The use of verbs in newspaper headlines

A case study of two British newspapers

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Abstract

This essay deals with verb use in headlines. More specifically, the aim was to see if there were any differences between two British newspapers in how verbs were used in headlines. In order to carry out this study, 100 headlines were collected from each of the newspapers and organized into groups; headlines that included verbs and headlines that did not. A decision was made to only look at two types of verbs; main verbs and auxiliaries.

The results showed that *The Independent* as well as *The Sun* generally contains verbs. *The Independent* has a slightly higher rate when main verbs and auxiliaries are put together. However, *The Sun* uses more auxiliaries. Only primary and modal auxiliaries are used in *The Sun* as well as in *The Independent*, no semi- or auxiliaries were found in any of the newspaper headlines. Another interesting fact was that *The Independent* has removed all auxiliaries in the forms of *be*. *The Sun* too seems to prefer headlines without this particular auxiliary but there were a few headlines which included forms of *be*.

A comparison between the results presented in this study and a study carried out by Mårdh during the late 1970’s shows similar results. The present study is far more limited in its material but the parts that could be compared shows that the verb use in newspaper headlines has not changed much during the past few decades.

Keywords

*The Sun*, *The Independent*, tabloid, quality, main verbs, auxiliaries.
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1. Introduction, aim and method

1.1 Introduction

This essay deals with newspaper language, more specifically with how headlines are constructed in terms of verbal use. In today’s society we are surrounded by different types of media. Newspapers are a large part of our lives and there are many newspapers fighting for our attention. News is something which gets old very fast, we get new newspapers every day and the old ones are thrown away. Some people wish to read the whole paper, perhaps over their morning coffee, while others go straight to the sport section reading about the latest soccer game. Headlines make it easier for the readers to find what they are interested in (Reah 1998:13-14). Ungerer (2000:vii) talks about the fact that it is important to make the paper interesting and make sure the reader’s attention is caught. Headlines are crucial when it comes to capturing people’s interest. Word choice can determine how interested a reader becomes in reading a certain text. It can also determine how affected the reader gets and how he or she interprets facts (Pitarchenko, 2008:2-3). Schneider (2000:54) mentions how some linguists claim that a good headline must include a verb. However, is this really true? And how are the headlines in newspapers generally constructed? In this paper I will focus on the use of verbs in two British newspapers, one quality and one tabloid. I will study the frequency of main verbs and auxiliaries in each of the newspapers and see what similarities and differences there are.

1.2 Aim

The aim of this study is to see if there are any differences and/or similarities between two British newspapers, The Sun (tabloid) and The Independent (quality), in how headlines are constructed in terms of verbal use. In addition, the results will be compared to previous studies on the topic. The following aspects will be investigated:

- Do the headlines of the newspapers chosen generally contain verbs or not?

- Are there any differences between quality and tabloid newspapers’ headlines in terms of verbal use? If there are differences, how is this indicated and what can be possible reasons for the differences?
• How do my findings correspond to previous claims?

1.3 Material and Method

The material for this study was collected from the internet based versions of The Sun and The Independent. The papers were chosen because they differ from each other, The Independent is a quality and The Sun is a tabloid. The intention was to see if they differ in terms of how they use verbs in headlines. In order to accomplish the aim, 100 headlines, collected in November 2010, from each of the two newspapers were randomly chosen and investigated in terms of verbal use. The headlines were collected mainly from the front pages of the newspapers but also from different sections in the papers to give a broad view on the headlines’ structure.

The chosen headlines were analyzed and categorized into groups; headlines which included verbs and headlines which did not. The group which included verbs was then separated into subcategories; main verbs and auxiliaries. I chose to only look at these two types of verbs. There are a number of other categorizations that could have been used but there was not time nor space to look at them all in this particular paper. For a more detailed description of different verbs, see Estling Vannestål (2007). To see examples of an alternative way of categorizing verbal headlines see Mårdh (1988).

A comparison between the two newspapers was made to see if there were any differences and/or similarities in terms of verbal use in headlines. Finally, the results in this study were compared to previous work on the topic.

The results in this paper do not give a universal view of the frequency of verbs in newspaper headlines since the material is restricted to 100 headlines from each newspaper. If a greater number of headlines had been studied, it might have given a different result. A different result would also have been possible if other newspapers had been studied or if headlines had been collected during a longer period of time. Nevertheless, the result presented here could give a hint in the direction of how verbs are used in British newspapers.
2. Background

2.1 Historical background

Newspapers in Britain are first and foremost business. They do not exist to report the news, to act as watchdogs for the public, to be a check on the doings of government, to defend the ordinary citizen against abuses of power, to unearth scandals or to do any of the other fine and noble[sic] things that are sometimes claimed for the press. They exist to make money just as any other business does. To the extent that they discharge any of their public functions, they do so in order to succeed as business.

(Colin Sparks, in Keeble, 2005:2)

Today, newspapers appear to be closely connected to business and not only to information and news. However, they come from a long tradition of informing people around the world about local as well as global news. According to Fries and Schneider (2000:4-5) the precursor of the newspaper was the newsbook which was introduced during the 17th century. The headlines were very long and took up most of the space on the front page. In 1665 the first English newspaper was published, called The Oxford Gazette. At first it had no competitors but in the 18th century a number of other newspapers were established. The style and language of the newspapers were getting more and more important as the number of papers grew and had to compete with each other. Fries and Schneider (2000:4-5) explains that it was important to be able to get the reader’s attention, and headlines obtained a more central role as the competition between newspapers grew. The first headline has been traced back to September 2, 1622 and appeared in Weekly News (Márdu, 1988:17).

2.2 Theoretical background

2.2.1 Headlines

In this section the term headline will be presented and discussed. The Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2010) defines headline as “a line of words printed in large letters as the title of a story in a newspaper, or the main points of the news that are broadcast on television or radio”.
The purpose of a headline is to summarize a text, attract readers and split up the text on the page to make it easier to read. The language is important when it comes to making people interested. There are different types of headlines; some summarize the main news, some the whole article and some only reveals a few hints of the story. Even though these types differ from each other, the chief aim is to evoke interest among the readers to make them read or buy the paper (Mårdh, 1980:15-16). Modern headlines tend to focus on only one or perhaps two main points present in an article (Schneider, 2000:54). They are also closely connected to pictures which help strengthen the message of the headline. Sometimes the headlines would be impossible to understand without a picture which shows what is referred to (Reah, 1998:23). According to Reah (1998:13,16,19) the shaping of headlines is restricted since it depends on the design of the paper. Headlines can take up a lot of space, especially on front pages. However, due to the limited space, grammatical words, such as auxiliaries and determiners, are often left out in favor of lexical words such as nouns, adjectives and adverbs. The reason for excluding the grammatical words is that the meaning of the headline can often be understood even if they are removed, especially if looking at the context. Lexical words are more important when it comes to the readers’ comprehension. Another common feature is that the words in headlines generally tend to be short, effective and with the intention of catching the readers’ interest. Mårdh (1980:11-13) uses the term ‘economy grammar’ to refer to this short but informative type of language used in headlines, telegrams, advertisements etc. She also mentions a general view that headlines have their own rules and are seen as a particular language variety.

2.2.2 Verbs

Estling Vannestål (2001:152-153) brings up two categories of verbs: main verbs and auxiliaries. Most verbs are so called main verbs which can either stand on their own or follow an auxiliary. Main verbs are divided into three categories; transitive, intransitive or linking verbs. Transitive verbs are used together with an object. In contrast, intransitive verbs are not used together with an object. Many verbs can be both transitive and intransitive depending on the context they are used in but some are always either transitive or intransitive. Linking verbs are used together with a predicative. According to Greenbaum and Nelson (2009:37-40) regular main verbs can be divided into base form, -s form, -ing form and -ed form. Auxiliaries occur together with main verbs; most often they precede another verb (the main verb or another auxiliary). They usually do not stand on their own. Auxiliaries stand in front
of the main verb and the authors also divide them into groups. First there is the primary auxiliaries be, have and do, these auxiliaries can also be used as main verbs. Then there is the modal auxiliaries, can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might and must, and finally a third group of semi-auxiliaries; have to, be going to, had better and ought to (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2007:37-40).

Mårdh (1980:50) divides verbal headlines into six main types;

(a) Finite verbal headlines (Bus crashes)

(b) Verbal headlines with omitted auxiliary (Bus found)

(c) Non-finite verbal headlines (Found)

(d) SCs-headlines (Bus export a success)

(e) SA-headlines (Bus in ditch)

(f) Coordinated verbal headlines (Man kidnapped and shot)

Mårdh 1980:50

For a more detailed description of the types of verbs presented above, see Mårdh (1980:50).

2.3 Previous work

Mårdh (1980:185) made a study based on a corpus of data collected from headlines on the front page of two newspapers, The Times and The Daily Mirror. The material was collected between February and June 1974.

Mårdh (1980:185) came to the conclusion that finite verbal headlines was the most common type of verbal construction used in both papers, used in 61.9% of the headlines from The Times and in 81% of the headlines from The Daily Mirror (Mårdh 1980:158). Mårdh (1980:182) also came to the conclusion that the headlines were sometimes abbreviated, for example by removing an article or a verb, “but it also happens that neither a subject nor a verb is present, as in adverbial headlines” (Mårdh, 1980:182). Moreover, she found a high number of passive constructions and drew the conclusion that in headlines, the agent is of little
importance. Focus is put on the story and a verb is often preferred instead of a subject (Mårdh 1980:183-184).

According to Mårdh, her results “indicate that there is a core grammar of English newspaper headlines” (Mårdh 1980:184). Most of the structures she found occur in The Times as well as in The Daily Mirror, but the frequency differs somewhat. One difference between The Times and The Daily Mirror was that nearly four out of five headlines from The Daily Mirror include a verb. In the headlines from The Times approximately only half of the headlines include a verb (1980:184-185).

In Mårdh’s study the verb *be* occurred in 18.1% of the headlines in The Daily Mirror and in 11.2% in The Times (1980:161). Mårdh refers to *be* as a dummy verb with no actual function since the meaning often can be understood from the context. It is absent in a number of languages, for example in Latin, and also in other varieties such as child language. However, *be* is necessary when it is the main verb in a clause. The general approach is to omit this verb even when it grammatically should be there, because the headline becomes more emphatic without it (1988:159).

3. Results and discussion

In this section the results of the study will be presented and discussed. The results of each newspaper will be presented individually. The results of the two papers will then be compared to each other and connected to previous studies.

3.1 The Independent

To begin with, 90 out of the 100 headlines collected from The Independent include one or several verbs. 10 out of the 100 headlines do not include any verb at all; they will be referred to as verbless headlines. Some of the headlines are truly verbless while verbs in fact can be added to others.
Figure 1. The number of headlines including one or several verbs and the number of verbless headlines

The total number of main verbs in the 100 headlines from The Independent, are 107. This means that the average number of main verbs per headline is 1.07. From this it is possible to see that in average, the headlines from The Independent contain at least one verb.

Consider the following examples of headlines including verbs:

(1) Millions fall silent to remember war dead
   
   \textit{(The Independent 11.11.2010)}

(2) Ethiopian housemaid trades broom for song stardom in Iraq
   
   \textit{(The Independent 15.11.2010)}

(3) Artillery fire exchanged on Korean border
   
   \textit{(The Independent 23.11.2010)}

In examples 1 to 3 verbs are included in the headlines. The verbs are of the type main verbs and they are the most common type in the 100 headlines collected from The Independent. The other type is auxiliaries and examples of how they are used will be presented below in examples 8 to 10. As mentioned in section 2.2 regular main verbs can be divided into four forms; base form, -s, -ed and -ing ending. Examples 1 to 3 show three of these forms. The –
ing form is the only one missing, and is so in all of the examples collected from *The Independent*.

Apart from possible forms of verbs in headlines there are also headlines which do not include any verb at all. Consider the following examples of verbless headlines:

(4) Aesthetic solar power the French way

(4) Aesthetic solar power the French way

(The Independent 17.11.2010)

(5) World's first stem cell trial for stroke victims

(The Independent 16.11.2010)

(6) The magic of Harry Potter in figures

(The Independent 11.11.2010)

(7) The Dalai Lama: A very earthly representative

(The Independent 15.11.2010)

In examples 4 to 7 the headlines have been constructed in a way that there is no need for a verb. Example 7 is particularly interesting since a colon has been inserted. The colon could in fact have been replaced with the verb *be*, nevertheless the newspaper has decided to remove the verb in favor of a colon. Another interesting occurrence is that a verb may be added to some of these so called verbless headlines, but not to others. In examples 6 and 7 a verb can be added. For example one could insert the verb *shown* between *Potter* and *figures* and get a grammatically correct headline. As already has been discussed, *is* could replace the colon in example 7. Examples 4 and 5, however, show headlines presented in a way which makes it impossible to add a verb without changing the structure of the entire headline.

The type of verbless headlines presented above is not very common in the 100 collected headlines from *The Independent*. As mentioned in the beginning of this section, 90 of the 100 headlines include one or several verbs, which mean that only 10 of the headlines have the type of structure visible in examples 4 to 7.
As mentioned earlier, main verbs is the most common type of verb occurring in the 100 headlines collected from *The Independent*. The other variety studied here is auxiliaries. There are a few examples of auxiliaries being used in the 100 collected headlines. Some stand on their own but most of them stand in front of a main verb. Figure 2 gives an overview of what auxiliaries were found in *The Independent*.

![Auxiliaries in The Independent](image)

Figure 2: Auxiliaries found in the 100 headlines from *The Independent*.

The number and variants of the auxiliaries occurring in the headlines are shown in Figure 2 above. There are 11 auxiliaries all in all, 0.11 auxiliaries per headline. This is very few compared to the use of main verbs which is, as stated in the beginning of this section, 1.07. While the 100 collected headlines from *The Independent* on average contain one main verb, auxiliaries are only used once in every ten headlines. The number of different auxiliaries used is also very low, there are only four different varieties; *will*, *can*, *has* and *have*. In example 8 we see the most common auxiliary used, the auxiliary *will*. It is used 7 times while the other auxiliaries are only used once, or in one case, two times. In addition, only primary and modal auxiliaries are used. The third variety, semi-auxiliaries, is not used in any of the headlines.

(8) Biofuel plan *will* cause rise in carbon emissions

(*The Independent* 10.11.2010)

(9) All schools *can* apply for academy status

(*The Independent* 17.11.2010)
(10) The time *has* come for Dublin to change course

*(The Independent 16.11.2010)*

(11) England dare to dream. *Will* they rise to the challenge?

*(The Independent 23.11.2010)*

In all of the examples presented here, the auxiliaries have been placed directly in front of the main verb. This is how most of the headlines including auxiliaries and main verbs have been constructed. However, in one of the headlines the auxiliary and the main verb have been separated. In example 11 we can see that the pronoun *they* is placed between the auxiliary *will* and the main verb *rise*. This particular part of the headline is a question and that is the reason why it has been constructed this way.

Apart from auxiliaries and main verbs being separated there are also several examples where auxiliaries have been excluded and the main verb left on its own (excluded auxiliary indicated by parenthesis):

(12) Taxi driver *was* held over murder of newly-wed

*(The Independent 23.11.2010)*

(13) Bodies of civilians *were* found after Korean shelling

*(The Independent 24.11.2010)*

(14) Chelsea *was* torn to shreds

*(The Independent 15.11.2010)*

In examples 12 to 14 it is the verb *be* that has been excluded. This is the case in all headlines where an auxiliary has been excluded. Furthermore, it is interesting that the verbs are all passives.

It seems as if this particular auxiliary is possible to remove without losing the meaning and understanding of the headline. It is an example of ‘economy grammar’ (Mårdh, 1988:11-13). The term refers to the limited, yet informative language often used in headlines.
3.2 The Sun

Figure 3 shows headlines including verbs and headlines which do not. Here we can see that 79 out of the 100 headlines collected from *The Sun* include one or several verbs, the remaining 21 do not include any verb at all. There are a total number of 88 main verbs in the headlines, 0.88 verbs per headline. The total number of auxiliaries, which will be discussed later on, is 14.

![The Sun](image)

Figure 3. The number of headlines including one or several main verbs and the number of verbless headlines.

Consider the following examples of headlines including verbs:

(15) Chinese lantern *burns* lad’s face

*(The Sun 10.11.2010)*

(16) Murder boss *jailed* for life

*(The Sun 24.11.2010)*

(17) Boyfriend *‘killed* kid after *filming* abuse'

*(The Sun 18.11.2010)*
(18) Pirate prison pair arrive back in UK

(The Sun 17.11.2010)

In examples 15 to 18 regular, main verbs have been used. This is the most common type of verbs used in the 100 headlines collected from The Sun. All four forms of main verbs are represented in the examples; -s, -ed, -ing and base form.

Apart from the different verb forms occurring in the headlines there are examples of headlines that do not include any verbs at all. The following are examples of verbless headlines:

(19) Blood, fret and tears

(The Sun 15.11.2010)

(20) Bieber Fever

(The Sun 16.11.2010)

(21) Becks’ Galaxy pals in a panic

(The Sun 16.11.2010)

Examples 19 and 20 are what is referred to as truly verbless headlines while example 21 is more ambiguous. Since this is newspaper language the headline is fine the way it is, as mentioned in section 2.2 verbs are sometimes left out to save place, but it would be possible to add the verb are between pals and in. In another context it would probably be preferable to insert a verb but as has already been pointed out in section 2.2, headlines have their own set of rules.

Moving on to auxiliaries, in the 100 headlines collected from The Sun a total of 14 auxiliaries were found. There were 8 different forms of auxiliaries used in the headlines; they are presented in Figure 4. The different forms of auxiliaries can in turn be categorized into three groups; primary, modal and semi-auxiliaries. Primary and modal auxiliaries are present in the 100 collected headlines from The Sun. The third variety, semi-auxiliaries, is not used. For more information about what auxiliaries belong to which of the three groups, see section 2.2.
Figure 4. Auxiliaries found in the 100 headlines of *The Sun*:

Consider the following examples which illustrate how auxiliaries have been used:

(22) *Does* Cheryl Cole leave you cold?  

*(The Sun 11.11.2010)*

(23) I *can* live without Facebook, write?  

*(The Sun 24.11.2010)*

(24) Prince Hatty *is* looking natty  

*(The Sun 24.11.2010)*

In examples 23 and 24 the auxiliaries are directly followed by main verbs while example 22 shows that the main verbs and auxiliaries are sometimes separated by another word, or in this case the name Cheryl Cole.

There are also several examples of headlines where the auxiliaries have been omitted. Consider the following examples from *The Sun*:

(25) US (was) *stumped* by mystery 'missile'  

*(The Sun 10.11.2010)*
(26) TV giraffe (was) **struck** dead by lightning

*(The Sun 10.11.2010)*

(27) Caldo (was) **delighted** at shock win

*(The Sun 11.11.2010)*

In all of these examples it is different forms of the auxiliary *be* that has been omitted. This also applies for the rest of the headlines with an omitted auxiliary. It seems as if this particular auxiliary can be left out without affecting the meaning of the headline since the main verb gives the necessary information.

### 3.3 Comparison between *The Independent* and *The Sun*

As shown in Figure 5 below, it is clear that the headlines in *The Sun* as well as *The Independent* generally contain verbs. In addition, Figure 5 illustrates that the number of headlines in *The Independent* which include one or several verbs is higher compared with *The Sun*.

![Headlines including/excluding verbs](image)

**Figure 5.** Headlines including/excluding verbs

In addition, *The Independent* use a larger number of verbs compared to *The Sun*. Table 1 shows that the total number of verbs, main verbs and auxiliaries included, used in the 100
headlines collected from *The Independent* is 118. *The Sun* has used 102 verbs in the 100 collected headlines.

Table 1. Total number of verbs and verbs per headline (main verbs and auxiliaries included)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total number of verbs</th>
<th>Verbs/headline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Sun</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Independent</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whether these differences are connected to the different types of newspapers studied, quality and tabloid, is hard to tell. Even though there clearly is some difference the figures are after all rather similar. The diversity in these figures is not very surprising since not all newspapers can use the exact same number of verbs. If a greater number of headlines had been studied the figures are likely to have been different.

Similarly to the results connected to the use of main verbs, auxiliaries occur in both newspapers. The following examples illustrate the most common auxiliary in *The Sun* and in *The Independent*:

(28) Talibain *is* running out of AK-47 bullets’

(*The Sun* 16.11.2010)

(29) Hubble telescope *will* go out in a blaze of glory

(*The Independent* 18.11.2010)

Despite the fact that auxiliaries clearly exist in headlines from both newspapers, they are used to a slightly higher extent in *The Sun* than in *The Independent*. Which auxiliaries are used also differs. *Will* is the most common auxiliary used in the 100 headlines collected from *The Independent*, see Figure 2, and *is* is the most common in the 100 headlines collected from *The Sun*, see Figure 4. The number of auxiliaries used is similar, *The Independent* uses 11 auxiliaries all in all and *The Sun* uses 14. However, there is a difference in the number of different auxiliaries used. *The Independent* only uses 4 different types while *The Sun* uses 8 types. One possible explanation to why *The Sun* uses more auxiliaries could be that it often publishes news about celebrities, fashion etc besides the “regular” types of news like world
news and business which seems to be the main focus in *The Independent*. This might increase the number of verbs like *is*, see example 23. However, considering that only 100 headlines from each newspaper have been studied it is hard to tell whether the type of newspaper has anything to do with the different results.

An interesting question is why no semi-auxiliaries (*have to*, *be going to*, *had better* and *ought to*) are used in the headlines. Only primary auxiliaries (*be*, *have* and *do*) and modal auxiliaries (*can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should*, *may*, *might* and *must*) have been used in the headlines collected from *The Independent* as well as from *The Sun*. One possible reason to why no semi-auxiliaries have been used it that it might sound strange in a newspaper headline. Verbs like *had better* and *ought to* sound rather formal and headlines are not known for that particular type of language. According to Mårdh (1980:11-13) headlines have their own rules and are seen as a particular language variety. Another reason could be that headlines are supposed to be short and direct and that might make other, shorter verbs more suitable. As mentioned in section 2.2 Mårdh (1980:11-13) uses the term ‘economy grammar’ about informative language used in headlines. This could be one example of that.

Not all possible forms of the regular main verbs are present either. In the 100 headlines collected from *The Independent*, only verbs in base form and endings in *-s* and *-ed* are found. There are no verbs ending in the fourth form; *-ing*. In *The Sun* however, all four forms can be found. In addition, in *The Sun* there are as much as eight verbs ending in *-ing*, in contrast to the none-existing number from *The Independent*.

Examples 12 to 14 from *The Independent* and examples 19 to 21 from *The Sun* prove that it is not always necessary to include auxiliaries in newspaper headlines in order for the readers to understand what is written. Where it is possible, *The Independent* has removed all auxiliaries in the form of *be*. In *The Sun* however, *be* is used five times in the forms of *is* and *am*.

There could be different reasons for why *be* has been excluded in some of the headlines collected from *The Sun*, and in all of the headlines collected from *The Independent*. Perhaps it is related to the simple fact that it is not really needed for the comprehension of the headline. Another reason could be that removing the auxiliary saves space and tokens. As mentioned in section 2.3 Mårdh (1980:159) claims that *be* is necessary when it occurs as the main verb in a clause but is preferred to be omitted in other contexts. That *be* is still kept in some of the
headlines in *The Sun* might have something to do with the content of the paper, as discussed above in relation to the somewhat higher rate of auxiliaries.

3.4 Results compared to previous findings

The results presented in this study compared to previous studies are somewhat inconclusive since different types of material have been used as well as different categorizations of verbs. As was established in section 2.2, Mårdh (1980:50) divides verbal headlines into six main types; finite verbal headlines, verbal headlines with omitted auxiliary, non-finite verbal headlines, SCs-headlines, SA-headlines and coordinated verbal headlines. In this study however, only two categories of verbs have been used; main verbs and auxiliaries. Mårdh also used a larger amount of material and investigated several other areas of headlines besides verbs. In addition, Mårdh’s book was published in 1980 which could mean that some facts are no longer valid. On the other hand the difference in time could give an interesting comparison between verb use in older newspapers and verb use in present newspaper.

As pointed out in section 2.3, Mårdh (1988:184) found that generally the same structures were used in both of her investigated newspapers’ headlines but differed somewhat in frequency. This also applies for the study presented here. Main verbs and auxiliaries are present in *The Independent* as well as in *The Sun* but differ in frequency. The headlines also include more or less the same number of auxiliaries, with *will* and *can* being used more frequently than other varieties. This difference is particularly obvious in the headlines collected from *The Independent*, see Table 1.

Another similarity is the abbreviation of headlines. Mårdh found that the headlines in her study was sometimes abbreviated, verbs, articles etc. was removed. The results presented in this study indicate the same phenomenon. It might be related to the short but informative language usually preferred in headlines, ‘economy grammar’ as Mårdh calls it (1980:11-13).

4. Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has been dealing with verbs in newspaper headlines. Two British newspapers were studied, *The Independent* and *The Sun*. 100 headlines was collected from each of the newspapers and studied in terms of how main verbs and auxiliaries was used.
To begin with, main verbs are the most frequent type of verbs used in the headlines of each of the two newspapers. In addition, both newspapers use verbs to a quite similar extent. Nevertheless, if we look at Figure 5 and Table 1 we see that *The Independent* is the newspaper which uses most verbs and also has the most headlines including verbs. *The Sun* has a somewhat lower number.

Even though *The Sun* does not use as many verbs in total as *The Independent*, *The Sun* use more auxiliaries. There are 14 auxiliaries and 8 different forms in the headlines from *The Sun*. In comparison, *The Independent* used 11 auxiliaries and only four different forms in the headlines collected. The auxiliary *will* is most frequently used in *The Independent* while *is* is the most frequently used in *The Sun*. The difference in use of auxiliaries could be related to the content in the newspapers. *The Sun* which is a tabloid probably writes more about celebrities, fashion etc. than does *The Independent*. Then it might not be so strange that auxiliaries like *is*, see example 23, is more common in *The Sun*. On the other hand there is no indication that *is* functioning as a main verb is more common in *The Sun* than in *The Independent*. One possible explanation to why *The Sun* uses more auxiliaries could be that it often publishes news about celebrities, fashion etc. besides the "regular" types of news like world news and business which seems to be the main focus in *The Independent*. This might increase the number of verbs like *is*, see example 23. However, considering that only 100 headlines from each newspaper have been studied it is hard to tell whether the type of newspaper has anything to do with the different results.

One similarity is that primary and modal auxiliaries have been used in both *The Independent* and *The Sun*. In addition, the third variety, semi-auxiliaries, has not been used in any of the two newspapers.

A comparison between the results presented in this study and the study Mårdh carried out during the late 1970’s, published 1980, shows that the results are similar. Even though only a small amount of Mårdh’s study could be compared to this more limited study it shows that the verb use in newspaper headlines has not changed much during the past few decades. Verbs are used but to different extent depending on the newspaper. The language is still kept rather short, with omitted verbs as a result.

In brief, although there clearly are some differences between *The Sun* and *The Independent* when it comes to what verbs they use and how they use them it is hard to tell whether this has
to do with the fact that one is a tabloid and one is a quality paper. It would be interesting to look at a larger number of headlines and make a more detailed study of verbs to see whether this could prove a difference in verb use between the newspapers. Finally, the results of this study could only be put in relation to a few aspects of Mårdh’s more extensive study. Nevertheless, from what could be compared a conclusion can be drawn that the verb use in newspaper headlines has not changed much during the past few decades.
References


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