

Basic newspaper features

BRIEF NEWS ITEMS

The principal function of a brief news item is to inform the reader. It states facts without giving explicit comments, and whatever evaluation there is in news paragraphs is for the most part implicit and as a rule unemotional. News items are essentially matter-of-fact, and stereotyped forms of expression prevail. As an invariant, the language of brief news items is stylistically neutral, which seems to be in keeping with the allegedly neutral and unbiased nature of newspaper reporting; in practice, however, departures from this principle of stylistic neutrality (especially in the so-called "mass papers") are quite common.

It goes without saying that the bulk of the vocabulary used in newspaper writing is neutral and common literary. But apart from this, newspaper style has its specific vocabulary features and is characterized by an extensive use of:

a) **Special political and economic terms**, e. g. *Socialism, constitution, president, apartheid, by-election, General Assembly, gross output, per capita production.*

b) **Non-term political vocabulary**, e. g. *public, people, progressive, nation-wide, unity, peace.* A characteristic feature of political vocabulary is that the border line between terms and non-terms is less distinct than in the vocabulary of other special fields. The semantic structure of some words comprises both terms and non-terms, e. g. *nation, crisis, agreement, member, representative, leader.*

c) **Newspaper cliches**, i. e. stereotyped expressions, commonplace phrases familiar to the reader e. g. *vital issue, pressing problem, informed sources, danger of war, to escalate a war, war hysteria, overwhelming majority.*

Cliches more than anything else reflect the traditional manner of expression in newspaper writing. They are commonly looked upon as a defect of style. Indeed, some cliches, especially those based on trite images (e.g. *captains of industry, pillars of society, bulwark of civilization*) are pompous and hackneyed, others, such as welfare state, affluent society are false and misleading. But nevertheless, cliches are indispensable in newspaper style: they prompt the necessary associations and prevent ambiguity and misunderstanding.

d) **Abbreviations.** News items, press reports and headlines abound in abbreviations of various kinds. Among them abbreviated terms – names of organizations, public and state bodies, political associations, industrial and other companies, various offices, etc. – known by their initials are very common, e.g. UNO (United Nations Organization), TUG (Trades Union Congress), NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), EEC (.European Economic Community), FO (Foreign Office), PIB (Prices and Incomes Board),

e) **Neologisms.** These are very common in newspaper vocabulary. The newspaper is very quick to react to any new development in the life of society, in science and technology. Hence, neologisms make their way into the language of the newspaper very easily and often even spring up on newspaper pages, e.g. *a splash-down* (the act of bringing a spacecraft to a water surface), *a teach-in* (a form of campaigning through heated political discussion), *stop-go policies* (contradictory, indecisive and inefficient policies).

The above-listed peculiarities of brief news items are the basic vocabulary parameters of English newspaper style.

The vocabulary of brief news items is for the most part devoid of emotional colouring. Some papers, however, especially those classed among "mass" or "popular" papers, tend to introduce emotionally coloured lexical units into essentially matter-of-fact news stories, e.g.

"Health Minister Kenneth Robinson made this shock announcement yesterday in the Commons." (Daily Mirror)

"Defense Secretary Roy Mason yesterday gave a rather frosty reception in the Commons to the latest proposal for a common defense policy for all EEC countries." (Morning Star)

Important as vocabulary is, it is not so much the words and phrases used in brief news items that distinguish them from other forms of newspaper writing. The vocabulary groups listed above are also commonly found in headlines and newspaper articles. The basic peculiarities of news items lie in their syntactical structure.

As the reporter is obliged to be brief, he naturally tries to cram all his facts into the space allotted. This tendency predetermines the peculiar composition of brief news items and the syntactical structure of the sentences. The size of brief news items varies from one sentence to several (short) paragraphs. And generally, the shorter the news item, the more complex its syntactical structure.

The following **grammatical peculiarities** of brief news items are of paramount importance, and may be

regarded as their grammatical parameters.

a) **Complex sentences with a developed system of clauses**, e. g.

"Mr. Boyd-Carpenter, Chief Secretary to the Treasury and Paymaster-General (Kingston-upon-Thames), said he had been asked what was meant by the statement in the Speech that the position of war pensioners and those receiving national insurance benefits would be kept under close review." (The Times)

"There are indications that BO AC may withdraw – threats of all-out dismissals for pilots who restrict flying hours, a spokesman for the British Airline Pilots' association said yesterday," (Morning Star)

b) **Verbal constructions** (infinitive, participial, gerundial) and **verbal noun constructions**, e.g.

"Mr. Nobusuke Kishi, the former Prime Minister of Japan, has sought to set an example to the faction-ridden Governing Liberal Democratic Party by announcing the disbanding of his own faction numbering 47 of the total of 295 conservative members of the Lower House of the Diet." (The Times)

c) **Syntactical complexes, especially the nominative with the infinitive**. These constructions are largely used to avoid mentioning the source of information or to shun responsibility for the facts reported, e. g.

"The condition of Lord Samuel, aged 92, was said last night to be a 'little better.'" (The Guardian)

"A petrol bomb is believed to have been exploded against the grave of Cecil Rhodes in the Matopos." (The Times)

d) **Attributive noun groups** are another powerful means of effecting brevity in news items, e.g. 'heart swap patient' (Morning Star), 'the national income and expenditure figures' (The Times), 'Labour backbench decision' (Morning Star), 'Mr. Wilson's HMS fearless package deal' (Morning Star).

e) **Specific word-order**. Newspaper tradition, coupled with the rigid rules of sentence structure in English, has greatly affected the word-order of brief news items. The word-order in one-sentence news paragraphs and in what are called "leads" (the initial sentences in longer news items) is more or less fixed. Journalistic practice has developed what is called the "five-w-and-h-pattern rule" (who-what-why-how-where-when) and for a long time strictly adhered to it. In terms of grammar this fixed sentence structure may be expressed in the following manner: Subject – Predicate (+Object) – Adverbial modifier of reason (manner) – Adverbial modifier of place – Adverbial modifier of time, e.g.

"A neighbour's peep through a letter box led to the finding of a woman dead from gas and two others semiconscious in a block of council flats in Eccles New Road, Salford, Lanes., yesterday." (The Guardian)

It has been repeatedly claimed by the authors of manuals of journalistic writing that the "five-w-and-h-pattern rule" (who-what-why-how-where-when) was the only right pattern of sentence structure to use in news reports. Facts, however, disprove this contention. Statistics show that there are approximately as many cases in which the traditional word-order is violated as those in which it is observed. It is now obvious that the newspaper has developed new sentence patterns not typical of other styles. This observation refers, firstly, to the position of the adverbial-modifier of definite time. Compare another pattern typical of brief news sentence structure:

"Derec Heath, 43, yesterday left Falmouth for the third time in his attempt to cross the Atlantic in a 12ft dinghy." (Morning Star)

"Brighton council yesterday approved a J 22,500 scheme to have parking meters operating in the centre of the town by March." (The Times)

This and some other unconventional sentence patterns have become a common practice with brief news writers.

There are some other, though less marked, tendencies in news item writing of modifying well-established grammatical norms. Mention should be made of occasional disregard for the sequence of tenses rule, e.g.

"The committee – which was investigating the working of the 1969 Children and Young Persons Act – said that some school children in remand centers are getting only two hours lessons a day." (Morning Star)

What is ordinarily looked upon as a violation of grammar rules in any other kind of writing appears to be a functional peculiarity of newspaper style.

(Galperin, I. R. English Stylistics)