



# The deviant syntax of headlines and its role in the pragmatics of headlines

Florent Moncomble

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- 1 The study of headlines has long been a mainstay of linguistic forays into non-standard English. The object of brief mentions in the writings of Otto Jespersen or Edward Sapir, their grammar first received full attention in 1935 in the form of Heinrich Straumann's *Newspaper Headlines: A Study in Linguistic Method*. Claiming that "block-language cannot in any case be comprehended by means of the traditional categories of grammar", Straumann (21) found it difficult to depart from a vision which considered *headlines* to "fall outside language proper" (Jespersen 311), and some of its characteristics to be "a matter of mere typographical caprice" (Straumann 51). Since then, the particular syntax of newspaper headlines has been most widely seen as stemming from the primordial need to fit as much information in as little space as possible.
- 2 In this paper however, my aim will be to draw from the recent literature on the subject and, with the help of a corpus of headlines, to show how their morphosyntactic structure, far from being a mere accident (albeit successful) or the product of purely material constraints, fits their pragmatic purposes and contributes to constructing them as autonomous news items.
- 3 For the purposes of this paper, a few choices had to be made. I have decided to concentrate on news websites, arguably the main source of readership for today's news outlets: while *The Guardian*, for example, has an average daily circulation of 189,000,<sup>1</sup> it has an unduplicated<sup>2</sup> British readership across print and digital platforms of 5.8 million per week.<sup>3</sup> Another reason for this choice is that it is quite remarkable that *headlines*, a form purportedly stemming from a need for brevity, should have survived the transition to the web, where limits on space are mostly a thing of the past. Secondly, for the sake of coherence as well as concision, I only look at news stories, deliberately leaving aside features, opinion pieces and op-eds. The resulting primary corpus consists of 129 headlines collected on the homepages of *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The*

*Irish Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* over one day in March 2014. For the sake of illustration, I have also included headlines collected in 2005 in support of previous research.

- 4 After assessing the relation of *headlines* to the idea of linguistic norm, I will undertake a critical overview of the various goals this particular style has been said to pursue in the literature, before showing how the deviating morphosyntax of headlines is the means through which they achieve their primary goal of optimizing their relevance to the reader.

## 1. Deviation from the norm... as a norm

- 5 Here we use a dictionary definition of the word ‘norm’, such as the relatively complete one found in the *Trésor de la langue française*.
- 6 In a statistical sense, the norm is defined in terms of frequency: what is normal is what is regular and habitual.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, headlines are ‘abnormal’ in that they constitute a tiny fraction of the total linguistic output in the English language. A quick estimate based on the corpus used for this paper yields a rough 2% of any newspaper’s wordcount. This statistical under-representation of headline text is visually compensated for, however, by its typographic enormity.
- 7 The notion of ‘norm’ also carries a value judgement:<sup>5</sup> the status of Southern British English as a norm, due to the high regard in which it is held, is a case in point. As for *headlines*, it was, and still is occasionally, considered a lowly form, an impoverishment of the English language.<sup>6</sup>
- 8 What is normal is also what conforms to a set of rules.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, *headlines* breaks the rules of English grammar: a title such as ‘GDP “set to top pre-recession peak”’ (T 10/03/2014)<sup>8</sup> cannot be considered a normal utterance in Standard English, due to its missing a BE copula and determiners before singular count nouns. This echoes Jespersen’s position, as well as Edward Sapir’s contention that headlines ‘are language only in a derived sense’ (Sapir 37).
- 9 As a fragmented type of language, *headlines* has also been said to be ‘a way of reducing life from its full rich experience’ (Flavin 242). It is a fact that most news headlines result from the reduction of a full sentence or paragraph: most copyeditors work from the first paragraph of the news article itself (the lede) and boil it down to its most essential semantic parts. This is an example from *The Times* (T 10/03/2014):  
[1] *First paragraph*: Oscar Pistorius sat blocking his ears and retching in the dock today as a pathologist described in clinical detail the injuries inflicted on Reeva Steenkamp when the athlete shot his girlfriend on Valentine’s Day last year. (36 words)  
*Headline*: Pistorius retches as pathologist details girlfriend’s injuries (7 words)  
*Homepage headline*: Pistorius retches as injuries described (5 words)
- 10 The paragraph undergoes a first process of reduction to form the title of the article, then another which yields the headline as it appears on the news site’s homepage. On average, in the corpus, first paragraphs are reduced by over 73% to produce titles, and by a further 4.5 percentage points (77.5%) to produce homepage headlines.
- 11 In the process, headlines come to exhibit features, abundantly described in previous literature, markedly different from those of ordinary English.

- 12 The omission of obligatory constituents is probably the most obvious; these are chiefly the BE copula and auxiliary, and determiners.
- [2] Libya Ø on war alert over Ø threat to sink Ø tanker in Ø rebel port  
(T 10/03/2014)  
= Libya is on war alert over **a** threat to sink **a** tanker in **a** rebel port.
- [3] Ø Man, 84, Ø sent to prison for killing Ø wife (USAT 15/07/2005)  
= **A** man of 84 **has been** sent to prison for killing **his** wife.
- 13 In both these examples, the verb BE is omitted where it should be present: between subject and prepositional predicate in the first, between subject and verb in the second. The same can be said of determiners, as the zero article is normally impossible before a singular count noun. Such omission of constituents has been a defining characteristic of *headlines* as far back as ‘Cornwallis Taken!’ in the *Boston Gazette* of October 26, 1781.
- 14 Another major feature is the widespread use of the present simple. It can be used to refer to current events:
- [4] European Lawmakers Prepare to Vote on ‘Net Neutrality’ (NYT 31/03/2014)
- 15 or to upcoming events:
- [5] Co-op chef gets £3.7m for eight months’ work (T 10/03/2014)  
= The Co-operative Group has unleashed a fresh political row after documents leaked over the weekend showed **the new chief executive will be paid** £3.66 million for eight months’ work last year.<sup>9</sup>
- 16 These do not pose a problem in ordinary English, where the present tense can serve to refer to events that extend beyond the time of utterance. However, *headlines* also displays a predominant use of the present simple to refer to past events, where ordinary English would generally have a present perfect or even a preterite:
- [6] Brooks denies approving payments (G 10/03/2014)  
= Rebekah Brooks **has denied** paying a serving police officer for a story while she was editor of the *Sun* . . .
- [7] Panel warns of worsening effects of climate change (WP 31/03/2014)  
= The world’s leading environmental scientists **told** policymakers and business leaders Sunday that they must invest more to cope with climate change’s immediate effects . . .
- 17 A third hallmark of headline style is the concatenation of noun phrases: mere juxtaposition of nouns or noun phrases occurs in phrases where ordinary English would most likely resort to prepositions or other forms of modification and complementation:
- [8] Sisters of Dalkey woman dispute claims (IET 16/07/2005)  
= the woman from Dalkey
- [9] Charged with schoolgirl murder (IET 16/07/2005)  
= the murder of a schoolgirl
- 18 As is evident, these recurring characteristics point towards the existence of *headlines* as a norm within the field of news item titling. News headlines feature them to a high degree. Headlines are instantly recognizable: having evolved for over two centuries, they have now (since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) reached a fixed form which is remarkably homogeneous across the English-speaking press and the English-speaking world.
- 19 Such features, along with others, are part of a set of rules, prescriptions and proscriptions, for writing a good headline:<sup>10</sup>
- Use a verb in the active form
  - Use the present tense

- Omit the verb BE
  - Omit articles
  - Name people
  - Be as short as possible
  - Be clear, easy to understand, unambiguous
  - Be interesting
  - Contain new information
  - Include names and concepts with high ‘news value’ for the readers
  - Connect the story to previously known facts and events
  - Connect the story to prior expectations and assumptions
  - Frame the story in an appropriate fashion
  - Avoid negation
  - Do not use nouns as adjectives
  - Do not use plural adjectives
  - Avoid excessive omission
  - Do not abuse catchwords
  - Do not confuse tenses
  - Avoid clumsy construction
  - Do not presuppose information unknown to the readers
- 20 These rules constitute the norm of a “good” headline. This is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that almost all of them are regularly violated: if we test the first rule against the corpus, we find that nearly 8.5% of headlines are nominal, while over 14% use a passive voice.
- 21 They also make *headlines* stand decidedly apart from what Straumann called the “common core” of the English language, to the point where he claimed that it should be considered a separate language with its own grammar, and that linguistic methods of inquiry should be changed to adapt to its specificity:
- If these journalists agree that a headline should always have a verb, that the article and “unnecessary” auxiliary verbs ought to be omitted whenever possible, but retained when convenient to fill a line, that the present tense of the verb should be used for past events and the infinitive or future tense for coming ones, and that the active voice should be preferred, they are on the other hand perfectly unaware of the fact that such a proceeding means a fundamental step toward the creation of the system of a new language. (Straumann 35)
- 22 Yet, the fact that headlines can be easily understood without any specific training argues against its status as a separate language, and perhaps also as a variety, insofar as many varieties of English, specialised or not, are in some measure opaque to speakers of other varieties. In view of this, my hypothesis is that *headlines* builds on the potentialities of ordinary English, extending the normal limits in order to fulfil particular pragmatic goals.

## 2. What is *headlines* for? The pragmatics of headlines

- 23 Many hypotheses have been made as to what the purpose of *headlines* is. The longest-standing of them is the basic argument that *headlines* saves space. This makes perfect sense for the printed newspaper, where the headline has to convey as much information as possible in very few words given the strict constraints on space on the page. However, if this was the main motivation, *headlines* would be absent from the

web, where the space constraint does not exist, at least outside the news site's homepage.

- 24 Another hypothesis is that the shorter form of language which is *headlines*, stripped of the “frills” (Radder & Stempel 150) of ordinary English, speeds up the processing of information by the reader. According to one manual, the headline must be “swiftly readable, economical in editorial, production, and reading time, and in newsprint space” (Evans 5). The headline is designed to allow the reader to skim the front page, or the website's homepage, and get the main news in a matter of seconds. A recent study (De Lange, Vasic, and Avrutin), comparing article omission in headlines and child speech in Dutch and Italian, has shown that for an utterer to select which article to use requires more effort in languages such as Dutch and English than in languages such as Italian and French, which would explain why article omission is more frequent in the former group of languages than in the latter: in the authors' view, it facilitates, or speeds up, the production of headlines. However, that study seems to jump to rather illegitimate conclusions when it extends its findings not only to the *production* of headlines by writers, but to their *reception* by readers.
- 25 Indeed, the structure of headlines has side effects, mainly ambiguity, which actually slow down their comprehension. The grammatical marking omitted from headlines, for the most part, carries redundant information: the time of the event, for example, can without any problem be identified as the recent past; in most cases, determiners can be easily supplied, which only shows that they serve to synthesize parameters (new/familiar, count/non-count) already present elsewhere, and can thus be dispensed with. However, ‘redundant’ is not to be understood as “superfluous”:

The fact of redundancy increases the reliability of speech communication and makes it resistant to many types of distortion. By limiting the number of discriminations required of the listener and by assisting his choice through the redundant coding of information, we make talking to one another a reasonably satisfactory business. (Stevens, quoted in Jakobson & al. 8)
- 26 The risk of ambiguity is increased in *headlines*, where for example determiners are no longer there to indicate the nominal nature of the element following them. A title such as “Army Demands Change” can mean two totally different things, and English-speaking newspapers regularly come up with what the Language Log bloggers have christened “crash blossoms” and “garden paths”:

[10] Mansell guilty of missing businessman's murder (*ABC News* 7/11/2011)
- 27 or “noun piles”:

[11] Sex quiz cricket ace in hotel suicide leap (*The Sun* 14/11/2011)
- 28 A study of headline comprehension (Perfetti & al.) shows that syntactic procedures take precedence over problem-solving procedures when resolving ambiguity in headlines.<sup>11</sup> While this is an indication that *headlines* is no different from “common core” English in this respect, it entails that readers will take longer to understand headlines:

Ambiguous headlines produce more failures to comprehend and more time to comprehend relative to unambiguous headlines following the same story context. (Perfetti & al. 700)
- 29 This slowing effect is even carried forward to the following text, making the article itself longer to read. Speeding up access to information is thus certainly not the main goal of resorting to *headlines*.

- 30 Yet another hypothesis (León) proposes that headlines facilitate the comprehension and memorization of the information carried in the body of the article, in the same way as the title and summary of a scientific article. Yet this does not seem to be the case either; Perfetti shows that ambiguity triggers miscomprehension of headlines:

Readers uniformly can comprehend the ambiguous newspaper headlines. Thus, the high ‘error’ rates found in Experiment 4 are not likely due to failures to obtain any meaning, but rather a failure to obtain the particular meaning required by the story. (Perfetti & al. 705)

- 31 Furthermore, León also shows that headlines do not improve comprehension and recall of the information contained in the article, as readers do not score better in the tests whether they have read an article with or without its headline. According to the author, this may have to do with morphosyntactic structure:

In [some] cases, the design of the headline depends on the amount of space available. As a result, the headline often becomes a telegraphic message in which words fulfilling important grammatical functions are omitted. (León 95)

- 32 However, as León focuses on Spanish and not English, the main factors are probably elsewhere, namely in the style and rhetoric of the headline, a “rhetoric of facticity” (León 95.) where the title, far from encapsulating the macrostructure of the article below it, seeks to bring out an interpretation of the information, or to make contact with the reader by resorting to appealing, albeit inaccurate or misleading, headlines. In the words of Ifantidou (702), “recent work supports the view that . . . unless one reads the actual news report, s/he receives a distorted or incomplete account of the story”. The corpus for this study contains examples such as these:

[12] Cameron turns “internet of things” slogan into fact (G 10/03/2014)

[13] Anger grows as researchers fail to find missing jet (T 10/03/2014)

- 33 The first headline glosses over the fact that many questions are still facing the government’s project; the second one gives prominence to a fact which, in this story dealing with the aftermath of the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, represents a mere 5% of the article’s wordcount.

- 34 This leads us to what has often been underlined as the actual goal of writing headlines, namely to encourage readers to buy the newspaper or click to read the article. As the copyeditor of a New Jersey newspaper puts it, the headline “pulls the reader in. . . . Plunk down your \$1.25 to find out more” (Pisetzner). In more academic terms, selecting a salient fact, rather than a representative one, from a news story often aims at optimizing the relevance of the article to the reader.

- 35 In cognitive terms, relevance is defined as the ratio between cognitive effort and cognitive effect (Sperber & Wilson 145). In short, a relevant headline is one which promises new information in exchange for little reading effort. But as learning something new is a cognitive effort in itself, headlines strive to connect new information (“new assumptions”) with the readers’ preconceptions (“previous assumptions”). This is why headlines convey a type of ‘linguistically underdetermined meaning’:

Unlike ordinary cases of pragmatically fine-tuning the meanings of words in context, headlines are different in the sense that contextual information may be rudimentary, i.e. elliptical or underspecified. (Ifantidou 703)

- 36 In the case of headlines, the inferential lexical adjustment processes of concept narrowing or broadening (which normally take place in any situation of



communication) are based on an impoverished context: in these conditions, readers end up creating “*ad hoc* contexts and build[ing] occasion-specific sense” (Ifantidou 705) based on their own culture and expectations. Perhaps paradoxically, involving the reader in the construction of the meaning of the headline actually enhances its relevance, provided the reader is cooperative (Ifantidou, Maingueneau).

- 37 One major way of securing the reader’s cooperation is, rather than insisting on accuracy and information, to resort to feelings and emotions, which are more widely shared than knowledge of particular issues, as this piece of advice from another news editor advises:

Go for the emotion in the story. Is there anger? Love? Frustration? Desperation? Appreciation? Elation? Shame? Embarrassment? Readers respond to emotion. Hit ‘em in the gut or in the heart. (Schlander)

- 38 Not only will this allow readers to connect to the news story more easily, it will also reduce their cognitive effort, as it is their affect, rather than their intellect, which will be at play. More or less careful choice of wording can achieve this goal of sharing the emotion of the story with the reader, as the following examples illustrate:

- [14] England’s young guns **triumph** (G 10/03/2014)
- [15] **Row** over Stormont nude protest (G 10/03/2014)
- [16] Skydiver and plane clash in **dramatic** mid-air accident (T 10/03/2014)
- [17] Pistorius **breaks down** on hearing autopsy evidence in court (IET 10/03/2014)

- 39 The front pages of the newspapers that went on sale on 12 September 2011 in the US are cases in point in this matter: words such as *terror*, *anger*, *outrage*, *anguished* or *shock* flourished in the headlines, and a climax of expressivity was probably reached in the *San Francisco Examiner*’s “Bastards!” stretched across the whole page above a photo of the WTC tower being hit by the second plane.

- 40 Deliberately focusing on details, rather than going for the whole story, may achieve the same objective:

- [18] Pistorius vomits at autopsy evidence (G 10/03/2014)

- 41 The fact that Oscar Pistorius vomited at his trial is only secondary to the main news, which is the presentation of the evidence from the autopsy and his emotional reaction to it. Yet, it is this relatively trivial occurrence which is likely to draw readers in and allow them to connect to the story, as it conjures up a feeling (nausea) everybody has experienced in their lives. In addition, it promises a rewarding reading experience, insofar as it probably shifts most readers’ previous assumptions about Pistorius by portraying him in a position of weakness, as capable of remorse, not far from inspiring sympathy.

- 42 Finally, resorting to wordplay and humour is also a satisfying way of appealing to the reader’s affect:

- [19] Take that, space junk! Australian scientists to zap debris with lasers (G 10/03/2014)
- [20] Fyffes shares soar as investors go bananas for Chiquita deals (IET 10/03/2014)
- [21] Dyson in drive to fill engineering vacuum in UK schools (G 12/06/2014)
- [22] Super Caley go ballistic, Celtic are atrocious (*The Sun* 9/02/2000)
- [23] Headless Body in Topless Bar (*New York Post* 15/04/1983)

- 43 One may then wonder what the specific role of syntax is in optimizing the relevance of the story to the reader.

### 3. The role of syntax

- 44 Resorting to the lexicon of emotion is not the only way of appealing to the reader's senses: the syntax of headlines itself is a syntax of expressivity.
- 45 In his theory of psychomechanics, French linguist Gustave Guillaume posits that every utterance is composed of expression and expressivity. On the one hand, expression in discourse conforms to the rules of grammar, instituted at the level of tongue.<sup>12</sup> Expressivity, on the other hand, relies on improvisation on the speaker's part, and thus consists in bending the rules of grammar. Expression and expressivity exist proportionally to each other in any utterance: the more expression, the less expressivity, and *vice versa*. Poetic language is an example of the syntax of expressivity. In the words of Kristeva, it is a pre-verbal form of language, belonging to the semiotic rather than to the symbolic; it resorts to what is left of the pre-verbal in language: sounds, prosody, musicality, and also to constant transgression of the laws of grammar and syntax in favour of the expression of affect and emotions. Paramount in the language of expressivity is its perlocutionary dimension, the aim to produce an effect on the reader/hearer, to act on them. *Headlines* fits that definition rather perfectly, as the following focus on two aspects of its syntax should demonstrate.
- 46 As described above, in *headlines* determiners (especially articles) are missing where they would normally be required; most of the information marked by articles is in fact redundant, as it can easily be deduced from context – especially in the case of the zero article/A(N) commutation depending on the count/non-count status of the following noun. However, one of the main functions of determiners is interlocutionary, in that they serve for the utterer to indicate to the hearer whether they should retrieve the referent of the NP in past discourse (endophora) or in the situation (exophora) or consider it as new information. The definite article signals anaphora, while the indefinite article (or zero article before non-count nouns) signals newness. Of course, their uses are based on what the utterer presumes is the extent of the hearer's knowledge, and they effectively force an interpretation on the hearer, to the extent that a reference can be misunderstood (or not understood at all) by the hearer if the speaker presumes wrongly.
- 47 In interlocutionary terms, the zero article signals that the speaker lets the hearer establish the reference by themselves, on the grounds that it is unproblematic given the data immediately and simultaneously available.<sup>13</sup> In the case of headlines, it is particularly useful, as the utterer is not in a position to make any assumptions regarding the state of the reader's knowledge, and whether references are accessible or not; they are forced to assume that the reader may or may not be already familiar with the topic, else they risk alienating part of their intended readership. The absence of marked determiners in headlines is thus a predominant tool in achieving optimal relevance for all readers.
- 48 Calling this absence an "omission", as most news editing manuals and academic studies have done so far, is misleading, as it implies the suppression of a previously expressed determiner. But even if it is often possible to re-establish an article, this is not always the case:

[24] GDP "set to top pre-recession peak"

= **The** GDP is set to exceed **its** pre-recession peak

[25] Chinese carmaker back in bidding for MG Rover (T 15/07/2005)

= ?? **A/The** Chinese carmaker is back in the bidding for MG Rover

- 49 In the second headline, the adverb *back* points to an anaphora and precludes the indefinite article, yet the subject noun phrase is too vague to allow reference to a specific entity.
- 50 In view of that, one is necessarily led to assume that the absence of determiners in headlines is not so much the product of a transformation (an omission), but is part and parcel of the production of headlines. In itself, it is an extension of the domain of the zero article, where its interlocutory value outweighs the semantic count/non-count constraint for the sake of optimizing the headline's relevance.
- 51 The predominant use of the present simple also contributes to enhancing relevance. Manuals of journalism see it as a way to "[put] the reader in the middle of the action. It gives him a feeling of participation" (Evans 27). However, we have argued that, if a feeling of participation is to be given to the reader, it is mostly by inviting them to co-construct the meaning of headlines. Instead, the present simple mainly serves to withdraw the headline writer from their own utterance. It carries zero aspect, meaning that it denotes events and properties regardless of any particular point of view: hence its use in general statements, universal truths and proverbial speech. The present simple is able to refer to events which coincide narrowly with the time of utterance, which are to take place in the future, or whose span encompasses past, present and future – not, in principle, to events located solely in the past. Yet, the term "historic present" is not adequate here either: the present simple in headlines is best described as an aorist, defined as the aspect under which facts or propositions are supposedly presented independently of any enunciative point of view (Groussier & Rivière 17).<sup>14</sup> In contrast, both the imperfective and resultative aspects, marked by the BE+V-ING and the HAVE+V-EN forms respectively, imply that the utterer adopts a point of view situated either within the process or in its immediate aftermath, hence narrowing the representation of the event. Resorting to the present simple allows the event to be represented for itself, erasing the presence of a witness.
- 52 As with the absence of articles, this is an extension of the domain of this verbal form, where its aoristic value takes precedence over temporal reference. On a side note, it also ties in with newspapers' avowed quest for (apparent) objectivity in news items. As a result, headlines appear as "sentences without text", or "aphorisms" in the definition developed by Maingueneau, which can be interpreted in the following manner:
- For the most part, they are detached utterances, composed by boiling down the first paragraph of articles, and appearing by themselves on the home pages of news sites.
  - Their meaning is altered, or indeed impoverished, underdetermined; they can be enigmatic and require the reader's active participation in constructing their meaning.
  - They have heightened relevance, and aim at acting upon the reader, convincing him to buy the paper or click the headline.
  - They do not target any specific reader, but rather an audience that is not on the same plane as their utterer, and not likely to take part in the utterance.
  - Their utterer is made invisible, any traces of subjectivity erased.<sup>15</sup>
- 53 As such, they are autonomous utterances, which acquire meaning and value in and of themselves, outside their text of origin. Their frame of reference is no longer dependent on any speaker/hearer relationship, whether deferred (as in the case of fiction) or not, as they are their own frame of reference. Assumptions of previous information or 'newsness' of information are not based on acquaintance with the

- Surrounding headlines on the page:

## Flooded Balkan countries appeal for support

54 Here the NP *expert* refers to Roy Meadow, mentioned in the title to the left, and the whole headline “Expert told multiple cot deaths ‘one in 73m’” acts as a commentary on the other one: it is located to its right, therefore subsequent in the natural reading flow, it is printed in regular type rather than bold, and provides the reason why Meadow was struck off the national register, revealing what his “grave error” was. The following screen capture shows that news headlines echo one another on the home pages of websites as well:

**THE IRISH TIMES**  
Monday, March 10, 2014

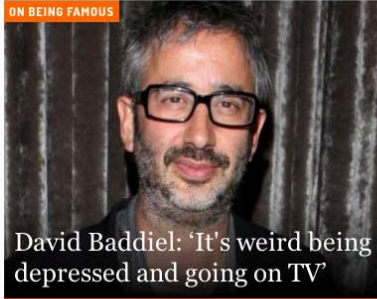
**News** Sport Business Debate Life & Style Culture Offers Search

### Quinn says Flannery approached him on Rehab issues

Minister for Education confirms he was approached informally by Fine Gael strategist and Rehab director; Minister of State Kathleen Lynch says in her view Frank Flannery's position as party strategist and lobbyist for charity has become untenable

- Position at Kenny's side in doubt
- Strategist 'should' attend PAC
- Flannery paid to lobby Govt

### ON BEING FAMOUS



**David Baddiel: 'It's weird being depressed and going on TV'**

### Paris holds all the answers for Irish rugby team

**International** | 08:06  
Tommy Bowe expected to train with Ireland squad tomorrow

- Full coverage of the Six Nations
- Sweet victory - yet still much to work on
- O'Driscoll bids farewell in some style

### Ten countries scour sea for disappeared Malaysia plane

**Asia-Pacific** | 13:28  
No confirmed wreckage found; Questions over security after two stolen passports used

- Malaysian flight may have turned back
- No news for relatives of lost flight

### Latest News

- 14:45 Bayern Munich boss admits evading €18.5 million in taxes
- 14:42 Witness says she feared Clifford was trying to rape her
- 14:33 Cameron, Merkel warn Russia on Crimea referendum
- 14:17 Fitch: AIB and Bank of Ireland 'unlikely' to need more capital
- 14:09 Financial regulator raised 'no red flags' about Anglo share deal
- 14:04 McDonalds reports bigger than expected drop in sales

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(IET 10/03/2014)

- Past stories: in quite a number of instances, the reader is invited to relate the headline to previous reporting on the same theme (although, again, the syntax of the headline does not make anaphora a requisite). This is often done via a noun phrase acting as a label before the headline *per se*:
    - [26] Crimea: rivals on the march (G 10/03/2014)
    - [27] Flight MH370: officials still “puzzled” as search widens (G 10/03/2014)
    - [28] Heathrow expansion: fourth runway “would block flight path” (T 10/03/2014)
- 55 These “labels” allow the reader to situate the headline within a context of continuing media coverage: the annexation of Crimea, the search for the missing Malaysia Airlines plane, the controversy over the expansion of Heathrow airport. In certain cases however, the content of the label is part of the new information:
- [29] 999 deaths: scores died after “failings” (T 10/03/2014)
- 56 The news here is that a report revealed that many people died while in the care of ambulance staff, and that these deaths were caused by serious failings. The label makes room for the fact that some readers may already have some notion of the contents of the report, while the rest of the headline promises more detail.
- The hypertext: increasingly, in an age in which news travels faster and faster, the whole media discourse, materialized by the abundance of hypertext links which pepper and follow news articles (underlined in the following screen capture), is a provider of context that cannot be ignored:



scheduling an MRI, she is traveling around the state promoting the insurance marketplace. "People are calling back and saying, 'I love you!'" she said.

#### Penalties kick in

Monday is the day by which most Americans are required to have picked a health plan or face a fine. This mandate has long been the most unpopular part of the law, and it's likely to affect millions of people, though at this point it's not clear how many. (The administration decided last week to extend the [deadline](#) for some.)

The fine is \$95 per uninsured adult or 1 percent of income, whichever is higher, for the first year. It [gradually rises through 2016](#) to \$695 per uninsured adult or 2.5 percent of income. The fine will be collected at tax time, when the Internal Revenue Service will deduct the amount from tax refunds.

Some people have made up their minds to defy the requirement. Paul Alexander Clark, 35, an entrepreneur in Nashville, said he has decided to pay the fine this year rather than pay \$132 a month for an insurance policy with an annual deductible of more than \$6,000. "It was simple math combined with the knowledge and confidence of being able to navigate the health system," he said.

*Lena H. Sun contributed to this report.*

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(WP 31/03/2014)

- 57 In effect, news headlines on the Internet shatter the traditional definition of "text", and even of aphorisation as a process of borrowing from one text to another: the frame of reference has become hypertextual. In the list of priorities for headlines, teasing the reader's curiosity has subsided in favour of SEO, i.e. search engine optimization: titles are crafted primarily around keywords so as to be linked to by search engines and other news media (Lindeman). This network of inter-referencing utterances forms a hyperstructure which effectively replaces the notion of 'text' as we used to know it.
- 58 By effacing the origin or target of the utterance, the syntax of headlines is instrumental in constructing their autonomy as 'sentences without text': as such, it allows headlines to acquire universal value and, therefore, optimal relevance. It is little wonder then that the deviation from the norm that is *headlines* should have come to develop as a norm and survived the shift to the Internet: it is essential in generating what all news outlets are so desperately after nowadays – revenue.

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## NOTES

1. Audit Bureau of Circulation 2013.
2. In order to measure reach and popularity, Internet metrics look at the number of uniquely identified visitors to a particular website rather than the total number of visits.
3. Guardian US Press Office 2012.
4. « Etat habituel, régulier, conforme à la majorité des cas. » (TLFi)
5. « Etat régulier, le plus conforme à l'étalon posé comme naturel, et par rapport auquel tout ce qui dévie est considéré comme anormal. » (TLFi)
6. The term *headlines* appeared in 1933 the first edition of Garst & Bernstein (109); yet, as early as 1935, Straumann (21) used it in a neutral way. Usage has varied between the two ever since, while some recent studies (Isani 2011) have defined *headlines* as a sub-genre of headlines, primarily found in British tabloids, concerned primarily with grabbing the reader's attention through wordplay and cryptic turns of phrase. Focusing on the syntax of headlines in relation to that of Standard English, we follow Mårdh's lead in using *headlines* 'to denote simply the language used in headlines' (Mårdh 13).
7. « Gramm., ling. Règles définissant ce qui doit être choisi parmi les usages d'une langue, ce à quoi doit se conformer la communauté linguistique au nom d'un certain idéal esthétique ou socio-culturel, et qui fournit son objet à la grammaire normative ou à la grammaire au sens courant du terme. » (TLFi)
8. The following abbreviations are used for corpus sources: G = *The Guardian*; T = *The Times*; IET = *The Irish Times*; NYT = *The New York Times*; WP = *The Washington Post*; USAT = *USA Today*.
9. In all examples, highlighting is my own.
10. Compiled from Evans 25-37, Radder & Stempel 159-180, Dor 708-716.
11. "Syntactic processes similar to those used in other instances of language comprehension are used in headline reading. [...] These processes are triggered for headline reading as they are for other reading and cannot easily be bypassed, even when it would be advantageous to do so" (Perfetti & al. 706).
12. 'Tongue' is the attested translation of Guillaume's *langue* (Hirtle 17), which should not be confused with Saussure's use of the term (Boone & Joly 253-258).
13. 'Les données immédiatement et simultanément accessibles aux interlocuteurs dans le cadre de ce rapport interlocutif direct . . . sont présumées pouvoir fournir la base d'un accord immédiat, non problématique'. (The data immediately and simultaneously available to the interlocutors in the framework of this *direct interlocutionary relationship* ... are presumed fit to provide the basis for an immediate, non problematic agreement.) (Douay 116 ; highlighting is the author's)
14. Cf. also Simon-Vandenberg 235.
15. In headlines, modal auxiliaries other than WILL are extremely rare, and often appear as parts of quotations.

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## ABSTRACTS

The syntax of newspaper headlines in English displays features which, on a superficial level, set it apart from the norm of Standard English. This, however, is not to say that *headlines* stands outside the notion of a linguistic norm: drawing from a corpus of various headlines, and looking at the specific fields of determiners and verb tenses, this article explores how the English of newspaper headlines constitutes a norm in itself which actually builds on the very potentialities of Standard English. Such an extension of the syntactic possibilities of English is designed to fit the pragmatic purpose of headlines, i.e. heighten the relevance of the newspaper article to the reader.

Les caractéristiques syntaxiques des titres de presse en anglais les distinguent nettement, à un niveau superficiel, de la norme de l'anglais standard. Cependant, cela ne revient pas à affirmer que le *headlines* n'obéit à aucune norme linguistique : à partir d'un corpus de divers titres d'articles, et de l'examen des questions spécifiques de la détermination nominale et des temps verbaux, cet article explore la façon dont l'anglais des titres de presse constitue une norme en soi qui, en réalité, s'appuie sur les potentialités mêmes de l'anglais standard. Une telle extension des possibilités syntaxiques de l'anglais se justifie par la nécessité pour la syntaxe d'épouser l'objectif pragmatique des *headlines*, qui est d'optimiser la pertinence des articles pour le lecteur.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** newspaper headlines, Standard English, norm, syntax, pragmatics, relevance optimization, zero determiner, aorist

**Mots-clés:** titres de presse, anglais standard, norme, syntaxe, pragmatique, optimisation de la pertinence, déterminant zéro, aoriste

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Florent Moncomble is an agrégé in English and Lecturer in English linguistics at the Université d'Artois (Arras, France). Originally inspired by Gustave Guillaume's psychomechanics, his research draws on various fields of linguistics (syntax, pragmatics, corpus linguistics) to propose a systematic study of what lies at the margins of tongue, language as well as linguistics as a discipline — from non-standard varieties of English such as *headlines* to intersemiotic transfer in the case of translation or cinematographic adaptation of literary works.