



English Newspapers as Specimen: A Study of Linguistic Features of the English Newspapers in the 20th Century From Historical Linguistics

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Abstract

The 20th century has posed to us a challenge we have never met before, that is, we were living in a world in tremendous changes. English language, as a growing organism, from the point of historical linguistics, is a witness to these changes. English language presents us with a lot of new features in the 20th century, echoing with the changes of people's material and spiritual life reflected in daily happenings. English newspapers are a good place to observe these new features.

With English newspapers as exemplars, the article conducts a survey on the linguistic features of English language in the 20th century from the perspective of historical linguistics. The investigation has been conducted in three aspects: the lexical level, the grammatical level and rhetorical level. Besides, another thing is noticeable during investigation. That is to say, linguistic features of English language should be examined in relation to scientific, political, religious and other factors in a broad social context. It is social reality that has shaped most of these features, and the features are a mirror of the social reality.

Key words: English language; English newspapers; Linguistic features; The 20th century; Historical linguistics

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INTRODUCTION

English Language has a history about 1,500 years. During the process of development from the Old English Period to

the Modern English Period, it has undergone tremendous changes in the aspects of phonology, morphology, semantics, etc., in the contact with a diversity of cultural, political, religious elements both from the English-speaking world and other corners of the world.

The 20th century poses to us a challenge that we have never met before, that is, we are faced up with a world in continuous changes. Language, as a growing organism, is a mirror of progress. As Darwin puts that the fittest survive, it is also the same with language development. The English language presents us with a lot of new features in the 20th century, echoing with the changes of people's mind and lifestyle reflected in daily occurrences. It is of significance to conduct a survey on the new features, mainly linguistic features of the English language in the 20th century, from the perspective of historical linguistics.

It is indeed a broad topic to conclude all the new features of the English language in the 20th century. To solve the problem, this article poses a good way of conducting the survey from the perspective of English journalism in the 20th century, because journalism really serves a kaleidoscope to give us insight into everyday happenings in people's life. We can easily pick up this exemplar, take a look at it, and have a lot of surprising findings about how things have happened, and how they have been inscribed by the powerful tool of language.

1. HISTORICAL FACTORS AFFECTING THE LARGE CIRCULATION OF ENGLISH JOURNALISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

In January 1900, there were approximately 140 million native speakers of English in the world. A century later that figure has almost tripled to nearly 400 million, adding to them about 100 million who speak English as a second language. Consider how English has become

the international language of communication, both conventional and digital, in the 20th century and think, moreover, of the massive increase in literacy since 1900, the legacy of the spread of universal education in the late 19th century. The English language is in an unprecedented number of hands. In that same period, the world itself has changed almost beyond recognition. In 1900, no powered heavier-than-air craft had left the Earth's surface, but a hundred years later we look with complacency at pictures of the Earth taken from outer space; various forms of electronic communication have brought all corners of the globe into instantaneous touch with each other; Sigmund Freud and his successors have delved into the recesses of the human psyche. The computer has grown, and shrunk, from a set of winking throbbing cabinets big enough to fill a room to a miniaturized component of everyday life, holding the threat and the promise of the future in its microcircuits (Ayto, 1999, p.1). All the factors contribute to updating of knowledge at an unprecedented speed, and English journalism serves as the messenger of imparting knowledge to the mass.

About 70% of the adult population in America read one or another of the nation's 1600 daily newspapers. The U.S. has never had a national press or newspaper with a mass national circulation like *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* in Britain or the leading papers in other countries. However, the influence of a few prestige newspapers, most notably *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* has increased on that these papers come close to constituting a national press. These papers syndicate their staff-written stories to regional newspapers all over the country. They are regularly read by government officials, corporate executives, interest group leaders and other media people. The top five newspapers, by daily circulation (October 2000 to March 2001) are: *The Wall Street Journal*, 1,819,528; *USA Today*, 1,769,650; *The New York Times*, 1,159,954; *The Los Angeles Times*, 1,058,494; *The Washington Post*, 802,594.

In comparison, British newspapers are controlled by national or international financial syndicates, up to 90%. The newspaper industry in Britain is located in Fleet Street. The most prestigious newspaper *The Times* and *Financial Times* all have a circulation of 300 thousands per day. *Financial Times* is printed directly outside Britain, so it has a great impact on the media and people abroad.

2. LEXICAL FEATURES OF ENGLISH JOURNALISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

2.1 Midget Words or Small Words

American linguist H. L. Menchen (1980), in his book *the American language* approves that the newspapers have a distinguishing mark that there are so many short words.

e.g. Governor to *Axe Aide* (cancel), Unions *Back Peace Move*(support), *Pit Talks* end (coal mine), Irish Top Ranks *Vie* for Office (to compete), *blast* (explosion, strong criticism), *swap* (exchange).

Among many midget words, there are slang words which are used to create the common touch, as the 20th century is the one for the mass, and people want to narrow the gap among them. Slang words cater for the mass.

e.g. Buck (dollar), bust (degradation), jawbone(give high pressure), ego trip (pursuit for fame and fortune), pink slip (an announcement to dismiss somebody), buddy (friend), highbrow (well-educated people), go-go (full of energy).

2.2 Neologism

Neologism is attributed to the rapid development of science and technology. H. L. Menchen says in the days of stress, in times of war, in an era of discovery and invention, 5,000 or more words will win the favor of the public every year (Menchen, 1982, p.202). Neologism means both the creation of totally new words and the old words which have acquired new meanings in the new social context. There are many ways of creating new words, and here only a few are to be mentioned.

In the introduction and popularizing of new words in journalism has been a factor of steadily increasing importance. Newspapers and popular magazines not only play a large part in spreading new locutions among the people but are themselves fertile producers of new words (Baugh & Cable, 1993, p.303).

2.2.1 Creating New Words by Shortening or Clipping

In the 20th century, there pops up a lot of shortenings. Linguists Eric Patridge and Simeon Potter mentions (Patridge & Potter, 1969) that in the world, shortenings spring up in a great amount, hard to be accumulated totally. Shortening or clipping has become an obvious feature of English Journalism in the 20th century. Examples are as follows:

Influ (influenza), Dem (Democrat), Lib (liberation), corp (corporation), Choc (chocolate), execs (executives), Net (Internet), asst (assistant), dept (department).

In addition, acronyms are part of the words formed by shortening or clipping. Examples are as follows: BBS (Bulletin Board System), DN (domain name), FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions), FTP (File Transfer Protocol), HTTP (Hyper Text Transfer Protocol).

What's more, blending is an effective way of word formation, and it also belongs to shorten or clipping. Examples are as follows: Dawk (dove+ hawk), filmdom (film+ kingdom), sitcom (situation+ comedy), Comsat (communication+ satellite).

Furthermore, flexible use of idioms by shortening or extending the original idioms, changing a specific word in the idiom can create an entertaining effect.

e.g. Employees foster nose-to-the-grindstone strategies (nose to the grindstone is the shortening of keeping one's nose to the grindstone).

e.g. Many government-sponsored agencies are now jumping on the exercise-bandwagon and coaxing reluctant spectators to join the fun. (Jump on the exercise bandwagon is extended from jumping on the bandwagon, meaning that they want to make headway in exercise).

2.2.2 Creating New Words by Affixation

New words can be created by affixation, which means adding a fixed part to the old word. The fixed part is called affixes, and the word is root. Affixation can be divided into two categories: suffixes and prefixes.

(a) Derivation by suffixes

-gate: Watergate, Monicagate or Zipgate, Camillagate (the reason of Dianna's divorce in 1996)

-eteria or -teria (sub-rank, service on a small scale): luncheteria, roadeteria, chocolateria, fruiteria

(b) Derivation by prefixes

Eco-: ecocrisis, ecofreak, ecocide

Info-: info-tech, infoweapon, infomaze

Cyber -: cyberculture, cyberhead (computer-obsessed people), cyberspace

e-: e-paper, e-cash, e-commerce, e-journal

2.2.3 Creating New Words by Compounds

In the history of English, compounding is an old and important way of creating new words. And compounds number only less than words by affixation. In the 20th century, this kind of word making device is quite active. American linguist H. L. Menchen says that the most obvious trend in word creating for Americans is the fairly easy way of compounding (Menchen, 1980, p.144). Examples are as follows: a silence vow (a vow to keep silence about something secret), depth interview (an interview which is designed to probe attitudes, feelings or motives), house-boat (a boat which is fitted up for living in)

2.2.4 Creating New Words by Analogy

Analogy is an inference or an argument from one particular to another particular, as opposed to deduction, induction, where at least one of the premises or the conclusion is general. There are different ways of using analogy.

(a) The first one is making a new phrase by turning opposite the original meaning

e.g. baby-boomer-baby buster (the babies born in the downfall of birth).

(b) The second one is making a new phrase according to some similarities with the original phrase

e.g. missile gap-generation, gap-credibility gap, Great Leap Forward-Great Leap Outward (opening up of a country to the outside world).

(c) The third one is making a new phrase according to different time and space

e.g. Landscape –moonscape, cityscape, nightscape, marscape; ghost town –ghost site (deserted website).

(d) The fourth one is making a new phrase according to different colors

e.g. Blue-collar workers, grey-collar workers (people who fix something), pink-collar workers (female nurses, teachers, secretaries), steel-collar workers (computers), open-collar workers(those people who work at home by using a computer).

3. GRAMMATICAL FEATURES OF ENGLISH JOURNALISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

American journalism writer Rene J. Cappon sings a high praise of British Newspaper, *The Economist*. He says that the good quality of *The Economist* is guaranteed by its conciseness. Most introductory parts have no more than 16 words on average, and the sentences in body averages at 16-19 words (Cappon, 1991, p.51). The conciseness of journalism is mainly achieved by grammatical economy; the most obvious feature of English journalism at syntactical level. The following will explain how grammatical economy is attained by means of compression.

3.1 Collocation Premodification

The columnist John Leo for *U.S. News & World Report* says that pre-modification is basic element of newspaper English, and it is an important means of compression. If we restore the highly compressed message into its original form, we have to construct a long phrase or sentence. There are several types of pre-modification from English Journalism.

In 1958, American economist and diplomat John K. Galbraith used "The Affluent Society" to entitle his book (Galbraith, 1998), but now we used affluence society. Years ago, we use "Silent Generation", but now "Silence Generation". This suggests that premodification is being changed according to social circumstances. Examples are as follows:

(a) Nouns as modifiers: A carrot-and-stick policy, rags-to-riches success stories, power game, discount store, tube strike, TV violence, gun control law, panic buying, membership action plan, defense diplomacy.

(b) Verbs as modifiers: A stand-up meeting, start-up costs, a go-with-the-stream person.

(c) Adjectives as modifiers: War-weary citizens, power-hungry politicians.

(d) Phrases as modifiers: On-the-job problems, on-site service, on-the-spot investigation, under-the-counter deal.

(e) Present and past participle as modifiers: Turned-on audience, burnt-out teacher, full-blown case.

(f) A sentence as modifier: A Papa-knows-best family, a seeking-is-believing attitude.

3.2 Embedding

The aim of news reports is to convey to audience information as much as possible. Embedding is an effective way of compressing information. In the stylistic sense, the embedded part is independent from the other parts of the sentence structure. Examples are as follows:

e.g. People are confounded; which Bible will give a particular person maybe a scholar or seeker, a harried parent, a struggling student-spiritual nourishment, moral enlightenment and literary pleasure? (U.S.A., Today)

3.3 Ellipsis

Ellipsis and other means of compression also help us to direct attention to the most salient points of discourse, by suppressing items that the context or the conventions of grammar will make reasonably obvious (Quirk, 1990, p.202).

Grammatically speaking, every title in a newspaper should be a complete sentence, but we still find a lot of titles having only content words, and no functional words. The most frequently left-out functional words are articles and “to be”, and next conjunction words, auxiliary words and pronouns.

Sometimes, we will find “and” is taken place by coma. Examples are as follows:

Thailand, Malaysia Ink Sea Treaty = Thailand (and) Malaysia Ink (a) Sea Treaty.

Woman Kills Husband, Self = (A) Woman Kills (Her) Husband (and) Herself.

In addition, we will find “to be” or some other kinds of verbs are taken place by semicolon. Examples show like this:

Chinese Cooks: Masters at Turning a Turnip into a Flower = Chinese Cooks (Are) Masters at Turing a Turnip into a Flower.

Koreans: Grumpy Toward America = Koreans Are Grumpy Toward America.

Furthermore, we can also find those titles with nouns as modifiers instead of adjectives or having no action verbs or linking verbs, and this can be double economic. Examples show like this:

Channel Tunnel Halt (The Project of building Channel Tunnel is postponed for a moment).

(b) Zoo Escape Drama (Some fierce animals tried to escape from the zoo, but they failed, and no harm caused to people).

Besides, there are a lot of elliptical words in titles for the purpose of saving space. There are usually names of important international organizations.

PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization), IMF (International Monetary Fund), Generation E (young entrepreneurs aged below 40)

3.4 Simplification of Tenses

3.4.1 Use of Present Tense Instead of Past Tense

Simplification of tenses is a frequent linguistic occurrence in newspaper headlines. We have past, present and future tenses in English language, but in newspaper titles, we find usually present tense. The reason for using the present tense is to make the news sound more realistic and in the fashion, otherwise, people will not be interested in reading them. Present tense is used to take place in past tense, and future tense. Most news concern past events. But to give the effect of immediacy, almost all sentence headlines use the present tense.

e.g. EU Plans to boost France’s Recovery.

In normal sense, this action of EU has been completed and has some influence upon the present, so it should be in the present perfect tense. But the writer simplifies it into the present tense. This causes no trouble to our understanding, as we can infer the time of action from the context.

3.4.2 Use of Past Participle

A usual journalist practice is to delete the auxiliary verb “be” in the headlines where the passive voice is involved. So only the past participle is left, and the reference may be to the past, the present or occasionally to the future. Examples are like this:

Envoy to Cuba Recalled in Dispute over Exiles (*Washington Post*, August 24, 2004).

Battle Lines on Foreign Policy Clearly Drawn (*The Washington Post*, October 1, 2004).

3.4.3 Use of Present Participles

To save space, reporters often avoid using continuous verb forms in the headlines, and generally favor the use of present participles without the auxiliary verb “be” to represent continuous tense.

e.g. Staph Peril Increasing for the Sick in Britain (*International Herald Tribune*, August 25, 2004).

3.4.4 Use of Infinitive

When the time reference is to the future, reporters often use the infinitives in headlines though the “will” construction also occur:

e.g. Trials to Begin for Four Inmates at Guantanamo (*Washington Post*, August 24, 2004).

4. RHETORICAL FEATURES OF ENGLISH JOURNALISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Meaning is not always stable, and there is a lot of scope for creativity. Figurative language use is one way in which the phenomenon of language change takes place, as words acquire metaphorical or metonymic meanings different from their original literal meanings and the new usages become absorbed into the language as commonplace.

4.1 Metaphors

From a historically point of view, when there is a new object or a new idea, a bulk of new words will appear to refer to the new referents. Another reason for language change through figurative language is that an idea of shared experience may be relatively abstract, and in order to be able to talk about it, terms are drawn from another, more concrete area. Newspapers are a good place to observe these happenings: Metaphors are used as bold, simple and direct ways of conveying an abstract idea.

The word *metaphor*, in the etymology (i.e. the linguistic background), is Greek for “transport”. Perceiving a metaphor as a kind of transport draws attention to the way a metaphor transports a concept from where it is normally located, to somewhere else where it is not usually found. Thus a metaphor allows you to create correspondences in the world which did not exist before, and allows new meanings to occur (Thornborrow & Shan, 1998, pp.96-97).

Metaphors can be good examples to show the economy of newspaper language. Some phrases frequently occur in newspaper, and if we want to restore them into a complete sentence, it will occupy a lot of space. Besides this, metaphor can add vividness to the reporting of current news; even they can have joked effects on big events by making them less serious.

e.g. After *an incubation period* of nearly three years, the infant Indonesian stock-market is finally trying to *break out into the real world* with its first issue of any importance (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 23, 1979).

Though metaphors can add vividness to the news report, they are usually culturally loaded. Understanding metaphors require background knowledge about a certain culture. There some examples: Bald eagle (leader with bald head), dove (the political party in favor of soft line), hawk (the political party in favor of hard line), elephant (American Republicans), donkey (American Democratic), floo-floo bird (conservatives), lion (Britain).

4.2 Metonymy

Metonymy, like metaphor, is a figurative use of language rather than a literal one. Metaphor is Greek for transport, metonymy is Greek for a change of name (Thornborrow & Shan, 1998, p.109). In this case, the name of a referent (or thing referred to) is replaced by the name of an attribute, or entity related in some semantic way, or by spatial proximity, or another kind of link, i.e., the ground of substitution is not similarity as it is in the case of a metaphor, but association. There are some examples: Oval Office (the power of American President), Langley (Bureau of CIA), Madison Avenue (American advertising industry), Silicon Valley (high technology), Fleet Street (British finance and business), Westminster (British Parliament), Windsor (British royal family).

4.3 Allusion

Allusion is a passing reference, without explicit identification, to a literary or historical person, place or event, or to another literary work or passage (Abrams, 2004, p.9).

e.g. A newspaper title reads like this “A Tale of Two Hearts” (Newsweek). Actually it tells about heart transplantation. It alludes to Charles Dickens’ novel *A Tale of Two Cities*.

e.g. *The Old Man and the Economic Sea*. This is about the career of an old economist, and the title alludes to *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway.

4.4 Euphemism or Cosmetic Words

An inoffensive expression called euphemism or a cosmetic word is used in place of a blunt one that is felt to be disagreeable or embarrassing (Abrams, 2004, p.83). Euphemisms are used frequently with reference to such subjects as religion, death, bodily functions, etc.. There are examples from English Journalism. Examples are like these: Needy, underprivileged, disadvantaged (poor), surreptitious entry (burglary), correctional center (prison), landscaper (gardner), recession (economic crisis), industrial action (strike).

CONCLUSION

Language, as a growing organism, is a mirror of social progress. The 20th century has posed to us a lot of challenges we have never met before, and we were faced up with social changes at an unprecedented pace. The social development has brought about brand-new things and ideas, affecting both people’s material and spiritual life. Those changes were nearly all reflected in language.

As English is the international language of communication, both conventional and digital in the 20th century, it is of significance to conduct a survey on how the new social factors have been reflected in English language. The good way of conducting the survey is through English journalism, because the language in them is flexible, adaptive to social changes every day and cater for the mass media. Although it can not embrace all the changes, yet it can serve as nice specimen for our survey.

The linguistic features of English journalism have been investigated from three aspects: the lexical level, the grammatical level and the rhetorical level. At the lexical level, we have found that midget or small words are frequently used, and we also have a detailed analysis of how new words are formed through the ways of shortening or clipping, affixation, compounding and analogy. At grammatical level, we have found a distinguishing feature of grammatical economy, one of the main characteristics of journalistic language, and how it can be achieved through means of pre-modification,

embedding, ellipsis and simplification of tenses. At the rhetorical level, we have mainly examined how the rhetorical devices of metaphor, metonymy, allusion and euphemism or cosmetic words can make abstract ideas concrete.

Besides this, one thing is worth noticing during the examination of linguistic features of English journalism in the 20th century, that is linguistic features should be examined in relation to religious, political, scientific factors in a broad social context. The social reality has shaped all these features, and the dynamics of those features are mirror of the social changes.

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