Some Characteristics of Newspaper English

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A great number of articles and books have been and will continue to be published on what is commonly called 'current English', and it might not make any sense for me to present just another report on the same subject. It seems, however, that those articles which exclusively deal with editorials in newspapers are comparatively few, and so in the hope that I might add just a little bit to what has already been discussed and published, I have focused myself on the editorials of THE TIMES anb THE GUARDIAN, the two leading papers in England. The following is an interim report on some of the features of newspaper English. They are not of course peculiar to journalism, but still they may be held to be characteristic of newspapers, since they seem to occur frequently even in editorials, which are supposed to be the most conservative and orthodox in their phraseology and style of all kinds of reading matter in newspapers. All the quotations in this report are from the editorials of the two newspapers mentioned above.

1. Editorial 'we'

Contrary to my expectation, this 'we' seems to be used very sparingly in editorials, which may well be considered to be its original habitat. Most of the we's that I have collected do not come under this editorial 'we' (the editor and the editorial staff), but refer to the reader along with the editor himself, or rather the English people as a whole, as might be seen from the following examples.

> We have seen the quartet of Russia, China, India, and Pakistan adjusting their relations in response to events in the past five years.
>
> We, too, it is true, are also fighting an anachronistic battle in South-east Asia.
>
> We must never let ourselves grow accustomed to the fact that one third of the human race is undernourished while the rest of us have more than enough.

There seems to be a tendency to use the passive voice (i.e. it is believed, expected, supposed, etc.) to the exclusion of editorial 'we'. This is especially the case when the passive construction contains such words as should, must and the like.

It must be assumed that prudence rather than pure indecision also accounts for the score under 'no reply' to so many of the questions.

First, it must be emphasised that Britain is anxious to give Germany . . . more of a say in alliance decision making. . . . the country is suffering, it is to be suspected, from mass underemployment.

This point should be made clear to the Germans who tend sometimes to see...

By using the passive voice this way, the writer can refrain from using the word we, which is inevitably associated more or less with egotism, though less so than the first person singular I. Moreover, he can avoid comitting himself and give some semblance of objectivity to his statement.

2. Sentence modifying adverbs

One finds a great number of sentence modifying adverbs used in journalism. Some of the most frequently used are certainly, clearly, obviously, surely, apparently, seemingly, and no doubt.

Obviously he is taking a chance on not losing too many in the new exodus, but . . .

The figures certainly show that Japan's anti-war feeling is still strong.

Admittedly, the new encyclical will not directly affect the cold war unless the Communist world displays equal generosity.

In the following examples, the adverbs serve to express the writer's comment on the statement.

Understandably the Administion does not yet countenance such a course.

Not surprisingly the Warren Commission has made certain recommendations on measures for the safety of the President.

Ideally the Americans would allow the Europeans a share in . . .

All these adverbs used in the above two groups of examples could be rephrased

into 'it is obvious that', 'it is undestandable that', 'it is not surpring that', etc. In fact, it is by no means seldom that we find sentences of this construction and its variants.

It is conceivable that Duff Cooper might have said something of the kind.

It is reported that written records —— ink on wood and pottery—from the reign of shadowy King Gunthamund have been unearthed.

Senator Marcos was younger, and had a good war record, and was much helped, it seems, by a wife who was a popular singer.

It must be admitted, however, that sentence adverbs are in much commoner use than the 'it-is-clear (reported, etc)' construction. Let's take the following two sentences for example.

a) It is clear therefore that Britain and the United States must continue their efforts to make the French and Russians pay up.

b) Clearly Sir Philip Sidney was thinking of this problem when he . . .

In (a), the underlined part tends to be too prominent or at least as prominent as the subsequent noun clause (i.e. 'that Britain and . . . '). When there is no occasion for putting stress on the part 'it is clear', the adverb clearly, being shorter in form, is preferable, as in sentence (b). Morever, this kind of adverbs are particularly handy and effective in the following cases, where it would be very clumsy to substitute any other way of expression for the adverbs.

The reports on the views alledgedly held by Edward VIII on foreign policy provide a classic example of the Nazis' inability to understand the British mentality.

. . . the poet and painter supposedly concealed in every bureaucrat.

General Chiang Kai-shek did not accept them, but they still presumably exist, at least in suspension.

Commendably anxious not to unload the responsibility on to the innocent customer . . .

Incidentally, 'editorially' and 'diplomatically' in the following are just a few examples of the adverbs peculiar to journalism.

. . . this newspaper asked editorially, "But can mankind grow up quickly

enough to win the race between civilization and disaster? (editorially = in its editorial)

Diplomatically, however, the Germans are being urged by Britain to take a greater share in Western decision making outside the NATO area. (diplomatically =diplomatically speaking)

3. Metaphorical expression

Metaphorical expressions are very common both in speaking and writing, because they serve to make our speaking and writing more exact, concrete, alive, impressive and interesting. In fact, we cannot read a single newspaper account, or any kind of writing for that matter, without coming across some metaphorical expressions in it. Some of them are quite hackneyed and can be found in any small dictionary, as in the examples below:

No one wants the clock to be put back.

. . . the Great Powers may have 'missed the bus' in the negotiations for a nuclear test ban.

Speculations about . . . is certainly wide of the mark.

That would certainly be the best way of stealing the thunder of the breakaway People's Socialist Party.

Most of them, however, are invented as occasion demands, and when used happily, they set off the sentence with such effect as might otherwise be impossible. Here are some of them.

This would blow a big hole in the treaty.

Francis I of France had put the cat among the pigeons by making an alliance with the Turks.

No matter what the period it will inevitably load the dice against those countries which cannot give help to their competitors to the extent that Russia and the United States of America are able to do. (cf. to play with loaded dice)

What gives an edge to disagreements between Arbs and Iran is territorial disputes.

. . . they have been consigned to the dustbin of history along with Mr. Khrushchev.

It is possible that, should India appear on the doorstep of the nuclear club, she (=Russia) will see the problem in wider perspective and reconsider her position.

The phrase appeared in a statement, on which the ink must scarcely be dry, to which a delegation of the Indonesian People's Consultative Assembly put their names in . . .

At the risk of rubbing salt in the wound, attention must be drawn to a British shipbuilding occasion yesterday.

But every now and again it is not a bad thing to take file out of the drawer and speculate on what would happen if an effort were made to bring Cuba back into the American cummunity.

Now at last they have had the green light from Argentina and they are on their way.

Some Continental airports, such as Orly, appear to solve the problem by having really comprehensive, intelligible, and conspicuous indicator boards that enable the passenger to be master of his own fate.

In most cases, they present no difficulties at all to the reader, but sometimes they can be hard to understand. This will be the case with the last two examples, which means 'have had permission to enter Argentina' and 'to go on board his airplane instead of missing it by falling asleep in the departure lounges' respectively.

4. Modifiers

In order to save space, nouns, adjectives, present and past participles, and adverbs are placed attributively before or after the headword instead of adjective clauses beginning with relatives. When carried to extremes, this space-saving device sometimes results in ambiguity. This will be treated later.

The sense of national pride and power that was affronted by the Chinese assault in 1962, or is now burgeoning with a new sense of confidence after the trial of strength with Pakistan, has not yet been harnessed to demolish the barriers that impede Indian agriculture.

But if the sense of self-reliance can be given the right direction some of the necessary measures, often proclaimed but never really driven through, may at last be made effective.

In the first quotation above, two relatives clauses are used with the result that considerable stress is placed on the clauses themselves. Generally speaking, a clause is inevitably ponderous with at least one finite verb in it, while a participle placed after its headword as a sort of afterthought is more handy and sends the flow of of sentence running more smoothly, for then the participle is directly related to its preceding headword without intervening words (i. e. relative and finite form of 'be').

Incidentally when (while, though, if, etc.) +participle (adjective) is quite often used almost to the exclusion of more complete and ponderous adverbial clauses with subjects and finite verbs.

Henry V when calling his troops into the perilous breach had no leonine thought.

They take this line of retreat when asked what should be done over the war in Vietnam.

. . . the impulse towards self-reliance, though useful for future, has its ludicrous side as well.

He is trying as far as possible to get rid of malcontents and elderly people, while keeping young people between fifteen and twenty-six—the age group on which his regime is now most dependent.

When modifiers are more closely related with their headwords, they precede them, forming a sort of compound nouns. They can be devided into several subgroups.

1. Adverb + participle + headword

the long-drawn-out dispute

the ever-increasing-population of China

a steadily enlarging part of the voters

the recently signed and now ratified treaty between Japan and South Korea

2. Noun + participle +headword

the richest oil-producing area

loss-making contracts

a chop-stick-using upper class and a hand-using lower class

the blood curdling versions of history

Here the noun preceding the present participle functions as a logical object in relation to the following participle (i.e. area which produces oil, etc)

German-manned Sergeant missiles

the Marxist-oriented Turkich Workers Party

the poverty-stricken countries

Here the noun preceding the past participle functions as an agent (i.e. Sergeant missiles which are manned by Germans).

3. Noun + headword

the clause four argument

the partial test ban treaty

the whole moon probe business (=the undertaking to probe the moon)

4. Sentence + headword

He showed no follow-my-leadar tendency . . .

What might be called the where-am-I syndrome can be recognized in many faces . . .

5. Headword + adverb

the anti-American demonstrations some years ago

In a memorandum 12 months ago Russia announced its readiness to reduce its forces.

The Shah's remarks yesterday emphasize the more independent role which he wishes Iran to play.

The following are rather complicated, if not ambiguous:

a busily revolutionary, intensely nationalist if not xenophobe China (=a China which is busily engaged in revolution and intensely nationalistic if not xenophobe)

The parallels between the lost French war and the losing American war in Vietnam grow more striking every day. (=the war which the French lost and the war which the Americans are now losing)

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, however, the modifiers in the

following examples qualify their headwords in so far-fetched a way that without the context, it would be almost impossible to understand what is really meant.

hand-eaters (=people who eat with their hands, not with knives and forks)

There is also a lot to be said for establishing a book of moon etiquette. (=etiquette that must be observed on the moon)

And the Germans have already renounced nuclear ambitions. (=ambitions to arm themselves with nuclear weapons)

They want the international agreement to suspend sovereignty claims there, ban all arms, and ensure free access for scientific expeditions. (=claims for sovereignty)

Still, if this additional evidence is going to give latitudinal diplomatists a longer rest on arrival than a bare one day, it should not be grudged them. (=diplomatists who travel up and down, i.e. from north to south or from south to north)

5. 'With' of attendent circumstances

The absolute participial construction with a noun or pronoun functioning as the subject is used, as everyone knows, to express attendant circumstances.

The men were all proud in their cossack dress, their blue eyes gleaming from the depths of sheepskin hats that looked . . .

This construction, however, is more often preceded by 'with' than not, especially when reason or result is implied together with attendant circumstances.

With astronauts wandering about space in their underwear a jet flight across the Atlantic becomes positively prehistoric.

. . . others have regular elections with the same party remaining in power, like India or Japan.

With their plans frustrated, all they could do now was . . .

If Britain had imposed on South Africa special rights of access to it (= Basutoland) in 1910 it would be better off, but with the Union (of South Africa) then in the British Empire no such precautions were dreamed of.

With such organization on both sides the prospect of whole-sale clash between left and right has to be reckoned with.

The last two examples have prepositional phrases instead of participles, but they can be construed in the same way as the other three. The second example implies result, and the others imply reason.

6. Inversion

Nouns, adjectives and participles are sametimes placed at the beginning of a sentence, with a finite form of 'be' following, and the subject closing up the rear.

Even more vigorous than in Vietnam have been demonstrations in streets of Seoul.

Much the most numerous among its modern patrons are the tourists, many of them uncaring and greedy to add to their travel experiences this starred item of London's list.

Much more serious and revealing is the explanation that the ban is in support of the resolutions passed on October 22 by the African summit conference in Accra.

A sad-sounding though curious case of this transit traffic is the report about 110 Russians who have been waiting in Hongkong for nearly a year until some country said it was ready to receive them.

This inverted word-order facilitates the linking of the sentence in which it occurs with the preceding one, and comes in handy especially when the subject word is qualified by modifiers consisting of a great number of words, as will appear from all the above examples but the first one. This is also the case with a long list of names functioning as a subject, as in "also attending the conference were Mr.___, Mr.___, ... " In this way one can prolong the list interminably, which could not possibly be done without making the sentence top-heavy if the names were placed in the normal position for the subject, that is, at the beginning of the sentence.