



**HAL**  
open science

# Beauty and the Tweet: How traditional media seduce in the digital age

Florent Moncomble

► **To cite this version:**

Florent Moncomble. Beauty and the Tweet: How traditional media seduce in the digital age. E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone, 2017, 15.1, 10.4000/erea.5917 . hal-04101423

**HAL Id: hal-04101423**

**<https://univ-artois.hal.science/hal-04101423v1>**

Submitted on 28 Dec 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License



**E-rea**

Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone

15.1 | 2017

1. La séduction du discours / 2. A Death of One's Own

---

## Beauty and the Tweet: How traditional media seduce in the digital age

Florent MONCOMBLE

---



### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/erea/5917>

DOI: 10.4000/erea.5917

ISBN: ISSN 1638-1718

ISSN: 1638-1718

### Publisher

Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherche sur le Monde Anglophone

Brought to you by Université d'Artois



UNIVERSITÉ D'ARTOIS

### Electronic reference

Florent MONCOMBLE, "Beauty and the Tweet: How traditional media seduce in the digital age", *E-rea* [Online], 15.1 | 2017, Online since 15 December 2017, connection on 28 December 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/5917> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.5917>

---

This text was automatically generated on August 9, 2023.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

---

# Beauty and the Tweet: How traditional media seduce in the digital age

Florent MONCOMBLE

---

- 1 This article will present ongoing research of the way the syntax of headlines functions as a pragmatic tool, and is evolving to accompany the move of the press to digital platforms. Even though headlines have been a regular topic of interest for linguists of various denominations, its syntax has rarely, if ever, been studied in conjunction with its pragmatic functions. I will defend the notion that the very survival of the deviant syntax of headlines in the age of digital media shows how instrumental it is to achieving the various goals of headlines, mainly to lure the prospective reader into purchasing the newspaper or, in this day and age, into clicking a link to the newspaper's webpage. I will show how the century-old headline has changed with the advent of the Internet and search engines, and how social networks are providing it with renewed room for development.
- 2 After a brief description of my working corpus and methodology, I will describe headlines and discuss their possible pragmatic functions. Then I will demonstrate how their syntax serves precisely the most plausible of those functions, i.e. enhances their relevance to the reader. Finally, I will provide insights into the adaptations of headlines to digital media, and the way Twitter in particular seems to have picked up where traditional headlines left off.
- 3 **Corpus and methodology**
- 4 For the purpose of the present study, two parallel corpora have been compiled:
  - A corpus of 1,800 headlines gathered via an RSS aggregator from the websites of various news organisations. The focus being on broadsheet newspapers, the corpus consists of 300 headlines from each of the following sources: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Irish Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*. I have also collected 300 headlines from the *Daily Mail*.
  - A corpus of 2,400 tweets collected via the Twitter Streaming API. This API allows a registered user to either stream a sample of the whole body of tweets published in real time, or to

output a live flow of tweets based on various filters such as language, keywords, or Twitter account IDs. This part of the corpus consists of 600 tweets from each of four categories:

- Broadsheet newspapers (*The Guardian, The Times, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Irish Times, The New York Times, The Globe and Mail*)
- Magazines (*The Economist, Newsweek, Time*)
- Tabloids (*The Sun, The Daily Mail, The Daily Star, The New York Post*)
- And a category labelled ‘clickbait’, made up of a relatively recent type of websites such as *BuzzFeed, Gawker, Funny or Die, Cracked* or *College Humor* that mainly publish listicles of factoids, such as ‘22 hilarious ways to deal with a text from a stranger’, or ‘6 Creative Criminal Punishments So Ridiculous They’re Brilliant’. Those websites, vaguely disguising as news sites, mainly generate traffic to their pages via retweets and shares on social networks.

• In order to compare the language of headlines with the body of news articles, I also used a portion of the British National Corpus consisting of news stories published in various newspapers. That is not an ideal option as it is quite dated (1990) and exclusively British, but access to more up to date corpora could not be secured in a way that was so easily incorporable into the study at this point. However, it offers an acceptable starting point from which to build valid hypotheses.

- 5 The corpus was analysed in three ways:
  - A first quantitative approach in an Excel spreadsheet offered comparable data in terms of word and character count.
  - A more fully fledged statistical analysis, taking parts of speech and syntactic patterns into account, was carried out using the TXM software from the Textométrie Project at ENS Lyon.
  - A quick semantic analysis was performed using the Tropes software.
- 6 For the purpose of illustration, examples have been drawn either from this corpus, or from an earlier selection of headlines.

## 1. Headline English and its purpose

### 1.1 Description

- 7 The language used in the titles of the English-speaking press is a non-standard variety of English, in that it differs markedly with the language normally used by native speakers, either in speech or in writing. Jespersen considered the language of headlines to ‘fall outside language proper’ (Jespersen 311). Edward Sapir asserted that headlines ‘are language only in a derived sense’ (Sapir 37).
- 8 The point of a headline is to boil a story down to its essentials (Garst & Bernstein 122). The way it often works is by reducing the lead (the first paragraph of an article, which offers a summary of the story) to its most significant semantic parts.
  - (1) Lead: 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) (*The Times*, 10 March 2014)
  - Title: Pistorius retches as pathologist details girlfriend’s injuries (7 words)
  - Homepage headline: Pistorius retches as injuries described (5 words)
- 9 The lead undergoes a first process of reduction to form the title of the article, then another reduction which yields the headline as it appears on the news site’s homepage.

On average, as seen in a selection from our corpus, leads are reduced by over 73% to produce titles, and by a further 4.5% to produce homepage headlines.

10 This reduction is accompanied by morphosyntactic transformations which make headline English markedly different from ordinary English:

- The omission of obligatory constituents is probably the most conspicuous feature. Those constituents are considered by copy editors to be ‘minor words’, or ‘frills’.

Fig. 1

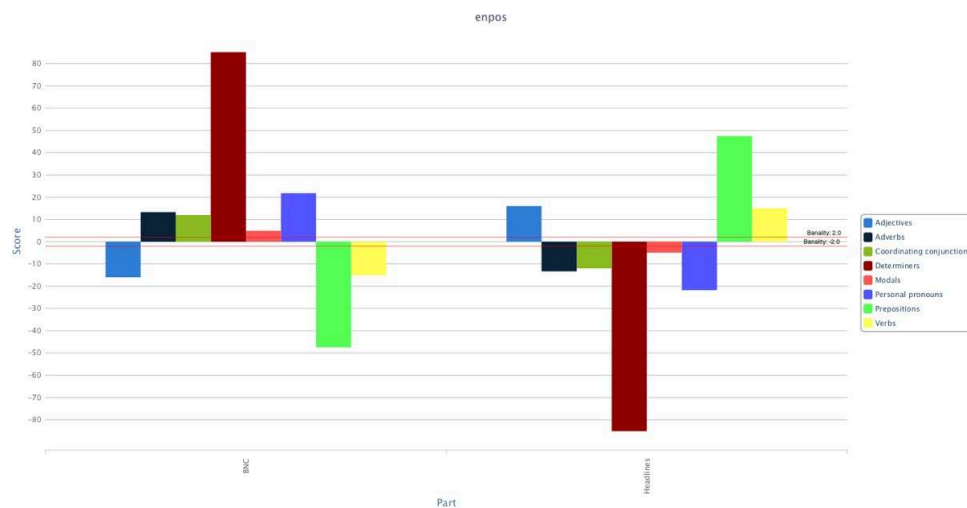
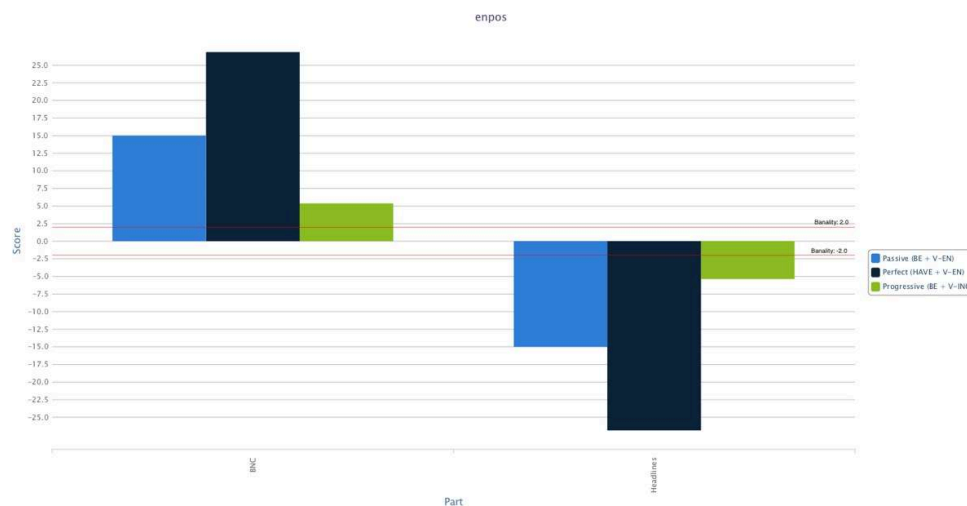


Fig. 2



11 Figure 1 above shows that adverbs, coordinating conjunctions, determiners, modal auxiliaries and personal pronouns are underrepresented in headlines compared to the news section of the BNC<sup>1</sup>, while Figure 2 shows the underrepresentation of auxiliated verb forms.

- (2) Kevan Thakrar  $\emptyset$  awarded £1k after  $\emptyset$  prison guard spilt shampoo on his CDs  
(Daily Mail, 4 January 2016)

Lead: A triple-murderer behind bars **has been** awarded £1,000 in compensation after a guard squirted shampoo on his CDs<sup>2</sup>

- Another remarkable feature is the widespread use of the present simple, as shown in Figure 2 and the following chart.

Fig. 3



- 12 The present simple can be used to refer to current events, which does not pose a problem in standard English, although one would probably prefer the BE + V-ING form:

(3) Taiwan **prepares** for turmoil as China watches its elections from afar (*The Guardian*, 16 October 2015)

Lead: Taiwan is used to the damage caused by raging typhoons but now it **is looking** at their political equivalent in the shape of an implosion of the ruling Kuomintang party that could radically alter the balance of power on the island.

- 13 Most of the time though, it is used to refer to past events, where standard English would have a present perfect or a preterit.

(4) Barbie doll sales **fall** as girls turn to electronic toys and tablets (*The Guardian*, 16 October 2015)

Lead: Sales of Barbie dolls **have fallen** for the eighth straight quarter, as girls turn to interactive electronic toys and tablets.

(5) Donald Trump **Calls** for Surveillance of 'Certain Mosques' and a Syrian Refugee Database (*New York Times*, 21 November 2015)

Lead: Donald J. Trump **said** Saturday that he would order surveillance of 'certain mosques' to combat terrorism after the Paris attacks and claimed to have watched as 'thousands and thousands of people were cheering' while the World Trade Center towers fell on Sept. 11, 2001.

- 14 As a result, use of the preterit is confined to events which occurred prior to the main or most recent event reported — most of the time, to report the findings of a survey, investigation or trial:

(6) Police **failed** to see a murderer in the making (*The Times*, 15 October 2015)

Lead: The parents of the murdered teenager Georgia Williams accused police of failing their daughter yesterday after a serious case review criticised the way that the authorities **had dealt** with her killer following previous attacks.

- A third feature is the concatenation of noun phrases, i.e. the mere juxtaposition of nouns or noun phrases, where standard English would probably resort to prepositions or other forms of modification and complementation.

(7) Michel Hecht is new suspect in **French Alps murder mystery** (*Daily Mail*, 3 January 2016)

= the mystery surrounding the murder which took place in the French Alps.

- 15 Those characteristics are now remarkably stable across time and space: apart from a few minor differences (such as the British tendency to juxtapose more nouns than in North America), they form part of a normalised variety of English which is instantly recognisable, to the extent that it features in fiction to convey a sense of urgency, or an ironic lack thereof:

Still from *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh 1949, starring James Cagney)

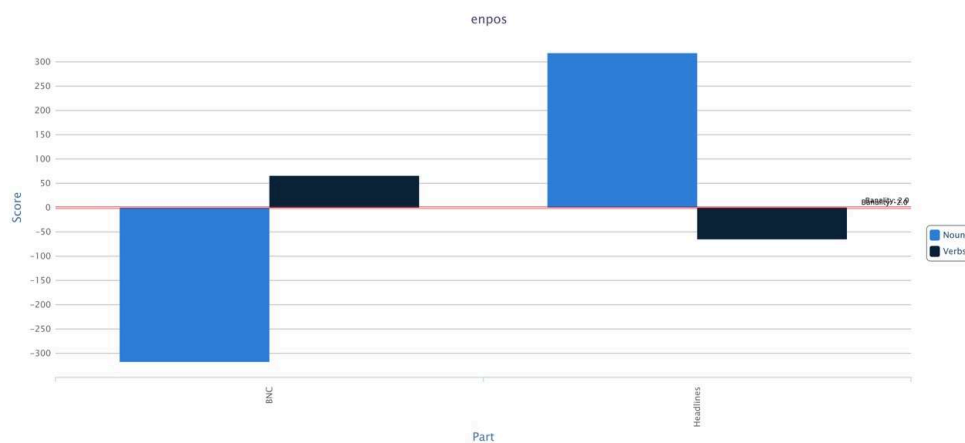


(8) [Quoy] saw the commonplace of everyday life as newspaper headlines. Man Walks Across Parking Lot at Moderate Pace. Women Talk of Rain. Phone Rings in Empty Room. (Proulx 8)

- 16 The features above, along with some others, are part of a set of rules, prescriptions and proscriptions, for writing a good headline (agglomerated from Evans 25-37, Radder & Stempel 159-180 and Dor 708-716):
- 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 constructions
  - do not presuppose information unknown to the readers
- 17 Those rules constitute the norm of a ‘good headline’, which is possibly best exemplified by the fact that almost all of them are regularly violated. For instance, despite the compulsion to use verbs rather than nouns, the following chart shows that in headlines nouns are overused and verbs underused compared to the body of news articles:

Fig. 4



## 1.2 What is headlines for? The pragmatic nature of headlines

- 18 The motivation traditionally highlighted for resorting to headlines is to pack as much information as possible in as few words as possible. That was certainly true, for the most part, in the age of the printing press: in order for headlines to stand out, they had to be printed in large type, while space on the page was a rare commodity. The omission of ‘minor words’, as well as the use of the shorter present simple form of verbs, could effectively be seen as a means to that end.
- 19 However, if that were the main *raison d’être* for headlines, it would have disappeared in the digital era. Today’s newspapers are primarily read online: while *The Guardian* had an average daily circulation of 189,000 in 2013 (*ABC National Newspapers Report*), it had an unduplicated British readership across print and digital platforms of 5.8 million per week in 2012 — i.e. 640,000 online readers per day (*The Guardian*). Some titles now only exist online, such as *The Independent*, which ceased its print circulation in March 2016. And while a selection of news stories feature on the homepage, where there may be said to be limitations on space, most of them only appear in the deeper pages of the websites, where such limitations do not bear. So why has that particular syntax of headline survived the shift to the Internet?
- 20 Three main hypotheses may be formulated as to the actual purpose of headlines.
- 21 - One contends that the syntax of headlines speeds up the processing of information. In the words of Harold Evans, the headline must be ‘swiftly readable, economical in editorial, production, and reading time, and in newsprint space’ (5). The headline is



designed to allow the reader to skim the front page or the site's homepage and get the main news in a matter of seconds, even if Garst & Bernstein underline that speed is not the object, 'only a happy by-product' (10). A recent study, however (De Lange et al.), comparing article omission in headlines and child speech in Dutch and Italian, has shown that for a speaker to process articles (the selection process) requires more effort in languages such as Dutch and English than in Italian and French, for example; that would explain why article omission is more frequent in the former group of languages: it speeds up the production of headlines. However, to claim that the same applies to the reception of headlines, as the study does, seems far-fetched.

- 22 Indeed, the structure of headlines leads to ambiguities which actually slow down their comprehension. The function words omitted from headlines (auxiliaries, determiners) may well carry redundant information, such as the time of the event (almost always the recent past) or parameters of nominal reference (new/familiar, count/non-count) which can be retrieved from context, but redundancy is not superfluousness:

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, in Jakobson 8)

- 23 The absence of determiners, which can act to signal the nominal nature of the word following them, increases the chances of ambiguity: a title such as *Army demands change* can have two radically different interpretations (either *The army is demanding change*, or *The demands of the army are changing*). English-speaking newspapers regularly come up with what the linguists behind Language Log call 'crash blossoms' and 'garden paths':

(9) Mansell guilty of missing businessman's murder (ABC News, 7 November 2011)

- 24 Or rather obscure 'noun piles':

(10) Citizen science charts horse chestnut tree pest spread (BBC News, 25 January 2014)

- 25 Perfetti & al.'s study of the comprehension of headlines shows that syntactic procedures "similar to those used in other instances of language comprehension" take precedence over problem-solving procedures when resolving ambiguity in headlines (706). As a consequence, readers will take longer to understand headlines (700), a slowing effect which is even carried over to the text following the headline, making the article itself longer to read (704). Speeding up access to information thus cannot be the main goal of headlines.

- 26 - Another hypothesis is that headlines facilitate the comprehension and memorisation of the information contained in the body of the article, in a way comparable to the title and abstract of a scientific article. But this does not seem to apply either, since ambiguity results in errors in understanding headlines (Perfetti & al. 705). As for memorisation, another study (León) has shown that readers do not perform better at memory tests whether they had read an article preceded by its headline or not. According to Ifantidou (702), this would be due to a 'rhetoric of facticity' in which the title, rather than the macrostructure of the article below it, seeks to bring out a particular interpretation of the information, to reach out to the reader by resorting to appealing features, regardless of inaccuracy or deceptiveness. Our corpus contains quite a few examples of that:

(11) Cameron turns 'internet of things' slogan into fact (*The Guardian*, 10 March 2014)

(12) Anger grows as searchers fail to find missing jet (*The Times*, 10 March 2014)

- 27 The first headline glosses over the fact that many questions are yet to be resolved in the government's project, while the second gives prominence to a feeling ('anger') which only represents 5% of that news story about the disappearance of the Malaysia Airlines flight over the Indian Ocean.
- 28 - Our hypothesis is that the very syntax of headlines entices the reader to buy the newspaper or, in the digital age, to click the link to the article and generate revenue. As Joel Pisetzner, former copy editor of the *Star Ledger* (New Jersey), puts it, the headline 'pulls the reader in. [...] Plunk down your \$1.25 to find out more.'
- 29 Pulling the reader in means optimizing relevance. In cognitive terms, relevance is defined as the ratio between cognitive effort and cognitive effect (Sperber & Wilson 145). A relevant headline, in this respect, is one which promises interesting new information for little reading effort. As learning something new is a cognitive effort in itself, headlines strive to connect the new information ('new assumptions') to the reader's pre-existing conceptions ('previous assumptions'). According to Ifantidou (703), that is why headlines offer a type of 'linguistically underdetermined meaning', 'in the sense that contextual information may be rudimentary, i.e. elliptical or underspecified.' In those conditions, readers end up creating '*ad hoc* contexts and build occasion-specific sense' (705) based on their culture and expectations. Paradoxically, involving the reader in the construction of the meaning of the headline actually proves to enhance its relevance to them, provided they are cooperative (Ifantidou: 717; Maingueneau). In other terms, this optimized relevance reduces the cognitive effort required of readers in a way which overrides the extra effort induced by the heightened risk of ambiguity that we discussed earlier. We will now show how the syntax of headlines contributes to optimize their relevance.

## 2. How do headlines work?

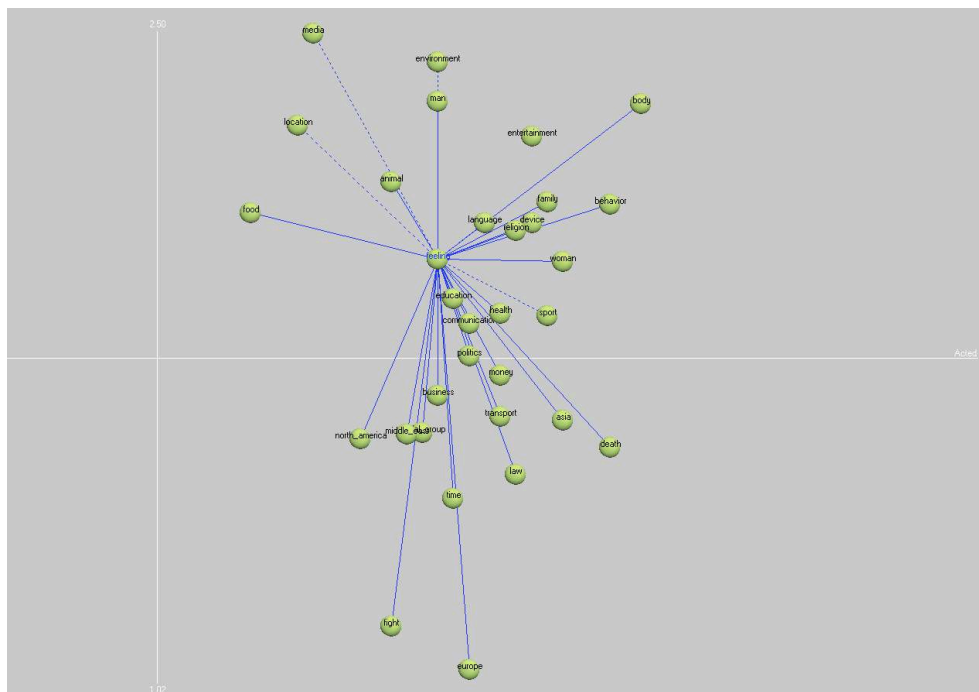
### 2.1 The prevalence of affectivity

#### 2.1.1 Semantics

- 30 A way to secure the reader's cooperation is by resorting to their affect rather than their intellect; to feelings and emotions rather than accuracy and information. As John Schandler, a copy editor at the *St. Petersburg Times*, puts it: '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.'
- 31 Emotions being more widely shared than the knowledge of particular issues, this allows the reader to be drawn to the news story more easily; appealing to their affect rather than their intellect also reduces the reader's cognitive effort. That can be achieved through the choice of wording of the headline:
- (13) Joe Biden the big loser from Hillary Clinton debate triumph. (*The Times*, 15 October 2015)
- (14) Indian carpenter with world record 28 fingers and toes in constant **fear**. (*The Daily Mail*, 27 January 2016)
- (15) Reece Topley **happy** to be standard-bearer for brave new England. (*The Times*, 22 November 2015)

- 32 The front pages of the newspapers published on 12 September 2001 in the US are cases in point: words such as *terror*, *anger*, *outrage*, *anguish* or *shock* filled the headlines, and a climax of expressivity was probably reached in the *San Francisco Examiner*'s 'Bastards!', stretched across the full width of the front page.
- 33 A simple semantic analysis of the corpus in the Tropes software brings out how high the reference fields of feelings, as well as other semantic fields pertaining to basic human preoccupations, score quantitatively in headlines: among the top 20 are such reference fields as 'feelings' (18<sup>th</sup>), 'fight' (2<sup>nd</sup>), 'health' (13<sup>th</sup>) or death (15<sup>th</sup>). A closer look at the field of feelings also shows how it is linguistically connected with a number of the most fundamental domains:

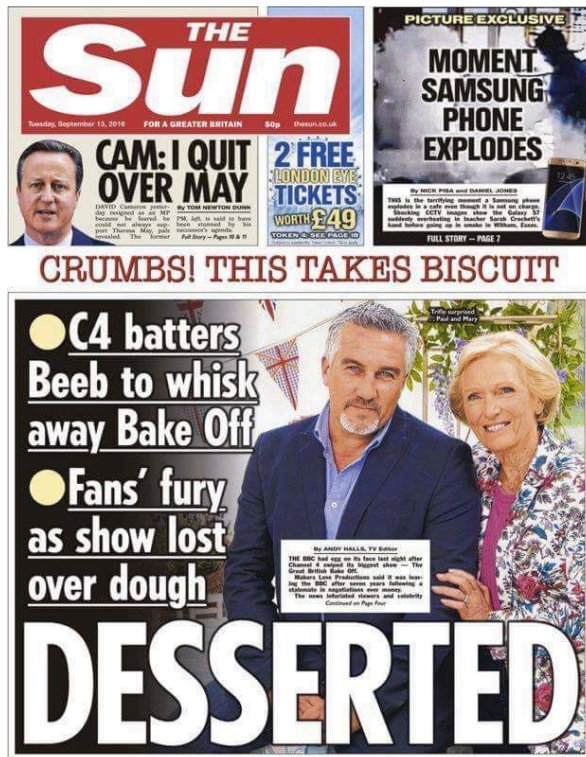
Fig. 5



- 34 Deliberately focusing on details rather than going for the whole story may achieve the same objective. When the *Guardian* reports that
- (16) Pistorius vomits at autopsy evidence (*The Guardian*, 10 March 2014),
- 35 it is highlighting an accident, a side-event, the main news being the presentation at Pistorius's trial of evidence from the autopsy of his girlfriend. But it is likely to seduce readers as it allows them to share Pistorius's experience, and promises a rewarding read since it changes most readers' previous assumptions about the athlete by portraying him in a position of weakness, even remorse.
- 36 Resorting to wordplay and humour is also a satisfying way of drawing the reader in: not only is the lightness of humorous headlines attractive, they involve the reader in deciphering their meaning and flatter those who manage to crack the puns:
- (17) Take that, space junk! Australian scientists to zap debris with lasers (*The Guardian*, 10 March 2014)
- (18) Fyffes shares soar as investors go bananas for Chiquita Deal (*The Irish Times*, 10 March 2014)
- (19) Super Caley go ballistic, Celtic are atrocious (*The Sun*, 2000)

(20) Headless body in topless bar (*New York Post*, 1983)

37 This recent *Sun* front page is also a textbook example:



### 2.1.2 Syntax

- 38 But it is not only the choice of words or expressions which constitutes an appeal to affect: the syntax of headlines itself is one of ‘expressivity’ rather than ‘expression’. In the terms of the French linguist Gustave Guillaume, ‘expression’ refers to the exploitation in discourse of resources instituted at the level of tongue, while ‘expressivity’ consists in a more improvised, less codified type of discourse (Guillaume 202-203). Any utterance is part expression, part expressivity, in inversely proportional quantities: the more expression, the less expressivity and *vice versa*. Expressivity consists in substituting ‘expressive movement’ for the traditionally instituted resources of tongue: this movement may involve a number of verbal and non-verbal modalities, depending on the medium, such as intonation, gesture, typography, etc. This results in a reintroduction in discourse of an affective dimension otherwise absent from the heavily codified domain of tongue. Furthermore, it is generally associated with an illocutionary dimension: it is a privileged means for the utterer of influencing their addressee.
- 39 Headlines is a case in point: not only does its syntax deviate from the norm of Standard English, it serves as a trigger for the recipient’s act of purchasing or clicking. As such, headlines is a product of what Kristeva and others in the psychoanalytical school of literary criticism have termed the ‘semiotic’, as opposed to the ‘symbolic’: while the symbolic encompasses all that conforms to the verbal rules of syntax and grammar, the semiotic consists in the reinscription in language of the pre-verbal, a phase of child development where language is not yet fully formed. We have seen that headlines has been compared to child language, but it may also be said that in the

same way as poetry, the language of headlines resorts to what is still pre-verbal in language: sound, prosody, musicality, and a constant transgression of the rules of grammar for the benefit of the expression of affects and emotions. Thus, it targets a part of the reader over which they have less intellectual control.

## 2.2 The aoristic nature of headlines

40 Another way in which headlines enhances the relevance of headlines is the aoristic nature of its morphosyntactic features; i.e., they evacuate the utterer from discourse, thereby imparting headlines with universal relevance.

41 - Omission of determiners

42 One of the main functions of determiners is interlocutionary: they serve to signal to the hearer/reader whether a certain reference is new to them or can be identified with previous information. Hence, their uses are dependent on what the utterer assumes is the extent of the hearer's knowledge, and effectively force an interpretation on the reader, to the extent that a reference can be completely missed or misunderstood if the utterer presumes wrongly.

43 In the case of headlines, where the recipient is not known to the utterer, the latter, is not in a position to make any assumptions of that nature, and is forced to accept that the reader may or may not be already familiar with the topic at hand; else they risk alienating part of their intended readership. 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 salient data immediately and simultaneously available to both; in headlines, the absence of semiologically marked determiners is thus a predominant tool in achieving optimal relevance for all readers, by removing the subjective element.

44 - Present simple

The ubiquitous use of the present simple points in the same direction. According to manuals of journalism, not only does the present tense bring events into immediacy, they give the reader an impression that they participate in the action (Evans 27, Garst & Bernstein 110).

45 While that sounds like an overstretch, the fact remains that the present simple effectively withdraws the headline writer from their own discourse. The present simple carries zero aspect and, contrary to auxiliated forms, does not imply that a particular point of view is taken regarding the event, which is presented in and of itself, as if in the absence of any witness. As a result, headlines appear as aphorisms (Maingueneau 2012), detached utterances whose meaning is altered or impoverished, but whose relevance is heightened by the fact that their utterer is made invisible and that, rather than addressing a specific reader, they target a generalized audience which is not on the same plane as their source.

46 The syntax of headlines is thus instrumental in achieving their pragmatic goal: by effacing the relativity and subjectivity of discourse, they acquire the optimal relevance which is decisive in triggering the reader's impulse to purchase the paper or log on to the website.

### 3. Evolution in the digital age

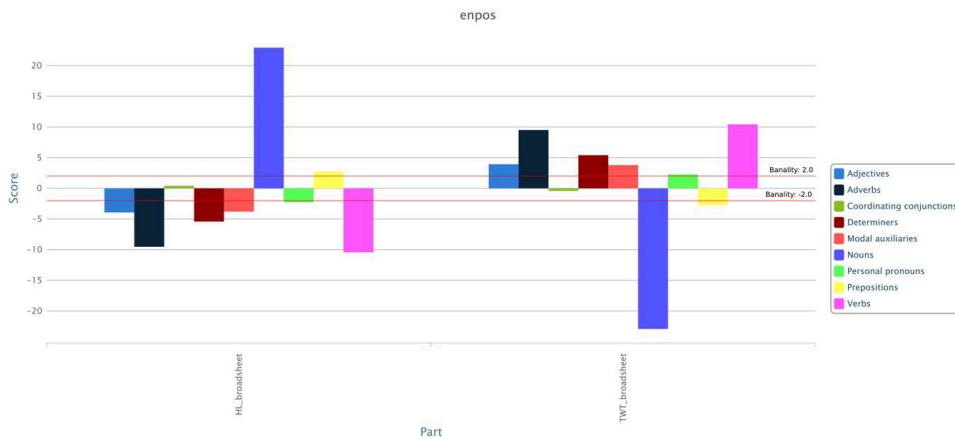
- 47 A relatively recent news platform, Blendle (<https://launch.blendle.com/>), offers its subscribers a selection of news articles based on their profile; readers can access articles for a nominal fee of 5 to 25 US cents, which may be refunded if they are disappointed with the content. When prompted to say why they have asked for a refund, most discontented readers claim that ‘the article didn’t live up or agree with the headline’, showing the prominent role played by titles even in today’s modes of consumption.
- 48 Yet the headline has changed dramatically since the advent of the Internet. The newsstand, where prospective readers would scan the headlines of a variety of newspapers at a glance, has receded in importance in the face of search engines, where users access articles on the basis of a few keywords entered into the search field. Hence, the importance of catchy headlines has given way to search engine optimization, or SEO. The logic behind the headline has changed: the priority is now to pack as many keywords as possible in a title whose attractiveness and, sometimes, readability, seem to be given only secondary importance. In an age when information travels faster than ever before, traditional newspapers are no longer first on the news, and news outlets have to take into account the high plausibility that people will have somehow heard of an event before it makes the headlines. In that context, the main challenge is no longer to tickle the reader’s curiosity, but to appear among the top search results on Google and the like.
- 49 Hence headlines such as the following, which is arguably difficult to parse (especially if one is not aware of the informal military use of *buzz* as a transitive verb), but full of the keywords that an Internet user is likeliest to input when looking for information about this particular incident:





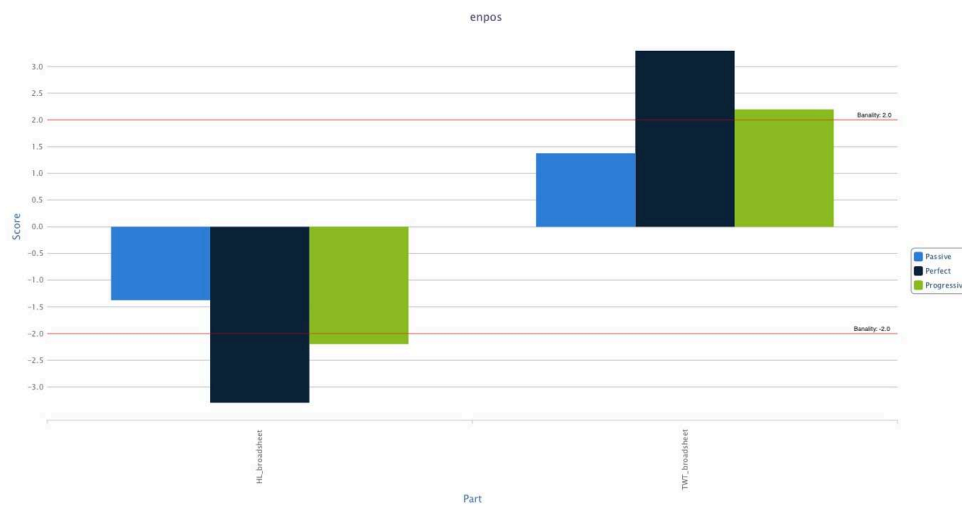
- 50 Social media are where a lot of news breaks, with the traditional press following. Accordingly, those are where competition for attention is the highest, and this is brought to light on such a network as Twitter.
- 51 There are mainly three coexisting ways of using Twitter. It is first and foremost a social network, where users engage in conversations about anything ranging from the intimate to the societal; statistics show that a huge majority of tweets belong to private conversation, although they can be publicly accessed. Twitterers also use the social network as a continuous newsfeed: by following the accounts of a number of media outlets, one can have information streaming continuously to one’s timeline. Finally, a minority of users use Twitter to publish or advertise their own published content.
- 52 In the context of the second type of use, it is apparent that Twitter is one of the new horizons of headline English: not only is it of paramount importance to stand out of the stream to attract readers’ attention, tweets are also quantitatively constrained by the 140-character limit. However, due to the nature of social media, tweets seem to differ from headlines in a number of ways.
- 53 An overview of tweets from broadsheet publications shows that, despite the space constraint, their character count is on average 11% greater than that of headlines, and their word count larger by 16.7%. Given that the average word length in broadsheet headlines is 6 characters, against 5.6 in tweets (a 6.67% difference), one may assume that the ‘extra words’ found in tweets are short; probably function words. Indeed, a statistical comparison shows that tweets use significantly more determiners, modal auxiliaries and personal pronouns, among others:

Fig. 6



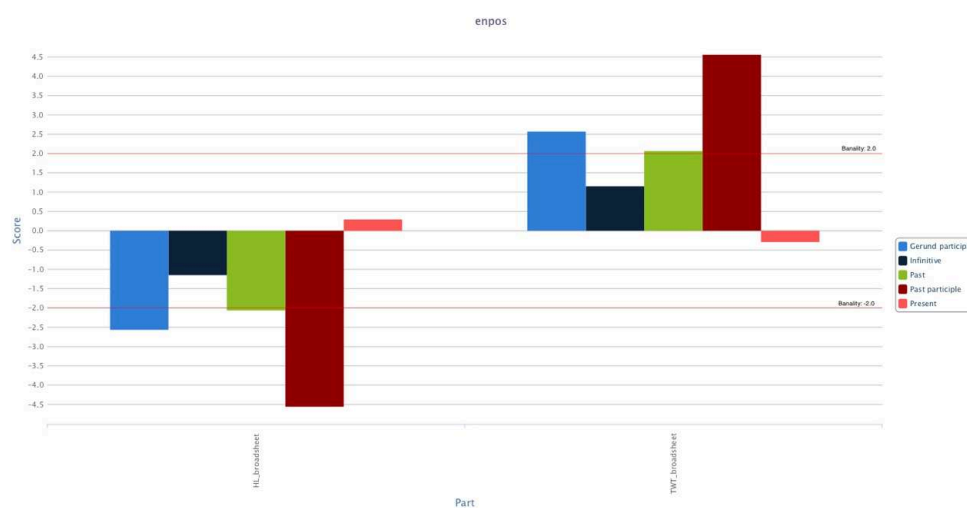
- 54 Auxiliated verb forms are also significantly more frequent in tweets, indicating that the omission of auxiliaries is not as prevalent as in headlines:

Fig. 7



- 55 The use of verb forms generally is more varied in broadsheet publications' tweets than in their headlines, with the past, gerund and past participle forms significantly more frequent:

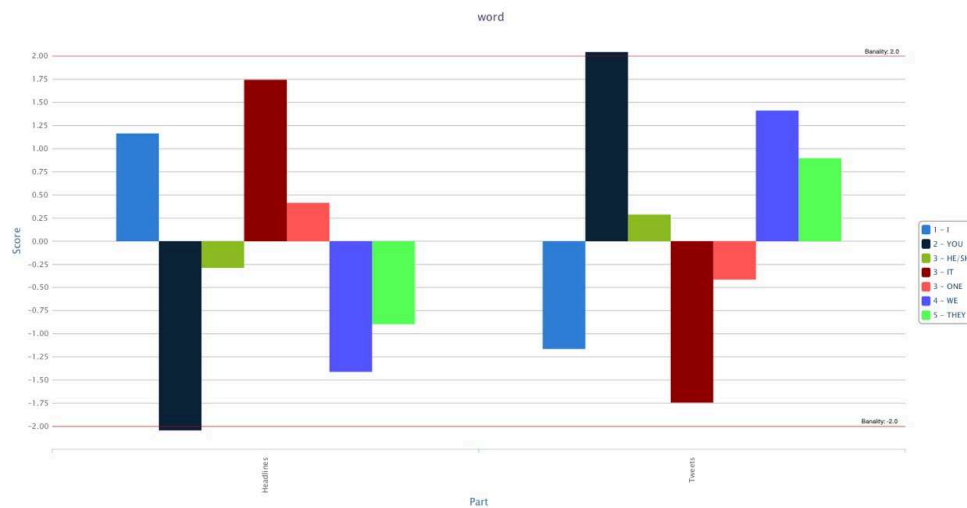
Fig. 8



- 56 This higher frequency of verbs, determiners, modals and auxiliated verb forms shows that tweets tend to move away from the aoristic nature of headlines: albeit in a small way (they are still far less used than in Standard English), point of view comes back into play.
- 57 As we have just seen, personal pronouns also appear more often in tweets than in headlines. The following comparison between headlines and tweets across all types of press brings out finer distinctions:



Fig. 9



- 58 The significantly higher frequency of the second-person pronoun shows that the addressee is no longer a disembodied abstraction, but the very person reading the tweet. That pronoun is sometimes introduced where it does not appear in the actual title of the newspaper article:

(21) 12 wines your kitchen can't do without (@nytimes, 13 October 2015)

= 12 Everyday Bottles for Wine Lovers (*The New York Times*, 12 October 2015)

(22) What could happen if you use an outlawed Segway (@Independent, 12 October 2015)

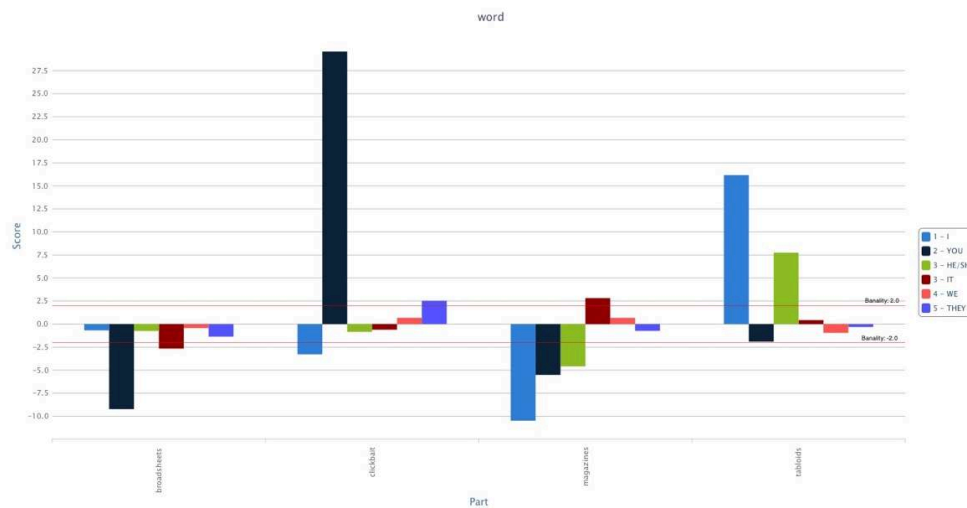
= Hoverboard ban: What are the penalties for riding on the pavement? What will happen if I use an outlawed Segway? (*The Independent*, 12 October 2015)

(23) Own one of these bad boys? Turns out you could be breaking the law... (@TheSun, 13 October 2015)

= They think it's all hover - Latest celebrity craze banned by Victorian law (*The Sun*, 12 October 2015)

- 59 Here the strategy seems to be to take advantage of the specificity of a social network and engage the reader to participate in a conversation, a situation of interlocution rather than be the passive recipient of one-way communication. The second-person tweet also carries the promise that the article is going to be about the reader themselves.
- 60 A category of Twitter accounts which I have labelled 'clickbait' works precisely on that premise, and takes the concept to the extreme. Here the second-person pronoun is blatantly overused:

Fig. 10



- 61 Incidentally, this chart also reflects how tabloids, where first- and third-person pronouns are overrepresented, rely on personal stories, especially in the form of testimonies, to draw readers in.
- 62 The overwhelming majority of clickbait tweets are pure promise, with hardly any information:
- (24) 5 Times Science Ruined Your Day (@Cracked, 13 October 2015)
  - (25) 29 photos that prove the entire world is against you (@BuzzFeed, 13 October 2015)
  - (26) 6 Feelings You Have When You Graduate College (@CollegeHumor, 18 November 2015)
- 63 By addressing the user directly, they aim at making them feel as if the story were about them, but give no information beyond the general context of a supposedly shared experience. Many tweets go further by promising that the reader will actually be transformed by reading the article:
- (27) 12 amazing photos that will make you feel so very insignificant (in a good way) (@BuzzFeed, 13 October 2015)
  - (28) 7 Unexplained Deaths That Will Shake Your Faith In Reason (@Cracked, 14 October 2015)
  - (29) FACT: you don't know very much about #StarWars. Fix it with our @thelistapp guide to the good movies (@Cracked, 18 November 2015)
- 64 This category of tweets fits rather perfectly the definition of a relevance optimizer, as they promise the reader cognitive reward (the new assumptions, the transformed perspective they will have acquired) for relatively little cognitive effort, encapsulating as they do the fact that the information will be presented in the easily digestible format of a short list of items.
- 65 It is interesting to note, however, that the traditional press, even tabloids, has not embarked on this trend, sticking with minor changes to the more informative format of the news headline. It has somehow adapted its headlines to a new medium where conversation is the model by shifting to more standard morphosyntactic features; however, when compared to the news section of the BNC, the differences between headlines and tweets tend to appear rather less clearly.

- 66 In other terms, traditional news media have not yet fully embraced the format of social networks, and their Twitter presence, for the most part, only simulated interaction with the readers. Their tweets may trigger a number of reactions and responses, and debates among their followers, but they very rarely result in a direct exchange with readers.
- 67 These findings are only a beginning, and pave the way for a deeper study of the way news tweets function compared to headlines. In particular, the corpus needs to be refined and better balanced, and a method should be elaborated of assessing the interaction generated by individual tweets. Also, the current corpus must be compared with a large body of random tweets, if only to measure the respective gaps between Standard English, Twitter English and the syntax of news tweets.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, Tim. "Can the Internet Save the Press from Oblivion?" *The Guardian*, 17 April 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/apr/17/can-internet-save-printed-press-blendle-lumi>, Accessed 18 April 2016.

Audit Bureau of Circulation. *ABC National Newspapers Report*, June 2013, <http://abc.fileburst.com/publishedreports/National%20Newspapers%20Report%202013-06.pdf>, Accessed 9 April 2014.

Bastian, George C., Leland D. Case, and Floyd K. Baskette. *Editing the Day's News*. 4th ed., Macmillan, 1956.

Boone, Annie, and André Joly. *Dictionnaire terminologique de la systématique du langage*. 2<sup>e</sup> ed., L'Harmattan, 2004.

Broomhall, Kirsten. "Web Style." *Guardianstyle*, edited by David Marsh. Guardian Books, 2007, pp. 314-317.

Chéroux, Clément. « Le déjà-vu du 11 septembre ». *Etudes photographiques*, 20 June 2007, <http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/index998.html>, pp. 148-173, Accessed 30 May 2009.

De Lange, Joke, Nada Vasic, and Sergey Avrutin. "Reading between the (Head)lines: A Processing Account of Article Omissions in Newspaper Headlines and Child Speech." *Lingua*, vol. 119, 2009, pp. 1523-1540.

Dor, Daniel. "On Newspaper Headlines as Relevance Optimisers." *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 35, 2003, pp. 695-721.

Douay, Catherine. *Éléments pour une théorie de l'interlocution*. Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000.

Dredge, Stuart. "Strictly Algorithm: How News Finds People in the Facebook and Twitter Age." *The Guardian*, 10 March 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/mar/10/journalism-democracy-algorithms-facebook-google-twitter>, Accessed 30 June 2014.

Evans, Harold. *Editing and Design, Book Three: News Headlines*. Heinemann, 1974.

- Flavin, Louise. "Quoyle's Quest: Knots and Fragments as Tools of Narration in 'The Shipping News'." *Critique*, vol. 40, no. 3, Spring 1999, pp. 239-247.
- Garst, Robert E., and Theodore M. Bernstein. *Headlines and Deadlines, A Manual for Copy Editors*. Columbia University Press, 1933.
- Guardian US Press Office. "The Guardian is Now the World's Third Most Read Newspaper Website," press release, <http://www.theguardian.com/gnm-press-office/8>, Accessed 9 April 2014.
- Guillaume, Gustave. *Leçons de linguistique de Gustave Guillaume, 1947-1948, série C, Grammaire particulière du français et grammaire générale III*, edited by Roch Valin, Walter Hirtle and André Joly. Presses de l'Université Laval, and Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1987.
- Ifantidou, Elly. "Newspaper Headlines and Relevance: Ad hoc Concepts in Ad hoc Contexts." *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2009, pp. 699-720.
- Jakobson, Roman, et al. *Preliminaries to Speech Analysis*. M.I.T. Press, 1952.
- Jespersen, Otto. *The Philosophy of Grammar*. Allen & Unwin, 1924.
- Joly, André. *Essais de systématique énonciative*. Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1987.
- Joly, André. "Lucy was beautiful." *De la syntaxe à la narratologie énonciative*, edited by Monique de Mattia and André Joly. Ophrys, 2001, pp. 147-170.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by Margaret Waller, with an introduction by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Kronrod, Ann, and Orit Engel. "Accessibility Theory and Referring Expressions in Newspaper Headlines." *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 33, 2001, pp. 683-699.
- León, José A. "The Effects of Headlines and Summaries on News Comprehension and Recall." *Reading and Writing*, vol. 9, 1997, pp. 85-106.
- Mahin, Helen O. *The Development and Significance of the Newspaper Headline*. George Wahr, 1924.
- Maingueneau, Dominique. *Les phrases sans texte*. Kindle edition, Armand Colin, 2012.
- Mansfield, Frederick J. *Sub-Editing: A Book Mainly for Young Journalists*. 4th ed., Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd., 1946.
- Mårdh, Ingrid. *Headlines, On the Grammar of English Front Page Headlines*. CWK Gleerup, 1980.
- Marsh, David. "The Secrets of Great Headline Writing." *The Guardian*, 9 January 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/09/secrets-great-headline-writing>, Accessed 30 June 2014.
- Moncomble, Florent. "Contribution à une analyse psychomécanique de la détermination zéro en anglais contemporain". Unpublished doctoral dissertation, ULCO, 2008.
- Ouattara, Aboubakar. "Le morphème si, les dièses, les bémols et les modalités syntaxiques". *Actes du IX<sup>e</sup> colloque de l'AIPL*, edited by Ronald Lowe. Presses de l'Université Laval, 2002, pp. 341-357.
- Perfetti, Charles A., et al. "Comprehending Newspaper Headlines." *Journal of Memory and Language*, vol. 26, 1987, pp. 692-713.
- Pisetzner, Joel. "Head Hints." <http://www.copydesk.org/words/headhints.htm>, Accessed 30 May 2009.
- Proulx, E. Annie. *The Shipping News*. Fourth Estate, 1993.

- Radder, Norman J., and John E. Stempel. *Newspaper Editing, Make-up and Headlines*. McGraw-Hill, 1942.
- Sapir, Edward. *Language: an Introduction to the Study of Speech*. Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1924.
- Schlander, John. "Stuck for a Headline? Try these Tips." <http://www.copydesk.org/headtips.htm>, Accessed 30 May 2009.
- Simon-Vandenberg, Anne-Marie. *The Grammar of Headlines in The Times 1870-1970*. Paleis der Academien, 1981.
- Sperber, Dan, and Deirdre Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Blackwell, 1986.
- Stevens, Stanley S. "A Definition of Communication." *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, vol. XXII, no. 6, 1950, pp. 689-691.
- Straumann, Heinrich. *Newspaper Headlines*. Allen & Unwin, 1935.
- Wolf-Fedida, Mareike. « Le verbe sans sujet, contributions psychanalytique et psychopathologique ». *Marges linguistiques*, no. 8, 2004, pp. 153-162.

### Corpus tools

- The British National Corpus*, version 3 (BNC XML Edition). 2007. Distributed by Oxford University Computing Services on behalf of the BNC Consortium. <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>, Accessed 24 September 2016.
- Tropes, High Performance Text Analysis for Professional Users*. <http://www.semantic-knowledge.com/tropes.htm>, Accessed 24 September 2016.
- Twitter Streaming API*. <https://dev.twitter.com/streaming/overview>, Accessed 24 September 2016.
- TXM. Projet Textométrie*. <http://textometrie.ens-lyon.fr/?lang=fr>, Accessed 24 September 2016.

## NOTES

1. The size of the bars is a representation not of the absolute number nor proportion of occurrences of each part-of-speech category, but of the relevancy score of the over- or under-representation of each part of speech in the corpus considered. The minimum score for relevancy is 2 ( $p < 10^{-2}$ ), materialised by the red horizontal lines. In this view, the underrepresentation of determiners, for instance, is highly remarkable.
2. Highlighting in examples is mine throughout the article.

---

## ABSTRACTS

*Headlines*, the language of English news headlines, stands out as a unique feature of the English-speaking press worldwide. Yet, as the age of the printing press fades away in favour of digital platforms, so does the way traditional news media reach out to their readership evolve into new territories.

Although originally motivated by the space constraints of the printed page, the non-standard

syntactic features of *headlines* have remarkably survived the shift to the web, where such constraints do not exist. Indeed, its fundamentally aoristic morphosyntax is instrumental in optimizing the relevance of headlines, thereby luring the reader into accessing content and generating revenue.

However, the shift to the digital age has introduced a number of radical changes. As Internet users increasingly gather their news through Google and its ilk rather than by picking a paper at the newsstand, the importance of attractive headlines has diminished in contrast to their ability to score highly in search engines. As a result, the traditional function of headlines is being devolved to a new medium, Twitter. It is on this platform that the old headline seems to be revived, both in terms of purpose and form, but in a renewed, less aphoristic expression, which traditional media are still slow to adopt.

Looking at a corpus of 1,800 news website headlines and 2,400 news tweets from some of the major online outlets provides some quantitative as well as qualitative insights into how the pragmatically oriented syntax of *headlines* is evolving to keep the seduction working.

L'anglais des titres de presse, ou *headlines*, est un trait caractéristique de la presse anglophone à l'échelle mondiale. Néanmoins, à l'heure où les plates-formes numériques se substituent à une presse écrite déclinante, les médias d'information traditionnels s'aventurent dans de nouvelles façons de s'adresser à leur lectorat.

Quoique motivées, à l'origine, par les contraintes de place inhérentes à l'imprimé, les caractéristiques syntaxiques non-standard du *headlines* ont remarquablement survécu à la transition vers le web, où de telles contraintes n'existent pas. En effet, cette morphosyntaxe fondamentalement aoristique est essentielle pour optimiser la pertinence des *headlines*, et donc pour inciter le lecteur à accéder au contenu des articles et générer un revenu.

Toutefois, le passage à l'ère numérique a introduit un certain nombre de mutations radicales. Les internautes se servant de plus en plus de Google et consorts pour glaner l'information, l'importance du pouvoir de séduction des titres de presse diminue en faveur de leur capacité à apparaître en tête des résultats de recherche sur Internet. En conséquence, c'est sur un nouveau terrain, Twitter, que le *headline* traditionnel se trouve revitalisé, aussi bien en termes de forme que de fonction, quoique sous une expression moins aphoristique que les médias traditionnels sont lents à adopter.

Cette étude s'appuie sur un corpus de 1800 titres de la presse en ligne et de 2400 tweets de quelques-uns des principaux sites d'information, dont nous tirons des indications quantitatives et qualitatives sur la façon dont la syntaxe pragmatique des *headlines* évolue pour que la séduction continue d'opérer.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** headlines, Twitter, syntax, pragmatics, corpus linguistics, determiners, pronouns, aspect

**Mots-clés:** titres de presse, Twitter, syntaxe, pragmatique, linguistique de corpus, détermination nominale, pronom, aspect

## AUTHOR

FLORENT MONCOMBLE

Université d'Artois

florent.moncomble@univ-artois.fr

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.