

The Newspaper Makeover: A Study of Changing Trends in the Language and Typography of Feature Stories in the Newspaper

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Abstract

Newspaper, that was once a dull and drab grey sheet of paper carrying cut and dry, matter of fact news in a mundane format has transformed into a colourful spread of news and features with innovations in content and design. As the content evolved, it was accompanied by the change in presentation. This study focuses on the changes that have occurred in the language and typography of the feature stories that appear in the newspapers. While the change in language has been studied in terms of readability ease and writing style, change in typography has been studied vis-à-vis use of text breaker devices, typographical arrangement, and fonts of feature story headlines. The content analysis spanning eighty years has been conducted on The Tribune, an English language, Indian daily. The major findings of the study are- significant increase in readability ease, increase in descriptive style of writing, increase in number and variety of text breaker devices used and innovation in typographical arrangement and the fonts used in headlines.

Keywords: Newspaper, Language, Typography

Introduction

Evolution of Newspaper Content and Design

One of the first evidence of a newspaper found in ancient Rome was carved in metal and stone. Another example of an ancient newspaper is from the Chinese Tang Dynasty that was hand written on silk. Over the centuries, newspapers have undergone transformation in both content and presentation. While the change in content saw emergence of several new forms of journalistic writings, change in typography included, innovative design, fonts and page make up. Changes in both the areas remained closely linked as the display of news stories reflected their news worthiness and relative importance.

As content and design evolved, newspapers emerged from being mere carriers of latest information to products with individual personalities. New forms of journalistic writings, change in language, ease in readability, innovation in typography all helped make newspaper take a leap from a product to the brand with its own image catering to the needs of the readers.

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Thus, the newspaper as we see it today is a result of the experimentation in content and typography. An important form of journalistic writing that was a product of this metamorphosis is journalistic features. Emerging in the Seventeenth Century these have today become an indispensable part of the newspaper and in the course of time have undergone a change in language and typography.

Changes in Language

Everything that is written in a newspaper has to be transmitted through the medium of language.

Language gathers its own emotional and cultural 'loading'. For example, if a particular culture has little respect for certain groups, concepts or beliefs, then the language for expressing ideas about those groups, and as beliefs and values change, language changes as well. [1]

With the passage of time, as the newspaper content underwent a metamorphosis, the quintessential ingredient of the newspaper text i.e. the language also underwent a change. From the times when language used in the newspaper was considered a yardstick for vocabulary, to the times when slangs and colloquialism are an accepted ingredient of the newspaper text; specifically the feature stories, language has visibly changed and led to the change in readability and comprehension of newspaper text. Along with the change in language, the writing style has also undergone a change with changing needs of the reader.

Changes in Typography

The very first newspapers bearing some resemblance to the newspapers of the present day started appearing in 1600s. Both the British and the American newspapers of this era were more in format of a newsletter printed on single side, set in two columns with headings in both upper and lower case. It is interesting to note that although rare but some newspapers of this era used the scriptorial font for the news reports, a trend that is completely redundant in the centuries that follow.

Over the centuries, social and political events had a significant impact on the typography of the newspaper. For instance, world wars, assassinations of political leaders, winning of important sports events, led to several design innovations like introduction of subheads, experimentation with column width, use of banner headlines etc.

Emergence of yellow journalism also affected the newspaper typography. It brought along with it big black gothic headlines. In 1890's sensational papers like World and Sun included jumbled masses of large banner headlines, spreads and illustrations designed to aggressively draw in the eyes of the reader. The twentieth century with the innovations in printing technology and use of computers made newspaper typography more evolved and scientific. Rather than merely providing an eye relief, the typographical arrangements became a defining feature of the newspaper

The change in language and typography of newspaper thus becomes an important area of study as it has the ability to attract the readers and relay information effectively.

Literature Review

Several researchers studying the change in language and typography of newspapers suggest a connection between language and typography of the newspaper and its readership. Early research on readability includes a study by Donald Murphy in 1947 which suggested that reducing readability ease from the ninth to the sixth-grade level increased readership by 43%. [3]

Another study by Wilber Schramm found that an easier reading style helps to decide how much of an article is read and that people would read less of long articles than of short ones. A story 9 paragraphs long will lose three out of 10 readers by the fifth paragraph. A shorter story will lose only two [3]. A study by Charles Swanson in 1948 showed that better readability increases the total number of paragraphs read by 93% and the number of readers reading every paragraph by 82% [4].

Morison highlights the relationship between typographical arrangement and readership of the newspaper. According to him as the public mind becomes habituated to certain arrangements of heading, type, column, margin etc, it demands contents corresponding with these arrangements whenever and wherever these arrangements occur. As a corollary, when a certain type of journalism is associated in the public mind with a set typographical style, new comers aspiring for the public favour will adopt the same [5].

He further explains his point by citing example of newspapers that appeared in early 1600s. He says that the typographical style of these was still so essentially bookish that the public mind could hardly have been able to distinguish news books from books in general. Consequently, the newsletter had to look like a newsletter, whether it was printed or written. The 'looking-like' means that it had its individual format.

Thus, one can draw a conclusion that new forms of journalism and journalistic writing bring with them new typographical styles that make them distinct and recognizable from the others. In other words, changes in journalistic styles go hand in hand with changes in typographical styles.

An important contribution to newspaper design, especially in the American newspapers comes from John Allen. He further throws light on the relationship between typography and text by citing examples of design techniques that worked against attractiveness and legibility and techniques that worked in favor of those things. In his later works, he made a mention of a structural design technique called 'streamlining' that laid stress on making the newspaper design more useful for the readers and more easily readable. Taking note of his work many modern newspaper designers attacked traditional style of the newspaper in favour of clean and simplified look [6]

Thus, a close coordination between the use of language and typographical styles and the effect they have on the appearance and readability of the newspaper has been suggested by researchers.

AIMS and Objectives

Keeping in mind the significant role of language and typography of the newspaper in its production and consumption of news by the readers, the aim of the study was to trace the changes that have occurred in the language and typography of the feature stories appearing in the newspaper.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- i) To study the change in language vis-à-vis the ease of readability of feature stories
- ii) To study the change in writing style of feature stories
- iii) To study the change in use of text breaker devices used in feature stories
- iv) To study the change in typographical arrangement and fonts used in feature story headlines.

Reserach Method

The research method chosen for the present study was a quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The publication chosen for the content analysis was The Tribune, an English language Indian daily that is a centenarian newspaper, and has high readership in the northern India since its inception in 1881.

The time chosen for the content analysis was 1931 to 2009. Six issues per year were examined by constructing a composite week and alternate years were selected for the sample keeping the feasibility factor in mind.

The unit of analysis was one feature story. The several categories of content were created. Ease of readability was categorized according to the Flesch Formula. The style of writing was studied under four categories namely, informative, descriptive, analytical, and argumentative. The use of typographical arrangement of headlines was categorized under seven broad heads, namely, Centred, Waistline, Inverted Pyramid, Pyramid, Flush Left, Flush Right and Free Style. Fonts were categorized under Black Letter, Roman, Sans Serif, Scripts & cursives and Decorative.

Results

The ease of readability of the feature stories has increased in past eight decades. In the pre independence decade i.e.1931-39 the readability ease is 46.56, which according to the Flesch Scale is categorized as difficult to read or understandable by a university graduate, the number rose to 63.2 in 1991-99 and is 68.7 in the last decade i.e. from 2001-09 (Table 5.1). As implied by the Flesch scale the text of feature stories is now easier to read.

Using the chi square, Goodness of Fit (one variable) the statistical significance of the change in reading ease was calculated. This change was not found to be statistically significant [p value > .05]

A content analysis of the writing style of feature stories in past eighty years reveals a change from informative style of writing to more descriptive and analytical style of feature stories. From 49.49% of feature stories written in informative style in the pre independence era in the 1931-39 decade the percentage has reduced to only about 3.27% in the present era. The descriptive

writing style on the other hand has increased from 40.40% in the decade 1931-39 to about 65.42% in the decade 2001-2009. The analytical style of writing also shows an increase, from 9.09 % in 1931-39 to 29.91% in the decade 2001-2009. The argumentative style of writing is the least preferred in all decades. (Table 5.2)

According to The Chi Square (Goodness of Fit test) there is a statistically significant change in informative, descriptive and analytical styles of writing. Informative: [p< 0.05], Descriptive: [p< 0.05] and Analytical: [p< 0.05]. However, the change in number of feature stories written in argumentative style was not found to be statistically significant [Argumentative: p>0.05]

The use of text breaker devices shows an increase in number of text breaker devices used in feature stories. The increase is in both number and variety. In the pre independence era and the couple of decades that follow, use of text breaker devices was restricted to provide eye relief whereas in the current era they also help enhance the page design and make up.

The increase in numbers can be understood as one sees the total number of text breaker devices in a decade and the total sample of feature stories (Table 5.3). From about a total of 19 text breaker devices used in 99 stories in the decade 1931-39, i.e. about 19%, this number increases to 208 text breaker devices in 214 stories, about 97.1% in the present era i.e. the decade spanning from 2001-2009.

Table 5.1: Change in Ease of Readability of Feature Stories

Years in Decades	Flesh Readability Score	Implication according to Flesh Formula
1931-39	50.66	Fairly Difficult
1941-49	53.35	Fairly Difficult
1951-59	50.5	Fairly Difficult
1961-69	55.06	Fairly Difficult
1971-79	58.1	Fairly Difficult
1981-89	58.3	Fairly Difficult
1991-99	63.2	Standard
2001-09	68.7	Standard

Table 5.2: Change in Writing Style of Feature Stories (All figures in Percentages)

Year	Informative	Descriptive	Analytical	Argumentative
1931-39	49.49	40.40	9.09	1.01
1941-49	34.83	57.30	7.87	0
1951-59	50.57	37.93	5.75	5.75
1961-69	32.28	35.43	30.71	1.57
1971-79	31.54	44.97	20.81	2.68
1981-89	12.57	52	33.71	1.72
1991-99	8.57	56.33	33.06	2.03
2001-09	3.27	65.42	29.91	1.40

The variation in total number of text breaker devices was found to be statistically significant (P value < 0.01). In terms of variety of text breaker devices used, in the pre independence era there were only about five types of text breaker devices used namely a box, strap line, paragraph sub heads, sub headlines and Slug. These increase to about 10 categories of including box story, bold text, multi column lead, Drop Cap, Dingbat.

With the passage of time, the text breakers change in usage. For instance in earlier decades the Drop Cap and Dingbat are more ornamental sometimes using Black letter.

The study of change in the headline font shows Roman and Sans Serif fonts being the popular fonts in the span of eight decades. While the Gothic or the Sans Serif font is dominating in the pre independence decade, with 63.64% of the feature story headlines written in this font, the Roman font becomes popular in the decade 1951-59 and 1961-69 with 78.16% and 75.59% of feature story headlines written in the Roman font respectively, with

Table 5.3: Change in the use of Text Breaker Devices

Year	Total Text Breaker Devices	Total Feature Stories	Values In %
1931-39	19	99	19.1%
1941-49	39	89	43.8%
1951-59	47	87	54%
1961-69	95	127	74.8%
1971-79	88	149	59.06%
1981-89	141	175	80.05%
1991-99	213	245	86.9%
2001-09	208	214	97.1%

variation in the form of serifs. Black Letter Font is not used for headlines in any of the decades. Being an ornamental font with less legibility, this font remains restricted to Mastheads and the Drop Caps. Scripts and Cursive Fonts are used only in the pre independence era with 6% of the total feature story headlines using this font.

Thus, one understands that legibility and better readability score over ornamentation in terms of fonts used in the feature story headlines. Ornamentation gives way to decorative fonts that are coordinated with feature story themes.

Table 5.4: Change in Fonts (All figures in Percentages)

Year	BL	R	S.S	S	D
1931-39	0	30.3	63.64	6.0	0
1941-49	0	53.93	35.96	0	10.1
1951-59	0	78.16	10.34	0	11.4
1961-69	0	75.59	17.32	0	7.8
1971-79	0	51.68	39.6	0	8.7
1981-89	0	41.14	49.14	0	9.7
1991-99	0	48.98	43.67	0	7.34
2001-09	0	42.99	50.74	0	6.5

BL =Black Letter, R= Roman, S.S =Sans Serif
S= Script Cursive D= Decorative

Table 5.5: Change in the use of Typographical Pattern of Headlines (All figures in Percentages)

Typographical Patterns Years	Inverted Pyramid	Pyramid	Waistline	Centred	Free Style	Flush Left	Flush Right
1931-39	16.16	0	62.63	20.2	0	1.01	0
1941-49	31.46	0	20.22	30.34	0	17.98	0
1951-59	34.48	0	28.74	32.18	0	4.59	0
1961-69	51.97	0	15.75	28.35	0	3.1	0.78
1971-79	31.54	0	1.34	53.69	0	12.08	1.34
1981-89	15.43	0	1.14	65.71	0	17.14	0.57
1991-99	18.37	0	0.04	59.18	0.40	20.82	0.81
2001-09	12.62	3.7	1.4	44.39	0.46	37.38	0

The use of Decorative fonts begins in the post independence era with about 10% of feature stories having headlines written in decorative fonts. This font adds to the creativity of feature stories written on varied themes. For instance a feature story about animals has a headline font resembling paw marks. In the later decades also the decorative fonts are used in feature story headlines. The use of this font ranges from 11% to 6% in all decades.

Using the chi square goodness of fit test the statistical significance of the variation in fonts in all eight decades was

calculated. The change in Roman, Sans Serif, and Decorative font was found to be statistically significant. [Roman: P value < 0.01], [Sans Serif Font : P value < 0.01] and [Decorative Font : P value < 0.05]

The typographical pattern of the headlines shows a change in eight decades (Table 5.5). Waistline pattern dominates in the pre independence era with about 62.63% feature story headlines following this pattern. The trend declines after the post independence era and waistline pattern almost vanishes from the newspapers. Inverted Pyramid pattern shows an increase

from pre independence era till the decade 1961-69 when it is maximum 51.97% and then shows a decrease with about 12.62% headlines in inverted pyramid style in the decade 2001-2009.

Centred pattern shows an increase in the span of eighty years and becomes a dominating typographical pattern in the decades spanning from 1971-79 to 1991-99 with about 53% to 65% of feature story headlines. Flush Left is another popular pattern that shows a rise in last few decades. From about 12% in the decade 1971-79, to about 37.38% in the last decade. Besides these, flush right and free style typographical patterns are found in small and almost insignificant numbers.

Thus, the change in typographical pattern of the headlines shows a shift from complicated patterns to simpler and streamlined ones. The change in typographical pattern also occurs as the length of the feature story headline decrease. In the earlier decades, headlines are about 11 to 20 words, these are composite multi deck headlines and take the waistline pattern and in the later decades headlines are only about six to ten words long and prefer centred or flush left typographical patterns. The change in Inverted Pyramid pattern, Waistline pattern and Flush Left pattern was found to be statistically significant using Chi Square Goodness of Fit. (p value < 0.01)

Conclusion

The study of change in language and typography of feature stories in past eight decades shows that the language has become simpler as the ease of readability increased on the Flesch Scale. This implies the fact that newspapers have evolved to make their text simpler and more comprehensible over the years.

The writing style of feature stories has become more descriptive over the years. Features by their nature are a vivid description of

places and people within a news event and therefore over the years this element of description has increased and become richer. Although the length of the feature stories has decreased in eight decades, but even in lesser number of words the idea is going beyond the information already given in a news report and describing a certain specific angle of the news event.

The change in typography of the feature story shows innovation and experimentation. The use of text breaker devices not only increases in number but also in variety. With advancement of technology, the usual text breaker devices like box or slug become interesting with graphic slugs and coloured boxes with innovative shapes and boundaries in sync with the theme of the feature story. The typographical pattern of the headlines become simpler and less space consuming whereas the fonts of the headline show a dominance of Roman and Sans Serif font in all eight decades. Thus, both language and typography of the feature stories appearing in the newspaper undergo changes in eight decades that contribute to the makeover of the newspaper.

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