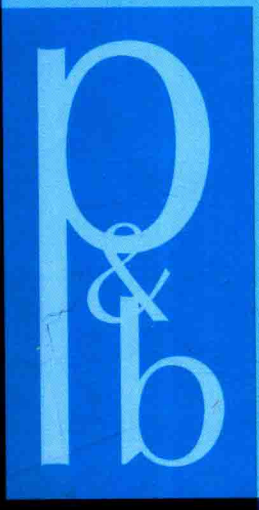
# Pragmatics of Tense and Time in News

## From canonical headlines to online news texts

Jan Chovanec



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Jan Chovanec
Masaryk University

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# Preface

The increasing attention that has been paid over the past couple of decades to the study of language in the media attests to linguists' fascination with a field that is immensely diverse as regards communicative situations, discourse phenomena and the communicating participants. The globalized transfer of information and the almost continuous exposure to-diverse communication channels means that the media have a more central role than ever in the lives of almost all individuals. Mass media messages have become omnipresent, and the public sphere is increasingly encroaching upon private communicative situations, providing the interlocutors with topics, standpoints, opinions, catchphrases, etc.

This book aims to be a contribution to our understanding of some of the linguistic phenomena that operate in the public, institutional discourse of the media. It is primarily interested in how the traditional print and the new online newspapers enhance the interpersonal dimension of communication by relating to readers through certain conventional linguistic means, most notably the shift of grammatical tenses. The overall focus on temporal deixis and its explanation as an audience-oriented strategy is indicative of the classification of the present book as a pragmatic analysis.

The book is the result of a long process that ultimately goes back to my doctoral dissertation defended at Masaryk University in Brno in 2001. While the thesis, based on a diachronic analysis of a set of news reports on a single topic, remained unpublished, most of its novel findings, such as those concerning the temporal aspects of news headlines (including the conventional deictic projection), and the personalization patterns observable in the changing forms of reference to social actors, were never even presented at conferences since my research interests drifted in different (though not unrelated) directions.

When it was eventually decided to present some of the ideas in a book form, it became evident the whole issue needs to be radically reworked. In order to assure thematic consistency, the topic became limited solely to temporal deixis in news stories, with a particular focus on news headlines. The earlier thesis provided little more than a general structural framework for what is an entirely new work that is based on new, up-to-date material.

Brno, June 2014

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CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

In this book, I consider how temporality is encoded in news texts and how shifts of grammatical tense, first in the news headline and then in the rest of the article, are pragmatically motivated by the need to negotiate a shared temporal context with the readers. The book explores a topic that is very central to media discourse because of the media's preoccupation with time: news needs to be both current and delivered to the audience as quickly as possible, subject to the news production cycle of a given media channel. It is hardly surprising that recency is one of the top news values associated with the nature of the news story.

The aim of the book is to reveal the operation of the textual rhetoric of traditional written media by considering the relatively straightforward phenomenon of temporal deixis, i.e. the way the temporal anchorage of past-time events is encoded. The starting point is the interpretation of the conventional non-deictic present tense found in English headlines as an interactive device. Instead of providing temporal anchorage of the main event, it is oriented towards establishing the illusion of a shared discourse space. Against this background, other tenses are analysed with the aim of describing and explaining some of the patterns that arise out of the combination of diverse textual and intertextual features, the most important of which is heteroglossia. The interpretation of tense in headlines as an interpersonal device is supported by considering the differences in how temporal deixis is encoded in different segments of news stories.

The book also develops our current understanding of the pragmatic nature of news texts by extending its approach to cover online news that is much more dynamic and immediate than its print counterpart. Hypertextuality marks the transition from traditional news texts as relatively independent units to a situation in which a given news text is not only connected with other news items and multi-modal materials in a complex news cluster on a single topic, but also interlinked with previous news texts in the news archives. The compression of time resulting from the ease with which readers can move back in time affects the increased need for explicit encoding of time in the news story's attribution and byline. In addition, the presentation of news previews on the papers' home pages has brought an additional textual level that needs to be, as argued in this book, taken into account in the analysis of online news texts.

It is believed that the analysis will shed new light on some traditional concepts analysed in media discourse analysis, as well as offer novel insights into the nature of online news texts.

## 1.1 Goals and objectives

One of the most striking and noticeable linguistic phenomena characterizing modern English news discourse is the use of the present tense in headlines to refer to past-time events. This convention is so notoriously known that there is hardly any speaker, native or non-native, who would not be able to recognize, name and correctly interpret such brief texts as the following:

> SIX KILLED AS 8.2 MAGNITUDE EARTHQUAKE HITS NORTHERN CHILE
> (*The Telegraph*; 2.4.2014)

However, as is often the case, some phenomena that appear as relatively simple and self-evident may turn out to embody a surprising extent of complexity that involves not only the phenomenon at hand but also a host of other related issues. Thus, if we want to understand how the above-mentioned headline operates and what mechanisms allow us to correctly interpret the temporal situation encoded in it, we may have to consider more than just the conventionality of the present tense ('hits') and the operator deletion in the passive construction ('Six killed'), which are the salient formal features that trigger our instant recognition of the text in question. While these conventional forms are explicable in pragmatic terms, as the result of a complex projection of deictic centres, a true understanding of temporal deixis in news texts – with the present tense in headlines being a classic example – requires us to consider temporal deixis in a broader context.

Thus, for instance, the coverage of the event initially broken in the headline above is continued in the subhead with the present tense providing the initial description of the event (cf. 'triggers' and 'alerts'):

> Powerful quake triggers tsunami waves of two metres on Chilean coast and alerts along 3,000 miles of coastline in Central and South America
> (subhead; SIX KILLED AS 8.2 MAGNITUDE EARTHQUAKE HITS NORTHERN CHILE; *The Telegraph*; 2.4.2014)

However, the temporal situation then changes in the first paragraph of the text (the lead) where a switch into the simple past tense occurs, as indicated by the forms of verbs that refer to the same past-time moment (cf. 'hit' and 'lashed'):

> A powerful 8.2-magnitude earthquake hit Chile's Pacific coast on Tuesday, killing at six people as tsunami waves of more than two metres lashed the shore. (lead; SIX KILLED AS 8.2 MAGNITUDE EARTHQUAKE HITS NORTHERN CHILE; *The Telegraph*; 2.4.2014)

While the repetition of some of the key information about the event derives from cyclical presentation of content occasioned by the inverted pyramid structure, we can see that the verb phrase undergoes a significant transformation in its grammatical marking of tense. This indicates that temporal deixis is deployed very differently in the different segments of news texts. The different functions of verbal tense in the headline as opposed to the other structural segments can be accounted for in pragmatic terms, as the result of a specific textual rhetoric of news texts.

Let us conclude these introductory observations by briefly contrasting the above-mentioned example with the coverage of the same event in a different newspaper, with the aim of hinting at some aspects of systematic variation in temporal deixis.[1]

> TSUNAMI WARNING AND EVACUATION OF THOUSANDS AFTER EARTHQUAKE IN CHILE
>
> **Deaths reported and people on coast spending night in the hills after magnitude 8.2 undersea quake triggers emergency**
>
> An earthquake of magnitude 8.2 has jolted northern Chile, triggering a tsunami alert and the evacuation of thousands of people from coastal areas. At least five people were killed and more than 300 women escaped from a coastal prison. (*The Guardian*; 2.4.2014)

While the headline is non-finite (and, thus, not explicit about the real-time placement of the event, leaving it up to the reader to infer), the subhead uses the typical headline syntax by ellipting the operator ('Deaths reported') and including the present tense ('triggers'). Arguably, in the absence of verbs, the effect of the earthquake is presented in the headline more as a state than an action (cf. 'warning' and 'evacuation' in the *Guardian* example versus 'hits', 'triggers' and 'alerts' in the *Telegraph* example). As a consequence, the *Guardian* article communicates a stronger sense of current relevance, which is further enhanced by its use of the present perfect tense in the lead ('has jolted'). The appearance of this tense is made possible

1. Both articles were retrieved from the online versions of the newspapers on the day of the event and at the same time. Sources: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/02/chile-earthquake-sparks-tsunami-warning-and-evacuation-of-thousands and http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/02/chile-earthquake-sparks-tsunami-warning-and-evacuation-of-thousands.

by the avoidance of any adverbial of time that would, as in the first example ('hit … on Tuesday'), establish an unequivocal past-time anchorage.

Clearly, journalists and editors are able to skilfully exploit discourse patterns and genre conventions by selecting meaningful forms from the set of options that are available to them at a given point of occurrence. The relatively straightforward situation observable in the examples above is frequently complicated by not only the non-chronological structure of news texts but also their heteroglossic composition when diverse accessed voices are cited. Moreover, online news texts appearing on 24/7 news websites that provide continuous coverage are not only updated with newly emerging information but are also much closer – in terms of real time – to the events reported than corresponding news items in print newspapers. All that makes it worthwhile to explore the systematic patterns of the coding of temporality in news texts and some of the specific features found in online news.

The analysis of temporal deixis in news texts offered in this book revolves around three main research questions that are reflected in the division of the book into its three parts. Together, these research questions aim to provide a comprehensive account of temporal deixis in news texts.

Thus, the first part of the book seeks to answer the following question:

- **How does temporal deixis operate in traditional news texts, and what are the specificities of temporal anchorage in online news articles?**
  This question addresses the nature of the encoding and decoding processes involved in the production and reception of news texts and what it implies for the linguistic coding of time. By viewing these phenomena from the perspective of traditional pragmatics, I consider how a pragmatic model of deictic centre projection can represent this situation in print news and how online news, on account of its hypertextuality and process-rather-than-product nature, stands out from traditional print news.

The second part of the book focuses on the explanation of specific linguistic phenomena observed in the analysed data set, seeking to address the following issue:

- **Which verbal tenses are used in headlines, and what is the motivation for the variation?**
  This question deals with the variation of verbal tenses in a 'paradigmatic' sense, by viewing them as a set of options available to the editor when formulating headlines. Thus, the investigation seeks to explore what factors – semantic as well as pragmatic – motivate the choice between deictic and non-deictic tense in headlines and how the convention is affected by the utilization of accessed external voices. The issues related to this dimension of news texts form what I refer to as 'textual rhetoric of headlines'.

Finally, the third part of the book adopts a more global view of news texts, by considering and explaining temporal deixis and tense variation as a systematic macrostructural pattern. This idea is captured in the final research question:

- **What is the temporal organization of news texts beyond headlines, and how can the regularities in some of the organizing principles be explained?**
  This question elaborates the notion of temporal variation by developing the analysis along the 'syntagmatic' axis, i.e. by considering the linear progression of news texts across their individual structural segments. With reference to the inverted pyramid structure of news texts, the individual segments (including the headline) are documented to have different functions that are systematically reflected in the patterns of temporal deixis. The issues related to this dimension of news texts form what I refer to as 'textual rhetoric of news texts'.

Each of the broad reseach questions requires the exploration of a number of issues, such as the role of time adverbials when providing specific temporal anchorage, the function of heteroglossia to access external voices, and the multi-functionality of the verb phrase in different structural segments of news texts. While those more specific phenomena are analysed in independent chapters, they are all related to the overall aim of the book and its structural framework in terms of the three parts identified above.

The discussion of the issues outlined above aims to show that temporal deixis is a crucial pragmatic phenomenon that is conventionally used in newspaper discourse (both printed and online) in a relatively complex way in order to develop the interpersonal dimension of media communication. The fundamental principle on which news texts operate is the projection of certain temporal deictics to the anticipated time of the texts' reception, whereby the impression of a shared context is constructed. Temporal deixis is understood here in the broad sense as the textual specification of time, realized through verbal tense and adverbials of time, rather than in the narrow sense of pragmatic anchorage of a particular proposition or act with respect to the moment of utterance.

The aim of the book is also to offer a pragmatic explanation for a set of tense shifts observable in news texts. The shifts, used by editors when formulating the news texts, refer to the relation between the event and the grammatical tense chosen to encode the event. Editors formulating headlines can perform two switches, each for a different purpose. The first switch is towards the conventional present tense to refer to a past-time event, by means of which the proper genre characteristics of the text at hand can be emphasized. The second switch operates in the opposite direction: away from the conventional present tense and towards other tenses, which – paradoxically – can result in the seemingly normal situation of semantic correspondence, i.e. the use of the past tense for past-time events. As a

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