

A Contrastive Analysis of Sports Headlines in Two English Newspapers

Ali Roohani

E-mail: roohani.ali@gmail.com

Maryam Esmaeili

Email: esmaeilimaryam99@yahoo.com

Shahrekord University, Iran

Abstract

It holds true that a flourishing field of Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) research has begun to address the way various text types and/or genres may differ across cultures and languages (Corner, 1996). Very much in line with this development, this study was an attempt to characterize the linguistic structures of headlines in the sports section of 2 English newspapers: one non-Iranian (*The Times*) and one Iranian (*Tehran Times*). The content analysis was based on a 3-week corpus of the headlines. The variability of syntactic and lexical features of the sample headlines in both newspapers was analyzed contrastively. The results of the qualitative and quantitative analyses of syntactic and lexical features indicated that the sports headlines of both newspapers were similar in using type of verb (dynamic and stative), headline types (verbal and nominal), voice (passive and active), tense (simple past, present, progressive, and future), and functional types (statement, question, and command), but significantly different in their quantitative use of headline types by predications (simple, complex, and compound). Besides, quantitative differences were observed in the type of modifications (premodification/postmodification), type of nouns (proper, common, and acronym) and exclamation type of headlines. The pedagogical implications of the study have been offered.

Keywords: *Headlines, Newspapers, Syntactic and lexical features*

1. Introduction

The media is the whole body of communications that reach large numbers of the public via radio, television, movies, magazines, newspapers, and the World Wide Web. Among the written type, as Reah (2002) states,

newspapers, partly due to easy acceptability and wide range of content such as news, opinions, editorials, comment columns, entertainment features and sports, have the most readers. As Shams (2007) states, "newspapers present news through three kinds of codes: typographic, graphic and linguistic" (p. 13). The most important code to convey the meaning, both connotative and denotative, to the reader is linguistic one which refers to the linguistic signs, that is, words, phrases, and sentences. The linguistic code can well be embedded in headlines, which are texts at the top of newspaper articles, indicating the nature of the articles below.

According to Ungerer (2000), a headline "describes the essence of a complicated news story in a few words. It informs quickly and accurately and arouses the reader's curiosity" (p. 48). To move further, the headline is more than a semantic summary of the story and a pragmatic attracting-device for the reader. It is, in Dor's (2003) terms, "a communicative device whose function is to produce the optimal level of affinity between the content of the story and the reader's context of interpretation" (p. 720). However, as Reah (2002) states, the problematic issue for us is that language of headlines is special and has its own characteristics on the lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical levels for its brevity, attractiveness, and clarity. Headline writers have developed a vocabulary that fulfills the requirements of the headline, using words that are short, attention-grabbing, and effective. They use a range of language devices to make their headlines memorable and striking. As Mouillaud and Tétu (1989; cited in Develotte & Rechniewski, 2000) suggest, the suppression of spatial and particularly temporal markers, the use of the present tense of verbs, the replacement of verbs by nouns, the suppression of declarative verbs, and the disappearance of signs of speech like quotation marks are typical of headlines. These devices and features might make the understanding of headlines somehow harder than other parts of news stories. As observed, foreign learners of English in Iran confront great challenge in comprehending headlines of English newspapers. This claim is particularly made when EFL learners begin to read the headlines in sports sections of newspapers, which have high readership among young EFL learners, but demand specific syntactic and lexical features. They are sometimes confused about the way in which elements within a sports headline are ordered. To move further, sometimes some linguistic differences between the headlines in the different English newspapers such as those published outside and inside Iran are observed. Understanding the linguistic differences and similarities between different English newspapers are important for Iranian EFL learners, who should read both Iranian and non-Iranian English newspapers, since reading or translating newspaper headlines, particularly sports headlines, is

not just a matter of vocabulary, but understating the style and genre of headlines. However, there is no solid research to uncover linguistic similarities and differences of sports headlines between Iranian and non-Iranian English newspapers, which is the subject of this study.

2. Review of literature

Headlines play an important role in the communicative act performed by newspapers. They are used, in Taiwo's (2007) terms, "to initiate, sustain and shape discourse on the views of readers" (p. 244). Thus, they have been studied by a few journalists and researchers. Straumann (1935), pioneer of headline studies, considers the language of headlines as an autonomous language which is the subject of linguistic analysis. Mårdh (1980), in a study of linguistic features in the headlines of English newspapers, identified the following features as typical of headlines: the omission of articles; the omission of verbs and of auxiliaries; nominalizations; the frequent use of complex noun phrases in subject position; adverbial headlines, with the omission of both verb and subject; the use of short words; the widespread use of puns, word play, and alliteration; the importance of word order, with the most important items placed first; and independent "wh" constructions not linked to a main clause (e.g., *Why the French don't give a damn*).

van Dijk (1988) analyzed over 400 headlines in the Dutch press which were reporting the 1985 Tamil panic, an occasion of racial tensions between the Dutch and immigrant groups. He found that the Dutch authorities dominated subject positions in the headlines with active verbs. When the disadvantaged Tamils were mentioned first, the verb tended to be passive. Scollon (2000) in his study of five days of three editions of the same newspaper in its Chinese and English editions has concluded that the English headlines, following on general western journalistic practice, put the main point right in the headline in what has also been called a deductive rhetorical mode. The Chinese headline, on the other hand, uses the headline to establish the setting, but do not provide any further information about the content of the talks. In other words, the major difference lies in whether the headline focuses directly on the central topic found within the body of the story or the setting.

Also, Khodabandeh and Tahririan (2007) conducted a contrastive analysis (CA) between the newspaper headlines of English and Persian languages in order to find the major similarities and differences between them. Utilizing CA, they analyzed the variability of syntactic and lexical features across and within a one-week corpus of the English and Persian newspaper headlines. The conclusion was that the headlines of English and

Persian languages were similar in using dynamic verbs, active voice, short words, declarative sentences, finite clauses, and simple sentences and different in the use of tense forms, headline types, modification, and omission of words. Finally, Prášková (2009) attempted to identify the most frequently used grammatical features and structures that would occur in British newspaper headlines to see whether the structure of headlines would differ from that of the common core which is stylistically unmarked. Two hundred newspaper headlines were randomly selected from six different British newspapers. The language of headlines was compared with the grammatical rules of the common core. Furthermore, he investigated whether there were significant differences in grammatical structures of broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. The result of the study indicated no significant differences between the language of headlines and common core structures despite the fact that a few features such as abbreviated structures and the frequent use of verb forms were observed more in the newspaper headlines. He concluded that there might be a core grammar of British newspaper headlines which would be used almost equally by both types of newspapers.

A few studies of headlines aforementioned intended to discover some linguistic features in the headlines of different languages, particularly English, or different types of newspapers to see whether similar features could be observed. However, there is still more need for further research with regard to headlines in different types of newspapers and in different contexts. One such study can be a CA of headlines in newspapers published in a native and nonnative country of the language to solve the challenge readers might have. In light of this view, this study is intended to investigate linguistic—syntactic and lexical—features of the sport-section headlines in newspapers, which seem to be problematic for Iranian EFL learners. To this end, the study compares and contrasts the headlines in 2 daily newspapers: *The Times* (a non-Iranian English newspaper published outside Iran) and *Tehran Times* (an Iranian English newspaper published inside Iran). Accordingly, the following research questions are developed:

1. Are there differences and similarities in the syntactic features between sport-section headlines in *The Times* (a non-Iranian English newspaper) and *Tehran Times* (an Iranian English newspaper)?
2. Are there differences and similarities in the lexical features between sport-section headlines in *The Times* (a non-Iranian English newspaper) and *Tehran Times* (an Iranian English newspaper)?

3. Method

3.1 Materials

To compare and contrast the headlines in *The Times* and *Tehran Times*, the online headlines from the sports section of these two daily newspapers were collected from the Internet for a three-week period from 6 to 29 April, 2010. The corpora included 320 newspaper headlines, including 160 headlines from each of the two newspapers.

3.2 Procedure

This research used content analysis to explore the syntactic and lexical features of the headlines in the corpus from the two English newspapers.

3.2.1. Syntactic features

To describe the syntactic features of headlines, three categories were investigated: structure type, function type, and complexity in headlines of the two daily newspapers. Concerning the first category, following Mårdh's (1980) model, the corpus was divided into three basic groups: verbal, nominal, and adverbial headlines. Verbal headlines were considered as headlines with a verb phrase or part of a verb phrase not dominated by a noun phrase. They were distinguished, as the examples below show, according to finite verb phrases, nonfinite verb phrases, headlines with omitted auxiliary, subject complement headlines, and subject adverbial headlines. Nominal headlines were considered as the ones headed by a noun. The syntactic variation in nominal headlines was analyzed according to modification: unmodification, premodification, postmodification, and pre and postmodification. And, adverbial headlines were considered as the one headed by a word, phrase, or clause that functioned like an adverb.

- **Verbal headlines** (finite verb phrases): e.g., Augusta chairman says woods disappointed fans (*The Times*, April 7, 2010)
- **Verbal headlines** (nonfinite verb phrase): e.g., Klitschko to defend WBC title (*The Times*, April 10, 2010)
- **Verbal headlines** (subject adverbial headlines): e.g., Sepahan out of ACL (*Tehran Times*, April 29, 2010)
- **Verbal headlines** (subject complement phrases): e.g., Ghotbi candidate for Australian post, Verbeek says (*Tehran Times*, April 19, 2010)
- **Verbal headlines** (omitted auxiliary): e.g., Redknapp shocked by Campbel arsenal return (*The Times*, April 14, 2010)

- **Nominal headlines** (unmodification): e.g., Esteghlal (*Tehran Times*, April 14, 2010)
- **Nominal headlines** (premodification): e.g., Premier league (*Tehran Times*, April 7, 2010)
- **Nominal headlines** (postmodification): e.g., FA cup final (*Tehran Times*, April 10, 2010)
- **Nominal headlines** (pre and postmodification): e.g., Hall of fame basketball coach wilkens (*The Times*, April 7, 2010)

As to the second category (i.e., functional type), following Mårdh's (1980) description, the corpus was divided into four types: statement, question, command, and exclamation. As to the third category (i.e., complexity), the headlines were classified into three groups according to the number of predicates and (in)dependent clauses: simple, compound, and complex. Accordingly, a complex headline would have, at least, two predicates with one or more dependent clauses. A few examples are provided below:

- **Statement headlines:** e.g., Van Persie could play against spurs (*Tehran Times*, April 14, 2010)
- **Question headlines:** e.g., Will O'Sullivan quit for real this time? (*The Times*, April 29, 2010)
- **Exclamation headlines:** e.g., Mourinho: a devil the Catalans know too well (*The Times*, April 7, 2010)
- **Simple headlines:** e.g., Zob Ahan finishes top of group in ACL (*Tehran Times*, April 29, 2010)
- **Complex headlines:** e.g., Harvich unsure where he'll drive next season (*The Times*, April 25, 2010)
- **Compound headlines:** e.g., Sepahan faces Al Shabab; Mes plays Al Ahli in ACL (*Tehran Times*, April 7, 2010)

3.2.2. Lexical features

To describe the lexical features of the headlines, individual words under different categories of nouns, verbs, articles, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, pronouns, and prepositions were investigated and their frequencies were obtained. Under the major category of nouns, four subcategories (proper and common nouns, abbreviations and acronyms) were explored. Under the major category of verbs, tense (past, present, future, continuous, and infinitives), voice (active and passive) and type (stative and

dynamic) were investigated. Following Richards and Schmidt's (2002, p. 511) description, stative verbs were defined as the ones which would express emotions, knowledge and beliefs, or show relationships, and dynamic verbs were defined as the ones which would express activity and process.

- **Stative verb:** e.g., Federer vows to bounce back from shock defeat (*The Times*, April 28, 2010)
- **Dynamic verb:** e.g., Esteghlal qualifies for ACL next stage (*Tehran Times*, April 15, 2010)

4. Data analysis

In the first level of analysis, the syntactic features of the headlines across and between the two newspapers were analyzed. Table 1 displays the frequency and percentage of the headline types in both newspapers by structure (verbal, nominal, and adverbial), function (statement, question, command, and exclamation), and the number of predications and the type of clauses (simple, complex, and compound).

Table 1. Frequency of headline types in *The Times* and *Tehran Times* corpora

Type of Headline	Times		Tehran Times	
	N	%	N	%
Verbal	103	38.44	117	39.93
Nominal	165	61.56	176	60.07
Adverbial	0	0	0	0
Total	268	100	293	100
Statement	153	95.63	147	98
Question	5	3.12	3	2
Command	0	0	0	0
Exclamation	2	1.25	0	0
Total	160	100	150	100
Simple	116	72.95	126	84.66
Complex	40	25.05	18	12.08
Compound	3	2	5	3.36
Total	159	100	149	100

As Table 1 demonstrates, nominal headlines had the highest percentage of structural headline types in *The Times* and *Tehran Times* corpora (61.56% and 60.07%, respectively). However, there was no example of adverbial

headlines in both newspapers. Also, more than 90% of functional headlines were statements in the corpora from *The Times* and *Tehran Times*. The command type of headline was not found in both newspapers. In addition, the exclamation type was absent in the *Tehran Times*, too. According to Table 1, the simple headlines outnumbered the compounds and complex ones in both newspapers; they received 79.95% in *The Times* and 84.66% in the *Tehran Times* corpora. The least used category was compound headlines. Besides, the complex headlines made up a considerable percentage (40%) in *The Times* corpus.

Table 2 reports the frequency and percentage of different types of nominal headlines. According to this table, most nominal headlines in *The Times* and *Tehran Times* (47.87% and 50%, respectively) were unmodified. Also, the occurrence of premodifiers (43.03% and 40.35%) in both newspapers was more than postmodifiers (8.48% and 3.97%).

Table 2. Frequency of four types of nominal headlines in *The Times* and *Tehran Times* corpora

Type of Headline	Times		Tehran Times	
	N	%	N	%
Unmodified	79	47.87	88	50
Premodified	71	43.03	71	40.35
Postmodified	14	8.48	7	3.97
Pre and postmodified	1	.60	10	5.68
Total	165	100	176	100

In the second level of analysis, the lexical features of the headlines across and between the corpora from the two daily newspapers were analyzed. Words in the corpora were classified into 10 parts of speech and their frequencies were obtained. The results are reported in Table 3. As the table shows, nouns in *The Times* and *Tehran Times* (N = 444 and N = 378, respectively) as well as verbs (N= 187 and N = 161) were the most frequent words in the headlines. The percentage of nouns was higher than any other parts of speech in both *The Times* and *Tehran Times* (47.43% and 45 %, respectively).

Table 3. Frequency of words in *The Times* and *Tehran Times* corpora

Type of Word	Times	Tehran Times
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	N	%	N	%
Nouns	444	47.3	378	44.4
Verbs	187	19.90	161	19.15
Adjectives	135	14.47	127	15.11
Adverbs	32	3.40	45	5.30
Preposition	106	11.20	120	14.20
Articles	16	1.70	8	.90
Conjunction	2	.21	3	.30
Pronoun	17	1.81	9	1.00
Total	939	100	851	100

In order to give a better picture of nouns and verbs as the two frequent words in the headlines, their frequencies by type, tense form, and voice are reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency of nouns and verbs by type, tense, and voice in the English and Persian corpora

	Nouns	English		Persian	
		N	%	N	%
Noun	Abbreviation	2	.54	2	.76
	Acronyms	4	1.08	29	11.11
	Proper noun	198	53.80	205	78.54
	Common noun	164	44.56	25	9.57
	Total	368	100	261	100
Verb type	Dynamic	108	81.82	118	82.64
	Stative	24	10.64	25	10.61
	Total	132	100	144	100
Verb tense	Present	88	72.83	96	68.08
	Past	19	15.80	18	12.76
	Future	7	5.78	9	6.41
	progressive	3	2.27	2	1.41
	Infinitive	4	3.32	16	11.34
	Total	121	100	141	100
Verb Voice	Active	126	89.36	118	89.39
	Passive	15	10.64	14	10.61
	Total	141	100	132	100

According to Table 4, the proper nouns had the highest percentage in the corpora from *The Times* and *Tehran Times* (53.80 % and 78.54%, respectively). Also, the proportion of acronyms was considerably higher in the *Tehran Times* corpora (11.11%) than *The Times* corpora (1.08%). While about 44% of *The Times* corpus included common nouns, just about 9% of

the *Tehran Times* corpus included the common nouns. Also, the dynamic verbs outnumbered the static verbs considerably in *The Times* (81.82%) and *Tehran Times* corpora (82.64%). The frequency of simple present tense in both newspapers was much higher than other tense forms and the verbs in the headlines of both *The Times* (89.36%) and *Tehran Times* corpora (89.39%) were mostly in active voice.

The above results displayed some linguistic similarities and differences in the headlines between *The Times* and *Tehran Times* corpora. However, it did not indicate whether differences were significant between the two corpora. That is the reason why several tests of significance were conducted on the frequency of specific linguistic features in the corpora. The first chi-square was conducted on the verbal and nominal headlines from *The Times* and *Tehran Times* corpora. The second one was conducted on the statement, exclamation, and question headlines from both newspapers and the third one was conducted on types of nominal headlines (unmodified, premodified, postmodified, and pre and postmodified) from the two newspapers. The results of the tests indicated that both Pearson and Yates' statistical values for the difference in the nominal and verbal headlines between *The Times* and *Tehran Times* corpora were not significant at .05 ($\chi^2 = .132$, $df = 1$, $p = .716$ and $\chi^2 = .077$, $df = 1$, $p = .782$, respectively). Also, the chi-square value for the difference in the functional headline types between the two corpora was not significant either ($\chi^2 = 2.30$, $df = 2$, $p = .317$). However, the chi-square value for the difference in the complexity of headlines between the two corpora was significant ($\chi^2 = 8.94$, $df = 2$, $*p < .05$).

Furthermore, to see whether lexical features were significantly different between the corpora obtained from *The Times* and *Tehran Times*, another chi-square was conducted on the frequency of words in the headlines from *The Times* and *Tehran Times* corpora. The chi-square value for the difference in the parts of speech between the two corpora was not found to be significant ($\chi^2 = 11.58$, $df = 7$, $p = .115$).

5. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the data shows that there are some quantitative similarities and differences between the two corpora obtained from the sports sections of *The Times* and *Tehran Times* newspapers. The headlines of the two languages were similar in several lexical and syntactic features. In both newspapers, the preference was given to the active voice of the verbs. It is assumed that agents (whether a person or thing) that did actions were often expressed in the subject positions in the sports headlines, given that nouns and dynamic finite verbs made a large amount of headline corpus. According

to data analysis, nouns as subjects of active verbs and verbs in the active form were frequently used in the sports headlines. Also, as it was expected, the corpora from both newspapers indicated a preference for lexical content words, particularly nouns, partly because the sports headline writers would like to include much meaning in a limited space. It seems that nouns served this purpose well, and it is not surprising that most functional words such as pronouns and articles were left out. Meanwhile, the higher percentage of nouns in the headlines of two newspapers supports the higher percentage of nominal headlines in the corpora. The results also indicated that both Iranian and non-Iranian English newspapers showed a preponderance of the simple present tense in the finite clauses. This is because simple present tense is often used in sports headlines, contrary to standard language, to refer to the past and future time. Besides, both newspapers were similar in the nonoccurrence of adverbial headlines, frequent use of statement headlines, and preponderance of unmodified and premodified nominal headlines. One reason is to save space and produce economical texts with higher degree of readability; headline writers of the two newspapers effectively used premodifiers more than postmodifiers as the latter occupies more space than the former. Statement headlines are also conventional and equally short. This justifies why editors had preference for them. Apart from descriptive results, tests of significance, showed that the two newspapers were not significantly and quantitatively different in terms of syntactic features such as headline types (nominal, verbal, question, statement, and exclamation) and lexical features such as part of speech (nouns, verbs, etc). The above results indicate that language of Iranian newspapers resembles the authentic language of English newspapers, and such newspapers have a legitimate place in EFL curriculum development in Iran.

Nonetheless, some linguistic differences were observed in the corpora from the two newspapers. *Tehran Times* made use of more proper nouns, perhaps, because explicitness was so important for the writers of sports headlines. It is assumed that through proper nouns, writers of Iranian newspapers can make information explicit. On the other hand, the command type of headline was quite absent in the corpora obtained from *Tehran Times*. One possibility might be that command type of headline carries too much force, which is not culturally acceptable in sports. Perhaps the use of this type of headline puts the sports headline writer in a difficult situation for criticism. The results also indicated that quantitative differences were observed in the use of acronyms and type of modifiers, but when the tests of significance were conducted, the results demonstrated that the headlines in the two

newspapers were significantly different just for the complexity, operationalized in terms of the number of predictions and types of clauses. One reason is that the proportion of complex headlines in the corpus obtained from *The Times* (25%) was almost two times that of *Tehran Times* (12%). On the other hand, simple headlines were given preference in *Tehran Times*. The difference might be due to headline writers' different style of writing or level of language skills. Upon further investigation, it was found that almost all the sports headline writers of *Tehran Times* have been living in Iran since this newspaper was issued. If we accept that living in a country such as the US, where English is spoken as a native language, increases the amount of comprehensible input the speakers of that language receive, then we can expect variations in the language ability between the Iranian and native English sports headline writers since, as Krashen (1981) states, language competence is a function of the amount of language comprehensible input. The other possibility can be attributed to the assumptions made by the editors concerning the set of considerations shared by their readers such as their cognitive styles, their reading proficiency, their interests, and their views, and so forth. Regardless of the reason, the above result can support the claim made by some Iranian syllabus designers in sequencing materials in terms of complexity of structures in courses such as Reading or Translating Journalistic English. They claim that such courses should start from the sections of Iranian English newspapers which include simple structures and then move to the sections of non-Iranian newspapers which include complex structures.

The results of the CA of the headlines from the sports sections of the two English newspapers—one Iranian and one non-Iranian—have important practical and pedagogical implications for both L2 teaching and translation. It can help L2 teachers to notice the structural differences of headlines in order to lead L2 Learners toward a better understanding of the language of the headlines, which tend to be important. As Dor (2003) points out, skilled newspaper readers spend most of their reading time scanning the headlines, rather than reading the whole newspaper stories as they "render the stories optimally-relevant" and help the readers get the maximum from the minimum cognitive investment (p. 708). Thus, the linguistic knowledge of sports headlines can be useful for the L2 readers of sports stories. Indeed, a good teacher of journalistic English is the one with relevant contrastive information, even on different types of newspapers, since in this way he or she will know the real learning problems of students in reading journalistic texts and, as such, can provide better teaching. The findings of this study also suggest that Iranian English newspapers are good instructional materials

which represent authentic language and should be included in academic courses such as Reading Comprehension, Reading Journalistic Texts, and Translating English Texts, which are parts of EFL curriculum in Iran.

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Dr. Ali Roohani, an Assistant Professor at Shahrekord University, received his PhD in TEFL from Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran. He has published two books and translated a book into Persian. He has also presented several papers in the national and international conferences. His area of interest includes affective factors in L2 learning and contrastive analysis.

Maryam Esmacili is an MA student of TEFL at Shahrekord University. She received her BA in English literature from Bahonar University of Kerman. Her area of interest includes Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics.