Syntactic Analysis of Newspaper Editorials: a Pilot Study

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Abstract – This study assessed the feasibility of a syntactic analysis of newspaper editorials and to test out Morenberg's (2010) syntactic theory. The purposes of this study hence, were to develop appropriate research questions and to determine whether Morenberg's (2010) theory could be employed for the syntactic analysis of editorials. By adopting this theory, one editorial from The Star (2018), Malaysia and two editorials from The Sun (2018a, 2018b), UK were analysed, with the intention of investigating the concept of syntax to highlight the styles and constructions in professional writing. Sentences obtained from these three editorials were broken down via tree diagramming to answer the first research question - *what are the syntactic patterns used in editorials in newspapers*? The tree diagrams of all sentences were then examined to answer the second research question - *are there syntactic differences in editorials?* The study found the basic patterns of the sentences of all editorials used mostly transitive verbs, with the inclusion of many VBE verbs and very few intransitive and two-place transitive Vc verbs. Optional elements in the syntactic patterns, however, varied according to their different orders in sentence builds. Tree diagramming of the sentences revealed few noticeable differences in terms of sentence mood, structural parallelism, employment of wh-clause as well as subject ellipsis.

Keywords: newspaper, editorial, genre analysis, syntax

Introduction

Syntax according to Van Valin (2001) forms the core of human language which deals with the combination of words to convey intended meanings. Although English comprises other vital concepts such as semantics, pragmatics and phonology, it is argued that the concept of syntax deserves more attention as syntactic errors in sentences can affect the production of coherent pragmatic and semantic meanings. Although morphological errors can place a certain degree of impact on meaning production, they seldom affect meaning construction; this thus, speaks for less urgency. Despite English being an important language used in business transactions, education as well as professional communication in Malaysia, syntactic literacy among Malaysians has been found to be needing much work. Hijo (2013) found Malaysian secondary school students were not able to produce simple sentences or even phrases with multiple verbs due to the dissimilar word order in English and the national language, Malay. This phenomenon is not new as Darus and Subramaniam (2009) highlighted it as one of six most common errors committed by Malaysian students. This calls for a systematic investigation employing scientific methods to tackle this issue by drawing attention to the concept of syntax; this is what the present study aimed to accomplish. One platform proposed by many scholars for the learning of English among non-native speakers of English like professionals and university students, is the newspaper. Due to the reasons that (i) the editorial is the second most read page of newspapers (Wallack *et al.*, 1999) and (ii) that it is used for persuasion (Connor, 1996), this study decided to look into the syntax employed in this genre. This study not only aimed to devote more attention to research into the syntax of English in editorial pieces, but it was also intended to provide non-native professionals and university students a reference for examining syntactic constructions. Hence, to do this, two research questions - (1) *what are the syntactic patterns, used in editorials in newspapers?* and (2) *are there syntactic differences in*

editorials? - were posed in this study, in order to study ways of constructing sentences through use of different syntactic features. Sixty sentences from The Star (2018) (Malaysia*)* and The Sun (2018a, 2018b) (the United Kingdom) were syntactically analysed to answer the two research questions. The selection of both newspapers was made based on the fact that the newspapers recorded the largest circulation in their respective countries.

Related Works
Apart from its popularity in linguistics, genre study has long gained acceptance from other fields where it is attempted (Bhatia, 1997). In the case of editorial analysis, genre analysis which is an approach to discourse analysis, has been conducted from various perspectives including media framing, rhetorical strategy as well as myth and ideology inculcation.

Based on the review of the previous editorial analyses, rhetorical strategy has been found to be the most noticeable focus, adopted by many scholars including Ansary and Babaii (2009); Fartousi and Dumanig (2012); and Vázquez y del Árbol's (2005)*,* who employed Halliday's (1961) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) model and its related elements. However, a study by Fartousi and Dumanig (2012) examined the use of rhetorical devices and found the use of allusion, analogy, seugma, antithesis, hyperbaton and parallelism in *Wishing Iraq Well*, an English editorial published in *News Straits Times*. Belmonte (2009), Bonyadi (2012) and Kato-Yoshioka (2016) have also studied editorials. Editorial analyses involving rhetorical strategy have also been tackled in unusual ways. Bonyadi and Samuel (2013), for instance, only explored the rhetorical strategy of newspaper editorials to understand how the preferred ideology was projected.

Another noticeable focus of previous editorial analyses is myth and ideology inculcation. Thompson and Klerk (2002) assessed the editorial columns of *Cosmopolitan*, *Your Family* and *Financial Mail* magazine, by exploring how forms and the use of rhetorical questions as well as tags and slangs establish the inculcation of certain ideologies. While Thompson and Klerk (2002) investigated editorial columns in magazines, Ar (2015) analysed ideology construction in not only editorials, but also speeches on globalisation. As the topic was transdisciplinary, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed. Lule (2002) examined the embedding of myth in *New York Times* editorial pieces on the incident of September 11th. Similarly, the depiction of myth in US Newspapers on Uighur attacks and violence in China was examined in a study by Zhu (2017).

From the perspective of media framing, Smith and Wakefield (2005) conducted a textual analysis on 162 tobacco-related editorials where content, tone and ideological frame were also analysed. Similarly, Johnson (2017) examined media coverage by exploring journalists' responses to the Department of Justice's surveillance over the Associated Press and Fox News reporter, James Rosen; Edward Snowden; and American citizens. Through the examination of 61 editorials surrounding the three cases, Johnson (2017) reported that all editorials except *Wall Street Journal*, agreed that such surveillance by the Department of Justice was likely to cause a chilling effect on journalism and public discourse.

The review of these related works has revealed that most editorials have not examined editorials from a linguistic perspective, except Bal's (2014) study which examined the development of linguistic resources for opinion and argument analysis in news editorials. This study was designed to extend the research into editorials by examining them from a syntactic perspective.

Materials and Methods
This study analysed newspaper editorials obtained from two English newspapers published in Malaysia (L2) and the United Kingdom (L1) - one (1) The Star (2018) editorial and two (2) The Sun (2018a, 2018b) editorials. The decision to embark on a comparison of the syntax in a Malaysian English newspaper with a British newspaper was made to obtain insight into professional writing styles and to determine how different or similar they might be, in L1 and L2 contexts.

Guided by Morenberg's (2010) syntactic model, sentences were turned into tree-structure diagrams whereby each constituent was analysed and labelled in order to formulate the syntactic patterns used in

the editorials. Tree diagramming is basically an ordered representation of the grammatical structures making up a sentence. To demonstrate the sentence structure, diagramming the tree-structure of a sentence involves the parsing of all components according to their syntactic roles. Figure 1 illustrates the basic breakdown of a sentence via Morenberg's (2010) tree diagramming.
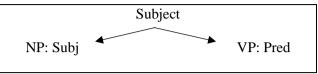
Figure 1: Basic Tree Diagram of a Sentence

This was to answer research question one - *what are the syntactic patterns used in editorials in newspapers?* When all syntactic patterns of all editorials from the newspapers were identified, the patterns and the constituents within the patterns (namely phrases, clauses and modifiers) were classified into categories based on the verb type they contained. Morenberg's model (2010) identifies six (6) verb types, each with its own basic pattern. The six (6) verb types are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Morenberg's (2010) Six Verb Types

Verb type	Formula	Constituents that follow
Intransitive verb (VI)	NP VI (Adverb)	None
Linking verb (VL)	NP VL { NP: PredN / Adj: PredAdj }	Noun phrase or adjective
Verb type	Formula	Constituents that follow
Transitive verb (VT)	NP VT NP: DObj	Noun phrase
Two-place transitive verb (Vg)	NP Vg { NP: IObj NP: DObj / NP: DObj {to/for} NP: IObj }	Two noun phrases or a noun phrase and prepositional phrase
Two-place transitive verb (Vc)	NP Vc { NP: ObjComp / Adj Ph: ObjComp / Inf Ph: ObjComp }	Noun phrase or adjective phrase or infinitive phrase
Verb BE	NP BE { NP: PredN / Adj: PredAdj / Adv: PredAdv }	Noun phrase or adjective or adverb

Only after assigning each pattern to a category, the syntactic patterns presented in the tree-diagram structure were compared to determine notable syntactic differences. This was to answer research question two of this study - *are there syntactic differences in editorials*?

Results and Discussion

As previously mentioned, two research questions were posed in this study. Each was done at different stages and yielded dissimilar results. Findings are presented and discussed according to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the syntactic patterns used in editorials in newspapers?

Through the application of Morenberg's (2010) syntactic model via tree diagramming, all syntactic patterns in the three editorials were uncovered. They were indicated according to the verb types found in such text type. Optional elements were put into brackets to convey their optionality. The obligatory elements on the other hand were left unconstrained by brackets. The three dots or ellipsis (…) represent the omission of preceding or/and subsequent builds that were analysed as different clauses or sentences.

The first category was made up of sentences using syntactic patterns with transitive verbs (VT). On one hand, 17 patterns were detected from the The Star (2018). Two editorials from The Sun (2018a, 2018b) on the other, used 13 different patterns containing transitive verbs (VT). These 30 syntactic patterns had similar core or basic sentence patterns, with variations of optional element orders. However, in some cases the obligatory elements were missing. This was due to the fact that the patterns were written in the passive voice. Table 2 summarises the syntactic patterns of sentences containing transitive verbs (VT).

Table 2: Syntactic Patterns Containing Transitive Verbs

The Star (2018)	The Sun (2018a, 2018b)

Syntactic patterns containing VT	NP VT NP (NRM) (Conj) … (Adv) NP VT (Adv)[1] (NRM) (NRM) NP VT NP (Adv) (NRM) (Adv) NP VT NP NP VT NP NP VT InfPh (Adv)… …VT NP NP VT (Adv) (Adv)[2] NP VT (Adv) (Adv) NP VT NCl NP VT (Adv)…[3] …GerundPh VT NP (Adv) NP (Postpronoun) VT NCl …VT (Adv)…[4] (Adv) NP VT[5] NP VT NP (Adv) (NRM) VT NCl[6]	NP VT NP (Adv) NP VT NP NP VT NP (Adv) NP VT NP (Adj) (Adv) (Adv) NP VT NP (Postpronoun) (Adv) NP (Adv) (Adj) VT NP (NRM) (Adv) NP VT InfPh (Adj) (Adv) NP VT NP (Adv) (Adv)[7] NP (Adv) VT NP (AdvPh) (NRM) (NRM) NP VT NP (Adv) (Adv) NP VT (Adv) NCl NP VT NP (NRM) NP VT[8]
Total patterns containing VT	17	13

One example of a sentence containing a transitive verb (VT), taken from The Sun (2018b) is presented below. The sentence uses the passive, with the omission of the logical or real subject. This explains why the verb '*must be restored*' is not followed by a noun phrase.

"Badly damaged trust must be restored" (The Sun, 2018b)

The second most recorded category was those sentences with VBE verb. The editorial from The Star (2018) was found to carry 5 patterns with VBE verb while the two articles from The Sun (2018a, 2018b) were observed to contain 8 patterns with this verb type. Optional elements were put in bracket to represent their optionality. This is illustrated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Syntactic Patterns Containing VBE

The Star (2018)	The Sun (2018a, 2018b)

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[1] Passive sentence
[2] Passive sentence
[3] Passive sentence
[4] Passive, compounded clause
[5] Passive sentence
[6] Imperative sentence
[7] Passive sentence
[8] Passive sentence

Syntactic patterns containing VBE	NP VBE NP GerundPh VBE NP NP VBE NP (Adj) (Adv) NP VBE (Adj) (NRM) NP VBE (Adv) Adj (Adj)	-VBE NP[9] (Adv) NP VBE NP NP VBE Adj (Adj) NP VBE Adj NP VBE NP (Adv) (Adv) NP VBE NP (Adv) NP VBE NCl NP VBE NP (Adj)
Total patterns containing VBE	5	8

The following sentence taken from The Star (2018) is an instance of a sentence containing VBE verb.

"It is relevant to us all; the world could do with more kindness" (The Star, 2018).

In the three editorials from The Star (2018) and The Sun (2018a, 2018b), patterns containing intransitive (VI), linking verbs (VL) and two-place transitive Vc verbs were infrequent. Patterns containing these three verb types are presented in Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6.

Table 4: Syntactic Patterns Containing Intransitive Verbs

	The Star (2018)	**The Sun (2018a, 2018b)**
Syntactic patterns containing VI	NP VI (Adv) NP VI… NP VI (Adv) NP VI (Adv)	NP VI (Adv) NP VI (Adv) (Adv)(Adv)
Total patterns containing VI	4	2

Table 5: Syntactic Patterns Containing Linking Verbs

	The Star (2018)	**The Sun (2018a, 2018b)**
Syntactic patterns containing VL	-	(Adv) NP VL InfPh (NRM)
Total patterns containing VL	-	1

Table 6: Syntactic Patterns Containing Two-Place Transitive Vc Verbs

The Star (2018)	**The Sun (2018a, 2018b)**

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[9] Subject ellipsis

Syntactic patterns containing Vc	Vc NP InfPh (Adv)[10]	(Adv) NP Vc InfPh[11]
Total patterns containing Vc	1	1

The identification of all syntactic patterns according to the verb types suggested by Morenberg's syntactic model (2010) indicated that the constructions of all three editorials from The Star (2018) and The Sun (2018a, 2018b) were very much alike, with minor differences in the order of optional elements. This finding indicates that editorial pieces are not formulaic. This might be due to the fact that editorial pieces were not written by one individual, but a group of editors - this makes it hard for an editorial piece to reflect a personal style of writing. Slate (1999) and The Guardian (2011) have pointed out that editorial pieces aim to reflect the collective position of a newspaper towards a subject or issue and that they are not reflective of a person.

RQ2: Are there syntactic differences in editorials?

The first syntactic difference found across the three editorials from The Star (2018) and The Sun (2018a, 2018b) was sentence mood. The syntactic analysis via tree diagramming showed that imperative sentences could only be found in the editorial from The Star (2018). One was found to be the main clause of the following sentence:

"Imagine how different GE14 would be if every politician took the pledge – and fulfilled it" (The Star, 2018)

The other three were observed to be compounded into one unit - a non-restrictive modifier.

"An individual can pledge to do three things to help create a kinder community: Treat everyone he meets with kindness, no matter how different they are; never be a bystander when he sees someone in need or being mistreated; and consciously do at least one act of kindness every week in 2018" (The Star, 2018)

Together, the imperative clauses, making up the non-restrictive modifiers, provided additional information. The compounding of the three structures was facilitated by coordinate conjunction '*and*'. While imperative sentences were only observed in the editorial from The Star (2018), the inclusion of passive sentences could be seen across all three editorials, with the exception of two sentences in The Star (2018) editorial comprising clauses, one of which was in passive voice, while the others were in active voice. One of them was the following sentence:

"The problem needs to be tackled early and using kindness as a counterweight makes perfect sense" (The Star, 2018)

As seen, the first clause "*the problem needs to be tackled early*" was written in the passive. The second clause "*using kindness as a counterweight makes perfect sens*e" conjoined via coordinate conjunction 'and', was written in active voice. Similar compounding of multiple clauses with different voices was also noted in the following sentence:

"Adults bully and get bullied too, and surely many young bullies take their cue from the behaviour of grown-ups" (The Star, 2018)
Compounding structures of different voices, however, was not seen in the two editorials from The Sun (2018a, 2018b) UK as sentences were consistently written in either forms. The inclusion of unparallel

structures however, according to Young (2016) can affect the readability as well as comprehension of sentences.

The second noticeable syntactic difference found was the inclusion of wh-clauses, which was observed in The Sun (2018a) editorial. The wh-clauses were found to function as adverb clauses, modifying the sentences they preceded. Both sentences used adverb clauses of time.

"When other departments write off millions, it is a waste of public money" (The Sun, 2018a)

"When the MoD does so, it puts us all in danger" (The Sun, 2018a)

The third noteworthy syntactic finding drawn from the syntactic analysis of sentences from The Star (2018) and The Sun (2018a, 2018b) editorials was the usage of subject ellipsis (or what Nariyama (2004) calls *null subject*) in The Sun (2018a).

"And, is not just lawyers" (The Sun, 2018a)

Although the subject was dropped in the sentence above, it was understood as the preceding sentence provided and gave readers the clue on the missing subject. Teddiman and Newman (2007) assert that subject ellipsis tends to be incorporated in informal contexts or registers like personal diaries. Apart from personal diaries, conversation and casual letters typically contain subject ellipsis (Nariyama, 2004).

Conclusion
This study analysed newspaper editorials from The Star (2018) and The Sun (2018a, 2018b) to answer two research questions: (1) *what are the syntactic patterns used in editorials in newspapers*? and (2) *are there syntactic differences in editorials?* In total, 60 sentences were broken down and analysed via tree diagramming to determine all syntactic patterns of the three editorials. Upon the dissection of sentences, each element or constituent was labelled based on the form and function in a sentence build. This therefore, allowed the construction of editorials from each newspaper to be observed and compared. Via tree diagramming, it was found that half (30 out of 60) of the sentences from all editorials contained transitive verbs. 12 sentences were found to use VBE verb, while the rest used other verbs such as intransitive verbs, linking and Vc verbs. Examination of these syntactic patterns then found three noticeable differences between all editorials. Sentence mood, wh-clause insertion and subject ellipsis were the three recorded differences. Although the study analysed only sixty sentences from three editorials, it showed that Morenberg's syntactic model (2010) could be employed as a data analysis tool to examine the genre of newspaper editorials. It was possible to systematically analyse sentence constituents, embedded phrases and clauses to conduct a comparison of sentences in editorials written in contexts which use English as the first language and as the second language. These preliminary findings, while interesting, will be further investigated and validated by examining a bigger corpus of editorials.

Acknowledgment

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