study only aims at focusing on lexical items and functional types of selected newspaper headlines in a Malaysian tabloid (The Sun), the findings might hopefully contribute to enhancing the understanding of ESL learners of the words used that shape the news in print media. It is hoped that future researchers might explore the use of lexical items in other print media headlines to enhance the understanding of the syntactical and structural of media discourse.

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