

The uses of the present tense in headlines

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The aim of the present article is to explore ways the present tense is used in newspaper headlines and explain what function this tense plays. It reports the results of a small study undertaken in order to reveal the general tendencies and patterns of some of the more frequent sentence types used as headlines. The canonical use of the present tense to report past actions is noted and explained with reference to standard grammar. The material under investigation has also indicated a tendency to use the present simple tense in headlines made up of complex sentences, where it occurs in subordinate clauses introducing the circumstances for a more important event expressed non-verbally. The reference of the present tense to past time is explained in view of its universal reference within the system of English tenses, its role as an ‘internal evaluation device’ in narrative and the support it lends to the interpersonal function of headlines.

1 The present simple and its meanings – theoretical considerations

The widespread use of the present tense in headlines is one of the defining characteristics of the register of news headlines (cf. Fowler 1991, Halliday 1985). In news discourse, the present tense is used conventionally to refer either to events which occurred in the past, or to present events (e.g. ‘state present’ and ‘habitual present’ as described by Quirk et al. (1985:179)). The focus of the present paper is to identify the reasons why the present tense can be used in headlines to refer to past events, what its effects are, and what major patterns of use emerge.

The present tense is the **fundamental tense** in the system of English tenses (Dušková et al 1988:217): in addition to present events, it can also express future and past events. In this sense, the present tense is **atemporal**. Although future reference of the present tense is usually complemented with an adverbial of time (the futurity thus being expressed lexically), this need not always be so, with the future reference being clear from the context.

Although the stereotypical description of past events by means of the present tense is usual in headlines, it also frequently occurs **in narration** – both fiction and conversation (Dušková 1988:219, Shiffrin 1981). The ‘historical present’ is used as a stylistic means – as McCarthy and Carter (1994:94) note, it operates ‘as one of Labov’s “internal evaluation” devices, heightening the drama of events and focusing on particularly significant points in the story’. The concept of ‘internal evaluation’ refers to the fact that a speaker’s evaluation of the prominent importance of particular information is carried out through the **manner of presentation** and not by means of some kind of a lexicalized marker, which would constitute ‘external evaluation’.

The headline present shares these characteristics with the historical present – its use highlights the urgency and topicality of the news story, thus substantially contributing to its newsworthiness and increasing its news value. (A parallel use of the present perfect divorced from the actual time of the event is noticed and commented on by McCarthy 1998:93-94).

Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the headline present and the historical present in terms of their relation to other tenses, which can be described with reference to the concept of markedness. While the **historical present is a marked tense** of referring to the past time in fiction and conversation, the present tense referring to past events in headlines is, on the contrary, an unmarked tense. The marked character of the historical present stems precisely from the fact that it is used as an ‘internal evaluation device’ (Schiffrin 1981) in situations where in ordinary communication, devoid of the speaker’s attempts at highlighting certain key events and actions, other tenses would be preferred for the expression of the relevant time (namely the past tense).

The situation of the present tense in headlines of hard news in the quality press is, in this respect, quite the contrary: the **unmarked tense** (if a tense is used in a headline at all, cf. Figure 2 below) appears to be the present simple because this tense is **conventional for the particular discourse situation** (as the articulation of particular headline conventions or the ‘grammar’ of headlines, cf. Halliday 1988). This does not mean that other tenses do not occur – they do, although only in a minority of instances and e.g. in quotations and the more narrative style of headlines of other sections than the hard news. The use of tenses other than the present simple in hard news headlines in the quality press may thus be seen as a departure from specific headline conventions, and labelled as marked uses against the background of the conventional headline present tense.

Nevertheless, one should not be misled by the seeming paradox of interpreting the use of the past tense referring to a past event as ‘marked’: markedness is seen here not as a fixed property of linguistic forms but as dependent on the variable context and the conventions of the particular register in which the forms are employed. This issue is graphically illustrated in Figure 1 below. (Let it be noted that the linguistic forms used in headlines have to be interpreted against the ‘dual background’ of the norms of standard language and headline conventions, cf. Chovanec 2000).

	Status of the tense referring to past events in:	
	conversation, fiction	headlines
Present tense	Marked (<i>historical present</i> – used as an internal evaluation device)	Unmarked (‘ <i>headline present</i> ’ – used conventionally)
Past tense	Unmarked	Marked

Fig. 1 The contrary character of markedness of the present and the past tenses when referring to past events in various contexts

The choice of the past tense to refer to past events is thus unmarked (‘default’) in everyday conversation, while it is marked in headlines.

The reason for the application of the present tense in headlines may also be sought with the help of Halliday’s functional-systemic approach to language: the choice of the tense

in headlines is regulated by the interpersonal function, as the shift of tenses results in a shift of deictic centres as if to the time of the event, thus bridging the gap between the event and the reader (see also below).

2 Analysis and classification of material

In order to reveal the patterns of use of the present tense in headlines, an analysis was carried out on a set of 242 headlines from the Electronic Telegraph. This is an on-line version of the Daily Telegraph, a British daily newspaper which ranks among the serious or ‘quality’ papers, with the highest circulation from among the serious national dailies (source: *Media* 2002). As approximately 50 articles are made available on the Electronic Telegraph homepage every day and all were collected, the sample consists of all articles made accessible on-line over a period of five (non-consecutive) days. All articles were retrieved from the domestic and international news sections, i.e. the vast majority of them introduced hard news, and several provided commentaries.

The headlines were analysed into two broad areas. One major group consisted of headlines which, despite being presented in the form of block language (the term for the ‘style’ of headlines used by Quirk et al. 1985), contained a finite verb form in the main clause. Because of the focus of the present study on the present tense, this subset of headlines with tensed verb forms is discussed and exemplified in subsection 2.1 below. The other group was made up of headlines which did not contain a finite verb form in the main clause and were either nominal or condensed by means of ellipsis of auxiliaries. The results are briefly commented on in subsection 2.2. Both groups were further subdivided in order to reveal the types and frequencies of headlines according to the character of their verbal elements. The results are presented in Figures 2 and 3, respectively. All numbers and percentages are summed up in Tables 1 and 2 below.

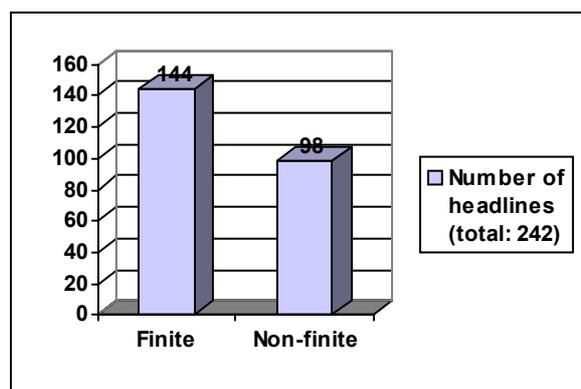


Fig. 2 Basic composition of headlines according to the form of the main clause

2.1 Finite sentence types of headlines

The analyzed sample has confirmed an earlier finding (Chovanec 2000) concerning the ratio of finite and non-finite headlines, which is approximately 6:4 in favour of headlines containing the finite verb form (the precise figures were 59.5 per cent of finite versus 40.5 per

cent of non-finite in the sample of 242 headlines). Table 1 provides a detailed summary of all types of finite headlines:

Table 1
Headlines containing finite main clauses

	Instances	% of finite	% of finite	% of total	% of total
Present simple	96	66.7	77.8	39.7	46.2
Present simple – double use	13	9.0		5.3	
Present simple + past simple	3	2.1		1.2	
Past simple	14	9.7	11.1	5.8	6.6
Past simple – double use	2	1.4		0.8	
Future simple	12	8.3	8.3	5.0	5.0
Other tenses	4	2.8	2.8	1.7	1.7
Total	144	100	100	59.5	59.5

Given the headline conventions, it is not surprising that the largest group of headlines with the finite verb form (77.8%, i.e. 46.2% of the total) comprises the canonical simple present tense referring to past events, as Example 1 illustrates:

Example 1

Dinosaur hunters find vomit from ‘sickysaurus’

Such instances typically refer to a single event with a relevance for the present, i.e. the present perfect would most usually be used to report the event in contexts other than the headlines. The fact that this tense is the unmarked tense for referring to such events is borne out by the first paragraph of the article (the lead), which uses the present perfect: ‘*Dinosaur hunters have found what they believe is the oldest authenticated fossilised vomit in a clay quarry in Peterborough*’.

The use of the present perfect in the lead is enabled by the absence of a specific adverbial of time (referring to the time of the find), which would anchor the event to a particular past moment in time, thus requiring the simple past tense. It is the same absence of an adverbial in the headline which allows the conventional shift of tenses and the eventual use of the simple present.

The present tense in headlines is, of course, reformulated into the simple past tense in the lead if the time is specified by means of a precise adverbial of time, as Example 2 indicates:

Example 2

Thatcher urges Bush to ‘finish business of Iraq’

Once the journalists make the option to include the adverbial of time referring to when the main reported event actually occurred, there is, of course, no other option than to

reformulate the message beyond the headlines by means of the simple past tense: ‘*Lady Thatcher praised President Bush’s leadership yesterday and called for the war on terrorism to focus on the ‘unfinished business’ of Iraq*’ (cf. also McCarthy 1998:93).

It is worth noting that while the two immediately following sentences describe the same event, they use very different tenses – the atemporal present tense with the universal reference (see above) and the past tense accompanied by the specifying adverbial of time *yesterday*. The text is comprehensible due to the readers’ knowledge of the conventions of the particular register, which ensures that the present tense in the headline is correctly decoded, in spite of the manipulation and shift of deictic centres carried out by the encoding journalists. The motivation for using the present tense in the headline is essentially its orientation to enhancing the interpersonal function (i.e. its attempt to communicate topical, ‘breaking’ news), while the reason for using the past or the present perfect in the lead is connected with the necessity of satisfying the ideational function (i.e. to specify the temporal context of the story; cf. McCarthy 1998:94, Chovanec 2000).

The analysis has also indicated that there are differences between headlines as to whether they include a single tensed verbal form or several (usually two) finite verb forms in various syntactic relationships. The mutual ratio is shown in Figure 3 and treated in the following two subsections.

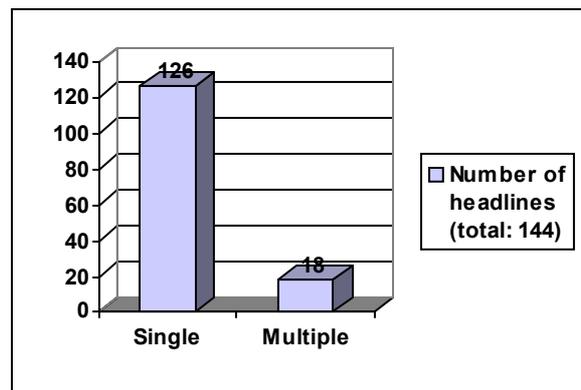


Fig. 3 Composition of the sample according to the number of finite verb forms in the headline

2.1.1 Single tensed forms in headlines

The number of headlines consisting of a single finite verbal form in the sample is 126 (i.e. 87.5 per cent of all finite headlines and 52.2 per cent of the total sample including non-finite headlines).

In spite of the operation of the strong tendency calling for the utilization of the present tense in headlines, the group is made up of a variety of tenses in the ratios illustrated in Figure 4:

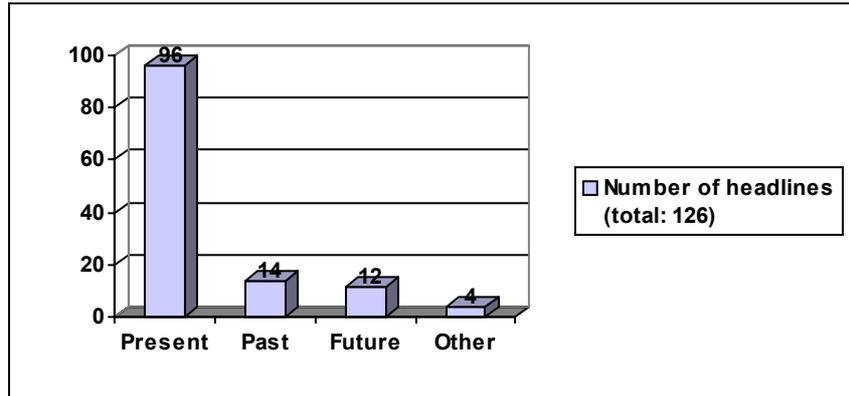


Fig. 4 The composition of headlines with single finite verbal forms according to the tense used

The majority of sentence-type headlines consisting of a single clause use the conventional present tense (75.2 per cent, 66.7 per cent of all finite). However, almost one quarter of the single-clause finite headlines are made up of other tenses, most notably the simple past tense (11 per cent), and the simple future tense (9.5 per cent). The remaining four instances indicated in Figure 4 above include combinations of modals with past infinitives (2 instances) and the present perfect (2 instances).

The simple past is the second most frequent tense in headlines, which is hardly surprising given the role of the papers to report past events. However, because of the operation of the headline convention to code past events in the present tense, it is worth exploring the contexts in which the past tense is used and try to see why the headline conventions are not applied in these instances, giving rise to the ‘marked’ use of the past in headlines.

One of the emerging patterns concerns verbal reactions of prominent news actors. It is significant that the news actor is identified by his name (or social role or any other label), followed by a colon introducing what is seemingly the news actor’s verbal comment. This pattern is illustrated in Example 3. The colon has essentially the same function as the reporting verb ‘says’ but its use enables the focus of the headline to be on the verbal comment itself, rather than being shared by the reporting verb (cf. Example 9 below).

Example 3

Mittal: I gave cash to re-elect Labour

By this simple device, the newspaper **accesses another voice** and introduces an indirect (see above) or a seemingly direct quote of the news actor or another discourse participant (see Example 4). The actual words need not constitute a precise quotation, they can be enclosed in what Fairclough (1989:89) calls ‘scare quotes’ (see Example 5). As a consequence of such an access to another voice, personal pronouns may be introduced into the headline and the headline conventions are loosened, thereby enabling the use of tenses other than the unmarked present tense.

Example 4

Jackson ‘exploited secret husband’

Example 5

Teams ‘peeped at’ naked cheerleaders

The past tense is thus used in such segments of headlines which are identified as pieces of other discourses, i.e. those words which are seemingly uttered by someone else than the reporting paper. In this sense, they provide an illusion of a more direct access to reality, a ‘window’ through which the reader is allowed to catch a direct glimpse of the past. It is important to note, however, that this tendency is attested for hard news items in the quality press; opinion articles are not governed by the same set of implicit headline conventions (as they do not disguise the fact that personal opinion is being presented) and the more popular press operates somewhat differently, too.

The future tense tends to be utilized in the same manner in sections reserved to another voice (understood here as a linguistic form presented as if originated by or belonging to another participant), as Example 6 attests. Such a use of the auxiliary *will* as a ‘**voice marker**’ is parallel to the use of the simple past tense in headlines discussed above.

Example 6

Changes to Bill ‘will increase animal cruelty’

However, there are also instances when the future is used within the voice of the paper itself in situations when the futurity needs to be specified explicitly or if the presence of such adverbials as *sooner or later* calls for the use of the future tense:

Example 7

World court will be judged by biggest case since Nuremberg

The auxiliary ‘will’ used to form the future tense also tends to be used in its modal meanings expressing willingness or unwillingness. One may thus be faced with e.g. an emphatically worded ‘present refusal’ rather than ‘future reference’, especially in view of the convention of coding the future in headlines by means of the to-infinitive (classified among non-finite headlines owing to the ellipsis of the finite form of the verb ‘be’, cf. *Kidman [is] to play medieval queen*). The notion of ‘present willingness’ is thus apparent in e.g. the following instance:

Example 8

Byers will meet boycott leaders

Other modals have been attested in headlines as well, e.g. *can, may, could, would*, etc. They can be co-classified together with the past and the future tenses because they share an important distinguishing characteristic as opposed to the conventional present tense: they do not realize any tense shift but refer to the real time of the event reported, expressing the whole range of modal meanings – present/future/past ability, possibility, permission, etc.

2.1.2 Multiple tensed forms in headlines

Table 2 below indicates that in 12.5 per cent of the cases, headlines contain two finite verb forms, i.e. they are made up of two clauses forming either a complex or a compound sentence. The vast majority of cases includes a double use of the conventional present tense.

A distinct pattern is formed with noun clauses functioning as direct objects of the reporting verb ‘to say’, as in Example 9:

Example 9

NHS is worse than ever, says public

The present tense of *says* refers to a past event, while the present form *is* in the noun clause refers to a present state. This pattern is similar to the colon structure discussed in Example 3 above and has the same effect of enabling the access of another voice into the headline.

Other patterns are usual as well: coordinated main clauses (Example 10 – expressing addition, contrast, etc.), noun clauses as objects of verbs other than ‘to say’ (Example 11), direct quotes consisting of several independent sentences (Example 12), and others.

Example 10

The flying media circus sits at the back and waits to be summoned

Example 11

EU checks to see if sauce is a vegetable

Example 12

The chief executive ‘I’m not surprised the system keeps breaking down. I need more staff’

However, there are also several instances when the present tense is used in connection with the past tense. Although the number of instances is too small to draw any clear conclusions, it appears that the conventional present tense is used in the main clause of the headline, expressing the major event which is being reported. The past tense occurs in subordinate clauses which express a previous action (the arrangement of the tenses thus indicates posteriority, cf. Example 13) and/or a circumstance (see Example 14).

Example 13

Wife’s affair tore my heart out, teacher tells jury

Example 14

Couple who hushed boys in cinema are beaten up

In this sense, the past tense in such complex sentence headlines is connected with a more ‘distal’ event – either one which is further removed in time or perceived as relatively marginal or circumstantial. **The present tense may thus serve a foregrounding function, while the past tense may be used for backgrounding.** More material will be needed, however, to show how frequent and systematic the tendency of mirroring clause subordination by the choice of tenses (i.e. main clause = present tense, subordinate clause = past tense) might be.

2.2 Non-finite sentence types as headlines

In the analysis of non-finite headlines, it was felt necessary to make a two-fold distinction. One of the classificatory criteria was whether the headline is a sentence fragment

which arose as a result of an ellipsis of a finite auxiliary, as in *Diana’s butler sent for trial* (referred to as ‘non-finite ellipted’) or whether it is entirely nominal, as in *Weighty task for Chinese army* (classified as ‘non-finite nominal’). A second distinction was made between such non-finite structures that stand entirely on their own (as is the case with the previous two quoted examples) and those that are accompanied by a clause (typically specifying circumstances, e.g. *Call for new trawl nets as dolphin deaths rise*). As such headlines are not formally sentences but structurally resemble complex sentences, they are marked in Table 2 below as ‘simple sentence fragments’ and ‘complex sentence fragments’, respectively.

Table 2
Headlines containing non-finite main clauses

Headline type	Instances	%	%	% of total	% of total
Non-finite ellipted – simple sentence fragment	51	52.0	61.2	21.1	24.8
Non-finite ellipted – complex sentence fragment	9	9.2		3.7	
Non-finite nominal – simple sentence	34	34.7	38.8	14.0	15.7
Non-finite nominal – complex sentence	4	4.1		1.7	
Total	98	100	100	40.5	40.5

As the focus of the present article is on the uses of the present tense in headlines, the non-verbal headlines (consisting of non-finite ellipted/nominal simple sentences) will not be dealt with. The remaining 13 examples (see Table 2), making up 5 per cent of all headlines (i.e. 16 per cent of the non-finite ones), have the **structure of a complex sentence**, regardless of whether the non-finiteness is the result of an ellipsis of an auxiliary or merely the nominal form of the main clause element.

2.2.1 Non-finite ellipted and non-finite nominal headlines with a complex sentence structure

The following two examples indicate the difference between non-finite ellipted headlines (Example 14) and non-finite nominal headlines (Example 15):

Example 14

Isle of Man sealed off as police hunt killer of teenagers

Example 15

Hard time for graduates as employers cut intake

Even though the number of instances falling into this category is relatively low (13), all of the headlines exhibit a striking structural similarity. They follow the same pattern – a non-finite structure is followed by the conjunction ‘as’ introducing a clause with a finite verb form – in the conventional present tense.

This pattern stands out particularly because such headlines refer to two main events (news) in combination: a STATE (expressed by the non-finite element) followed by an ACTION/EVENT (expressed by the finite clause). It is significant that the finite clause is structurally backgrounded, yet it is sufficiently newsworthy (and could take over the focus of the headline in the absence of the non-finite element, as in: *Arafat blamed as suicide gunmen kill four Israelis*). The conjunction ‘as’ plays various roles in this template – most typically, it may express causality (cause-result relationship) and simultaneity (two parallel events). The event introduced by ‘as’ is conceived of as a frame for another, related event. Such a duality of events in the headline may be a welcome opportunity for increasing its ‘narrativity’ and turning it into a real story.

3 Conclusion

The analysis of the set of headlines from the Electronic Telegraph has shown that the present tense in hard news headlines is used in three distinct patterns. First, it conventionally refers to past events in simple headlines. Second, it occurs in connection with other tensed forms and there appears to be a tendency to use the present simple for foregrounded actions while events considered as circumstantial to the main news story may be coded by means of the simple past tense. Finally, the present simple tense is utilized in clauses introduced by the conjunction ‘as’, which provide the background to (or the reason for) the focal event presented as a current state by means of a nominal (non-finite) element.

The use of the present simple in headlines is explained in connection with its ‘atemporality’ and its operation as an ‘internal evaluation device’ in narrative. Its property of referring to past events, seen as unmarked within the context of hard news headlines, is interpreted as being essentially motivated by the interpersonal function.

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