
GRAMMAR MISTAKE OR CREATIVE EFFECTIVENESS?

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Abstract: The starting point of the article is its title. There are some nouns and adjectives but no verbs in it. Neither main, nor auxiliary verbs. Even though it is a question, the structure does not follow any of the question types either. This makes us think that the title of the article in particular and the headlines in general do not follow the structure of the English sentence.

That is a common situation. A lot of headlines in newspapers and on covers of magazines, advertisements or just e-mails do not follow the grammar rules of a language. The Cambridge Dictionary says that headlines often use non-standard grammar and sometimes they are difficult to read. On the one hand, the main features are the use of a series of nouns, ellipsis, lack of articles or verbs (especially the verb *to be*).

Is it a mistake or just a way to attract the reader's attention? The article aims at providing an analysis of this type of 'mistakes' and address this knowledge gap.

On the other hand, in order to make the news more dramatic, powerful and persuasive, to make events sound as if they are happening now, headlines commonly use the present simple, even if the article refers to a past event or the *to*-infinitive form to refer to future events.

It is easy to relate the present perfect to the past. Although it is called present, the present perfect is a tense with past-time reference. It refers to actions and events in English that have happened up to now, in the recent past. This is the reason it is often compared to the past simple. But how can we relate the present simple to past actions and events? In formal writing the present simple is also used to refer to events in the past.

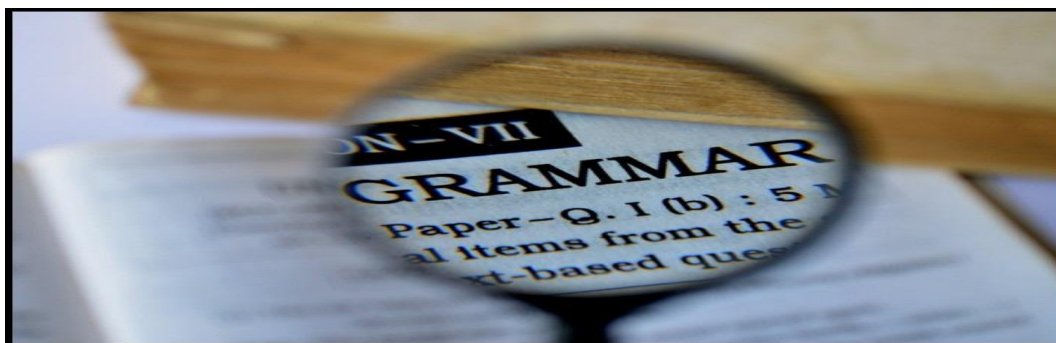
Yet another 'mistake' should be mentioned. Especially the advertisements give the reader the benefit of the doubt. They use grammar items which are not suitable for this very situation. For example, the use of countable and uncountable nouns in English is different in regard to both determiners and verbs. However, they are used interchangeably.

A similar 'mistake' is made with the plural form of the noun and the possessive (*body's* instead of *bodies*, Victoria's Secretad).

The present study comes to the conclusion that the creative effectiveness of headlines and ads is the reason for all the 'mistakes'. It is expressed only by key words to grab the attention of the reader.

Keywords: grammar, mistake, creative effectiveness, headline

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1. INTRODUCTION

Titles and headlines with their main purpose to communicate an idea by using a few words are the most important part of any writing, no matter if it is an article, a newsletter, a blog, a web page, an email or a business report. Headlines place the impact on the readers.

The article aims at establishing the most frequently used grammatical features that occur in headlines and advertisements as well as providing an analysis of this type of 'mistakes'. It attempts to apply the grammatical rules to the corpus of newspaper headlines in order to find out in what details the grammar of headlines differ from that of

the common core. The term ‘common core’ is described by David Crystal as “the range of linguistic features which would be used and understood by all speakers, regardless of their regional or social background”. (Crystal 2003, 460)

The material searched for the purpose of this paper consists mainly of headlines, which were randomly chosen from different British newspapers as well as various advertisements. The material is definitely limited and cannot exemplify all features. Therefore, the aim is rather to establish general characteristics with respect to the main areas which have been studied.

2. GRAMMAR IN HEADLINES

Headlines in newspapers are characterized with a special language. They are the first and often the only thing which many readers are interested in.

Simple, clear and precise – this is the rule we should follow when writing the title of an article or the headlines in newspapers and on covers of magazines. It is true for advertisements and e-mails as well. They do not stick to the grammar rules of the language. The Cambridge Dictionary (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/amp/british-grammar/types-of-english-formal-informal-etc/newspaper-headlines>) says that headlines often use non-standard grammar and sometimes they are difficult to read. Its main features are the use of short words, noun strings, ellipsis, and lack of articles or verbs (especially the verb *to be*). Word play and ambiguity are characteristic, too. That is why the meaning of the headline can sometimes be misleading or misinterpreted.

2.1. Headlines normally do not contain auxiliaries, pronouns, or articles.

This results in the use of only lexical but not grammatical words. What is the reason? The problem of fitting the best words may occur. Then the rule of a sentence may be broken, only minor sentences are used, and such a headline can be rather difficult to understand.

In some British newspapers, for example, the leading headlines usually omit verbs. This results in ambiguity and more ways of interpretation.

Decoding Brexit: Making sense of the jargon (<https://www.euronews.com/2019/01/29/decoding-brexit-making-sense-of-the-jargon>)

Transfer News Live: Two major stars on the way to the Premier League (<https://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/transfer-news-live>)

House prices/ Growth fastest in north of England and Midlands (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news>)

Headlines sometimes use a conjunction¹, an adverb or a preposition to begin, which is not typical for a regular sentence. In this way they are used for emphasis.

Through a lens darkly (<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/c/through-lens-darkly>)

Only Labour can tackle the inequality that shames our nation (<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/only-labour-can-tackle-inequality-shames-our-nation>)

Even Corbynites are rejecting the dear leader (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/even-corbynites-are-rejecting-the-dear-leader-5nn0v3002>)

Headlines often omit the definite and indefinite articles (*the, a, an*).

Tusk says ‘special place in hell’ for those who promoted Brexit without plan (<https://www.channel4.com/news/tusk-says-special-place-in-hell-for-those-who-promoted-brexit-without-plan>)

Is it a mistake or just a way to attract the reader’s attention? Whatever the answer is, ‘mistake’ is going to be used for similar situations in the present article.

2.2. Ellipsis.

Ellipsis is quite a common phenomenon in newspaper headlines. Two types of ellipsis can be identified: medial and initial. Whatever the kind of ellipsis is used, the missing word(s) can be inserted “without changing the meaning and without producing an ungrammatical structure”. (Biber et al. 1999, 442)

Medial ellipsis is generally related to the omission of the operator (Biber et al. 1999, 442). Concerning headlines, it means that in the utterances with this type of ellipsis auxiliary verbs are the most frequent elements which are omitted.

Venezuela's government threaten to hold early legislative elections to unseat the right-wing opposition

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¹ ‘Conjunctions’ are short words that join structures. The most common are *and, or, but, nor, yet, and so*.

Venezuela's government threaten to hold early legislative elections to unseat the right-wing opposition



[Venezuela's government threaten to hold early legislative elections to unseat the right-wing opposition](#)

Venezuela's government threaten to hold early legislative elections to unseat the right-wing opposition
 Venezuela's government threaten to hold early legislative elections to unseat the right-wing opposition
 (<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/w/venezuela%27s-government-threaten-to-hold-early-legislative-elections-to-unseat-the-right-wing-opposition>)

Facebook's Ad Transparency Questioned (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswfhm>)

Not only the auxiliary verb, but the subject is also omitted in utterances with initial ellipsis. Such words are usually at the beginning of the clause and they are regarded as words with a low information value. Moreover, Quirk et al. (1991) distinguish three categories of ellipsis in terms of its recoverability- situational, structural and textual. (Quirk et al., 1991, 892-893) As just situational and structural ellipsis were found in the corpus, textual is not considered. Quirk et al. say that "typically situational ellipsis is initial, especially taking the form of omission of subject and/or operator" (Quirk et al. 1991, 895-896). Quirk et al. remark that for the structural ellipsis the most important knowledge is that of grammatical structures and it is often confined to written language and involves "the common omission of determiners, operators, and other closed-class words in block language". (Quirk et al., 1991)

2.3. Headlines are fragments.

A sentence consists of a subject (the actor), a verb (the action), a complete thought, an initial capital, and end punctuation. If any of these parts are missing, the result is a *fragment*.

['No real progres' on Eurogroup transparency](https://euobserver.com/) (<https://euobserver.com/>)

[Sayeeda Warsi on Islamophobia, the changing face of Conservative politics and human rights policy](https://www.channel4.com/news/sayeeda-warsi-on-islamophobia-the-changing-face-of-conservative-politics-and-human-rights-policy)
 (<https://www.channel4.com/news/sayeeda-warsi-on-islamophobia-the-changing-face-of-conservative-politics-and-human-rights-policy>)

There are two types of headlines. **Sentential headlines** are all headlines that have a regular sentence structure, simple and complex sentences, i.e. all headlines with a subject and a finite verb phrase (Quirk 1991, 149).

The structure of **non-sentential headlines**, on the other hand, is lower than a regular sentence. Although they are constructed in an irregular way, they are frequently used.

2.4. Questions in headlines

Questions are not typical for headlines because they lack the answer and the main information. However, they are more often used to attract the reader's attention, to differ from the other headlines, to be catching. They typically show what is being written about, respectively, what question is being answered in the article.

Grannies against the right: older women are rising up – could they bring down Brexit?
 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2019/feb/07/grannies-against-brexit-its-time-for-older-women-to-take-to-the-streets>)

An environmental union? (<https://www.endsreport.com/reports/euref>)

Readers are not expected to give the answer. That is what the article is supposed to do.

2.5. Present instead of past

In order to make the news more dramatic, powerful and persuasive, to make the events sound as if they are happening now, headlines commonly use the present simple, even if the article refers to a past event.

It is easy to relate the present perfect to the past. Although it is called present, the present perfect is a tense with past-time reference. It refers to actions and events in English that have happened up to now, in the recent past. That is the reason it is often compared to the past simple. But how can we relate the present simple to past actions and events? The focus of the present article 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.

In formal writing the present simple is also used to refer to events in the past. The present tense is quick and current, and helps emphasise the action happening, rather than its completion.

On the other hand, the simple tense is used instead of the continuous or perfect tense. For the same reason the *to*-infinitive form can be used to refer to future events.

Temperatures to plummet to -10 C as ‘very significant snowfall’ forecast for UK (<https://www.independent.co.uk/30.01.2019>)

Nato to add Macedonia despite Putin warning (<https://euobserver.com/foreign/144109>)

2.6. If-clauses used as headlines

Headlines indicate a tendency to use if-clauses to express a threat, too.

If Sisi’s brutality in Egypt countries, the results could be dire for Europe (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/11/sisi-egypt-brutality-europe>)

2.7. Headlines do not spell out numbers

The leading rule again is The shorter, the better. Another reason for this feature is that figures are more impressive than their spelling.

Gove: 10 environment plan goals to be set in law (<https://www.endsreport.com/article/62083/gove-10-environment-plan-goals-to-be-set-in-law>)

Premier League: 10 talking points from the weekend’s action (<https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2019/feb/11/premier-league-ten-talking-points>)

2.8. Headlines use colon for *said* or *says*

Denmark burqa ban: “My clothes, my choice” (<https://cafebabel.com/en/article/denmark-burqa-ban-my-clothes-my-choice-5b642c5ef723b32cc9b140b7/>)

2.9. Abbreviations

Abbreviations, including contractions and acronyms, are usually used and the period is omitted from these abbreviations.

Trumped-up: EU-US trade deal spells climate disaster (<https://euobserver.com/opinion/144080>)

2.10. ‘The benefit of the doubt’

Yet another ‘mistake’ should be mentioned. Especially the advertisements give the reader the benefit of the doubt. They use grammar items which are not suitable for this very situation. For example, the use of countable and uncountable nouns in English is different in regard to both determiners and verbs. However, they are used interchangeably.

Has ignoring grammar rules become the rule in advertising? It probably makes you feel curious and the ‘mistake’ makes you think about it. Thus, this is a step forward; it has already attracted your attention.

Mercedes-Benz says for their 2012 C-class coupé: “*More power. More style. More technology. Less doors.*” (a TV commercial). We will argue that ‘less’ means smaller in quantity, e.g., less money; ‘fewer’ means smaller in number, e.g., fewer coins, and is therefore the correct word to use. This is a clever headline with an unexpected twist at the end and so the element of surprise makes the ad eye-catching and memorable.

A similar ‘mistake’ is made with the plural form of the noun and the possessive.

Victoria’s Secret ad for their *Body by Victoria* line of underwear uses *body’s* instead of *bodies*. The obvious ‘mistake’ of the possessive apostrophe to turn the name into plural looks even worse by setting quotation marks around it. The grabbing-attention ‘mistake’ achieved its aim once again.



Alliteration is another characteristic feature. Headlines use it to attract the eye and make it more memorable. The three Ds in the following headline are not accidentally used:

Brexit: Donald, devils and Dublin (<https://www.channel4.com/news/by/gary-gibbon/blogs/brexit-donald-devils-and-dublin>)

The repetition of one and the same letter highlights the negativity towards Brexit: the European Council President Donald Tusk, the reaction in the UK press to his “special place in hell” statement, associated with devils, and Dublin, the place where Brexit hangs like a cloud over politics, because Brexit is a threat to Ireland.

Sometimes the imperative, both negative and positive, is used to direct the attention to the main idea, the topic or a particular element or item of the article or ad under discussion.

Don't bin the bacon! How to turn the 10 most wasted ingredients into delicious soups (<https://www.theguardian.com/food/2019/feb/07/dont-bin-the-bacon-how-to-turn-the-10-most-wasted-ingredients-into-delicious-soups>)

Ban children's smartphones from mealtimes and before bed, parents told



(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/02/07/social-media-fuels-addiction-chief-medical-officer-backs-duty/>)

It is obvious that several ‘mistakes’ or features of the headline language can be combined. Besides the use of an imperative in the headline above, ellipsis is also present (*parents told*).

2.11. Texting

It is well-known that text messaging has changed the way we communicate. In the past years technology has “intruded” a new trend of communication that turned the worldview of many people, especially teenagers. Texting has also changed the meaning of sentences, punctuation, and grammar (Tsvetkova 2018). It arises the question: Does proper grammar matter in text messages?

3. CONCLUSION

The present study comes to the conclusion that the creative effectiveness of headlines and ads is the reason for all the ‘mistakes’. It is expressed by key words only to grab the attention of the reader. It breaks the grammar rules. The fact that the [full stop](#) is missing at the end even if the headline forms a complete sentence emphasizes on the incompleteness of the idea and urges the reader to go on reading.

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