

Grammar as focal point of metaphor in business press headlines

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Abstract

Previous work on business press headlines has identified and analysed patterns, mainly from the semantic point of view (Herrera Soler 2006a, 2006b). In the present study, we take grammar as our starting point. A major issue is where the focal point of metaphor is located, that is, on the verb or on the noun, which is to say, on entities or processes and what trends or patterns are evident within this division. While researching this issue, we have been struck by the fact that many headlines are in point of fact verbless phrases. Additional research has enabled us to quantify such use and to establish patterns within that use.

Our methodology follows Deignan's (2005) call for greater emphasis on naturally occurring language use, supported by corpus evidence, rather than on introspection. Hence, we have built up our own corpus of authentic Spanish and English business press headlines, comprising 981 entries. We then isolated all the cases of verbless phrases, providing a sub-corpus of quantitative data for this paradigm and proceeded to analyse its specific characteristics. To this end, we concentrated on the focal point of metaphor, establishing patterns of use both from the semantic and syntactic points of view. At the same time, we consider the communication impact or potential of these kinds of verbless phrases and their respective patterns. Our conclusion, in this respect, is that the absence of verbs seems to be compensated by the presence of elements which due to shared knowledge—for example, idioms, near idioms, salient culturally specific reference, embodiment or different grammatical devices—are likely to have added communicative potential or impact and thus positively contribute to the persuasiveness of these headlines.

Key words: business press, verbless headlines, metaphor focal point, communication

Introduction

A common approach to explaining metaphor is to consider it as one thing understood as another and summarised through the formula A is B, a typical realization of which would be MAN IS A WOLF. This raises expectations that metaphor use will arise in prepositional sentential structures involving subject + predicate contexts and doubtlessly metaphor studies show this to be a productive framework as also a pedagogically effective explicative formula. However, closer analysis will show this to be merely one of the ways in which metaphor use manifests itself. In our on-going research into business press headlines, and particularly into those where the focal point of metaphor lies, we have been struck by the high incidence of metaphor use arising in verbless headlines. This is so much so that out of the total of 981 headlines evidencing metaphor use which make up our corpus, 281 or 28.6% are verbless, something whose statistical significance is plain to be seen.

Having established the quantitative importance of this type of headline, giving us a sub-corpus of 281 instances, two major and related questions now arise. In the first place, headlines by their very nature pose difficulties to the reader. This is principally due to two reasons. Firstly, headlines canonically operate cataphorically and hence the reader lacks the aid of on-going anaphoric reference characteristic of most discourse and is

faced with linguistic input which only becomes meaningful when connected with the ensuing text. Secondly, headlines, which must also satisfy the functional requirement of supplying a suitable summary of that ensuing text, are often necessarily rather complex, having to capture in very few words texts of considerable complexity. At the same time, headlines must also fulfil another peremptory function of instantly engaging the reader and encouraging him or her to read on. An apparent contradiction thus arises between the complexity and difficulty, on the one hand, and the need for instant appeal, on the other. Moreover, verbless headlines, lacking the structural and semantic contribution of verbs, would seem to add yet further to the intrinsic difficulty of the headline element making us question the compatibility of such headlines with some of their prime functions. Our hypothesis here is that such headlines benefit from different communicative features that compensate for that difficulty or offset it completely. This now leads us to examine the patterns evidenced in our sub-corpus of verbless headlines.

Patterns within verbless headlines: Semantic focus

As may be expected, 281 verbless headline instances allow for a great deal of structural variation. However, our analysis can pinpoint certain recurrent tendencies which we claim can be considered patterns and which moreover in some manner or other mitigate the difficulties inherent in headlines in general, as pointed out above, and verbless headlines in particular. Whereas complexity in headlines focuses on the producers' role, as Baicchi (2003) points out, difficulty profiles the readers' perspective. Hence, one strategy bridging this divide would be the use of elements that prioritise shared knowledge. An analysis of our sub-corpus shows this feature to figure prominently as well as being common to the patterns our sub-corpus evidences. We shall now deal with each of these patterns in turn.

Idioms, near idioms and cultural or literary allusion

Idioms are expressions that have become so conventionalised as to be considered fixed in languages. They are thus elements which are highly shared among the users of a language and furthermore because of their conventionalised nature are highly understandable and in fact may reinforce in the reader a sense of satisfaction or reward on recognition of the expression to be part of his or her cultural heritage. As such, even though the idiom will need to be cataphorically connected to the ensuing text, there is also a certain sense of semantic autonomy accompanying it, so much so that it is communicative as a stand alone element, thus eliminating or mitigating one important element of difficulty, namely that involved in the search for cataphoric reference. Consider the following instances:

- 1) Familia y trabajo: encaje de bolillos.
- 2) A toda gas (referring to bull market).
- 3) Bruselas, con la sartén por el mango.

While idioms are fixed expressions, many studies have been devoted to how these can admit modification. Furthermore, as Giora et al. (2004) point out with reference to metaphor, optimisation effects are produced not so much by the highly innovative metaphors but by those which somehow or other modify an existing conventional situation or element. This kind of strategy, whereby the idioms are modified, a sense of

near idiom is established or a cultural or literary allusion is exploited, either literally or in slightly modified form, figures highly in our sub-corpus. Consider examples such as the following:

- 4) Tras los cañones la mantequilla: dinero para Irak (obviously playing on the fixed expression ‘guns or butter’—metonymically representing the policy option of channelling resources towards war or towards improving the material well-being of the populace).
- 5) Polanco y Alierta: una plataforma para la eternidad (playing on the Spanish title of the play on Thomas More: *Un hombre para la eternidad*).
- 6) France in search of lost time (exploiting the reference to the well know title of Proust’s novel).
- 7) El euro de hierro (cashing in on the effect of the partial change from the appellation for Margaret Thatcher, ‘la dama de hierro’).
- 8) Sea change for investors (playing on the well-known expression from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*).

These particular types of idiom, modification of idiom and cultural allusion are significantly frequent in this sub corpus (50/281=18%), attesting to their communicative potential.

Interface and puns

Interface is the term we give to the type of headline in which lexis proper to the semantic field of the subject matter under discussion is deployed figuratively. We have shown the productivity of this type of headline as also its communicative impact in earlier work (Herrera et al., 2006; White & Herrera, 2003). Other researchers in the field of headlines have referred to this specific type of headline as ‘double grounding’ (Brône and Feyaerts, 2005). As this type of headline establishes connections within the headline itself, its presence in verbless headlines facilitates understanding and mitigates difficulty by already establishing these connections within the headline and therefore, as in the case of the headlines in the preceding sub-section, prior to any cataphoric search in the ensuing text. Consider the following for example:

- 9) Rebelión en la ONCE por el bastón de mando (‘bastón’, being a salient element in the ONCE semantic field, connects up with that field while at the same time adding the semantic import of the concept of control deriving from the expression as a whole: this interconnection thus adds to its communicative impact).
- 10) Shoe deal unstitched by German anti-war stance (‘stitching’, being a salient feature of shoe making, connects this literal scenario and the figurative meaning of the possible collapse of German shoe exportation in the wake of US-German differences *vis-à-vis* the Iraq war. Again, the triggering of intra headline connections facilitates understanding and makes its point in an emphatically communicative manner.

Akin to interface, though not interconnecting the source domain and the figurative use of one of its literal elements, is the device of the pun, highly exploited in press headlines in general. In this latter case, the connection tends to be merely verbal, being a play at the level of words:

- 11) Navidad negra en el consumo de EE.UU. (Obviously, the conventional force of ‘white’ Christmas gives the extra communicative potential to the use of ‘negra’).
- 12) Síndrome de recesión aguda severa (The play arises from the substitution of ‘recesión’ for ‘respiratorio’ and in this way taps the communicative impact of the connection with bird ‘flu’ disease which was receiving a high news coverage profile at the time).
- 13) The hard man of software (Referring to the tough business policy of the head of the Oracle software company: the play derives from counterposing the words hard and soft).

Embodiment

Framing business issues in embodiment terms, that is using any of the multiple coordinates deriving from the scenario of the body in space, given its prominence in language use, likewise operates as a facilitator towards understanding at the intra-headline level:

- 14) Un traje a la medida para Iberdrola (The ease of understanding, deriving from the contribution of the figurative expression—tailor-made suit for an embodied company—means we already have a clear grasp of the issue prior to cataphoric connections with ensuing text).

The same may be said of the following examples where the intricacies of company relations and performance are captured in highly body specific terms:

- 15) La hemorragia bursátil de Jazztel.
- 16) Crisis prenatal en Sacyr-Vallehermosa.
- 17) Tokyo optimistic after a telephone message.

An interesting contrastive feature has emerged from our sub-corpora with respect to this particular area in that the instances in Spanish far outweigh those in English. This will be the subject of future research.

Metonymy

Verbless headlines show a high incidence of metonymic use. This again seems consonant with our argument that the devices which we consider to form patterns are net contributors in facilitating understanding. Metonymy by its very nature establishes connection, and the fact that it characteristically operates with salient features, hence being more likely to rank highly as shared knowledge, makes such connection establishing all the easier:

- 18) A flamboyant diplomat with the ear of his political master (The connections established by ‘ear’ as instrumental in being influential with an interlocutor gives the headline added communicative potential).
- 19) Wheels for the world: Henry Ford, his company and a century of progress (The metonymic role of wheels, ‘part for whole’, as well as the alliteration triggered with world, gives the headline, as in 18) that extra communicative edge).

- 20) Bulls on the march ('Bull' being a salient figurative expression for upward market tendencies, its metonymic use here calls up such a market scenario in a highly expressive way).

Patterns within verbless headlines: grammatical focus

Verbless headlines present highly varied grammatical forms and, as with the case of the semantic focus of the former section, evidence from this perspective likewise shows repetitive use warranting our claims as to the existence of certain patterns. Our interest is to examine the way in which these patterns contribute to ease of understanding and thus offset the added difficulty that the absence of verbs might suppose. We shall now examine these patterns in detail.

Noun phrases including prepositional phrase qualification

Many of the verbless headlines include pivotal prepositions. As prepositions by their very nature are relational, this means that once again intra-headline connections are triggered. Consider the following:

- 21) El matrimonio imposible entre la termia y el voltio (El Mundo, 16 Marzo 2003) (This highly figurative headline, with the metaphoric 'mergers are marriages' and the companies—Gas Natural e Iberdrola respectively—triggered by the metonymy 'product for producer', manages to make a statement by means of the relational preposition 'entre'. In this case, as in many others of this nature, 'light' verbs, that is, of little semantic import such as existential verbs, copulatives and possessives, could either be easily added turning the headline into a complete sentence, verb included, or the verb may be understood to have been elided. Thus, example 21) could be readily rewritten as 21b) 'El matrimonio entre la termia y el voltio es imposible'.)
- 22) (as above, 18) A flamboyant diplomat with the ear of his political master (The relation is set up by 'with' and again could be rewritten as 22b) 'The flamboyant diplomat has the ear of his political master').

Juxtaposition

Another syntactic device frequently appearing in the verbless headlines and one in which an empty carrier verb could be seen to be elided or could easily be added is juxtaposition, for example:

- 23) Arun Sarin: el nuevo 'rey' de los móviles.

Dynamic nouns

Nouns which are dynamic in nature and thus approximate towards verbs in that they indicate processes rather than entities also appear as a pattern, for example:

- 24) Putin in push for a fully convertible euro.
 25) En busca del líder eléctrico: tercer asalto.

In these cases, both 'push' and 'busca' here used as nouns clearly denote processes.

Overlapping use of various devices

The patterns singled out above are not mutually exclusive but in fact one and the same example may tap two or more of the different patterns. For instance, 19) above is simultaneously a case of interface, metonymy use and juxtaposition.

Conclusions

From the foregoing evidence, it is clear that even in a single sub-category of headlines, as is the case of verbless headlines, great variety is to be found. Secondly, it is possible to isolate different uses which due to their frequency of use may be considered patterns within this sub-category. Thirdly, all these patterns contribute to greater ease of understanding and hence are communicatively effective. The main way in which this is brought about, as we have shown in our analysis, is by facilitating the establishment of intra headline connections. This means that prior to any need for the establishing of cataphoric connections in the ensuing text, quite an amount of interconnection is already set up within the headline itself, a fact that boosts communication.

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