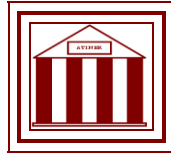


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*The Guardian Sports Headlines from a  
Syntactic Perspective*

**Sara Quintero Ramírez  
Professor  
University of Guadalajara  
Mexico**

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## **The Guardian Sports Headlines from a Syntactic Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to identify the main syntactic characteristics examined in a corpus of 100 sports headlines from the British national daily newspaper The Guardian in its electronic version. Headlines constitute a text genre that plays an important role in attracting the reader's attention and encouraging him or her to read the rest of the news presented in the article.

The main syntactic features we observed in this corpus were the following: a) the regular use of standard sentence patterns: subject + verb + direct object + circumstantial(s); b) the frequent use of the classic present indicative in third person singular; c) the not so frequent presence of noun phrases (as the only constituent of the headline) – most of the few noun phrases found in the corpus were formed by proper nouns that refer to a specific team or a specific sports personality; d) the constant reference to sports personalities through their complete names (i.e. names and last names).

Other syntactic characteristics that we observed in the corpus were the following: a) the common ellipsis of the copula verbs; b) the regular absence of definite and indefinite determiners in noun phrases; c) the use of quotations without writing the verb of communication; and so forth.

**Keywords:** Syntax, sports headlines, nominal phrases, verbal constructions, ellipsis, present indicative.

## **Introduction**

The objective of this paper is to describe a corpus of 100 sports headlines in relation to the syntactic features that distinguish the structure of this particular text genre in *The Guardian* newspaper. It is important to comment that we have done this syntactic research in Spanish (Quintero Ramírez, 2013) and we are carrying it out also in French with different types of corpora; since we believe that sports headlines present some widespread syntactic features, (such as brief constructions in present indicative) but in each language, this genre displays also very specific characteristics.

In order to arrive to the objective of this study, the manuscript is organized as follows. First of all, a literature review section about the newspaper headlines is introduced; in this section, we offer various definitions of newspaper headlines and we establish a list of their main syntactic features based on previous research on the subject. Secondly, there is a methodology section in which we explain how the corpus was constituted and the way we proceeded in order to analyze it. Afterwards, the analysis of the corpus of sports headlines is analyzed according to the syntactic parameters established in the literature review. At last, we present the conclusions of this study.

## **Literature Review**

### *Newspaper Headlines*

Newspaper articles are very important texts that have the goal of informing and updating the society about any social, political, economic or sports event. Indeed, "[a] newspaper is not just an anthology of new stories. It is a structured whole designed to help the reader make choices as to which news items to ignore, to sample, to skim, or to read thoroughly while constructing his or her own 'personal newspaper' out of the texts available" (Thogmartin, 1987: 249).

But, why do newspaper headlines and not newspaper articles constitute the main focus of our study? In the first place, there is no article without a headline; this is a rule of newspaper writing (Mouillaud, 1982: 75). In other words, all the stories in a newspaper must be introduced by a headline. In the second place, and most importantly, as newspaper headlines are defined as summaries of the news that are written in the body of the article (Alarcos Llorach, 1977; van Dijk, 1990; Herrera Cecilia, 2006; Castro Ferrer, 2011), there are a lot of people who claim not to have enough time to read the articles in a newspaper and prefer to read only the headlines in order to be informed. As a matter of fact, nowadays, there are more and more newspaper headlines readers instead of newspaper article readers because of this lack of time claim. "Skilled newspaper readers spend most of their reading time scanning the headlines - rather than reading the stories" (Dor, 2003: 695).

*What is a Newspaper Headline?*

"Newspaper headlines will be functionally defined as relevance optimizers [...] They are designed to optimize the relevance of their stories for their readers" (Dor, 2003: 696). For this author, the true role of the newspaper headline is as a "negotiator" between the news presented in the body of the article and the reader. Certainly, readers of newspaper headlines, especially sports headlines readers, must have a significant knowledge of the subject in order to understand the story in the article: "the construction of a successful headline requires an understanding of the readers - their state-of-knowledge, their beliefs and expectations and their cognitive styles - no less than it requires an understanding of the story" (Dor, 2003: 696).

Moreover, for researchers who study the ideologies that lie behind the newspapers, "headlines are emotion-inducing strategy in the hands of the editor used to initiate, sustain discourse and shape the views of the readers [...]" on important matters such as political, economic or social issues (Taiwo, 2007: 218). In other words, headlines play the role of antecedents to the news presented in the body of the article, and the way they are constructed is important in order to evoke emotions in readers.

In countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Mexico, and many others, the author of the headline is not the author of the article. Most of the time, the headline is written by the editor or by a member of the editorial board. The newspaper headlines authors try to cleverly choose words and expressions that reflect the thoughts, beliefs and emotions of people about different matters in the news (Taiwo, 2007: 219). That is why newspaper headlines have become an important text genre and they constitute the main focus of this study.

Besides the explanations offered in the above paragraphs, newspaper headlines constitute an excellent field to research in linguistics, especially because of the particular kind of syntactic phenomena displayed by this text genre (Bucaria, 2004: 280). Indeed, there are some very particular syntactic features of newspaper headlines that are not accepted in other text genres. Moreover, some of these features create a specific style in order to attract the reader's attention and make him or her read the rest of the article.

*Syntactic Features of Newspaper Headlines*

As Bucaria (2004) and Herrero Cecilia (2006) state, because of the space constraints of the newspaper headlines, their syntax is brief and concise; this means that omissions of specific grammar categories, such as determiners, verbs (i.e., copulas, auxiliaries, communicative verbs and others), and other lexical categories are very frequent (Bucaria, 2004; Nadal Palazón, 2012; Quintero Ramírez, 2013).

Following Bucaria and Herrero Cecilia's idea of brevity and conciseness, Nadal Palazón (2012) notices the presence of noun phrases, the recurrent use of the present indicative (Alcoba, 1985) instead of other tenses and moods, and the use of quotations of specific personalities. These features make that readers

feel attracted to the headlines and feel the need to continue to read the whole article.

Certainly, ellipsis is one important syntactic feature in newspaper headlines, especially in sports headlines where the reader is supposed to have a significant knowledge of the subject in order to fill in the omissions. Indeed, in sports headlines, we can find very often the noun *Madrid* instead of the noun phrase *Real Madrid*, and we as readers are supposed to know that this noun makes reference to the Real Madrid football team and not Atlético de Madrid which is known by sports journalists and supporters as *Atléti*.

Moreover, the ellipsis of determiners in noun phrases is very frequently seen in sports headlines. Besides this ellipsis, the omission of verbs in verbal constructions is a recurrent phenomenon. For example, we can read the following headline in the daily newspaper *The Guardian* of October 2nd: *New York Red Bulls 'not for sale'*, in which we observe the absence of the determiner *the* in the noun phrase, and the omission of the verb *to be* conjugated in present indicative third person plural *are* in the verbal construction that is presented as a quotation. Without any ellipsis, we would read the following title: *The New York Red Bulls 'are not for sale'*. Indeed, if we read the story presented in the article, we can see that the real quotation stated by the Major League Soccer (MLS) commissioner, Don Garber, was the following: "I can absolutely assure you that the New York Red Bulls are not for sale."

In addition to ellipsis, noun phrases are common in sports headlines because they contribute to the brevity of the genre and they denote creativity from the author of the headline. For example, numerous baseball headlines present *Captain Clutch*, *Yankees Captain* or *Mr. November* as the main subject of the article. The reader is then supposed to know that all these noun phrases make reference to Derek Jeter, and sports headlines authors use these terms in order to attract the reader's attention.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the sports headlines is the frequent use of present indicative, even if the article is written in another tense, such as simple past. Alcoba Rueda (1983: 114) states that the present indicative is very frequently used in newspaper headlines because it is considered a tenseless form, it is not a deictic form in this text genre. The headlines in present indicative constitute a simple label for presenting any event that can be written in any other tense and mood in the body of the article. For example, in sports headlines we can read that a football team defeats another one (in present indicative), and not defeated (in past tense).

### *Sports Discourse*

All the media: radio, television, written the press, and nowadays the electronic press, relate very closely to sports events. In fact, the media try to inform the society about all kinds of sports events that take place in many parts of the world: football, tennis, baseball, basketball, cricket, rugby, boxing, etc. According to Marín Montín (2000: 241), no other human activity creates so much expectation in the society than sports do, giving the sports journalist play

an important role in our present world because he/she represents the link between the audience and the sports events.

Sports discourse in the media has been studied from many different linguistic perspectives, since sports journalists have a particular way of describing, narrating and interpreting the events. Indeed, sports journalists use numerous technical terms, such as the names of specific plays and the description of their rules. Moreover, they use various nicknames in order to designate some players, teams and stadiums. Finally, they use creative language in their oral and written texts in order to attract and entertain their audience.

Hence, as we have seen throughout this literature review section, newspaper headlines and sports constitute an interesting text genre, sports headlines, that can be studied from a linguistic perspective, and more specifically from a syntactic point of view.

## **Methodology**

### *Corpus Formation*

The sports headlines corpus of this study consists of 100 newspaper headlines found on the Web site of the British national daily newspaper *The Guardian*, more specifically in the sports section during the months of August and September 2014. We have selected the 100 headlines randomly but trying to select several headlines of all the sports, even if football seems to monopolize most of the section not only of *The Guardian*, but also of many other worldwide newspapers.

We have chosen the headlines of *The Guardian* in order to constitute the corpus of this study because this is a well-known and prestigious daily newspaper. It was founded in 1821 and since September 2011, readers can have access to *Guardian Australia* and *Guardian US*.

In January 2012, the electronic version of the newspaper was the second most popular in the United Kingdom according to the National Newspapers Report (2013). In June 2012, *The Guardian* became the third most frequently read newspaper in all over the world: "The Guardian's online readership has grown rapidly since it adopted a 'digital-first' strategy in June 2011, ensuring that readers around the world get news online as soon as it happens. It was further boosted by opening a digital-only US newsroom in September 2011." (*The Guardian is now ...*, 2014).

Hence, the explanations offered in the above paragraphs made us select our corpus from the daily newspaper *The Guardian*.

### *Analysis Procedure*

In order to analyze our corpus, firstly, we organized the sports headlines according to the type of phrase, to be precise: a) noun phrases and b) verbal constructions. After having organized the headlines into phrases and constructions, we classified them according to the main syntactic parameters

established in previous research and presented in the literature review section of this paper.

In the case of noun phrases, we examined the type of nouns and the determiners preceding the nouns and also hypothesized on the determiners not appearing in the phrase. In the case of verbal constructions, we studied the characteristics of the verbs, more explicitly tense, mood, person and number and the types of arguments and adjuncts of the verb.

An important issue in our analysis is the ellipsis of different syntactic categories, as we have established in the literature review (Bucaria, 2004; Nadal Palazón, 2012; Quintero Ramírez, 2013): determiners, copulas, auxiliary verbs, modal verbs, verbs of communication, and so forth. The following scheme sums up better our analysis procedure:

- Noun phrases
  - a. Type of nouns
  - b. Determiners
  - c. Ellipsis
  
- Verbal constructions
  - a. Tense, mood, person and number
  - b. Types of arguments and complements
  - c. Ellipsis

## **Analysis**

### *Noun Phrases*

According to previous research, noun phrases (as the only constituent of the sentence) are very regularly used in newspaper headlines (Herrero Cecilia, 2006; Hernando Cuadrado, 1994; Nadal Palazón, 2012). Nevertheless, in the corpus of this research, we observed that they are not so common. Indeed, we noticed that the electronic version of *The Guardian* sports section prefers the use of verbal constructions instead of noun phrases. Therefore, noun phrases represent a small number of sports headlines of this corpus (less than 15%).

The few noun phrases we observed in the corpus are constituted of proper nouns that designate a team, as in (1) and (2), or a sports personality, as in (3) and (4). It is worthwhile mentioning that in the second example, we observe that the football team *Queens Park Rangers* is referred to as *QPR*, as all the Premier League audience calls it.

Furthermore, it is interesting to notice the two last examples, since they refer to sports persons through the use of their name and last name. Moreover, it is important to observe that examples (3) and (4) present an ellipsis of the main verb which is the copula *to be*, since the reader can fill in the space between the proper nouns and the adjectives with this verb conjugated in



present indicative: *Rory McIlroy 'is' ready for [...] José Mourinho and Manuel Pellegrini 'are' happy [...]*

1. Chelsea's 25-pass move and 20 of football's greatest team goals [19 Aug 2014].
2. Manchester United 4-0 QPR: Five talking points [14 Sep 2014].
3. Rory McIlroy ready for Europe Ryder Cup expectation after US PGA win [11 Aug 2014].
4. José Mourinho and Manuel Pellegrini happy with 1-1 draw [22 Sep 2014].

#### *Verbal Constructions*

Researchers of newspaper headlines such as Alcoba Rueda (1983), Hernando Cuadrado (1994), Castro Ferrer (2011), Nadal Palazón (2012), and others state that the most widespread tense, mood, person and number in newspaper headlines is present indicative third person singular. In fact, most of the sports headlines of this corpus used this combination of tense, mood, person and number, as we can observe in (5-8).

All the four examples are configured differently. Indeed, in example (5), the verb in present indicative is preceded by the subject *Rafael Nadal* and it is followed by the direct object *Richard Gasquet* and the two circumstantial complements of time and place: *on return from injury* and *at China Open* respectively. We can see the absence of determiners in both circumstantials, since in an alternative headline, we would read: [...] *on return from 'an' injury at 'the' China Open*.

5. Rafael Nadal beats Richard Gasquet on return from injury at China Open [30 Sep 2014].

Example (6) is the shortest headline in this series of examples, since the verb is preceded by a subject constituted by the nicknames of two rugby teams: *Panthers* and *Warriors*, instead of their official names *Penrith* and *New Zealand*, and it is followed by a direct object, *valuable victories*.

6. Panthers and Warriors secure valuable victories [10 Aug 2014].

In example (7), the verb is preceded by the subject *Usain Bolt*, and it is followed by two circumstantial complements, the first one of place, *in India*, and the second one of purpose, *for exhibition cricket match*. It is interesting to see that this last circumstantial complement lacks the indefinite determiner *an*, since an alternative headline would read: [...] *for 'an' exhibition cricket match*.

7. Usain Bolt arrives in India for exhibition cricket match [2 Sep 2014].

Finally, in example (8), the verb is preceded by the subject *Hugo Sánchez*, and it is followed by the direct object *Javier Hernández* and the circumstantial

complement of purpose *to succeed at Real Madrid*. In this headline, it is interesting to notice once again that the two football players and the team are referred to with their complete names, while in the body of the article we can see other noun phrases that refer to all of them through a shorter phrase, such as *Sánchez* instead of *Hugo Sánchez*, *Hernández* and *Chicharito* instead of *Javier Hernández*, and finally *Real* and *Madrid* instead of *Real Madrid*.

8. Hugo Sánchez backs Javier Hernández to succeed at Real Madrid [22 Sep 2014].

In the corpus, we found only two headlines in interrogative mood; we can see both examples in (9) and (10). Example (9) is a coordinate sentence whose coordinating conjunction is *or*. The configuration of the heading is the following: *verb + subject + nominal predicate + conjunction + nominal predicate*. The verb is *to be* and it is conjugated in present indicative third person singular, the subject is *Roger Federer* and the two nominal predicates are the following noun phrases: *the greatest ever* and *the second best of his generation*.

9. Is Roger Federer the greatest ever or the second best of his generation? [11 Sep 2014].

Example (10) presents the noun phrase *football transfer rumors* followed by a colon and then the question constituted by a *noun phrase + full infinitive + preposition + noun phrase + question mark*. It is interesting to notice that once again the tennis player in (9) and both football teams in (10) are referred to with their complete names.

10. Football transfer rumors: Real Madrid to swoop for Raheem Sterling? [24 Sep 2014].

Besides what we have stated about the headlines with verbal constructions, it is important to notice that occasionally the sports headline is presented with a quotation, as we see in (11-13). All three headlines are configured as follows: *author of the quotation + colon + quotation*. As we can observe, in the three headlines in this series, there is an ellipsis of the verb of communication (such as *say, state, affirm, etc.*).

Furthermore, we can see that the three authors of the quotations are designated through their name and last name: *Nicola Adams, Lizzie Armitstead* and *Jo Pavey*. The quotations in these examples are conjugated in different tenses. Indeed, the quotation in (11) is in past simple tense, the one in (12) is in future tense, and the one in (13) is in present indicative.

11. Nicola Adams: "It always felt like boxing was my path" [8 Aug 2014].  
 12. Lizzie Armitstead: At the end of the race, I'll be on my own [26 Sep 2014].

13. Jo Pavey: "Perhaps people relate to me more because I'm 40 and a mum" [13 Aug 2014].

We found a small number of headlines in which the quotation was presented at the beginning of the headline, afterwards, the colon and finally, the name of the author as in (14). As in the three previous examples, the verb of communication is omitted.

14. You are the umpire: Chris Jordan [28 Aug 2014].

Nonetheless, we found a few headlines in which the verb of communication is not omitted, as in example (15), but in this example there is no quotation as in examples (11-14) but a paraphrase of what the technical director Louis van Gaal has stated to the press.

15. Louis van Gaal says Manchester United challenge is the hardest of his career [25 Sep 2014].

Very rarely we found some headlines in other tenses than present indicative. We can see a simple past and a future indicative in examples (16) and (17) correspondingly.

16. Shane Watson ruled out of Australia-Pakistan series [21 Sep 2014].  
17. Yorkshire's Andrew Gale will have chance to clear name at ECB hearing [17 Sep 2014].

As we have seen in this section, sports headlines of the corpus present several syntactic features that characterize this text genre. Besides, *The Guardian* displays some interesting characteristics that we have observed only in this newspaper. In the following section of conclusions, we recapitulate all the features examined in the analysis.

## **Conclusion**

The main aim of the present study was to find out the main syntactic characteristics of the sports headlines from the British national daily newspaper *The Guardian* in its electronic version. After having examined the corpus of headlines, we have observed some interesting syntactic features that can be summarized in the following aspects:

- a. *The Guardian* has a strong preference for the use of verbal constructions in its headlines. The most frequent tense, mood, person and number were present indicative third person singular. Most of the headlines are affirmative, with only a very small number of exceptions in the interrogative mood (only two headlines).

- b. Noun phrases in our corpus were not so frequent as they are in other headlines of other countries such as France, Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, etc., as we can observe in previous research (Herrero Cecilia, 2006; Hernando Cuadrado, 1994; Nadal Palazón, 2012), where the use of noun phrases in the newspaper headlines are very common and sometimes they are even more frequent than verbal constructions.
- c. Most noun phrases in the corpus were constituted by proper nouns in order to make reference to a sports personality or a team.
- d. Another issue that we observed in almost all of the headlines of the corpus was that the sports personalities were always referred to by their name and last name: *José Mourinho, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Lizzie Armitstead, Usain Bolt, Javier Hernández*, etc. This is very different from the sports headlines observed in other languages such as Spanish (Quintero Ramírez, 2013) or French where the last name is frequently used or even a nickname because of the characteristic conciseness of the headline.
- e. Circumstantial complements were very frequently seen in the sports headlines constituted by verbal constructions. Most of them were circumstantials of place, although we observed also a small number of circumstantials of purpose and time. We did not expect to find so many circumstantial complements in the verbal constructions of the corpus for the reason that newspaper headlines are supposed to be a brief text genre.
- f. The few sports headlines that used quotations had a tendency to omit the verb of communication. The most frequent configuration we observed in the corpus was the following: *the author of the quotation (with his or her name and last name) + colon + the quotation*.

Finally, the findings of this research present only a broad overview of the syntactic characteristics that sports headlines display in a specific newspaper, in this case *The Guardian*. Therefore, further research should be done in order to establish other linguistic features of this interesting text genre in other newspapers in English and other languages

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