

## CHARACTERISTICS OF JOURNALISTIC LANGUAGE IN BRITISH NEWSPAPERS

Mădălina Cerban  
Assoc. Prof., PhD, University of Craiova

*Abstract:* In the present paper we are going to discuss the most important characteristics of journalistic language, pointing out both the linguistic and the punctuation rules that have to be followed in newspaper reports, as well as the discourse patterns which have as main features the ability to simplify the information, the focus on details and accuracy, the objectivity and the clarity of the text. In order to study the journalistic language, we have chosen several reports published in the most representative British newspapers, using for our discourse analysis texts from different domains, such as politics and sports. We are going to demonstrate that, in spite of the different topics, the characteristics of journalistic language are present in all written discourses.

*Keywords:* journalistic language, text analysis, newspapers

### I. Introductory Remarks

In our daily lives, we are surrounded by news, breaking news on our TV set, on our mobile phones, on our computers, on the car's radio, on the screen of a bar and so on. We are surrounded by written and oral news continuously, which is understandable as we all want to be informed as quickly as possible. If the newspaper's news changes every day and it is difficult to recover, the digital news on the Internet can be accessed any time even if the news is old. "Journalism is a broad range of activities associated with newsmaking [...]. In contemporary usage, it refers to the organized and public collection, processing and distribution of news and current affairs material" (Zelizer & Allan, 2010: 62)

In this paper we deal only with articles from on-line newspapers, analyzing their lexical and grammatical structure.

According to Van Dijk (1990), there are three main types of newspapers articles:

- *Informative*: texts are present the news in an objective way, having the intention to inform us about something. The aim of these articles is to communicate real facts directly, without interpreting them. The objective reportage is considered to be an example of informative text.

- *Opinion or interpretative*: texts that contain the author's opinion on a fact. The purpose of this type of article is to evaluate the facts that have already happened. Columns, editorials, opinion articles are the texts that belong to this type.

- *Entertainment*: texts that have as a main purpose the reader's entertainment. This type of texts includes texts about culture, food, travel and so on.

### II. The Structure of journalistic texts

Most of the British newspaper articles have the structure of an upside-down pyramid. The main idea of the article can be found in the first part of it, generally in the first paragraph. The consequences of the event are placed in the first paragraph whereas the cause of the event comes at the end of the article. The reason for such a structure is to draw the reader's attention, to make him curious. Less important information comes after the first paragraph, in

the middle of the article. Another characteristic of the structure of articles is the lack of chronological structure which is not essential as the purpose of the article is to give the reader the possibility to learn about the changes in a particular event.

According to Van Dijk (1990), a journalistic text should answer, if possible, to five questions: what, who, when, where, why. “What” refers to the topic of the article, to the actual fact; “who” refers to the participants in the event; “when” refers to the period of time the event happened; “where” refers to the place of the event; “why” refers to the possible reasons that triggered the events and “how” refers to the circumstances related to the event.

### III. Characteristics of Journalistic Language

The main characteristics of journalistic language, universally recognized, are objectivity, clarity and conciseness. The text should be brief, but full of information. The main function of news is to inform the reader about something; and, as a result, the language has to be clear, brief and easy to understand. A good news article avoids repetitions and ambiguities, and it is objective, without expressing the author’s opinion. Although the language is simple, the author must maintain the reader’s interest from the beginning to the end.

At the level of text, the coherence and the cohesion are two concepts from systemic functional linguistics, developed by Hasan and Halliday (1976), and they are essential for understanding the text. Cohesion is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition of coherence. The different types of cohesive relations are the fundamental resources out of which coherence is built. But only the presence of the cohesive ties in a text is not enough for guaranteeing a coherent texture. An important role is played by the structural component which is sub-divide into two areas: the thematic structure and the information structure. The cohesive is subdivided into four areas: reference, substitution and ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

(i). *Reference* can be cohesive when two or more expressions in the text refer to the same person, thing or idea. A characteristic of cohesive reference is that, on the second mention of a person, thing or idea, the text avoids to use the names again, using instead pronouns, demonstratives (*this, these* etc) or a comparative. According to the rules of thematic progressive, the repetitions of nominals may also have a cohesive function, but there is a special characteristic that is produced by the use of the unnamed reference. When readers or listeners come across a pronoun or a determiner, they have to identify in their minds the reference (“linked nominal”) in order to understand the spoken or written text. This has a very strong cohesive component.

(ii). Regarding *substitution and ellipsis*, there is a main difference between reference and substitution. In the case of reference, the cohesion exists between two or more words which refer to the same concept. With substitution we do not have co-referentiality, but rather a substitute for a word or group of words. According to Bloor and Bloor (2004: 95) “Substitution is used where a speaker or a writer wishes to avoid the repetition of a lexical item and is able to draw on the grammatical resources of the language to replace the item”. In the same cohesive class as substitution we have ellipsis, namely the omission of a word, groups of words or clauses. Halliday refers to ellipsis as substitution by zero.

(iii). *Conjunction* describes the cohesive ties between clauses and sections of the same text in order to demonstrate the logical relationship between them. “It is also possible to perceive this process as the linking of ideas, events or other phenomena” (Bloor and Bloor, 2004: 97). This linking is realized by *conjunctive Adjuncts* (the other types of adjuncts,

namely circumstantial and modal ones do not function as cohesive ties although they have a lot of semantic characteristics).

(iv). *Conjunctive Adjuncts* have two functions: to fulfill conjunction and to indicate the relationship between the two elements.

“Lexical cohesion refers to the cohesive effect of the use of lexical items in discourse where the choice of an item relates to the choices that have gone before”. (Bloor and Bloor, 2004: 99) Words form cohesion chains within a text; as a result, the text may have more than one chain running through it and these chains are the tools which make us say that a text is cohesive.

### III.1. Lexical and Grammatical Features of News Articles

#### III.1.1. Lexical and Grammatical Features of Headlines

It should be pointed out that the main function of English headlines is the informative function, the author in the first place informs the reader what the article is about and only after that he tries to attract attention and advertise his work. The title of the article has a great importance, and its distinguished feature is simplified grammar. In passive constructions, the auxiliary “to be” is often omitted:

e.g. *Johnson humiliated by Luxembourg PM at ‘empty chair’ press conference*  
instead of *Johnson was humiliated by Luxembourg PM at ‘empty chair’ press conference*  
([www.theguardian.com/uk-news](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news))

Articles and possessive pronouns are also taken out from the headlines:

e.g. *Clearance of ancient woodlands for HS2 to be halted until review.*  
([www.theguardian.com/uk-news](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news))

The headlines use mainly Present Simple Tense even if the action took place in the past. In this way, the reader has the feeling of simultaneity events.

e.g. *Owen Farrell changes tackle techniques amid fear of red and yellow cards.*  
([www.theguardian.com/sport](http://www.theguardian.com/sport))

Another characteristic of British newspapers’ headlines is the use of quotations or the direct speech:

e.g. *Jo Johnson: I Quit*  
*Nicolas Sarkozy: I’d return to politics only to save France.*  
*Relaxation of US cannabis laws ‘violates UN drug convention’.*  
([www.theguardian.com/news](http://www.theguardian.com/news))

Sometimes, indirect speech is used:

e.g. *Trump says he will discuss it in Congress*  
([www.theguardian.com/news](http://www.theguardian.com/news))

#### III.1.2. Lexical and Grammatical Features of Newspaper Articles

The style of newspaper writings has become more and more concise in the recent years. Articles are made of simple sentences because the message is unambiguous. Complex and compound sentences increase the risk of ambiguity, and this is why they are avoided. According to van Dijk (1990), today’s journalistic style has the following characteristics:

- It is objective, the author avoids using the first person, acting as a mediator

- The syntax and the lexicon are clear, unambiguous
- The style is short in order to save time and space. Relative clauses are frequently used, as well as nominalizations.

Syntax should be simple, generally made of affirmative sentences, expressing clear ideas. By contrast, subordinate and long sentences should be avoided. Sentences always begin with the Subject, the Theme of the article. Only when the author wants to emphasize a particular element, the Subject is preceded by this particular element. We have identified the following syntactic key features:

- the active voice is preferred to passive voice;
- the article should consist of short independent paragraphs, each of them making sense and being removable from the text without altering the central meaning of the article.
- the simplicity and directness are necessary features in order to avoid ambiguity
- the lexicon uses strong words, action verbs are preferred to stative verbs
- the positive constructions instead of negative ones
- the use of third person singular in order to be objective
- the past simple or past perfect in the narration of the event.

In the last part of the paper we will exemplify all these features on two texts from the famous British newspapers from two different domains: political and sport.

The first article refers to the most important topic of the day, namely Brexit.

*e.g. What happens next with Brexit?*

*Officially, the UK is due to leave the EU on 31 October 2019.*

*However, with the risk of no deal rising, MPs from different parties voted through a law forcing the government to seek a third Brexit extension.*

*Prime Minister Boris Johnson will have to request a Brexit extension from the EU on 19 October, pushing the deadline back to 31 January 2020. The only exception is if MPs approve a Brexit deal, or vote in favour of leaving with no deal.*

*Should the EU want a different deadline date, Mr Johnson will be forced to accept it unless MPs vote to reject it within two days.*

*Any extension offered to the UK has to be agreed to by all members of the EU - so there's no guarantee the UK will be offered one.*

(www.bbc.com)

First of all, we have to notice that the title summarizes the content of the article. Secondly, the article is organized in brief paragraphs (1-2 lines). Each paragraph develops a particular idea for the story in a concise way. The language is clear and precise, avoiding ambiguities. The style used by the author is simple so as all readers can understand it irrespective of their level of education. The text is coherent, all ideas are organized and connected with the help of punctuation, as well as with other grammatical and lexical devices. To begin with the grammatical ones, we would say that the reference is used nouns (*The UK, MPs, Mr Johnson, members*). Regarding the lexical devices, the author uses a variety of vocabulary related to the topic (*vote, agree, government, Prime Minister*).

The compound sentences are made only of two simple sentences. The second sentence has the role to enforce or to explain the meaning of the main sentence, reflecting the formal character of the text. The nouns with negative meaning (*risk, deadline*) are more numerous than the positive one (*law*); the verbs with negative meaning are also more frequently used (*leaving, forcing, reject*). There are also several negative constructions (*with the risk of no*

*deal rising, there's no guarantee*). The first person is not used in order to avoid subjectivity. Taking into account all these linguistic features, we can say that the article is an objective one, without any characteristics of sensationalistic text.

The second text is from sports, tennis to be more precise.

e.g. *Kim Clijsters: Former world number one to return to tennis aged 36*

*Winning is still the ultimate goal, Clijsters admits, but she is not setting herself any specific targets just yet.*

*Success at this stage, she says, would be to get herself at the standard required to compete among the elite once again. She would love to make her comeback in Australia in January, but will only do so if ready.*

*Clijsters says she won't play anything like a full season.*

*She does not want to be away from her family for much more than a couple of weeks at a time, so her schedule may be designed with the school holidays in mind - when the children can travel.*

*It will be fascinating to see how Clijsters gets on. How will the champion, renowned for her versatile game, great return and excellent movement fare against those younger and more powerful players?*

([www.bbc.com/sport/tennis](http://www.bbc.com/sport/tennis))

This text, as the previous one, is also made up of short paragraphs expressing clear ideas. The author does not use the first person in order to avoid ambiguity, but he uses reported speech (*Clijsters says she won't play anything like a full season, Winning is still the ultimate goal, Clijsters admits*). We can also notice that subordinate clauses are not frequently used in this text. The author prefers compound clauses related by the conjunctions *but* and *and*. Another characteristic of this text is the use of a great number of non-finite clauses, especially infinitive clauses, making the text more informative and logical: *want to be away, would love to make*.

### Conclusions

After analyzing the texts, we can conclude that both of them share the same main features of journalistic texts: simplicity, clarity and objectivity. Both texts are made up of short paragraphs (1-2 lines), the sentences are mostly simple, and the compound and complex ones are made of two sentences.

Nevertheless, there is a difference between the two approaches: while in the first one the author does not mention the participants' ideas about the topic of the articles, only enumerating the future actions that should be taken, in the second one, the author explains the tennis player's motivation for restarting her career and her future plans, especially using reported speech.

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