

# A Study on the Structures of Headlines in English Newspapers

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## 1. Introduction

The sentence or phrase structures of headlines in English newspapers are, in some respects, different from those of what is called 'normal English' as seen in ordinary written materials. They can be classified into several types, each of which has its own features related to tense and aspect. In this paper, however, we will find out what feature all these types have in common and make a clear explanation for why these types of structures with such feature are used for headlines in newspapers in comparison with their 'normal English' counterparts.

## 2. Types of Structures

We can typically divide the structures of headlines in English newspapers into seven types. The newspaper which we adopt here is *The Daily Yomiuri*, one of the most popular English newspapers in Japan. For the present study, we have all 427 headlines which appeared on the front pages of 82-day copies of this newspaper. In the next chapter, we will see each of the seven types that we have just mentioned.

### 2.1. S+V+X

This is the most frequent pattern in which a verb, followed by an object because it is transitive in many cases, comes after a subject, as is usually the case with 'normal English.' Let us see the following examples.

- (1) IMF approves \$4.5 bil. loan for Russia
- (2) NATO missiles kill 9 on crowded Serb bridge

Although nearly all the verbs of this type are expressed in present tense, they denote the events which happened in the past. It is evident that both (1) and (2) report the past events. In some cases, however, present tense verbs indicate present situations or future events, as in:

- (3) Govt sets aside extra ¥2 trillion to support Asia
- (4) Toyota, Itochu accept C&W takeover of IDC

- (3) denotes a *present* situation in which the government now saves money for future use, while (4) signifies a future event in which Toyota and Itochu accept a takeover, which has

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not occurred yet.

Of course, if a verb is intransitive, it is followed by a prepositional phrase, adverb, etc., not by an object. Examples are as follows.

- (5) Father of Empress dies at age 95
- (6) Jobless rate rises further to hit record high 4.9%

Whether a verb is transitive or intransitive, this type has no features different from those of 'normal English,' considering it has a subject followed by a verb. It typically shows that a subject did/does/will do (something), which we represent here as 'S+V+X.'

## 2.2 S+to-Infinitive

In this pattern, a verb in to-infinitive form follows a subject, generally indicating a future event. Examples are given below.

- (7) G-8 to urge Belgrade to pull out from Kosovo
- (8) Govt to send police to assist E. Timor poll

In both (7) and (8), the events have not happened yet but will happen in the future. (7) says that G-8 is going to urge Belgrade to withdraw from Kosovo, while (8) reports the plan for the government to dispatch the police to East Timor. In any case, this type typically shows that a subject will do something. We will represent this pattern as 'S+to Infinitive.'

## 2.3 S+Present participle

Occasionally we find a pattern in which a subject is followed by a verb in present-participle form, whose examples we see below.

- (9a) Govt studying measures to create mobile workforce
- (10a) U.S. Congress reviewing China spying

Since this pattern includes a present participle, it usually denotes an event or a situation in progress, which would be expressed by the *be+present participle* construction in 'normal English,' like the following.

- (9b) Govt *is studying* measures to create mobile workforce
- (10b) U.S. Congress *is reviewing* China spying

That is to say, we may say that *be* is omitted in this pattern in which a subject is/has been doing something. This pattern is represented as 'S+ Present participle' in this paper.

## 2.4 S+Past participle

Next to the 'S+V+X' pattern mentioned in 2.1, we often come across this pattern in which a past participle is directly combined with a preceding subject. Here, *be*, which should stand between a subject and a past participle, is considered to be omitted just as in 2.3.

- (11a) Taiwan vessel seized by China  
 (12a) 'Heat fatigue' seen in cracked N-plant pipe

The past participles used here signify that the subjects are affected by the actions caused by the agents, whether they are explicitly indicated or not. Most of this pattern report events in the past, which fact we can confirm by the following 'normal English' equivalent to (11a) and (12a).

- (11b) Taiwan vessel *was seized* by China  
 (12b) 'Heat fatigue' *was seen* in cracked N-plant pipe

We will represent the pattern treated here as 'S+Past participle.'

## 2.5. S+Adjective/Adverb

In this pattern, a subject has an adjective or adverb just after it, without *be* between them. Let us see the examples.

- (13a) Extension of Diet likely  
 (14a) Kosovo accord still up in air  
 (15a) U.S. violent crime rate down in 1998

This pattern indicates a future, present or past situation, as shown in (13a), (14a) and (15a) respectively. Here, as in 2.3. and 2.4, *be* is thought to be left out, because (13a) - (15a) would be expressed as (13b) - (15b) in 'normal English' with no change in meaning.

- (13b) Extension of Diet *is* likely  
 (14b) Kosovo accord *is* still up in air  
 (15b) U.S. violent crime rate *was* down in 1998

We can represent this pattern as 'S+Adjective/Adverb,' in which a subject is/was/will be in a certain situation.

## 2.6. S+Prepositional phrase

We rarely see this pattern in which a prepositional phrase comes immediately after a subject, as in:

- (16) 4 parties in accord on study panel for Constitution  
 (17) Diet near consensus on need for ethics law

A past situation like (16), or a present situation like (17) is shown by this pattern whose structure can be represented as 'S+Prepositional phrase'. In other words, it reports that a subject is/was in a certain situation. Note that this pattern, just as the 'S+Adjective/Adverb' pattern in 2.5, has no verb in any form. We will discuss this later in chapter 3.

So far we have mentioned the structures with only one subject in each. However, it goes without saying that we find such structures as have more than one subject, namely, what we call

'Complex/Compound sentences' in which there are usually two 'S+V' structures. We will deal with this pattern in the next section.

## 2.7. Complex/Compound sentences

Complex sentences can also be seen in some headlines, though the conjunction *that* leading a subordinate clause is always omitted.

- (18) U.S., British air strikes kill 9, Baghdad says
- (19) Poll shows 70% suffer stress, most at work

As seen in the examples above, a main clause can either follow or precede its subordinate clause. In most cases, a subordinate clause denotes an event, while a main clause clarifies the source reporting that event.

In complex sentences, some subordinate clauses do not have such 'S+V' structure as seen in 'normal English.' Instead, they have the structures that we mentioned in 2.2-5, whose examples are given below.

- (20) Kosovo peace talk to continue, Bonn says
- (21) Japan not considering Kosovo mission, govt says
- (22) Belgrade says 50 killed in Kosovo NATO attack
- (23) Norota says ships' warning shots legal
- (24) Business confidence up, Tankan survey shows

It is often the case that colons substitute for reporting verbs, for instance, *say*, *show*, *propose*, *report*, etc., as in:

- (25) Report: Chinese N-arms improved with U.S. secrets
- (26) China: U.S. envoy failed to explain bombing

Also in this case, we can recognize an event from the clauses or phrases after colons and identify the source reporting it as well.

Unlike colons, semicolons are usually used instead of the conjunction *and* or the conjunctive adverb *therefore*. Thus, headlines in which two or more clauses/phrases are linked by a semicolon can be regarded as compound sentences. The following examples clearly show this fact.

- (27) Malaysian liner sinks; all aboard saved
- (28) UNSC OK's Kosovo plan; NATO to aid refugees return

## 2.8. Other Types

There is a pattern in which a noun phrase, as a complement of the omitted verb *be*, follows a subject, as in:

- (29a) Torsion possible cause of power plant pipe leak

Originally, (29a) should be as follows:

(29b) Torsion *is* the possible cause of the power plant's pipe leak

Of course, this structure can appear in a subordinate clause, where *be* is also left out.

(30) Clinton: Ground troops still option

A very few complex sentences have subordinate clauses with their subjects only. However, we can understand their meanings because it is possible to infer what grammatical elements are omitted. For instance, let us consider the following example.

(31a) Coast Guard: Virtually no chance Kennedy party alive

Needless to say, we know that (31a) would be (31b) below if expressed in 'normal English.'

(31b) Coast Guard said that *there is* virtually no chance of Kennedy party being alive

### 3. Analysis

In the previous chapter, we have seen the typical structures embodied in the headlines in newspapers. The most typical pattern is the 'S+V+X' type, which can be said to be a kind of 'normal English' that we usually write and read. Therefore, it is seen in more than half of all the headlines examined in the present study. This fact is shown by the table below.

*Table: Structural Patterns Examined in the Present Study*

S+V+X	234	(54.8%)
S+to-Infinitive	55	(12.9%)
S+Present participle	10	(2.3%)
S+Past participle	59	(13.8%)
S+Adjective/Adverb	11	(2.6%)
S+Prepositional phrase	4	(0.9%)
Others	54	(12.7%)
Total	427	(100.0%)

As we have already seen, 'S+to-Infinitive' usually indicates future events, which would normally be expressed with *will*. But in addition to *will*, we have *be+to-infinitive* construction for their representation. Hence, it is also fair to say that the following example,

(32a) U.N. panel to propose intl small arms accord

would originally be (32b) shown below.

(32b) U.N. panel *is* to propose intl small arms accord

Now let us suppose that in the 'S+to-infinitive' pattern, *be* is omitted before to-infinitive. The

same supposition can be made on the 'S+prepositional phrase' pattern.

(33a) Iran students in new clashes with police

The meaning of (33a) is not changed at all even if *be* is inserted in it, as in:

(33b) Iran students *were* in new clashes with police

In 2.3-5, we also assumed that *be* is omitted. Here we have made the assumption that in all the patterns investigated in 2.2-6, *be* is left out. To put it another way, all of the patterns except 'S+V+X' have in common the feature of *be* being omitted. In next chapter, we will discuss the reason for this feature, that is, why *be* should, or is allowed to be omitted.

#### 4. Discussions

As we have seen in 2.7, colons are used instead of reporting verbs, leading subordinate clauses without the conjunction *that*. On the other hand, semicolons substitute for the conjunction *and* or the conjunctive adverb *therefore*. It has been pointed out that this is because spaces for headlines are limited and because it would make the expressions of headlines less lively to use these conjunctions as function words with less concrete meaning.<sup>1)</sup> Since the main purpose of headlines is to make a deep impression on readers with lively, easy-to-understand expressions,<sup>2)</sup> conjunctions are less important, resulting in their ellipsis. Readers can catch the meanings of headlines correctly without them.

Likewise, *be*, which is a linking verb without concrete meaning, may be omitted. This remark, however, does not answer the question why *be* is left out in so many cases and why readers can infer its omission.

Our suggestion is that this is because readers can correctly understand 'nexus' which is seen in many grammatical structures in English. According to Jespersen (1935),<sup>3)</sup> nexus is a subject-predicate relationship, whether it has an explicit relationship of subject-verb or not. The 'S+V+X' pattern in this paper is the former case. The latter case is seen in many structures in English. See the examples below.<sup>4)</sup>

(34a) It is not ethical for *a lawyer to reveal* information about his clients.

(35a) I once heard of *a pilot having* a heart attack in midair.

(36a) We found *her lying* face down.

(37a) Keep *your eyes closed*.

(38a) Who left *the window open*?

(39a) I found *the room in an awful mess*.

The italic parts in (34a) - (38a) are nexus, in which subject-predicate relationship can be seen. When we read them, we recognize them in our minds as follows:

(34b) ...for a lawyer to reveal... (S'+to-infinitive) →...a lawyer reveals... (S'+V')

(35b) ...a pilot having... (S'+gerund) →...a pilot had... (S'+V')

(36b) ...her lying... (S'+present participle) →...she was lying... (S'+V')

(37b) ...your eyes closed... (S'+past participle) →...your eyes are closed... (S'+V')

(38b) ...the window open... (S'+adjective) →...the window was open... (S'+V')

These grammatical structures are so common in English that we automatically find nexus, understanding its subject-predicate relationship. The italic part in (39a) is not nexus in a strict sense, but we interpret it in our minds like (34b) - (38b), namely by inserting *be* just after the subject, as in:

- (39b) ...the room in an awful mess (S'+prepositional phrase)  
 →...the room was in an awful mess (S'+V'+prepositional phrase)

To sum up, in all the structures in (34a) - (39a), we recognize subject-predicate relationship in our mind. In the same way, it may be fair to say that we can perceive nexus in reading the headlines represented in the structures shown in 2.2-2.6. This fact sufficiently explains the reason *be* is omitted in those structures. Thus, nexus is found in as large as nearly 50% of all the headlines, as the table shows in chapter 3.

## 5. Conclusion

So far it has been pointed out that headlines in English newspapers use shortened expressions including ellipsis,<sup>5)</sup> especially that of *be*, in order to make lively, easy-to-understand expressions which would make deep impression on readers. In addition to that, in this paper we have maintained that readers are so familiar with 'nexus' in English that they can automatically find subject-predicate relationship in it, even though *be* is omitted, which leads to the shortened expressions in headlines. This claim not only holds for all the patterns in 2.2-6 but also makes a clear, ample explanation for why there are many cases in which *be* is left out.

Directions for further studies are to deal with other English newspapers with a view to confirming the validity of our claim by comparing the structures of their headlines, and to make a contrastive study of the headlines in English and Japanese newspapers, which will reveal the grammatical features found in Japanese headlines, whether they are the same as in English ones or peculiar to Japanese ones.

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