

Analyzing the Use of Tenses in English News Headlines

Ayman Hamad Rlneil Hamdan¹, Layla Qais²^{1,2} Sudan University of Science & Technology - College of Graduate Studies & Scientific Research**ABSTRACT :**

This paper investigates the use of tenses in English newspapers' headlines of the Telegraph and *The New York Times*. As the main objective of this study is to observe which tenses are more frequent than others, the researcher randomly selected 100 headlines from both journals and statistically analyzed them using the statistical program SPSS. After analyzing the corpus of these two journals, the researcher has come up with some results that the present simple tense, whether conventional or historic, is the most frequently used tense as it gives the Journalists an opportunity to make the story more fresh and more vivid and hence attract readers' attention, followed by the past tense and the future tense successively. The paper also concluded that the historic present tense which was used to refer to past events in a fresh perspective is used more than the conventional present tense. The researcher recommends that media discourse needs more investigations in terms of sentence structure, passivization, the use of articles and conjunctions. A functional analysis research on how media lexis is loaded with meanings is also recommended.

Key words: Media language, News headlines, Tenses, Conventional present simple, historic present simple

المستخلص:

تدرس هذه الورقة استخدام أزمنة الأفعال في العناوين الرئيسية للأخبار باللغة الإنجليزية لصحيفتي التلغراف و النيويورك تايمز. و بما أن الهدف الرئيسي لهذه الدراسة يتمثل في معرفة أزمنة الأفعال الأكثر استخداما من غيرها في عناوين الأخبار الرئيسية, قام الباحث باختيار مائة عنوان من الصحيفتين بطريقة عشوائية و من ثم حللها إحصائيا باستخدام برنامج (SPSS) الإحصائي. و بعد تحليل العينة المختارة من الصحيفتين, توصل الباحث إلى نتائج تتمثل في أن الفعل المضارع البسيط سواء كان دالا على الزمن الحاضر أو الماضي هو الأثر استخداما ثم الفعل الماضي البسيط و المستقبل على التوالي. أيضا, خلصت الورقة إلى أن الفعل المضارع الدال على أحداث الزمن الماضي في صورة حدث طازج و جديد أكثر استخداما من الفعل المضارع الدال على المضارعة فعليا. و عليه, يوصي الباحث بأن خطاب الصحافة يحتاج المزيد من الدراسات التي تتعلق ببنية الجملة, المبني للمجهول, استخدام الأدوات و الروابط, بالإضافة إلى دراسة تحليل الدور الوظيفي للمفردة الإعلامية و ما تحويه من معاني متعددة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: لغة الصحافة, عناوين الأخبار الرئيسية, أزمنة الأفعال, الفعل المضارع الدال على الزمن الحاضر, الفعل المضارع الدال على الزمن الماضي .

1. INTRODUCTION:

Headline writing is a special form of short writing; few words must draw the attention of the readers to the information behind it. The main purpose

of headlines in a newspaper is to attract the readers' attention. Moreover, headlines also help summarize events, help readers grasp the contents of the

pages. They also help set the tone of the newspaper. News headlines have become an interesting area for many linguists and media discourse analysts because news headlines are considered to have their own unique characteristics and status in news discourse. Newspaper headlines are written in a special kind of language with its own vocabulary and grammar.

Newspaper writing rarely represents common English structures agreed up on by grammarians. Headlines in newspapers, in particular, use specific tenses which may have different grammatical functions. This is attributed to the fact that they are designed to be vivid and to attract readers' attention. One of these rules is the use of the historic present for past events to make the news fresher, more vivid and to give some life to it.

Media language plays a major role in our lives. The dominant media institutions within our society maintain their dominance through the use of language. The present tense is used to refer to the past time (historic present).

Previous studies had focused on headlines in general, its special language, its goals and its grammar, the few studies of tenses in newspaper headlines either concluded that the present simple is the main tense in newspaper headlines in an attempt to give life to past event or the previous studies analyze the tense system in newspaper headlines. Journalists frequently use the present tense in their English news headlines as a kind of manipulation to make the story more fresh and more vivid to attract readers attention.

A newspaper headline is often the only thing that readers read in a newspaper, or

at least, it is the first thing that everyone notices in a newspaper. It serves as a guide for the reader that helps him decide whether to continue reading the whole report or to skip into another one. Each headline should be a summary of the news which follows. A headline should be a sentence, and so it also should have a regular sentence structure containing a subject and a verb with the exception that headlines normally does not contain auxiliaries, pronouns, articles, or conjunctions. It means that only lexical, not grammatical words are used. Even when they put some verbs in headlines the tense is usually a source of confusion for the reader.

Materials

2.1 The Birth of Newspaper Headlines Language

It is hard to determine where and when the first newspaper was printed but what is important here is the birth of its language which was in 1851 where the first telegram service was invented in Britain and India. Since then, the telegraphic style of writing emerged.

2.2. Telegraphic style

Telegram style, telegraph style, or telegraphic style is a clipped way of writing that attempts to abbreviate words and pack as much information into the smallest possible number of words or characters. It originated in the [telegraph age](#) when [telecommunication](#) consisted only of short messages transmitted by hand over the telegraph wire. The telegraph companies charged for their service by the number of words in a message, with a maximum of 15 characters per word for a plain-language telegram, and 10 per word for one written in code. The style developed to minimize costs but still conveying the

message clearly and unambiguously (McEwen,2004).

Telegraphic style is a technique of eliminating a word or words necessary for complete grammatical construction, but understood in the context. For example, the use of “if possible” instead of “if it is possible”. Typically the articles “a”, “an”, and “the” are frequently eliminated from the linguistic structures of the headlines (Urgo ,2000). Financially talking, in American business life has been quoted that the elimination of the word "please" from all telegrams would save the American public millions of dollars annually. (McEwen,2004)

The formal or grammatical name for telegraphic style is “ellipsis” or “elliptical” style. The name “telegraphic” is more commonly used because it resembles the construction and sound of the wording typically found in a telegram. Most telegrams have somewhat cryptic worded messages because of the need to save the expense of being charged by the number of words in a message. Telegraphic style can be used in any phrase or sentence construction. Telegraphic has its advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that it may produce a speech pattern referred to as staccato. A staccato effect has abrupt, distinct elements or sounds which may give the reader a certain rhythmic momentum to read. Another disadvantage is that it may cause some misinterpretations by the reader of the intended message. Also, some readers may find it too cryptic. A definite advantage is that it saved space, especially in procedure tables, lists, and flowcharts (Urgo ,2000).

2.3 Iceberg Theory or Hemingwayesque

When Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in Literature in 1954. He was prized for his mastery of the art of narrative and for the influence that he has exerted on contemporary style (smith.1996 ; 45). Ernest Hemingway avoided complicated syntax. About 70 percent of the sentences are simple sentences a childlike syntax without subordination (Wells ,1975 : 130–133).

The Iceberg Theory (also known as the "theory of omission") is the writing style of the American writer, Ernest Hemingway. As a young journalist, Hemingway had to focus his newspaper reports on immediate events, with very little context or interpretation. When he became a writer of short stories, he retained this minimalistic style, focusing on surface elements without explicitly discussing underlying themes. Hemingway believed the deeper meaning of a story should not be evident on the surface, but should shine through implicitly (Hemingway 1935 : 98).

2.4 Language Change

Language changes for several reasons. First, it changes because the needs of its speakers change. New technologies, new products, and new experiences require new words to refer to them clearly and efficiently. Consider texting: originally it was called text messaging, because it allowed one person to send another text rather than voice messages by phone. As that became more common, people began using the shorter form *text* to refer to both the message *and* the process, as in: “*I just got a text or I'll text Sylvia right no*” (Birner, 1991).

Languages change, usually very slowly, sometimes very rapidly. There are many reasons a language might change. One obvious reason is interaction with other

languages. If one tribe of people trades with another, they will pick up specific words and phrases for trade objects, for example. If a small but powerful tribe subdues a larger one, we find that the language of the elite often shows the influence of constant interaction with the majority, while the majority language imports vocabulary and speaking styles from the elite language (ibid).

People tend to think that older forms of languages are more elegant, logical, or 'correct' than modern forms, but it's just not true. The fact that language is always changing doesn't mean it is getting worse; it's just becoming different. By 'correct English', people usually mean Standard English. [Most languages](#) have a standard form; it's the form of the language used in government, education, and other formal contexts. But Standard English is actually just one dialect of English language (ibid).

Drawing on what has been quoted above, news headlines frequently use the conventional present tense and the historic tense to mean the past. Also, the present tense is sometimes used to mean the future. Actually, news headlines have their unique grammatical rules that distinguish them from other kinds of discourses.

2.5. Block Language

Newspaper [headlines](#) are written in a block telegraphic style which often [omits the copula](#) creating syntactic ambiguity. This syntactic ambiguity is also called amphiboly or amphibology. It means that a sentence may be interpreted in more than one way due to ambiguous [sentence structure](#).

The term *block language* was firstly introduced by Straumann in 1935 in *Newspaper Headlines that studies the linguistic structure of media discourse*.

This [Language](#) structure is characterized by the use of less-structured sentences and made up only of words that are essential to convey a message. It also revealed that the present tense was the most recurring one. (Nordquist,2014) Mencken, (2006:185) criticized this elliptical language by saying that Headlines are one of the evils produced by that passion for compression and compact information which possesses so many ingenious minds in America. Everybody can see how an entirely new system of grammar, syntax and even language has been invented to fit the brevity of headlines. Such brevity, so far from being the soul of wit, is even the death of meaning and certainly the death of logic .

However, Mencken (2006) has been opposed by online readers as well as many media discourse analysts such as Nordquist,(2014) when he said that: Newspapers are one of the most popular media omnipresent globally. Their role in informing the public has remained equally important despite the ever-growing popularity of other forms of media nowadays. The writing in newspapers is characterized by a specific language marked by a distinct style and register. This type of language is called block language as used in headlines, or telegraphic speech. A type of structure different from normal clause or sentence structure, but often conveying a complete message. Block language is found especially in notices and newspaper headlines. It sometimes consists of single noun phrases (e.g. No exit, Essex's snappy reply to a negative image). Other block language has a sort of abbreviated clause structure, with articles, auxiliary verbs, and other minor words omitted. The features of this type

of language "are common in certain types of written language, such as notices, headlines, labels, advertisements, subheadings, Web sites and other settings where a message is presented as a 'block'. For example,

- *British left waffles on Falklands*

Did the British leave waffles behind, or is there waffling by the British political left wing?

- *Stolen painting found by tree.*

Either a tree found a stolen painting, or a stolen painting was found sitting next to a tree.

- *Somali Tied to Militants Held on U.S. Ship for Months.*

Either the Somali was held for months, or the Somali was just now linked to militants who were held for months. One could also imagine rope was involved, at which point [lexical ambiguity](#) comes into play.

2.6.1 Generative grammar

The system of rules that specifies the sound–meaning relation for a given language can be called the “grammar”, and in a more technical term it is called “generative grammar”. To be more clear, grammar generates a n infinite set of structures using finite number of rules. In news headlines, these finite rules have been minimized (Chomsky, 2006: 92).

The language of news headline is special and has its own characteristics on the lexical or grammatical level. It is characterized by its brevity, attractiveness, and clarity. The key to a good headline is the use, whenever possible, of strong action verbs. Headline writers use verbs in historical present tense , thus can describe the actions that had happened just now. This tense can express the feel of immediacy. English news headline often use short

words, such as abbreviations and acronyms, and the articles, personal pronouns, are often omitted. The new words are very common in the news headline as the technology develop; people have to use new words to describe the new things. (shi ,1985:9)

2.6.2 The Historic Present in Journalism, Linguistics and Literature

The present tense is used to give a timeless, permanent perspective to what could also be conceptualized as past event. There are a number of other places, where the present tense encroaches into past time territory.

The term 'tense' can be defined as a secondary grammatical category which serves to locate an event or a situation in time. It accounts for example, for the difference in the sentences John leaves / John left. It encompasses two aspects: a morphological aspect, namely a system of tenses encoded in the verb's morphology, and a semantic aspect dealing with the temporal location of the event or events depicted in one or more sentences: the 'meaning' of the various tenses. (Jour ,2008;20)

The main journalistic function of using a [verb phrase](#) in the [present tense](#) to refer to an event that took place in the past is to create an effect of immediacy. In [rhetoric](#), the use of the present tense to report on events from the past is called in Latin language *translatiotemporum* which means in English "transfer of times". It clearly shows that the historical present only exists as an intended tropical deviation of the past tense" . (Nordquist,2014)

In the Living English Language when telling stories about past events, people often switch into present tense, as in : “ *I was walking home from work one day.*

All of a sudden this man comes up to me and says.... “. This phenomenon is called the *historical present* which has a long history in English and is found in numerous other languages, both ancient and modern. Linguists have sometimes suggested that the historical present makes stories more vivid primarily by bringing past actions into the immediate present (ibid).

In [linguistics](#) and [rhetoric](#), the historic present or historical present, which is also called dramatic present or narrative present, refers to the employment of the [present tense](#) when narrating past events. (Huddleston & Pullum 2002). Besides its use in writing about history, especially in historical chronicles (listing a series of events), it is used in fiction, for 'hot news' (as in headlines), and in everyday conversation. The present tense is widely used in news headlines (spoken or written) for dynamic situations in the recent past (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 129–131).

2.6.3. The historic present in narrative

The present tense is used for past time situations in informal conversational narration or in fiction. For example, “*There was I playing so well even I couldn't believe it and along comes this kid and keeps me off the table for three frames!*”

This can be regarded as a metaphoric use of the present tense, a device conventionally used (in English and a very wide range of languages) to make the narration appears more vivid by assimilating it to the here –and –now of the speech act. Note that in the above cited example, the speaker switches from preterit (The preterit tense is used to refer to actions that occurred at a fixed point in past time) in the first two verbs to the present in the last two ones (ibid).

2.6.4. The historic present in hot news

The present tense is widely used in news headlines (spoken or written) for dynamic situations in the recent past :

- *UN aid reaches the stricken Bosnian town of Srebrenica.*
- *Probe clears Speaker over bike payout.*
- *Ailing pensioner gets Govt death notice.*

The texts beneath the headlines use past tenses, *preterit* (*An independent inquiry yesterday cleared former speaker Leo Mcleay of any favorable treatment in his \$65,000 bicycle accident compensation claim*)

Or present perfect (*An 84 –year –old Bathurst man recovered from a stroke has received a letter...*) , but in the headlines the simple present is shorter and more vivid. This might be regarded as metaphorical extension of the present tense in commentaries..(Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 130)

3. Methods:

3.1. Data Collection

Since this study is conducted to measure the frequency of the more used tenses in news headlines, 100 news headlines from the telegraph and *The New York Times* were analyzed . The quantitative numeric data were analyzed using the statistical programme SPSS. The researcher has used different issues for both newspapers dating from 21/12/2015 – 25/12/2015.

3.2. Validity and Reliability of the Corpus

To test the reliability and validity of the corpus, 10 headlines were randomly selected, and then manipulated using the features of Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). Then, the whole package has been analyzed, and

the attained results were closely related; a thing that indicates acceptable validity and reliability

4. Results:

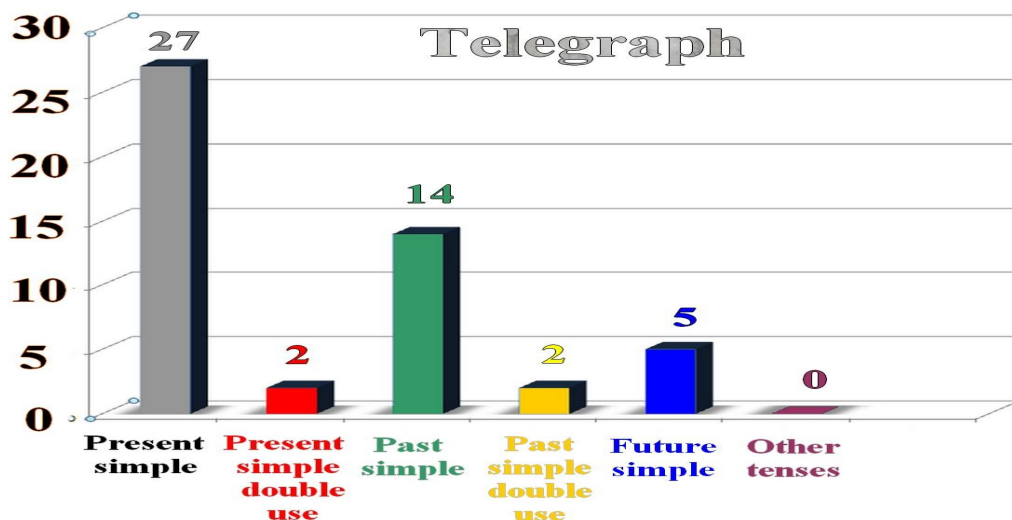
Research Question1: What are the most frequently used tenses in English News Headlines?

After analyzing a sample of 100 headlines from *The New York Times* and

the Telegraph, it has been confirmed that the present simple, past simple and the future tense are the most recurring tenses in media language successively. Moreover, the present tense is the most frequently used in both newspapers. Moreover, in the New York Times its use is more frequent than in the Telegram as the tables below illustrate.

Table (1): Analysis of the frequent use of tenses in Telegraph Newspaper Headlines:

Date	12/21 2005	12/22 2005	12/23 2005	12/24 2005	12/25 2005	Total	of % Total
Present simple	6	4	5	7	5	27	54%
Present simple double use	2	0	0	0	0	2	4%
Past simple	1	3	3	3	4	14	28%
Past simple double use	0	1	0	0	1	2	4%
Future simple	1	2	2	0	0	5	10%
Other tenses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
Number of headlines	10	10	10	10	10	50	100 %



According to the table and figure, It is quite clear that the journalists who write in the Telegraph more frequently use the

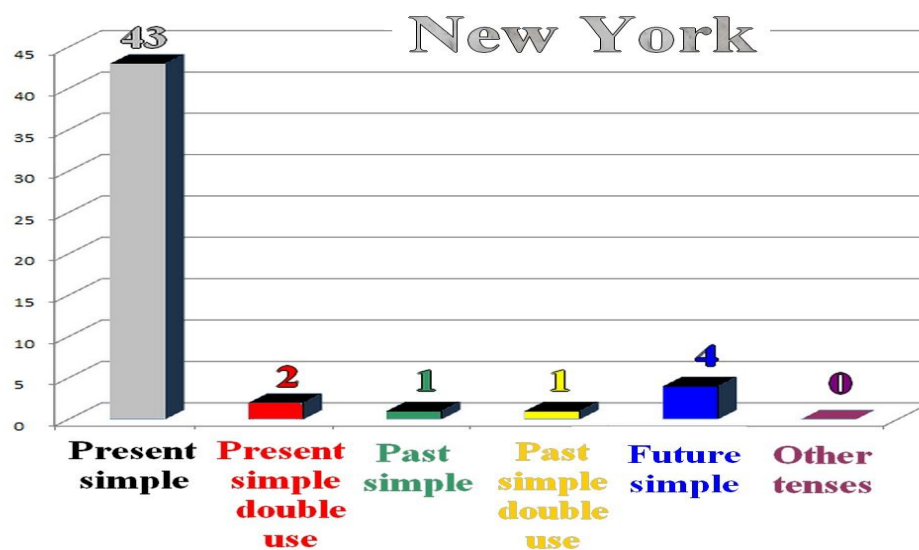
present tense as a dominating one with percentage 54% for single verb use and 4% for the use of double present verbs,

followed by the past simple with percentage 28% for single verb use and 4% for double past verbs use, and finally

comes the future simple tense with percentage 10.

Table (2): Analysis of the frequent use of tenses in the New York Times Newspaper Headlines:

Date	12/21 2005	12/22 2005	12/23 2005	12/24 2005	12/25 2005	Total	of % Total
Present simple	10	9	9	8	7	43	86%
Present simple double use	0	0	0	0	2	2	4%
Past simple	0	1	0	0	0	1	2%
Past simple double use	0	0	0	1	0	1	2%
Future simple	0	0	0	2	1	3	3%
Other tenses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
Number of headlines	10	10	10	10	10	50	100 %



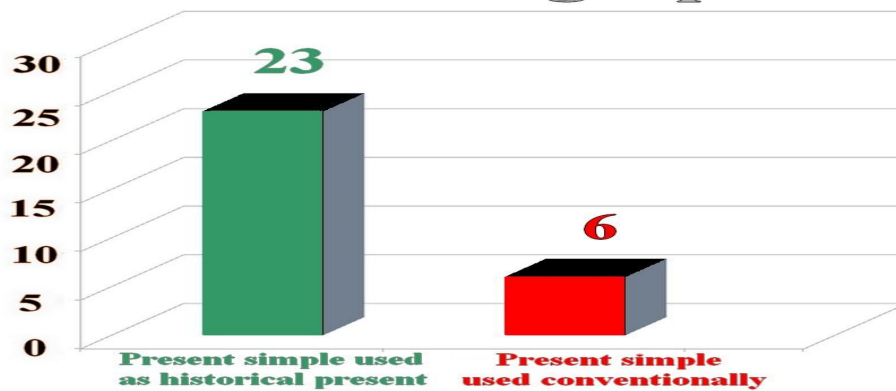
Research Question2: What is more frequent in News paper headlines, the

present conventional or the present historic tense?

Table (3): The Conventional Use of Present Tense versus the Historic Use in the Telegraph:

Date	21/12 2005	22/12 2005	23/12 2005	24/12 2005	25/12 2005	Total	%of Total
Present simple used as historical present	7	4	5	2	5	23	79.4%
Present simple used conventionally	1	0	0	5	0	6	20.6%
Number of headlines	8	4	5	7	5	29	100%

Telegraph

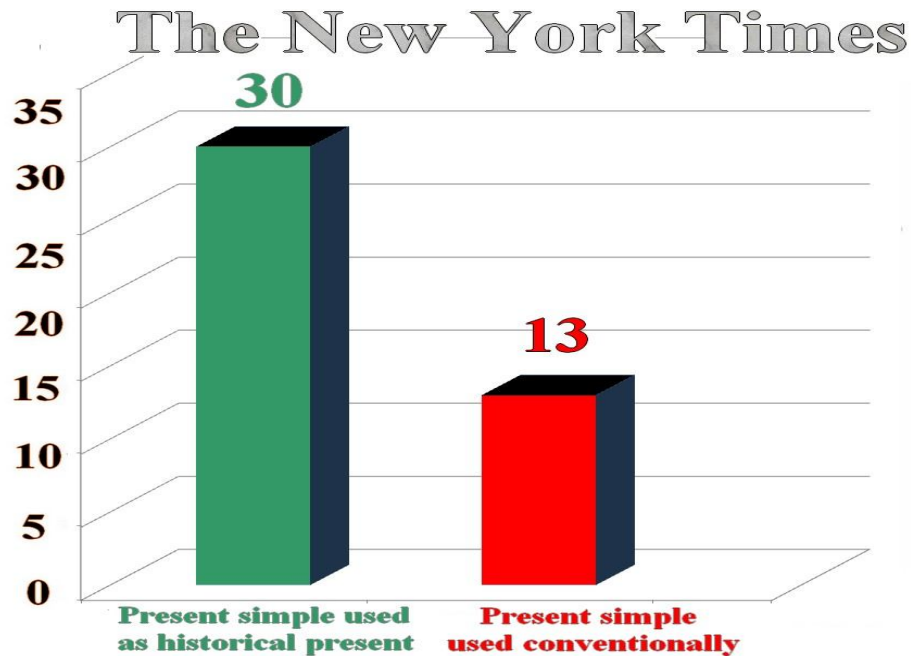


The above table indicates that the historic present tense that reflects the past is more frequently used than the conventional one as media reflects

past events in the Telegraph with percentages: 79.4% and 20.6% successively

Table (4): The Conventional Use of Present Tense Versus the Historic Use in the New York Times:

Date	12/21 2005	12/22 2005	12/23 2005	12/24 2005	12/25 2005	Total	Of %. Total
Present simple used as historical present	9	8	5	4	4	30	69.7%
Present simple used conventionally	10	1	4	4	3	13	30.2
Number of headlines	10	9	9	8	7	43	100%



The above table indicates that the historic present tense that reflects the past is more frequently used than the conventional one as media reflects past events in the New York Times with percentages: 69.7% and 30.3% successively

5. Discussion and Interpretation of the findings

The analysis of the frequent use of tenses in media discourse reveal that the present tense is the most prevailing one as reflected in the Telegraph and the New York Times as the tables and figures denote. Journalists frequently use the present tense in their English news headlines as a kind of manipulation to make the story fresher and more vivid to attract readers' attention.

The results also illustrate that the present tense is frequently used in with percentage 54% and 86% in the Telegraph and the New York Times successively. It is not surprising that the largest group of headlines with the finite verb is in simple present tense because it

is used conventionally and form historic perspective to represent the past tense.

The Historic present is more frequent than the conventional one with percentages: 79.4 and 69.7 successively as the tables and figures illustrates

5.1 Simple present used conventionally

Example 1

How Santa makes money

The headline in example (1) is on present simple using conventionally now let's take a look at the article to see what tense the editor choose to complete the article with:-

Despite Santa's best efforts at using Earbob and selling leftover cookies, Claus Inc makes an annual loss of £8,421,792,249. Where could Father Christmas cut costs? Just when everything finally starts to slow down in the City.

The journalist completed the article with simple present because it is the correct tense, the same thing in example (2):-

Example 2

The typical American lives 18 mile only from mom

The headline in example (2) is on present simple using conventional Let's see what tense the editor choose to complete the article with:-

Families traveling from far-flung places, returning home for the holiday That image of an American Christmas fits the perception of Americans as rootless, constantly on the move to seek opportunity even if it means leaving family behind. Yet that picture masks a key fact about the geography of family in the United States: The typical adult lives only 18 miles from his or her mother.

After the first line in present continues just because the journalist is trying to make an image for the reader he completed the article with simple present not because it is the favorite tense in headlines but because it is the correct tens. The headlines in example (1) and (2) is on the present simple used conventionally which is less common, the major grope as the analysis reveals is on the present simple used as historic present as in example (3) and (4) :-

5.2 Present simple used as historic present

Example (3)

Star wars smashes box office records on opening weekend.

Although smashing the box took place in the past but the journalist wrote it in present simple after that he completed the article with simple past as followed :-

"Star Wars: The Force Awakens" shattered box office records with an estimated \$517 million (£350 million) in worldwide ticket sales on its opening weekend, a staggering debut that re-established the celebrated space saga as a global phenomenon.

The first "Star Wars" film in a decade recorded the biggest domestic opening in Hollywood's history, collecting \$238 million over the weekend in the United States and Canada.

The same thing in example (4) after writing the headlines in historic present the journalist completed the article in simple past :-

Example(4)

Miss universe host Steve Harvey apologizes for blunder.

Although the apology took place in the past the headline was written in simple present and completed in simple past :-
Harvey spoke to reporters assembled at the Planet Hollywood hotel-casino where the pageant concluded with him awarding the crown to the wrong person. Harvey said it was his mistake and that he would take responsibility for not correctly reading the card, which said that contestant Pia Alonzo Wurtzbach of the Philippines was this year's winner and Miss Colombia was the first runner-up.

Reformulating the message beyond the headlines by means of the simple past tense make sense because first it is the correct tens second the reader at this point is reading the article after the headline achieved its goal with its special ornamented language regardless

of the wrong tense used to draw attention at the expense of grammatical rules to the extent that this grammatical error has become a common rule in media language. as table (3) and (4) reveals that writing hot news in historic present is so common in headlines to make the news more fresh more vivid and to keep the past alive see example (5):-

Example (5)

US admits that coalition air strike 'killed Iraqi soldiers'

Again the article was finished in simple past :-

About 10 Iraqi soldiers may have been killed by an American air strike as they fought Isil terrorists near the town of Fallujah, the US military admitted on Saturday

5.3 Present simple double use

Headlines sometimes form a complex sentence with two verbs both are simple present both are in historic present as in example (6):-

Example (6)

Joseph wins but only after Radio Times spoils it

This type of headlines usually used in sport news see example (7):-

Example (7)

Andy murry wins sporty as Tyson Fury misses out an award

This type of headlines with Present simple double use is only 4% as table (3) and (4) illustrate. But its importance only because it is part of the simple present used in headlines as historic present.

5.4 Simple past

Usually used with the verbs killed and murdered

Example (8)

US. Soldiers are killed by Taliban attack in Afghanistan

Example (9)

Man killed by shark during Aruba shipwreck rescue

5.5 Simple past double used

The same as simple past usually used with the verbs killed and murdered in complex sentence with two verbs both in the simple past as in example (10):-

Example (10)

Young Afghan American woman shot dead by mullah as she left her Kabul gym

5.6 Future simple

When this is the right tense why not using it, especially because it gives more live to the headline

Example (11)

Iraq and ISIS forces battling for control of central Ramadi

The article then written in the correct tenses as followed:-

For the first time, Iraqi forces engaged Islamic State fighters within the city center of Ramadi on Tuesday, reaching the edge of the inner government district in an attempt to seize the critical western provincial capital after months of approach and maneuvering, officials said.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions:

Language is always changing, evolving, and adapting to the needs of its users. Headlines language evolution can be summarized in three steps:-

1- All types of condense languages text messages, headlines and twitter started at the telegraphic age in 1851 when more words meant more money.

2- This type of language was recognized and become popular in (in 1954) when *Ernest Hemingway* awarded the noble prize for his contemporary style of writing at that time ,he avoided complicated syntax. About 70 percent of

his sentences are simple sentences a childlike syntax without subordination.

3- The widespread of newspapers and the severe competition among them, every newspaper wants to sell fresh news in a small space, again words means money.

Most of the times language evolves for good reasons but in the case of headlines it turns out to be inaccurate and misleading and this is obviously a part of inaccurate and misleading manipulative media aiming to shape public opinion, sell more, , and to draw readers attention. For these goals everything is possible even breaking grammatical rules.

The newspaper headline analysis of both The Telegraph and The new york Times has shown that the present simple is the main tense in newspaper headlines , the

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