Breaking Down BBC News Headlines: A Study of Sentence Structure Types

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Abstract

This study aims to find the structure types used in BBC News headlines. This research used Morley's (2000) theory for sentence types and Matthews' (1981) theory for phrase types as well as Brown & Miller's (1991) theory to analyze its constituent structure. This research used descriptive qualitative method to explain the final result of the research. The data sources were obtained from 186 BBC headlines for the period July 2023 which were then presented in a table according to the frequency of occurrence. The results showed that based on the sentence types, there are three sentence types found, namely simple sentences, complex sentences, and compound sentences. Among the sentence types used, simple sentences are the most frequent, with 151 occurrences, followed by complex sentences with 20 occurrences, and compound sentences with three occurrences. Furthermore, based on the phrase types, 11 headlines with noun phrase structure and one headline with verb phrase structure were found. It is hoped that after this research is conducted, it can make a positive contribution to the development of science, especially in the field of syntax.

INTRODUCTION

Mass media is one of the various types of media commonly used to disseminate information. Through mass media, various sources of information and news such as newspapers, television, radio, and the internet that can influence many people are published. One example of mass media that is familiar to the general public is news articles. News articles are written to inform and educate readers about current events or incidents around them. With the development of technology, it is easy for people to access any news on the internet. As people tend to prefer digital forms of news, news broadcasting companies are adding online news articles as their current feature. For this reason, news broadcasting companies compete to make news as interesting as possible in order to maintain the interest of their readers.

One way to do this is by making the headline as interesting as possible. Headlines are the first thing readers see in a news article, so it holds an important role in a news article. Readers will be interested in reading a news article if they find the headline interesting enough. Headlines are like signposts that direct readers to the news article and also determine the number of people who pass

by the news article. In addition, headlines also aim to show the essence of the whole news and the nature of the article underneath (Goyal, 2020). In other words, the headline is a summary of the entire content of the news article as well as serves as the key selling point of the article. Therefore, the sentences used to create a headline are designed to provide varying degrees of depth in relation to the concept, idea, or message of the news writer (Bornstein, 1997; McGregor, 2009).

Realizing the importance of a headline, news writers must have special writing skills related to the use of language and sentence structure. For this reason, one of the sciences that a news writer must master is syntax. Syntax is a science that studies the process of forming a sentence in a particular language (Chomsky, 1965). In syntax, there are several ways that news writers can utilize in composing headlines, including the selection of sentence patterns. In English, a good sentence pattern must fulfil the minimum requirements of one subject and one predicate (Bornstein, 1997). Then it can be added with other patterns to build a deeper meaning. According to Aitchison (2008), a writer cannot put words randomly to construct a comprehensible English sentence. In English, there are several patterns that can be used to construct a sentence such as SV, SVA, SVC, SVO, SVOA, SVOO, and SVOC.

These sentence patterns are formed by smaller units to define each component in more detail (O'Grady, 2010). These smaller units are commonly referred to as phrases. A phrase is a combination of one or more words that have a single core. House & Harman (1950) categorize there are four phrases in English based on their function: noun phrases, verb phrases, adjective phrases, and adverb phrases. Each of these phrases has a different function and core.

For example, if a phrase has a noun as its main subject or core then the phrase is included in the noun phrase (Matthews, 1981). Likewise, verb phrases, adjective phrases and adverb phrases each have a different core based on their category.

However, in its application, sometimes a news writer seems to ignore the structure of a good sentence pattern when composing a headline. This is in line with the opinion of Ernawati (2014) who said that in making varied and not monotonous headlines, news writers can use various pattern structures in the use of the language of their articles. Each pattern that news writers choose will accommodate every piece of information they have. This is further strengthened by the obligation of a news writer to make headlines as a summary of the entire article but only given a limited space or number of words. Therefore, some headlines are sometimes difficult to identify because they have a variety of structure.

In addition to sentence patterns, the selection of sentence types is also something that a news writer needs to pay attention to in composing headlines. Generally, there are four types of sentences in English: simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences (Morley, 2000). A news writer does not only write simple sentences but can also apply other types of sentences. The use of these sentence types depends on the context and the writer. Although in English the minimum requirement for a sentence is to have one subject and one predicate, this is not always applicable in the process of composing headlines. Sometimes news writers omit one of these minimum requirements in order to create an interesting headline. For example, when a headline looks like a complete sentence but when analyzed further, it turns out that the headline is only a phrase. Although rarely found, this

phenomenon is certainly utilized by news writers to make a high-value headline. Therefore, it can be said that both patterns and sentence types are a tool to frame the article in accordance with the writer's wishes so that the reader and the writer have the same idea in their minds.

There are several studies that discuss sentence structure analysis using syntactic analysis because sentence is the highest unit of syntactic analysis (Bornstein, 1997). The first research was conducted by Maharani (2015) who found that headlines in the form of sentences with SVO patterns were the most widely used in online news. The second research was conducted by Tabula & Agbayani (2015) who found that the sentence patterns that are widely used in headlines on Philippine and American news are SVO and SVC. The third research was conducted by Yuricki & Arfani (2019) who found four types of sentences: complete sentences, incomplete sentences, ambiguous sentences, and ellipsis sentences in the @Detik.com Twitter account headline sentence. The fourth research was conducted by (Rahmawati & Rachmi, 2021) who found 9 sentence patterns, of which 4 were basic sentences and the remaining 5 used complex sentence patterns in Jakarta Post news articles. The fifth research was conducted by Wiryastuti & Maharani (2023) which focused on direct objects in subordinative clauses in BBC News Instagram captions and found that there were 36 complex sentences as direct objects in 49 BBC News Instagram account captions. The sixth research was conducted by Karunakaran & Ang (2023) who found 651 adjectives in The Starnewspaper of which 426 function as descriptors and 225 as classifiers and 208 adjectives in Reader's Digest of which 189 function as descriptors and 39 classifiers. The selection of these previous studies was based on several factors. First, the studies were selected because they are directly relevant to the current study, either by answering similar research questions, using comparable methodologies, or offering basic insights into the topic being researched. In addition, these were selected for their credibility and reputation in the field, as they represent established and respected sources that lend authority to the claims and findings presented in the article.

In summary, although there are some similarities in the methods and theories used in these previous studies, each previous study has a different focus, data sources, and research objectives from the current study. The aim of this study is to describe the structure types used by news writers in BBC News headlines based on the theory proposed by Morley (2000) for sentence types and the theory proposed by Matthews (1981) for phrase types. In addition, this study also analyzes the constituent structure of the headlines depicted through a tree diagram based on the theory of Brown & Miller (1991). Tree diagrams are used to analyze patterns and sentence types to make them easier to understand and more detailed both in terms of structure and word class. It is hoped that after this research takes place, it can make a positive contribution towards the development of science, especially the sciences of linguistics and knowledge of problems related to patterns and sentence types in syntactic analysis.

METHOD AND THEORY

The method used in this research is the qualitative descriptive method. Based on the opinion of Creswell (2017), qualitative descriptive methods are used to understand and investigate the meaning derived from social issues or human error from an individual or even a group in society. Thus, the data in this research is analyzed in the form of words, not in the form of numbers. This research focuses on analyzing the headlines found on BBC News and

describing the structure types that compose each BBC News headline using the syntactic theory by Morley (2000) for sentence types and Matthews (1981) theory for phrase types. A tree diagram is then drawn based on the theory of Brown & Miller (1991) to see the constituent structure.

This research analyzes 186 headlines found on BBC News for the period July 2023. Furthermore, 5 headlines were selected from the main data to be further explained through a tree diagram. BBC News was chosen as the data source because according to the 2019 GlobalWebIndex on TV and digital news which surveyed one hundred and thirty-eight thousand people, found that BBC News is the most reliable news source in the world. There are several techniques used to collect data. First, collecting data by searching the BBC News online site at https://www.bbc.com. Second, noting and listing the news headlines that have been found. Third, reading carefully the news headlines that have been previously selected. Finally, interpreting the structure types in the BBC News headlines. The data collection techniques, such as online searching, noting, listing, reading, and interpreting, were conducted systematically to ensure the data's accuracy and consistency, enhancing the research's trustworthiness and the validity of its findings.

The data analysis process is carried out through several procedures. First, collecting data from headlines on the BBC News website, which was done by accessing the BBC News website at https://www.bbc.com and systematically retrieving headlines from the specified period in July 2023. Second, identifying and categorizing the news headlines that have been found based on their sentence types and phrase types. Third, drawing a tree diagram based on the pre-selected data from the BBC News headlines. Fourth, explain and describe the results

of the previously analyzed data based on the tree diagram. The last procedure is to draw conclusions from the results of the structure types used in the BBC News headlines.

The theory used in this research is the theory proposed by Morley (2000) regarding the sentence types, Matthews (1981) theory regarding the phrase types, as well as Brown & Miller (1991) theory regarding the constituent structure which will be further explained below.

Morley's Sentence Type Theory (2000)

Morley (2000) in the book *Syntax in Grammar* explains that there are four sentence types commonly used, namely simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences. A simple sentence itself is a sentence that can stand alone or is commonly called an independent clause. However, if there are two independent clauses in one sentence, it is categorized as a compound sentence. In contrast, a complex sentence is a sentence that consists of one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses. Meanwhile, compound-complex sentences are a combination of compound sentences and complex sentences that have one or more independent clauses and one or more dependent clauses.

Matthews' Phrase Type Theory (1981)

According to Matthews (1981) in a book entitled *Syntax*, a phrase is composed of one or a combination of words that have one core. The core of a phrase is an important element because it is the center of the phrase. Based on its function, there are four phrases in English: noun phrases, verb phrases, adjective phrases, and adverb phrases. A noun phrase is a phrase that has a noun at its core. For verb phrases, of course, it has a verb as its head. The same goes for adjective phrases with adjectives as their

core and adverb phrases with adverbs as their core. For this reason, it can be said that the head of a phrase determines the category of a phrase.

Brown & Miller's Constituent Structure Theory (1991)

Brown & Miller (1991) in the book entitled *Syntax: A Linguistic Introduction to Sentence Structure* argue that constituent structure refers to the hierarchical structure of words or groups of words in a sentence. In the concept of syntax, the analysis of constituent structure has an important role in linguistics especially for the study of sentence structure. This theory also provides an overview of how different elements combine to form one meaningful unit. In the analysis process, it involves drawing a tree diagram where each node in the tree diagram represents a constituent. Therefore, it can be said that the overall theory of constituent structure according to Brown & Miller (1991) is used to understand the relationship and organization between words and phrases in sentences.

The incorporation of Morley's (2000) theory of sentence types, Matthews' (1981) theory of phrase types, and Brown & Miller's (1991) theory of constituent structure is particularly important in this article for several reasons. Morley's (2000) theory provides a framework for understanding different sentence structures, thus enabling a systematic analysis of sentence types in headlines. Matthews' (1981) theory helps in categorizing and identifying the different types of phrases used in the headlines, which is crucial for a comprehensive linguistic analysis. Brown & Miller's (1991) theory of constituent structure is essential for dissecting and interpreting the structural elements in the headlines, offering a structural framework for examining their composition. Together, these theories provide a solid foundation for the analysis in this study which focuses on structure types and constituent structures in BBC News headlines.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Referring to the purpose of this research, which is to describe the types of structure found in BBC News headlines, this section presents the results and discussion of the research that has been conducted.

The research results were obtained from observations that have been carried out on each BCC News headline for the July 2023 period. There were 186 headlines found for further research. The data is then presented in the form of a diagram based on the structure types according to Morley's theory (2000) for sentence types and Matthew's theory (1981) for phrase types. Afterward, it is explained descriptively in the following discussion section. Tree diagram depictions were also added to the 5 selected headlines to make it easier to understand and more detailed both in terms of structure and word class.

Below is the data on the research results presented in table form.

Table 1 . Headline Categories Based on Structure Types

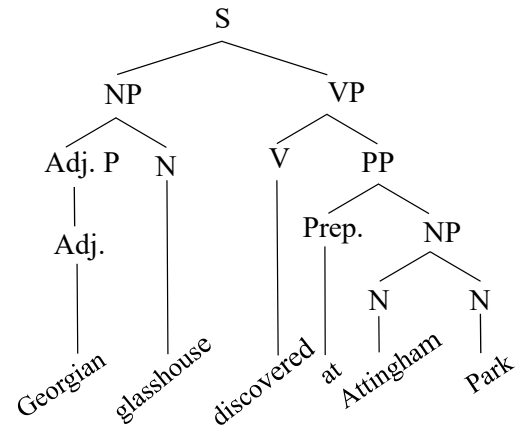| No	Structure Types	Frequency
1	Simple Sentence	151
2	Complex Sentence	20
3	Compound Sentence	3
5	Noun Phrase	11
6	Verb Phrase	1

Based on the table 1 above, it can be seen that almost all sentence types can be found in BBC headlines. However, a very significant difference can be seen in the frequency of occurrence of each sentence type when analyzed further. This is evidenced by the results of the data

analysis which shows that simple sentences are the most widely used sentence type. Simple sentences dominate with 151 headlines out of 186 main data that have been analyzed. The reason for the frequent use of simple sentences in headlines is that simple sentences are easier for readers to understand with a less complicated sentence structure.

Aside from simple sentences, complex sentences also have a fairly frequent frequency of occurrence, which is as many as 20 headlines. This is followed by compound sentences which have the lowest frequency of occurrence, namely in 3 headlines. However, the type of compound-complex sentences is not found in any of the headlines. The reason is that a complex-compound sentence is composed of several clauses that, if used as a headline, would look too complicated. Interestingly, there are also some headlines that are only composed of a phrase. This is evidenced by the appearance of 11 headlines that have a noun phrase structure and 1 headline with a verb phrase structure. These headlines with a phrase structure were chosen as headlines by the news writer in an effort to attract readers' attention.
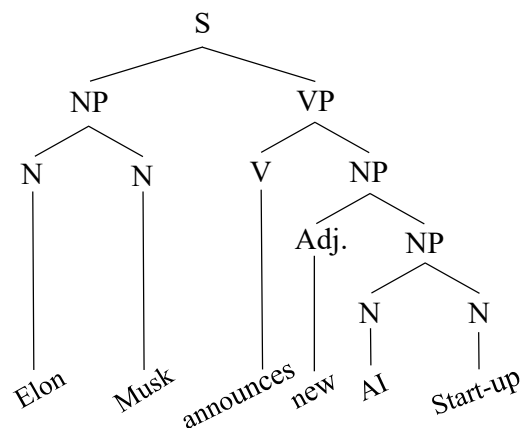
Furthermore, some of the selected headlines will be further explained for their constituent structure based on Brown & Miller's (1991) theory with the following tree diagram depiction which is then explained descriptively to make it easier to understand and more detailed both in terms of sentence structure and word class.

Georgian glasshouse discovered at Attingham Park
(Giddings, 27th July 2023)

The headline above is a simple sentence that has a complete structure with the SVA syntactic pattern. It is said to be a simple sentence because it consists of one independent clause and has one subject, one predicate, and an adverb of place. In the tree diagram above, the constituent structure of the headline is depicted where the verb connects the subject with the adverb in the sentence. The subject of the sentence itself is filled by the noun phrase *'Georgian glasshouse'*. While the predicate function is filled by the verb phrase *'discovered'*. Furthermore, the adverb of the sentence above is filled by the prepositional phrase *'at Attingham Park'* where this phrase states the location of the discovery of the Georgian greenhouse.
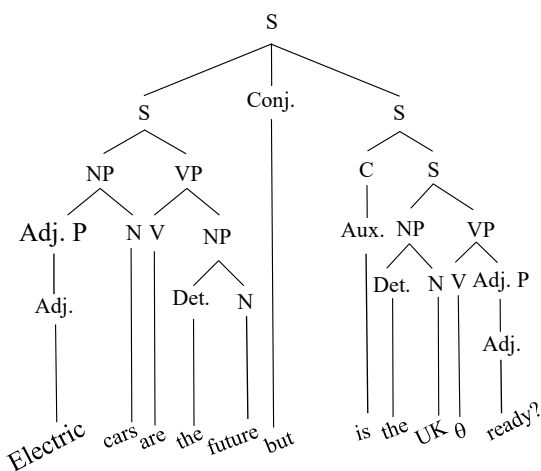
Elon Musk announces new AI start-up
(Clayton, 12nd July 2023)

Judging from the tree diagram, the headline above is one of the headlines that belongs to the simple sentence category. This is because the headline above fulfills the requirements of a simple sentence with a complete constituent structure. Based on the constituent structure, the subject position is filled by the noun phrase *'Elon Musk'* which is then connected by the verb 'announces' with a noun phrase that functions as an object, namely '*new AI Start-up*'. Therefore, it can be said that the headline has an SVO syntactic pattern consisting of one independent sentence with one subject, one predicate, and one object. Which in its arrangement, this sentence can provide a complete understanding to the reader about Elon Musk making an announcement about a new AI Start-up.

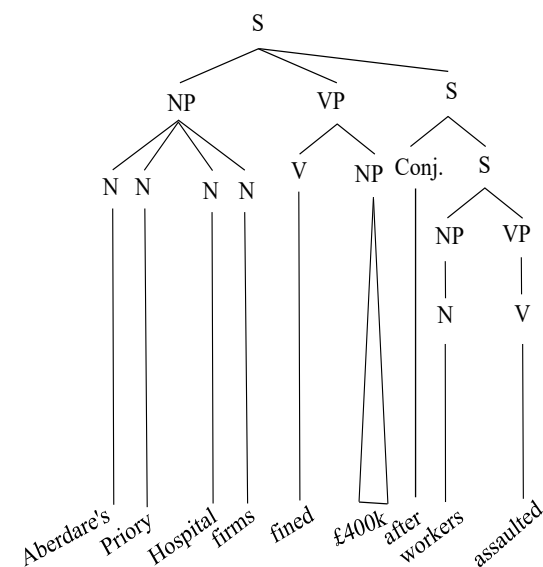**Electric cars are the future, but is the UK ready?**
(Rowlatt, 25th July 2023)

Based on the sentence pattern, the headline above is a compound sentence with a complete structure that has an SVC syntactic pattern in each clause. The headline above is a compound sentence because it has two independent clauses connected by the coordinating conjunction '*but*'. Each clause has a complete English sentence pattern consisting of one subject, one predicate, and a complement to complete the clause.

For the first clause, the subject function is filled by the noun phrase '*Electric cars*', the predicate function is filled by the verb phrase '*are*', and the noun phrase '*the future*' is added as a complement to complete the first clause. Meanwhile, the second clause in the headline above is an interrogative sentence so the predicate function is omitted. The auxiliary verb '*is*' fills the function as a complementizer for the second clause. The subject function itself is filled by the noun phrase '*the UK*', and added the complementary '*ready?*'. In general, the headline above summarizes the entire content of the news which discusses the UK's readiness to face the fact that electric cars are an unavoidable future.

Aberdare's Priory Hospital firms fined £400k after workers assaulted
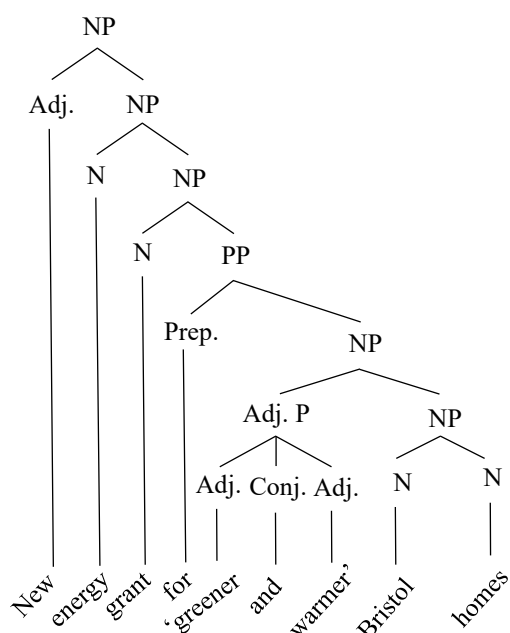(Belli, 26th July 2023)

The headline above is one of the ways used by news writers to vary their sentences. By using the SVOC pattern, the headline above belongs to a complex sentence type consisting of one main clause and one dependent clause. The main clause in the headline above is '*Aberdare's Priory Hospital Firms fined £400k*' where the subject function is filled by the noun phrase '*Aberdare's Priory Hospital Firms*' which is then connected

by the verb '*fined*' with the object '*£400k*'. Meanwhile, the subordinate clause is characterized by the subordinating conjunction '*after*' in the dependent sentence '*after workers were assaulted*'. Based on the tree diagram illustration above, the dependent clause modifies the object in the main clause while providing an additional description of the reason why Aberdare's Priory Hospital firms were fined £400k.

New energy grant for 'greener and warmer' Bristol homes
(Heath & Ellis, 25th July 2023)

Based on the results of the analysis, it can be seen that sometimes news writers do not only use sentences in composing headlines but on some occasions only use phrases as headlines. This is evident from the tree diagram above, which proves that one of the headlines found is only composed of a phrase. Although it looks like a complete sentence, when analyzed based on sentence types, the headlines above only have a subject in the sentence without being equipped with a predicate as a minimum requirement to be considered a sentence. Therefore, the headline belongs to the phrase structure category because it

only has a noun phrase as its structure. The noun phrase itself is filled by *'new energy grant'* which is then modified by the prepositional phrase *'for greener and warmer Bristol homes'*. Although it seems ambiguous, the headline above is still chosen as a headline by the news writer because in journalistic language, headlines that seem ambiguous will make the headline more interesting and can attract readers' curiosity to read the entire news article.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, several things can be concluded:

The findings of this study are consistent with the characteristics of headlines. Simple sentences are prevalent, 151 out of 186 headlines, in line with the general purpose of headlines, which is to convey important information in a direct and concise manner. Complex sentences, although fewer in number with 20 occurrences, still exist, and are often used when additional context or details are required. Compound sentences are less common with 3 occurrences due to the brevity required in headlines. The discovery of headlines consisting of only phrases with 12 occurrences, mainly noun phrases with 11 occurrences and one verb phrase, reflects the versatility of headline structures to create marketable and attention-grabbing content. The headline's constituent structure generally follows a logical and coherent pattern. The absence of complex-compound sentences can be attributed to the preference for simplicity and conciseness in headline construction. Although this study focuses on written headlines from BBC News, it suggests that future research could consider a wider scope, including spoken headlines from various news media, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the

structure of headlines across different communication modalities.

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