

## Headlines and Deadlines: Changing Newspaper Language

Jean Aitchison

University of Oxford

45 Malvern Road, London E8 3LP

jean.aitchison@worc.ox.ac.uk

### Abstract

Highly skilled and concise, newspaper writing can be considered quite as interesting as literature, continuing a long-standing tradition of story-telling.

After a brief historical introduction about the press, the notion of 'newsworthiness' will be considered. Some of the narrative and linguistic patterns found in news reports are described, showing how they have changed over the years. Above all headlines are looked at, showing how they attract attention, how over the decades they have developed a conventional style of their own.

Finally, since newspapers, especially headlines, are like advertising language, trying to grab people's attention, it will briefly be considered to what extent newspaper language is like, or unlike, advertising language.

### 1 Introduction

'Awkward, cantankerous, cynical, bloody-minded, at times intrusive, at times inaccurate, and, at times, deeply unfair and harmful to individuals and to institutions'. This bad-tempered outburst against newspapers was reportedly made by Prince Charles, the future king of England (*The Observer* 29 Dec 2002). His complaint is typical of a long line of moans and groans about the press. These go back decades, even centuries. Moving backwards, 'A hostile broth of black print' is how a newspaper is described by Saul Bellow in his novel *Herzog* in 1961 (1961/2001: 34). 'I read the newspaper avidly. It is my one form of continuous fiction' was attributed to the British politician Aneurin Bevan in 1960 (*The Times* 29 March 1960). 'In the old days men had the rack. Now they have the press' was reportedly uttered in 1891 by the playwright and wit Oscar Wilde (Wilkes 2002: 2). Journalism is 'the vilest and most degrading of all trades' claimed the respected 19th century philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (*Snoddy* 1992: 21). 'The newspapers! Sir, they are the most villainous – licentious – abominable – infernal – Not that I ever read them – No, I make it a rule never to look into a newspaper'. This was spluttered by the fictional character Sir Fretful Plagiary, in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play *The Critic* written at the end of the 18th century (Sheridan 1779/1988 I.1). And before newspapers, the so-called newsbooks, faced equal condemnation:

For all those persons, that to tell  
And write much Newes do love

May Caron ferry them to hell,  
And may they ne're remove.

This verse was printed in April 1648 in the newsbook *Mercurius Anti-Mercurius* (Raymond 1999: 18).

Alongside these multiple tirades against newspapers and newsbooks, quite excessive praise of literature is found. 'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree' said Ezra Pound in 1931 (Crystal, Crystal 2000: 237). This long tradition of moans and groans about the press is somewhat surprising, at a time when almost everybody at least glances at newspapers, while relatively few people immerse themselves in literature.

The complaints are particularly surprising, because newspaper writing is highly skilled. It is concise, clear and interesting – otherwise people would long ago have given up reading newspapers. I have long been puzzled by the public appetite for newspapers, alongside their deep distrust of them, and this has been a key theme in a book I have recently written, to be published by Cambridge University Press (January 2007). In the current talk, I have addressed some of the key issues which I have dealt with in that book. Above all, I would like to support newspaper writing as being quite as interesting as literature. I do not, of course, want to disparage literature, which is valuable, but it is only one kind of written output. Literature and newspaper writing have different readerships, and different goals.

After a brief historical introduction, I will consider the notion of 'newsworthiness', a concept which governs the choice of story. I will then describe some of the narrative and linguistic patterns found in news reports, showing how they have changed over the years. But I will above all be looking at headlines, showing how they attract attention, how over the decades they have developed a conventional style of their own. Finally, since newspapers, especially headlines, are, like advertising language, trying to grab people's attention, I will briefly consider to what extent newspaper language is like, or unlike, advertising language.

## 2 From traditional bards to newspapers

Modern newspapers continue a long-standing tradition of story-telling, handed down from one era to another. The story-telling tradition had its origins in pre-literary times, in the ballads sung by professional bards, who inherited an oral tradition. After the invention of printing, in the late 15th century, these ballads were published as broadsides or broadsheets, single sheets of paper printed on one side only. They contained lurid accounts of marvels, murders, monsters and mysteries. 'The broadside ballad was an adaptation of the older traditional minstrelsy to the newer demands of topicality, a kind of music journalism, and the forerunner of the popular press', pointed out Leslie Shepherd, one of the first people to work seriously on this topic (Shepherd 1969: 14). Broadsheets gradually gave way to chapbooks, small-size popular pamphlets which covered a wider range of topics than broadsheets, and contained more pages (Watt 1991).

Next came newsbooks. Newsbooks, dating from the mid-seventeenth century, are often regarded as the first 'true' newspapers, in that they consistently contained accounts of current

events, especially of the civil war which broke out in England in the mid 17th century (1642). Both the royalists, who supported the king, and the parliamentarians, who opposed him, had their own newsbooks. Factual reports of the events of the war were interleaved with gruesome shock-horror stories, such as an account of the execution of a child-murderer (Raymond 1993: 311) or the description of freaks of nature, such as a child born with two tongues (Raymond 1993: 439).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, newspapers took over. These were like megastores, with multiple departments, compared with the relatively simple content of the newsbooks. As a character in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's play *Money* (1840) comments: 'Ay – read the newspapers! Daily calendars of roguery and woe! Here, advertisements from quacks, money lenders, cheap warehouses, and spotted boys with two heads! Turn to the other column, police reports, bankruptcies, swindling, forgery, and a biographical sketch of the man who murdered three little cherubs in Pentonville. Turn to the leading article, and your hair will stand on end...' (Bulwer-Lytton 1840/1953: 47).

Newspapers, like their forerunners, realised the need to entertain readers. As an anonymous verse which went round Fleet Street in the 19th century commented:

Tickle the public, make 'em grin  
The more you tickle, the more you'll win.  
Teach the public, you'll never get rich  
You'll live like a beggar and die in a ditch

(Engel 1996: 17).

But it would be a mistake to think that just 'tickling the public' is enough. 'News' involves more than this.

### 3 Newsworthiness

So what is news? News ('new events') is 'anything that makes a reader say "Gee Whizz"', it is a famous saying sometimes attributed to the newspaper editor Arthur McEwan (Boyd 1994: 3).

Readers are unable to register everything, so only certain events are selected as 'news'. A classic article on 'newsworthiness' was written in 1965 by two Scandinavians, Johann Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge (Galtung, Ruge 1965/1999). They listed a number of key, intertwined factors, such as recency, proximity, negativity, unexpectedness and person-centredness.

Recency is essential. Anything that happened much more than 24 hours ago is unlikely to be 'news'. As the journalist Andrew Marr pointed out in his recent book: 'One moment news is verbal diamonds, the next it is dust. It seems in this respect like a drug... a brief flurry in the brain, then just a dirty smudge' (Marr 2004/5: 60).

Proximity is equally important: 'Small earthquake in Chile: not many dead' is a well-known spoof example of 'non-news', partly because Chile is far away, and partly because the earthquake was a small one. As one journalist commented: 'A whole population might be de-

stroyed in Peking or Macedonia, but it would not interest them [readers] as much as a fight in a street in which their aunt once lived' (Palmer 1968: 216).

Negativity also has a high priority: bad news is more newsworthy than good news, and can become addictive, as the comic writer A.P. Herbert wrote in his poem 'A ballad for breakfast time' (1931). The first verse is gloomy:

There's not very much in the paper,  
But what's in the paper is bad,  
A peeress has married a draper,  
An aeroplane's crashed in Bagdad.  
A girl has been cruelly battered,  
She was battered to death with a bat,  
The authorities say that it point to foul play,  
And what do you think of that?  
The chorus runs:  
News! News! It gives you the blues,  
Slaughters of daughters and all the clues!  
Why do we peruse the discouraging news  
On a mouldy Monday morning?  
But after five verses, the newsreader is clearly hooked, and  
Herbert concludes, at the end:  
But meanwhile I glues my nose to the news  
Every mouldy morning.

Negativity ties in with unexpectedness, a startling sudden event, which creates a shock-horror reaction. People sometimes tut-tut at this demand for mind-boggling death and disasters. But the demand for disaster is not necessarily bad: it shows we live in a relatively well-ordered world. As Andrew Marr points out, 'Journalism which did not find murder interesting would represent a fantastically violent society. Murder is extreme behaviour; and all extreme behaviour is interesting to those who live in the tepid middle of things.' (Marr 2004/5: 114).

Person-centredness is also important, and partially explains why mega-tragedies are often illustrated by highlighting one particular victim, or victims' abandoned possessions, as with an earthquake which caused a destructive tidal wave in Turkey: 'The rubble... leaves everyday reminders of the thousands of lives lost – a child's teddy, a clock stopped at 3.02 am; chess pieces; a bar of foaming soap' (John Arlidge, *The Observer* 29 August 1999).

The person-centredness is, however, skewed towards one type of person, females. In a study of newspaper reports of death caused by violent crime, victims were most likely to be female (325 female to 280 male). Yet according to official crime figures published by the Home Office there were more male victims of fatal violence than female (382 male to 240 female) (*Home Office* 1992; Naylor 1998). Female victims seem to newspapers to be more newsworthy than male ones.

However, newsworthiness alone is not enough. The stories selected have to be carefully structured.

#### 4 Story structure

'Journalists are the professional story-tellers of our age' as Allan Bell, himself once a journalist, points out. He continues: 'The fairy tale starts: 'Once upon a time.' The news story begins: 'Fifteen people were injured when a bus plunged...'' (Bell 1991: 147).

News stories have their own conventions, not quite as rigid as, say a sonnet in poetry, but still identifiable. When these are broken, the result is likely to be an unreadable hotch-potch, perhaps similar to the efforts of Boot, a fictional journalist in Evelyn Waugh's novel *Scoop* (1938). Boot is a nature-lover who pens a bi-weekly half-column for a newspaper: 'Feather-footed through the plashy fen passes the questing vole...' (Waugh 1938/1943: 21). He is mistaken for a top journalist and sent to a world trouble spot. His heart heavy with misgiving, Boot types the first news report of his career:

Nothing much has happened except to the president who has been imprisoned in his own palace by revolutionary junta... they say he is drunk when children try to see him but governess says most unusual lovely spring weather bubonic plague raging

(Waugh 1938/1943: 146).

Compare this with a typical news story in a modern paper. Under a headline 'Moscow disaster kills 13', the bare bones of the events are neatly summarized at the beginning of the news report:

At least 13 people, including two children, died and more than 90 were injured when the glass roof over a swimming pool at a leisure centre on the outskirts of Moscow collapsed yesterday.

(*Sunday Times* 12 February 2004).

This is typical of a modern, competent story, where all the vital information is crammed in early. The opening lines contain the six 'W/H' words "five W's and an H" with which journalists are taught to start newspaper reports: The W/H words signal the key points of every news story: WHO was involved? WHAT happened? WHERE did it happen? HOW did it happen? WHY did it happen? WHEN did it happen? 'Think of it as a silent chant: Who-What-How? Why-When-Where?' advises one manual for trainees (Aitchison 1988: 22).

The journalist's W/H words are not all equally important. Who, what, and where are crucial. How is moderately important. Why is not always known. When is often unnecessary, because if this is real 'news', that is, new events, then it has probably only just happened. Skilled journalists pack all the vital information into a single sentence. The report might be about a major disaster:

More than 200 people were killed yesterday when runaway train wagons laden with fuel and chemicals exploded after being derailed in northeast Iran.

(*The Times* 19 February 2004).

Or it could outline a single person's misfortune.

A pensioner died yesterday after being dragged from his car, robbed and beaten when he stopped to ask for directions yesterday morning.

(*Sunday Times* 7 April 1996).

Or it might be a story whose outcome is as yet unknown:

Cops have called in computer experts to find a schoolgirl they fear is in the clutches of an internet chat-room fiend.

(*The People* 1 February 2004).

But news reports contain more than a succinct first sentence. Over the decades, a conventional way of ordering events has emerged.

## 5 Ordering the order of events

Up until the turn of the 19th to 20th century, newspapers, like their predecessors the newsbooks, recounted events in the order in which they occurred, as in the following account in the *London Times* (1st September 1888) of one of the crimes committed in London's east end by the notorious 19th century murderer, known as 'Jack the Ripper'. The newspaper report has the sober headline ANOTHER MURDER IN WHITECHAPEL. The report begins with a statement that a murder has been committed:

Another murder of the foulest kind was committed in the neighbourhood of Whitechapel in the early hours of yesterday morning, but by whom and with what motive is at present a complete mystery.

It then describes the finding of the body:

At a quarter to 4 o'clock Police constable Neill, 97J, when in Buck's Row, Whitechapel, came upon the body of a woman lying on a part of the footway, and on stooping to raise her up in the belief that she was drunk he discovered that her throat was cut almost from ear to ear. She was dead but still warm. He procured assistance and at once sent to the station and for a doctor.

It then described the doctor's examination, the removal of the body, and the attempt to identify the victim, followed by the eventual identification. This old order-of-events account contrasts strikingly with the story structure typically found in modern day newspapers.

## 6 Modern story structure

In a typical modern day news story, the earliest of a whole sequence of episodes often comes almost at the end, as in a report of a car accident in *The Guardian* (19 May 1995). Here, the most recent event is placed at the beginning:

Police officers pushed a note through a distraught husband's door asking him if he was going to collect his wife's crashed car without realising she was lying dead inside.

Les London spent 36 hours searching for his estranged wife Sally, aged 39, after she failed to arrive at his home on Tuesday night.

After reading the note Mr. London phoned police to say she was missing, and officers went back to the car to discover her body still inside.

We do not hear the beginning of the story until almost the end of the report:

Mrs. London's black Ford Capri is thought to have crashed on Tuesday night. It was found on its roof in a cornfield close to Ridgmont, Bedfordshire. Next morning, police saw the car but after failing to discover the driver, they stuck a 'Police Aware' notice on the vehicle and left.

A spokesman for Bedfordshire police said a full inquiry was being launched.

The actual sequence of events is therefore almost the reverse of the order in which they are reported.

This car-crash account has been carefully organized, in a structure known as an 'inverted pyramid', basically an upside down triangle. This is possibly the commonest of several ways of organizing a story. An initial summary comes at the top of the report. This outlines the most recent and most newsworthy event. Earlier events are then fitted in, in a way which progressively explains the situation. Each subsequent piece of information is assumed to be less important, and is given less space. Finally, an evaluation or summing up is presented, though this is not crucial to the story, and could have been omitted, if space had been short.

At first sight, this structure seems like a specialised journalistic confection, which in some ways it is. But in other ways, it fits in with general expectations about British patterns of non-fiction. Some interesting similarities are found between the way a journalistic account is produced, and the way an academic article is structured:

ACADEMIC ARTICLE	NEWSPAPER ARTICLE
TITLE	HEADLINE
SUBTITLE	SUB-HEAD
ABSTRACT (above article)	ABSTRACT (first sentence, wh x 6)
EVIDENCE	EVENTS
RESULTS	STATE OF PLAY
CONCLUSION	EVALUATION

In news stories, the main advantage of the inverted pyramid structure is that someone perusing a paper in a hurry can simply stop after the first paragraph, knowing they have the basic outline:

An RAF jet carrying the Prince of Wales came within seconds of colliding with a commercial airliner with 186 passengers on board after an air traffic control mix up.

*(The Times 16 July 2004).*

A casual reader probably would not want to spend more time on this 'non-story'. Nothing happened. Both planes were safe, as well as their passengers. The height of the jets, how far they were apart, and where Prince Charles and the other plane were going are optional extras which anyone interested in the details could find out further down the page, if they wanted to continue reading.

The 'inverted pyramid' structure is drummed into all trainee journalists, though it is not without problems. For a start, it is not always clear which facts are more important than others. After the initial summary, the ideal way of expanding and explaining might vary from reporter to reporter, or from reader to reader.

Many journalists therefore, especially those with experience, adapt the inverted pyramid in ways which suits their story. One variant is an 'hour-glass' structure (Fedler et al. 2001: 200f). This begins with an inverted pyramid, then at some point, moves to a chronological survey of the facts. This has the advantage of clarifying the details in a complex story.

## 6 Hygiene and factivity

But organization is not the only difference between the past and now: two further trends are 'hygiene' and 'factivity'.

Modern disasters are typically described in a 'hygienic' way. Just as doctors are trained not to alarm their patients, so modern journalists describe even the most hideous scenes in a palatable fashion, typically via the abandoned possession of a victim: "One little shoe is all that is left of flight 999" is a journalistic cliché as Aitchison and Lewis point out (2003a: 2).

This 'hygienic' approach is unlike early reporting, when journalists did not flinch from gory details. When, in 1896, the Hon. C.S. Rolls became the first Englishman to die in a plane crash, his injuries were graphically highlighted:

The biplane reeled in the air and then pitching forward, crashed to earth... Mr. Rolls lay doubled up on the driving-seat with blood upon his lips... Mr. Roll's face was ashen grey and a large blue bruise marked his forehead.

(*Daily Mail* 24 October 1896, in Marr 2004/2005: 80).

A further modern trend is the emphasis on factivity, the presentation of facts and figures which corroborate the data presented, and emphasize its seriousness. Newspaper reports of the disastrous flooding caused by hurricane Katrina on America's Gulf Coast in August 2005 made sure the readers were given plentiful statistics:

The number confirmed dead passed **100** last night in the area which bore the brunt of the **135mph** storm as it smashed ashore... While New Orleans escaped Katrina's fiercest winds, a **200ft-wide** hole was breached during the night in a levee, or earth embankment, protecting the city – most of which is below sea level. The water gushed through putting **80 per cent** of the city under water. In some areas it was **20ft deep**... the U.S. military dropped **3,000 lb** sandbags from helicopters.

(*Daily Mail* 31 August 2005).

The need to quote figures, to give an impression of 'factivity', is often given a higher priority than the facts themselves. The death toll in the Twin Towers tragedy in New York was at first the focus of absurdly pessimistic guesswork, which gradually became more realistic (Aitchison 2003). On 23 September 2001, the British *Sunday Times* reported that almost seven thousand (6818) were feared to have died. The British politician Jack Straw gave the number of fatalities as over 4,000 on a radio programme in January 2002. Yet these figures gradually diminished. In March 2002, it was announced that 2,672 death certificates had been issued, with a further 158 people still unaccounted for (*The Observer* 10 March 2002).

Mega-disasters are newsworthy in themselves. But most of the time, newspapers have two problems. They have to compress information into a small space, and they have to attract readers' attention.

Compressed noun phrases are used to cram in information. A descriptive quasi-title has become a normal way of referring to a newsworthy figure. Parallel to genuine titles, such as 'President Bush', 'Lord Coe', we find references to 'modern megastar Michael Jackson', 'boxing champ Mike Tyson', 'royal photographer Norman Parkinson', 'veteran actress Shirley MacLaine', 'television cook Nigella Lawson', 'travel expert Nigel Carter', and so on. A pseudo-title both saves space, and dignifies the person being talked about, so making him or her seem newsworthy. Similar compact phrases are found elsewhere in the paper, as in: '**Interest rate hopes** lift the market' (Ni 2003). Such structures are a feature of modern newspaper language in general, and appear to be 'a reflection of two major factors: the informational purpose of newspaper prose, coupled with the influence of economy.' (Biber 1003: 170).

This brings me round to my main topic, headlines. These do two important things. They grab readers' attention, and compress information, and in good headlines, combine both of these features, as will be discussed below.

## 7 Grabbing attention

TEENAGE PRIEST IN SEX-CHANGE MERCY DASH TO PALACE is the ideal headline, according to an old joke. It encapsulates a popular view that headlines are just eye-catching words crammed together to create the maximum shock-horror effect. The novelist Michael Frayn exploits this view in his novel *The tin men* (Frayn 1965/1995).

In this novel, Dr. Goldwasser, the fictional Head of the Newspaper department, had invented what he called UHL 'Unit Headline Language'. He had collected multi-purpose monosyllables used by headline-writers, such as *fear, ban, dash, strike*, and fed them into a computer. Then he let the computer build its own headlines from this store of words. So it might start with:

STRIKE THREAT

Then adding one word at random a day, it could tell a story:

STRIKE THREAT BID  
STRIKE THREAT PROBE  
STRIKE THREAT PLEA.

Or the units could be added cumulatively:

STRIKE THREAT PLEA  
STRIKE THREAT PLEA PROBE  
STRIKE THREAT PLEA PROBE MOVE  
STRIKE THREAT PLEA PROBE MOVE SHOCK  
STRIKE THREAT PLEA PROBE MOVE SHOCK HOPE  
STRIKE THREAT PLEA PROBE MOVE SHOCK HOPE STORM.

Goldwasser's headlines are fiction. Real headlines are far more cleverly constructed than most people realise.

Headlines on the front page sell newspapers, and headlines on the inside pages influence what people read. (Headlines are discussed in various places, e.g. Bell 1991, Kniffka 1980, Mardh 1980, Schneider 2000, Simon-Vandenberg 1981, van Dijk 1988). Their effect is potentially long-lasting. 'Headlines and leads are often the only information read or memorized', it has been claimed. (van Dijk 1988: 189). And they can have an immediate effect. When a popular British retired boxer, Frank Bruno, had a mental breakdown, *The Sun* newspaper's first edition had a headline: BONKERS BRUNO LOCKED UP. This brought a deluge of complaints. '*The Sun* belatedly realised how badly they had misjudged the public mood... Later editions... announced SAD BRUNO IN MENTAL HOME and the following day the tabloid launched a mental health appeal.' (*Sunday Times* 28 July 2003).

Headlines grab attention via their subject matter, their style or preferably both: KNIFE NUT KILLS GIRL headed an account of a stabbing in *The Sun* (1992). GAZZA HAZZA PIZZA LUVVA, introduced a story about the soccer player Paul Gascoigne who had reportedly 'found new happiness with a busty pizza waitress.' (*Daily Star* 18 August 1999). CAN-NIBAL KILLER CAGED FOR LIFE told of a sadistic killer who the judge recommended should never be released (Newham Recorder 16 March 2005). HEADLESS BODY IN TOP-LESS BAR is a famous headline from the *New York Post* (Taylor 1991: 291). DENISE IS TOTTY WITH TOP BOTTY headed a British story of a 'TV babe' who had won a 'Rear of the Year' award, and who claimed that lots of sex 'kept her botty trim' (*The Sun* 22 October 1999). 'FLOODY HELL was the huge headline over a warning to the country 'to brace itself for the worst floods in a hundred years.' (*The Mirror* 3 November 2000). PERV GRABS TOT ran an emotive headline (*The Sun* 21 August 2003), yet a glance at the story revealed that the 'perv' was someone who had in the past been accused of paedophilia, but was in this case accompanied by his wife. The couple had tried jointly to take their own child abroad, who was officially in the care of social services.

Headlines are printed in large bold capital letters, which spread across the page. As in telegrams, surplus words such as the articles *a*, *the*, are routinely omitted. Predictable verbs such as *is*, *has* are left out. Such omissions can cause unintentional humour, as in the well-known ambiguous example: GIANT WAVES DOWN QUEEN MARY'S FUNNEL. In an Indian newspaper, I found DACOITS SHOOT DEAD POLICEMAN. 'Why did dacoits (bandits) bother to shoot a dead policeman?' queried one puzzled reader.

Short words are used to save space:

AXE, not closure: SMALL SCHOOLS FACE AXE

BAN, not prohibition: NEW BAN ON DEMONSTRATIONS

MOB, not crowd: MOBS RAMPAGE THROUGH CITY STREETS

QUIT, not leave or depart: CHURCH LEADER QUILTS

WED, not marry: BISHOP TO WED ACTRESS. (Swann 1995: 359-69).

Puns are prominent: PAIN STOPS PLAY reported *The Sun*, when a cricketer was bitten by an adder. PORK CHOP, also from *The Sun* announced that pork had been banned from a pub. PANDAMONIUM was a zoo story in the *Los Angeles Times* (Crystal 1998: 201).

Yet headlines are not inevitably playful. The greater the tragedy they are highlighting, the more straightforward the headline, and the larger in size. In July 2005, terrorists planted

a series of bombs in London, which exploded during the morning rush-hour. The headlines were stark. (The headlines below are from the papers on 8 July 2005, the day after the outrage). LONDON'S DAY OF TERROR, said *The Guardian*. BLOODIED BUT UNBOWED announced the *Daily Mirror*. SUICIDE BOMBER ON THE NO 30, proclaimed', with the added strapline TERRORIST BLOWS BUS TO BITS. *The Times* headline simply highlighted the date in large blue numbers, 7/7, reminding readers of the American disaster of 9/11.

Before the end of the month, a huge police operation ended with the arrest of the main suspects. The headlines the next day, July 30th, could be read from yards away: GOT THE BASTARDS! yelled *The Sun*. GOT THEM shrieked the *Daily Mirror*. SURRENDER! bel-lowed the *Daily Mail*. The day after, July 31st, the Sunday papers continued in the same vein: CORNERED! shouted *The Sunday Times*, RUN TO GROUND echoed *The Observer*. In short, the more dramatic the headline, the fewer the words and the larger the type-face. And in recent papers, a massive colour picture is placed alongside the huge headline.

## 8 Changing headlines

Headlines change over the years. Older headlines tend to cover the same topics as to-day's, but without the current streamlined wording:

FRIGHTFUL TRAGEDY IN SOHO  
HORRID MURDER AT BARNESLEY  
MELANCHOLY SUICIDE OF A CITY SOLICITOR  
THE ALLEGED POISONING OF A FAMILY AT BERMONDSEY  
THE HORRIBLE MURDER AT EAST ACTON

These occurred in the News of the World in 1854 (Engel 1996: 28) showing features that have been eliminated a century later, such as evaluative adjectives (frightful, horrid, melancholy), the articles *a* and *the* and prepositions such as *in*, *at*. Today's headlines would be more likely to read: SOHO TRAGEDY, BARNESLEY MURDER, CITY SOLICITOR SUICIDE. Some features remain, such as the fact that time is rarely mentioned.

In 1888, the headlines relating to the infamous serial killer known as Jack the Ripper looked fairly similar to the earlier News of the World headlines, as in the following triple-deck headline:

A REVOLTING MURDER  
ANOTHER WOMAN FOUND HORRIBLY MUTILATED IN WHITECHAPEL  
GHASTLY CRIMES BY A MANIAC (Sugden 1995: 59).

These Ripper headlines show a trend which temporarily was noticeable, that of a large quantity of headline information. In the 1930s, multi-deck headlines sometimes tried to cover a whole news story (Schneider 2000: 54):

69 CHILDREN DEAD IN BRITAIN'S WORST CINEMA DISASTER.  
SUFFOCATED IN STAMPEDE FROM FIRE ALARM.  
HUNDREDS TRAMPLED ON IN A PAISLEY HALL.

QUARTER OF A MILE OF WEEPING MOTHERS.  
HOSPITALS GUARD AGAINST ANGUISHED PARENTS.  
BROTHERS AND SISTERS KILLED.

Modern British headlines, in contrast, try to repeat the start of a story, and often summarise the first paragraph:

FRENCH STUDENT FEARED MURDERED

Detectives searching for Céline Figard, the French student who went missing after accepting a lift from an English lorry driver, fear she may have been murdered.

FATHER'S PLEA AS SEARCH FOR FRENCH GIRL IS STEPPED UP

The father of a French student missing for more than a week made an emotional appeal to the public yesterday to help find his daughter.

CELINE'S BODY FOUND IN LAY-BY

Céline Figard, the missing French student, was found dead yesterday near a lay-by in Worcestershire.

These headlines were from an (electronic) broadsheet, *The Electronic Telegraph* (between Xmas 1995 and New Year 1996). A similar pattern occurs in tabloids, as in the following account from *The Sun* (22 October 1999):

TRAIN SEX MONSTER MURDERED ISABEL

Pretty law student Isabel Peake was murdered by a sex monster who threw her from a French train, detectives feared last night.

Yet modern headlines are complex. Closer inspection shows that they contain hidden patterns, of which most readers are unaware.

## 9 Noun sequences

A strong feature of British headlines in recent years has been heaped up nouns. Noun sequences of the type **ALISON MURDER CHARGE** are common in newspapers today. They are a British post-1960s pattern (Simon-Vandenberg 1981) and tend to confuse foreigners, who are unsure whether Alison is the victim or the criminal. Yet speakers of British English are in no doubt: Alison is the victim. Headlines have an internal structure which allows habitual newspaper readers to interpret them without difficulty.

Both broadsheets and tabloids follow the same, semi-rigid patterns in noun sequences relating to similar events, though different topics show slightly different configurations. The section below examines the arrangement of nouns adjacent to the word murder.

These sometimes form the whole headline, as in **ALISON MURDER CHARGE**, sometimes only a part of it, as in **CAR MURDER HUBBY CAGED**. The patterns were analysed in a study of headlines which included noun sequences containing the noun murder over a six-month period (February-July 1992, analysed in Aitchison, Lewis and Naylor 2000). The study included both broadsheets and tabloids.

Noun sequences containing the word murder occurred in two, three and four word groups.

In a two-word group, the noun murder could either precede or follow the other noun:

Sex fiend wanted over BARMAID **MURDER** (*Daily Mirror*).  
**MURDER TRIAL** told of kamikaze threat (*The Guardian*)

In a three-word group, the word murder usually came second. Typical sequences were:

BRIDE **MURDER TRIAL**  
3-GIRL **MURDER RAP**  
STREET **MURDER ENQUIRY**  
SHOTGUN **MURDER HORROR**

First came the victim (most commonly), as Alison, bride or (sometimes) the murder location (e.g. street), or the murder weapon (e.g. shotgun). The final word was a legal term (e.g. trial), though might also be a general descriptive noun (e.g. horror).

Sometimes, though less frequently, three-word sequences began with the word murder, in which case the second word was a legal or abstract term, and the third some involved person:

**MURDER TRIAL JUDGE** praised.

Occasional four-word groups were found, and these mostly involved a victim placed in front of the three-word groups described above:

**BOY MURDER CHARGE MAN IN COURT**  
The murder headlines therefore showed a clear murder noun-sequence formula:  
A. Victim (most likely) or place or cause  
B. Word *murder*  
C. Legal or abstract term.  
D. Person accused.

The two-word sequences were:

A + B e.g. **ALISON MURDER**, or B + C e.g. **MURDER CHARGE**.

The three-word sequences were:

A + B + C e.g. **ALISON MURDER CHARGE**.  
The occasional four-word sequences were:  
A + B + C + D e.g. **BOY MURDER CHARGE MAN**.

Both broadsheets and tabloids followed this same basic formula. The main difference between newspapers was in the vocabulary. The broadsheets preferred to use surnames, while the tabloids mainly used the first names of victims:

**SHAUGNESSY MURDER TRIAL** (*The Times*)  
**ALISON MURDER CHARGE** (*The Sun*).

The broadsheets used relatively formal vocabulary to describe relationships, such as *mother, father, husband, child, friend*:

Jury in **CHILD MURDER CASE** was misled (*The Guardian*).

The tabloids, on the other hand, mostly referred to humans via short, informal vocabulary, such as *mum, dad, hubby, tot, pal*:

CAR MURDER **HUBBY** caged (*The Sun*).

Tot is silent witness to **MUM'S MURDER** (*The Mirror*).

Finally, the broadsheets used fairly formal legal or technical vocabulary, with words such as *charge, inquiry*:

Driver faces triple **MURDER CHARGE** (*The Times*).

The tabloids used mostly informal vocabulary, such as *rap, quiz*:

Husband on **MURDER RAP** (*The Mirror*).

The words *death* and *killer*, showed similar, though mildly different patterns, to *murder*. (For example, the word preceding *death* was most usually the cause of death, as **CAR DEATH, FIRE DEATH, STAB DEATH CHARGE**).

Linguistically, these patterns may have a wider significance. They show how pragmatic patterns, in this case words arranged in a newsworthy order, can become habits, and habits become near-'rules'. This may shed light on how language evolved among humans at its beginning (Aitchinson 1996/2000).

But my main point is that headlines are formulaic, in that they have developed near-rules of which most readers are unaware. These rules are unlike the 'normal' rules of English syntax, and reflect the newsworthiness of the news story being reported.

## 10 The language of advertisements

Finally, I want to briefly ask whether advertising language resembles headline writing. The short answer is 'no'. Although ads, like headlines, try to produce compressed information, they mostly try to catch readers' attention, in innovative ways. Ads love rhymes, as in 'Set it and forget it' for a new kitchen hob, alliteration as in 'Players Please', and the Tom, Dick and Harry type of sequence, (technically, Behagel's Law of increasing members'), where the last in a list of three is the longest, as in 'Light, versatile, and ideal for cooking' (ad for a type of cheese). In short, advertising language has more in common with the language of poetry, than with newspaper language. Advertisers, like poets try very hard to make their work unique. Headline writers, and journalists in general, try to make their work ear-catching, but do so in a comforting, semi-formulaic way.

## 11 Conclusion

Readers of newspapers want to hear about disasters and murders. But they need to be reassured that, though their world is maybe disaster-prone, the way in which disasters and murders are reported is predictable. This provides a comforting feeling of familiarity.

This point has been excellently made by the satirical writer Adrian Mitchell. I'll end with a short poem he wrote, called EARLY SHIFT ON THE EVENING STANDARD NEWS DESK (Summerfield 1974):

Fog Chaos Grips South

A thick blanket of fog lay across southern England this morning like a thick blanket...  
 'Don't let's call it a thick blanket today, Joe, let's call it a sodden yellow eiderdown.'  
 'Are you insane?'

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