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"Murder Suspect Seen on Video"

A syntactic analysis of the omitted verb *be*
in headlines

Bachelor's project in MLSPRÅK

Supervisor: Andrew Weir

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1.0 Introduction

“Brexit delay decision unlikely this week” (The Guardian, 20.03.2019), the newspapers write. Where is *be*? What tense is the sentence written in? In Standard English, one would write the headline as “Brexit decision is unlikely this week”. The grammar used in headlines differs from the grammar we use when we write or speak. Newspapers are being read both online and in paper-form every day, and news get old fast. Headlines are used to navigate the news, but they often do not follow the grammar in a Standard English sense. Tense in headlines is peculiar. As a finite verb in the headline, the verb, e.g. *be*, represents the tense and agreement in the sentence. Headlines are usually perceived in present tense, even if the subject or event of the headline is in the past. As this is the case, many newspapers drop the verb *be* in their headlines. The *be*-verb represent the tense in the sentences used in headlines. *Be* is also used to form progressive sentences or sentences with passive voice in a regular text. Hence, by dropping *be*, the aspect remains in headlines but not the tense. The headline can still be understood when this happens, especially if accompanied by a descriptive picture, but what does this mean for the grammar of the *be*-verb? Based on this, my thesis question will be the following:

Under what conditions can headlines omit the verb “be”, and why?

The aim of this paper will be to understand the role of the verb *be* in headlines, both as an auxiliary and as a copula. Auxiliaries are typically *be*, *do* and *have*, but auxiliaries have a handful of modal verbs such as *can*, *shall*, and *may* as well. The auxiliary examined in this paper will be the verb *be*. When necessary, I will look at the verb *have* which takes a similar role, but this auxiliary will not be the focus as it behaves differently in certain situations. The copula *be* is a main verb that acts like an auxiliary, carrying tense and agreement without assigning theta roles. The copula is a linking verb. The paper will be structured by looking at earlier studies of the role of verbs in headlines, using 10 headlines that have omitted *be* in its headlines from *The Guardian* and *The Sun*.

2.0 Theoretical background

Auxiliary verbs, or just auxiliaries, are a subclass of verbs that comes before the main verb in a VP. The auxiliaries consist of two subclasses: primary and modal auxiliaries. Lexical verbs assign theta roles, while auxiliaries do not (Haegeman & Guéron, 1999:92). This paper will focus on the primary auxiliary *be*, which is used to form passive sentences and progressive sentences. A passive auxiliary is always followed by a verb with an *-ed* ending (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2016:46). The paper will also focus on the copula *be*, which acts as a main verb by being the only verb or the rightmost verb in the sentence (Wilder, 2007:15). The copula functions on its own. The copula *be* is treated as a main verb with auxiliary behaviour, e.g. the copula *be* does no theta role-assigning.

2.1 Headlines as a language

Mårdh (1980) describes the language used in headlines as “economy grammar”, a grammar focused on the communicative effect and the shortness of the text. This term belongs under “block language”, a term made by Straumann (1935), who defines block language as a type of linguistic utterances, e.g. headlines, advertisements, recipes, etc. Block language consists of grammatical units lower than a sentence, such as one dependent clause or a noun phrase (Mårdh, 1980:12). In block language, the context provides important clues for understanding the message. For headlines, the aim is to catch the reader’s attention, and this became its central role as competition between newspapers grew (Salomonsson, 2011:3). Block language may also omit words of low information value, such as the article or the finite forms of the verb *be*. Mårdh named the language used in headlines as *headlinese* (1980:13). Some headlines provide only words that are impossible to understand without a picture to explain what it refers to (Salomonsson, 2011:4), while others leave out auxiliaries and determiners, but are still understood when looking at the context. Mård’s results “indicate that there is a core grammar of English newspaper headlines” (1980:184). The omission of elements of low value is a part of the grammar in headlines.

2.2 Auxiliaries, copula and IP

A structure contains phrases (XP), and a projection is assumed to have three levels of relations: XP-X’-X (Fjeldstad, 2000:10). This is called the X’ theory, where each bar is endocentric (headed). Following the X’ theory, the auxiliary cannot be contained under the VP if it is finite (Haegeman & Guéron, 1999). The auxiliary can be contained under an

INFL-branch, together with tense and agreement of the verb. Affixes cannot remain stranded under INFL, so the INFL-affix can move to the main verb in the VP, or the other way around if the main verb is a copula. Auxiliaries such as *be* and *have* follow a VP-adjoined sentence-medial when they are non-finite, and they are moved to INFL when they are finite (Hagerman & Guéron, 1999:88).

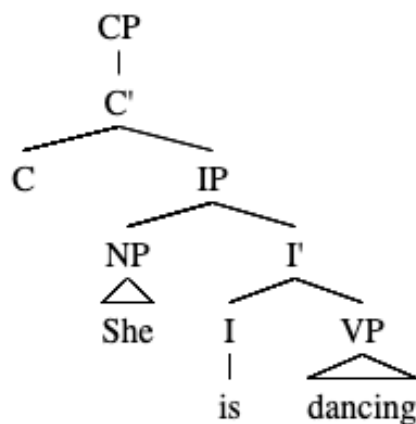
(1)

- a. Peter **is** already here.
- b. *Peter already **is** here.

It is desired to keep a binary branching syntax tree. Finite/non-finite properties are the function of an INFL, therefore the INFL heads the sentence (Haegerman & Guéron, 1999:94). The sentence becomes a projection labelled IP.

(2)

- a. She is dancing.
- b.

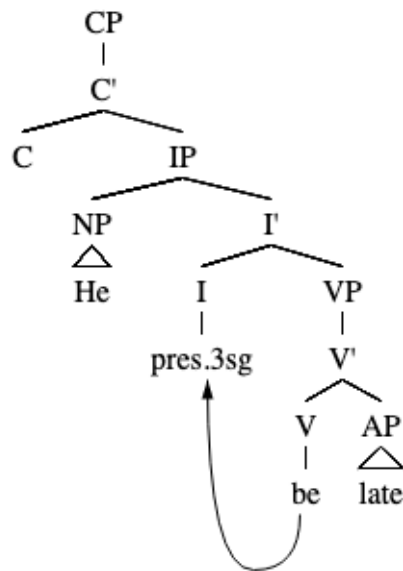


In finite clauses, the I in IP agrees with the subject. The finite verb carries tense and agreement. As seen in (2b), there is a local relation between NP and I. In the case of copulas, the *be*-verb is in the V-position, but its inflection that carries tense and agreement with the subject is in the I-position. See (3) for the behaviour regarding IP and VP for copulas.

(3)

a. He is late.

b.



One could suggest that a headline is a small clause. Small clauses are a partial structure headed by a functional element (Haegeman & Guéron, 1999:110). However, seeing as small clauses are phrases inside of the root phrase, while omitted versions of *be* in headlines are part of the main clause, it would seem like a headline with *be* omission is not a small clause. This is discussed further in chapter 5.0.

2.3 Null copula

In linguistics, a copula is a verb used to link the subject of a sentence with a predicate, e.g. "the teacher is tall". A copula is a case of a linking verb. Unlike auxiliaries, copular verbs function by themselves. Null copula is the omission of the verb *be*, and is not restricted to headlines. The complete use of null copula (NC) is not agreed upon, but if one excludes black language this is generally found in native speech among African American and Anglo-American speech communities (Dannenberg, 2002:71-72). It is more of a distinct language variety, rather than an ungrammatical omission. In headlines, null copula is a phenomenon where the copula may be dropped, while the headline is still acceptable (Reich, 2018:186).

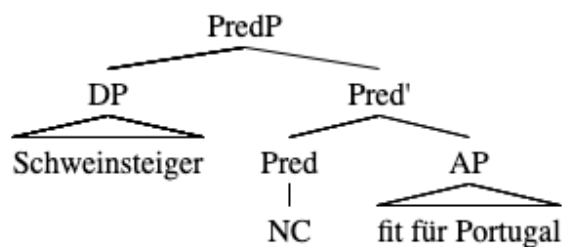
(4)

- a. Murder suspect seen on video
(Murder suspect **is/was** seen on video)

In his research, Reich (2018) shows headlines with a null copula: the NC has its first phrase located in the specifier position of the second phrase which heads the construction (2018:189). While Reich's research is aimed at German headlines, he compares them with English at several points. Reich proposes the following headline as an example:

(5)

- a. Schweinsteiger fit für Portugal
Schweinsteiger fitting for Portugal
- b.



(Reich, 2018:191)

Some instances in his research showed that potential copula deletion is not easily recoverable or can be paraphrased by a different lexical item, which may suggest that the NC is a different lexical item than the copula *be* (Reich, 2018:191). However, its selection properties are similar, if not identical with *be* – the NC “substitutes” verb phrases in participial form. One could argue that NC should be placed in I position instead of \emptyset (meaning “nothing”). Reich (2018:191) writes that the NC selects verb phrases only in participial form or nominal complements in predication function. This points to some potential hypotheses around the “missing” *be*: (a) headlines with the omitted *be* has the same grammar as native speech, but the *be* is silent, (b) headlines without *be* has a special “silent element” (the NC) used in the same place as the missing element, but has a different meaning than *be*, or (c) there is nothing corresponding to *be* – there is a subject and predicate but no linking element. These hypotheses will be discussed in the analysis.

3.0 Data and method

3.1 Data

3.1.1 Headlines retrieved from *The Guardian*

- (6) More than 20 dead as violence flares between Gaza and Israel
(The Guardian 06.05.2019)
- (7) Honours system under scrutiny after sex abuser kept title for years
(The Guardian 30.03.2019)
- (8) Brexit delay decision unlikely this week
(The Guardian, 20.03.2019)
- (9) Chiefs' Hill suspended amid abuse allegations
(The Guardian, 26.04.2019)
- (10) Senator booed as Democratic hopefuls try to woo women of color
(The Guardian, 26.04.2019)

3.1.2 Headlines retrieved from *The Sun*

- (11) Katya Jones axed from Strictly's line-up over sleazy snog with Seann Walsh
(The Sun, 26.04.2019)
- (12) Cops to quiz mum for 'misgendering' a child on twitter after TV debate
(The Sun, 19.03.2019)
- (13) Rachel Riley accused of 'prostituting her religion' by Labour activist troll in
abhorrent rant over anti-Semitism row
(The Sun, 31.03.2019)

- (14) Two suspicious packages found in Scotland 24 hours after three bombs sent to London transport hubs

(The Sun, 06.03.2019)

- (15) Jacqueline Jossa and Dan Osbourne ‘back together’ as they hold hands after date night

(The Sun, 27.04.2019)

3.2 Method

The headlines chosen in this paper are from *The Guardian* and *The Sun*. Both are British newspapers. When researching the use of *be*, both of these newspapers seemed to frequently omit the *be*-verb in their headlines. *The Sun* is a tabloid newspaper, meaning that it publishes smaller stories on a smaller format than a “quality”/broadsheet newspaper, and focuses more on scandals, entertainment and private life than e.g. politics (Sparks, 2000:15). *The Guardian* is a “quality” newspaper that makes headlines with less “shock factor” than a tabloid, e.g. by focusing more on politics, economics and society, but still have some instances of “soft news” as seen in tabloids (Sparks, 2000:14). The reason for choosing headlines from two newspapers is to check for the possibility that the *be* omission is specific to a certain newspaper and cannot be generalized.

The headlines have been retrieved from the online version of the papers, which makes it possible for the editors to change the headlines later on the online platform. The headlines will be used in the data with its publishing date, not its edited date. I will analyse the headlines, and then compare my findings to the earlier studies on this subject. The grammar in the headlines will be compared to the grammar of a native English speaker. Mårdh calls this the “common core” (1980:13), but this paper will refer to it as native speech or Standard English.

4.0 Analysis

In the ten headlines randomly collected from the two newspapers, 5 of the *be* verbs are copulas (see (6), (7), (8), (14) and (15)) and 5 are auxiliaries (see (9), (10), (11), (12) and (13)). This is an even distribution. *The Guardian* had 3 copulas and 2 auxiliaries, and *The Sun* had 2 copulas and 3 auxiliaries in the 5 headlines collected.

	Copula	Auxiliary	Total
The Guardian	3	2	5
The Sun	2	3	5
Total	5	5	10

4.1 Tense

Tense in headlines is ambiguous. When looking at the phrase structure, it would seem that there is no tense information on the inflection specifier (I) or verb specifier (V) at first glance. The tense can be understood by the context, but it is hard to decide when the omitted finite verb is the only verb in the headline. Headline (16) provides an example of understanding the tense based on context.

(16)

- a. Two suspicious packages found in Scotland 24 hours after three bombs sent to London transport hubs
- b. [Two suspicious packages **were** found in Scotland [24 hours after three bombs **were** sent to London transport hubs]]
- c. %Two suspicious packages **are** found in Scotland 24 hours after three bombs **are** sent to London transport hubs

The adverb *after* points to the headline as something that has happened in the past. Unless the reader clicks on the article the second the news has been updated or there is a live broadcast of something happening, the case has already happened. The headline's contents should be past tense in native speech. However, it would not be unnatural to find (16c) in a headline if the *be* verb is not omitted. This example is also interesting because it omits the *be* verb in both the main clause and the subordinate clause.

4.2 Auxiliary *be*

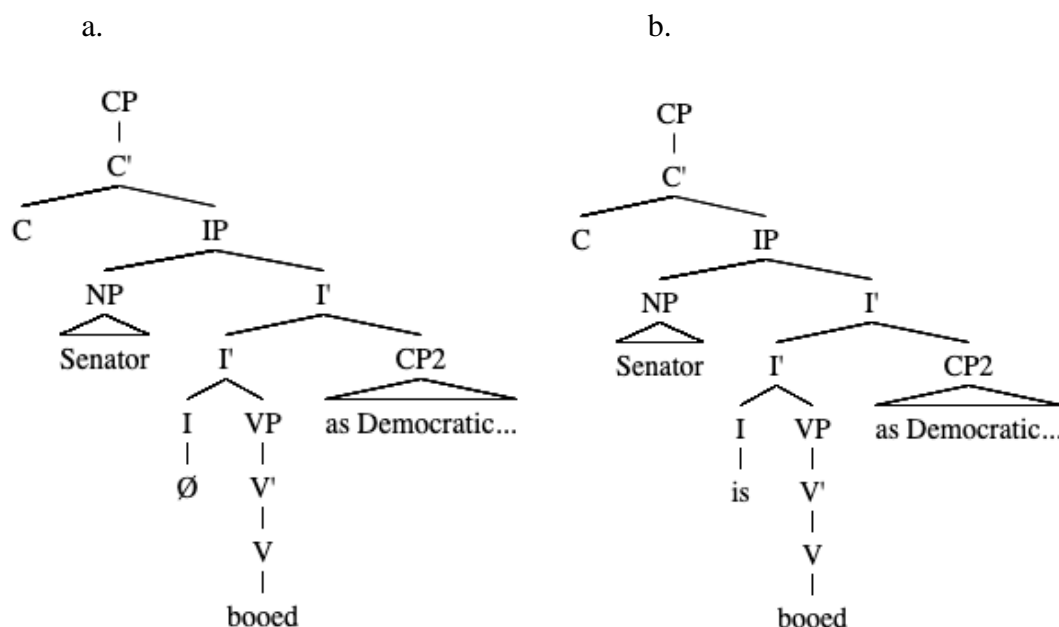
In the remainder of the analysis, it will be assumed that the tense is present when adding the inflectional *be* in the examples to see the effect of *be*. The modal verbs added have been chosen for their inflectional qualities and have no connection to the original headlines. The analysis investigates the role of the auxiliary *be* if not omitted, if the finite uses of *be* are possible to omit from headlines and if non-finite forms of *be* are not possible to omit. Headlines show a tendency to drop the *be* auxiliary in headlines and keep the main verb. As the auxiliary has the inflectional position in a Standard English sentence, the omission of *be* removes the tense and agreement with the subject.

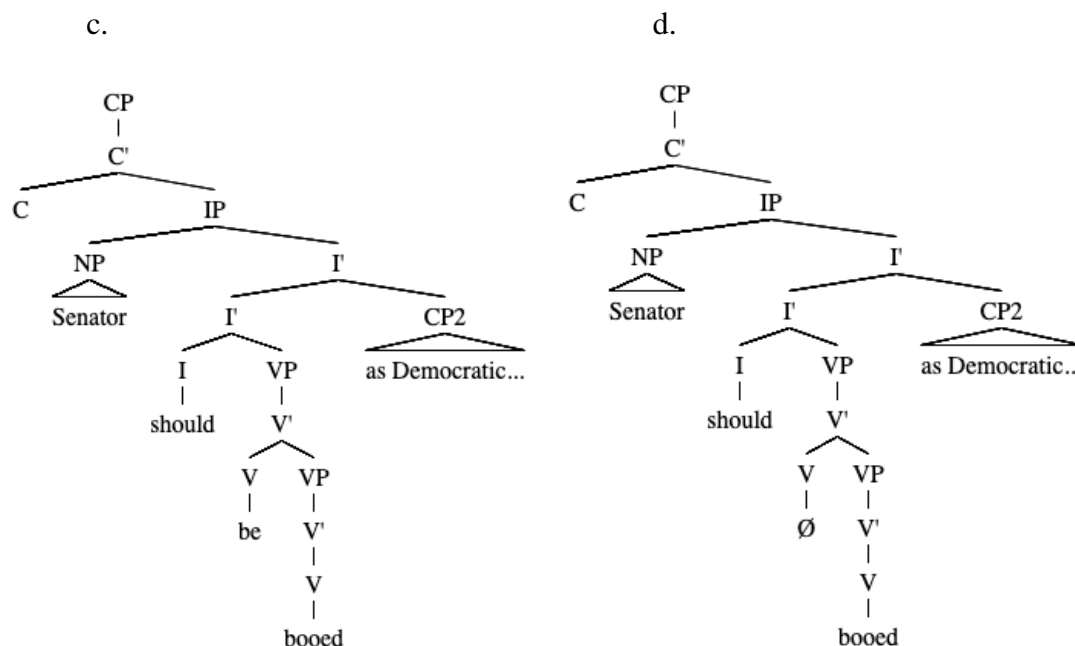
(17)

- a. Senator booed as Democratic hopefuls try to woo women of color
- b. Senator **is** booed as...
- c. Senator **should be** booed as...
- d. *Senator **should** booed as...

As demonstrated in (17b) and (17c), the originally omitted *be* changes its role when we add an additional auxiliary “should” that takes the inflectional role. (17a) sounds natural in a headline, while we would never see (17d) as a headline. The headline would sound unnatural. Drawn as syntax trees, one could argue that the headline would look like this:

(18)





At first glance, the original headline in (18a) contains every element except for the I, which holds the inflection. Placing *be* as the finite auxiliary in this position, as seen in (18b), would make this a natural native speech sentence. However, one would probably not find (18b) as a headline. The sentence with an added modal auxiliary in (18c) is also grammatically fine. It pushes *be* into a non-finite V position. Removing *be* from the V-position but keeping *should* makes the sentence ungrammatical as a headline and as a grammatical sentence, as seen in (17d) and (18d). This would suggest that a non-finite *be* cannot be omitted from a headline, while a finite *be* can. (19) follows the same pattern:

(19)

- a. Chiefs' Hill suspended amid abuse allegations
- b. Chiefs' Hill **is** suspended amid abuse allegations
- c. *Chiefs Hill **might** suspended amid abuse allegations

This works in the other headlines with auxiliaries as well from the 10 headlines collected. In (19) the example with a modal auxiliary and *be*-auxiliary is left out, as it has the same functions as (17c) in regard to the role of *be*. What is interesting about the *be* auxiliary is that this seems to be exclusively *be*-auxiliary behaviour. *Have* acts differently when used as an auxiliary in headlines, because *have* remains in the headline.

(20)

- a. Babies born to immigrant mums **have** risen by a FIFTH in the past decade, figures reveal

(The Sun, 08.05.2019)

- b. *Babies born to immigrant mums risen by a FIFTH in the past decade, figures reveal

Neither a headline nor a native English sentence would sound natural if phrased as (20b). This differs from *be* where the omission of a finite *be* is acceptable.

4.3 Copula *be*

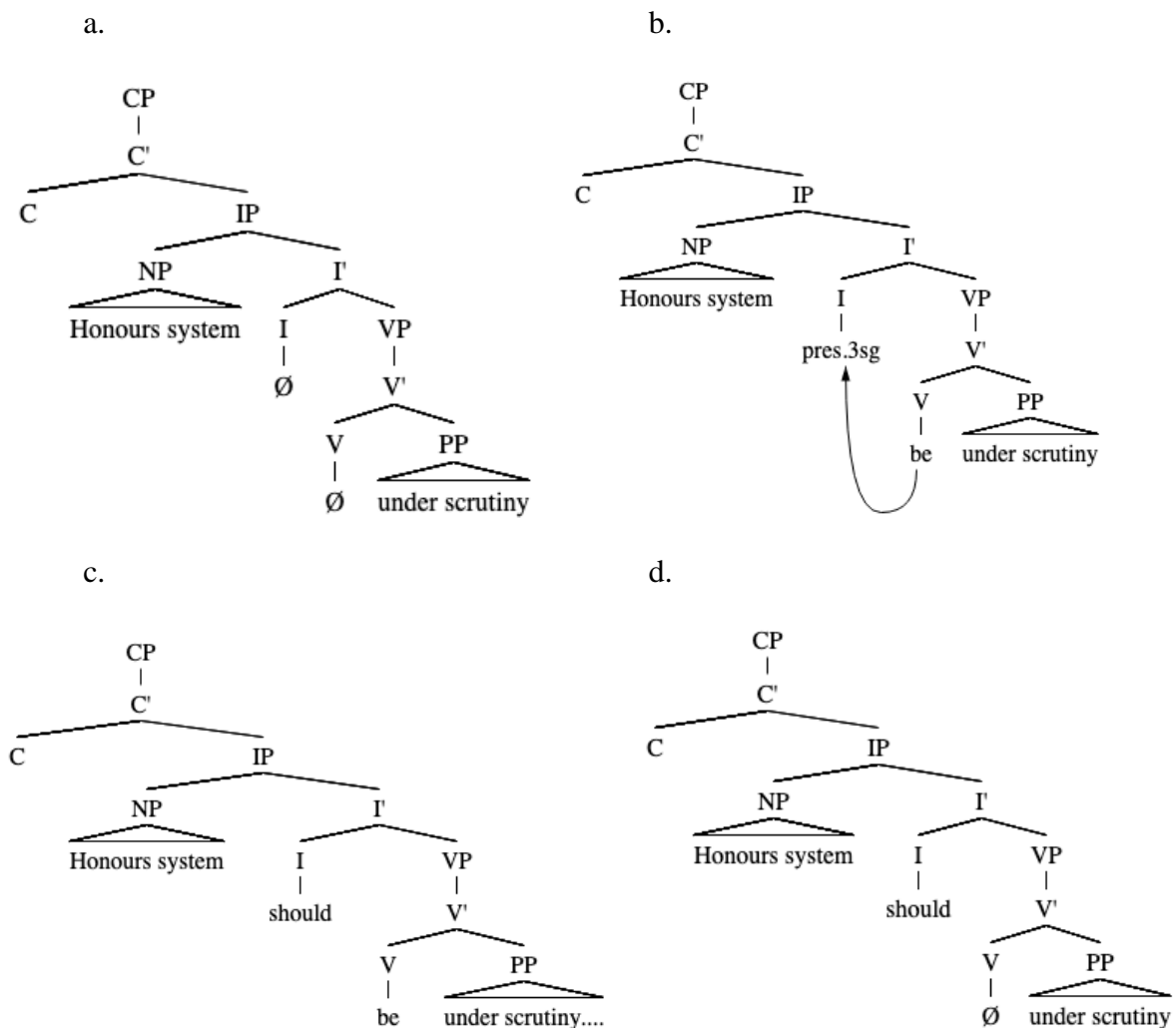
The analysis of the auxiliary would suggest that *be* as a finite verb in the I-position is omittable, while a non-finite *be* in a V-position is not. The auxiliary is not a main verb. However, the copula *be* acts as the main verb, as it is the only verb in the sentence or the rightmost verb in the sentence (Wilder, 2007:15). Consider the copula in headline (21).

(21)

- a. Honours system under scrutiny after sex abuser kept title for years
 b. Honours system **is** under scrutiny...
 c. Honours system **should be** under scrutiny ...
 d. *Honours system **should** under scrutiny...

In this example, copula *be* acts as relatively similar to the auxiliary *be* in the previous paragraph. (21a) is the original headline, (21b) shows how it would sound in native speech with *be*. As mentioned in chapter 2.2, affixes cannot remain stranded under INFL, so when the sentence has a copula, so the *be* moves from V to its affix in I-position as presented in (22b). In (21c) the *be*-copula moves from both main verb and I-position, to V-position when gaining a modal auxiliary. The copula has no inflection in the sentence anymore and will sound ungrammatical in natural speech if omitted, as shown in (21d) and (22d). Here, only the modal auxiliary remains while the non-finite *be* is gone. A headline like (21d) would not sound natural either, as it looks like something vital is missing. The syntax trees in (22) demonstrate how the copula *be* acts in the sentence when finite and non-finite.

(22)



As with the auxiliary, when copula *be* is moved into the VP head because of a modal auxiliary it becomes non-finite. The affix in the I-position requires an affix-movement already in (22b), and one can observe the *be* moving from V- to I-position. The tense and agreement of the IP changes *be* into *is*. This is also demonstrated in (22c) when the copula remains as *be* as the modal auxiliary is added, making the copula move into the V-position and act as the main verb. The modal auxiliary acquires the finite position. This trend continues in the other headlines with a copula as well. See the headline in (23):

(23)

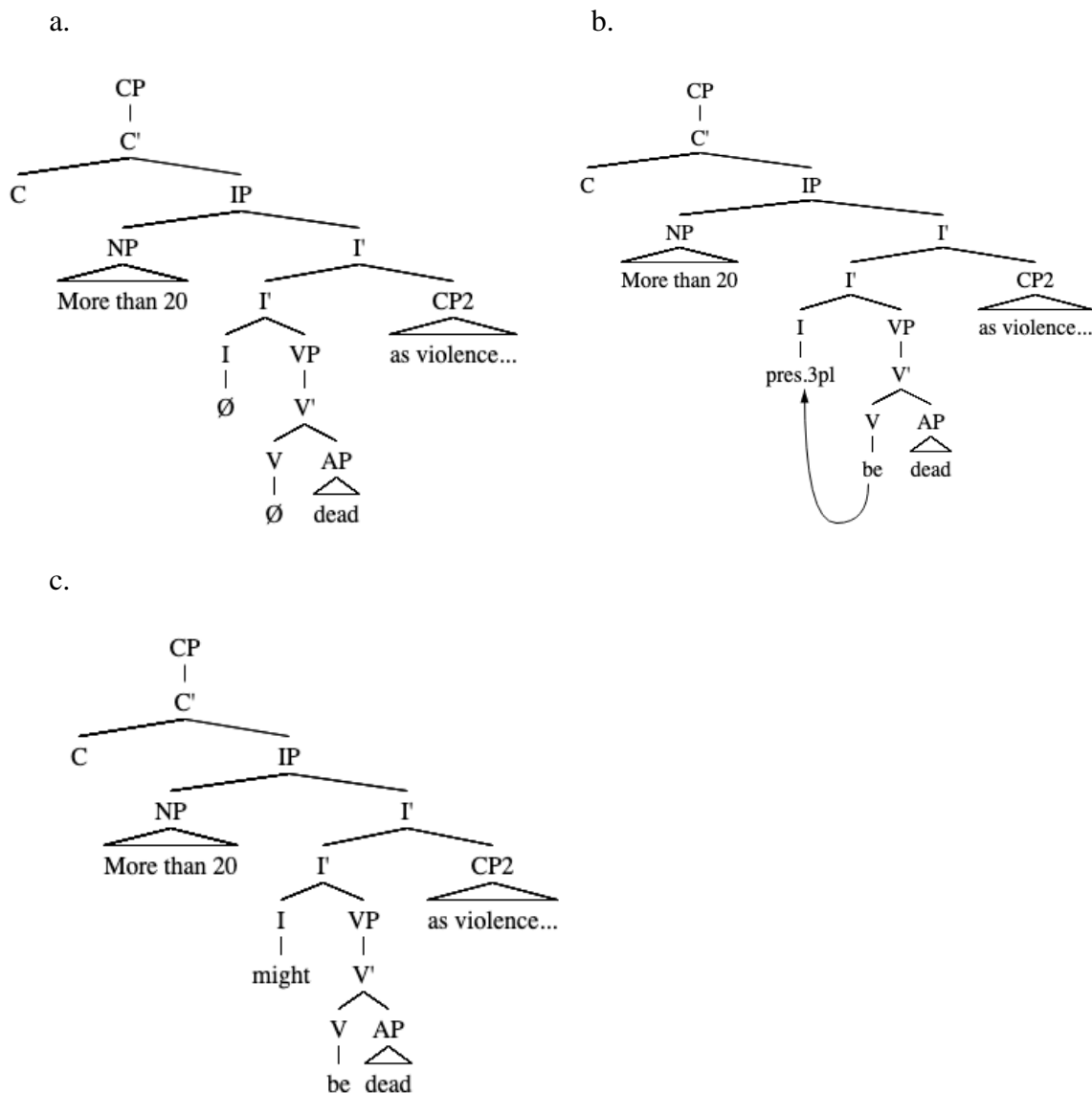
- a. More than 20 dead as violence flares between Gaza and Israel
- b. More than 20 **are** dead as violence...
- c. More than 20 **might be** dead as violence...

- d. *More than 20 **might** dead as violence...

Here, the finiteness of the copula *be* points to the possibility that only a finite *be* copula can be omitted, just as the auxiliary *be*. The subordinate clause “[as violence flares between Gaza and Israel]” functions as an adjunct. In (23b) the copula *be* moves to the finite position, while in (23c) a modal auxiliary has been added, which again takes the finite position and pushes *be* into simple form. In (23c), *be* is in its base form and does not show tense or agreement.

Omitting *be* would be ungrammatical, as shown in (23d). In (24) one can find the same behaviour of the copula *be* as with the auxiliary – it is unnatural in both headlines and native speech to omit the non-finite *be*.

(24)



If one follows Reich's (2018) theory of NC, the NC is placed in the I-position where \emptyset is in (18a). Based on this, one might argue that the *be*-copula is omitted in a finite position, but not in a non-finite: the NC might be a substitution for finite *be* in headlines exclusively, carrying tense and agreement without hopping onto the V. But one could also argue that *be* in finite position is omitted completely, leaving the sentence with a subject and a predicate, and no linking verb. However, this behaviour is common for both copula and auxiliary, not just the copula *be*.

4.3.1 Copula and the infinitive marker "to"

Headline (12) is interesting. This headline has a verb in the infinitival form, *to quiz*. The infinitive marker *to* in X' theory is a non-finite inflection (Haegman & Guéron, 1999:94). This makes the headline non-finite even with an item in the inflectional position.

(25)

- a. Cops **to quiz** mum for 'misgendering' a child on twitter after TV debate
- b. Cops **quiz** mum for 'misgendering' a child...
- c. *Cops **to** mum for 'misgendering' a child...
- d. Cops **are to quiz** mum for 'misgendering' a child...
- e. *Cops **are** mum for 'misgendering' a child...

(25a) is the original headline. Since *to* is a non-finite item in the I-position, one could argue that this headline has no missing copula. In (25b), the infinitive marker is removed, making the sentence finite in present tense as a consequence. (25b) works grammatically, but there is no *be* added. Instead, the I-position carries the tense and agreement to the main verb *quiz* which became the main verb and the finite verb. (25c) is ungrammatical, since there is no main verb and no inflection in the bare infinitive *to*. In (25d), adding *be* makes the line finite, pushing *to* into a non-finite V-position. *Quiz* is still the main verb, as it is the rightmost verb. However, removing *to quiz* in (25e) is ungrammatical, and will not work as a headline.

5.0 Further discussion

What is the function of *be* in headlines when it is omitted? Based on the analysis of this paper, *be* can be omitted without disturbing the natural grammar of the headline as long as *be* is in the finite position. This applies to both *be* as an auxiliary and a copula. This seems to be a behaviour exclusive to the verb *be*. The auxiliary *have* does not act the same way since it is not omitted in headlines, as demonstrated in (20). This might suggest that the omitted *be* has a function of its own as an NC that carries agreement with the subject, but without tense, and is silent. One could also argue that since the omission features only the finite *be* in the I-position, headlines simply have nothing that corresponds to *be* – it is not present in the sentence. The NC-theory of Reich seems to concern the copula, while the omissible finite-*be* behaviour works for both copula and auxiliary.

Based on the ten sentences used in this thesis, the differences between the newspapers are the length of the headline and the content. Headlines in *The Guardian* are shorter and contains zero to one adjunct, while *The Sun* has several adjuncts in their headlines, which makes longer headlines. *The Sun* uses more adjectives. *The Guardian* focuses more on economics, politics and the public sphere than *The Sun*, which mainly publishes articles on entertainment, sports and scandals. There was no notable difference in omission of *be* between the papers, suggesting that this is a trend across English headlines and not something specific for one newspaper.

Headlines are made to be relevant. The papers want the audience to read their paper, and the journalist wants the audience to read their article. The omission of *be* and an indistinguishable tense could be a way to erase how old news are. Frequent updates on an article are usual, and one newspaper does not want to be slower than others. E.g. “Brexit decision *was* delayed *last Monday*” as a headline in a newspaper on a Friday does not describe the event as something urgent and relevant for today’s audience, with both past tense and an adverb that points to a happening in the past. Perhaps it is a conscious decision of the newspapers to avoid expressing how relevant a case is. Every news headline is in the past and would be written as such if they were written in native speech, which indicates that the omission of *be* in headlines are to make the headlines more attractive.

Are headlines small clauses instead? As mentioned in 2.2, small clauses without a verb are questioned to hold any function at all. They are a partial structure headed by a functional

element (Haegeman & Guéron, 1999:110). However, small clauses are phrases inside of the root phrase, while omitted versions of *be* in headlines are part of the main clause. This would suggest that headlines omitting *be* are not small clauses. The only headline applicable for small clauses could be headline (20). Line (20) contains a verb with the bare infinitive marker, which affects what function it actually has. There is no inflection in the infinitive marker “to”. However, the headline “Prime minister considers Brexit unnecessary” can be considered a small clause, but then one is not looking at *be* omission anymore.

There are other restrictions to headlines that may affect how they are formed. Could it be that due to limited space, grammatical words are often let out in favour of lexical words? Earlier research points out that there is also layout and design that needs to be taken into account when making a headline. Text size, font and space may affect what the headline omits. Grammatical items that can be easily understood through context may be dropped. This changes from paper to paper. As presented earlier, *The Guardian* is a less tabloid newspaper than *The Sun*, and they have a different build of sentences. *The Sun* uses direct quotes in its headlines to attract readers. The headlines are longer than those from *The Guardian*. While *The Sun*’s headlines are generally more focused on celebrities and gossip, *The Guardian* chooses less descriptive words: in (11) the negatively loaded adjective “sleazy” is used in front of “snog” in *The Sun*, while *The Guardian* would refrain from using a loaded word. However, the omission of *be* still seems to follow the same patterns in both newspapers. The results of the analysis would suggest that the finite position is omissible in both. But can the headlines be understood with the omission of *be*? Yes, indeed, as headlines have been used and written about for several decades (see Mårdh, 1980), and this type of block language is still used today. This suggests that the public do not need an explicitly grammatical sentence to read about an event and (mostly) understand what is going on, and that headlines are an acceptable language in the media.

6.0 Conclusion

Headlines as a language is not ungrammatical, but rather a variety of English used in headlines. Newspapers frequently omit the verb *be* in headlines, both as an auxiliary and a copula. The omission of *be* sounds natural only when the omitted *be* would be in the finite position of the sentence. A non-finite omission of *be* would not sound natural or grammatical, not in Standard English nor in headlines. As a function of this, tense in headlines is

ambiguous since there is no grammatical function in the IP that explicitly states the tense. If this is an NC that holds only agreement, or if there is nothing in the I-position at all, is debatable and requires further research with a larger set of data than the data presented in this paper. Based on the headlines retrieved, one can argue that this behaviour of the verb *be* is common for headlines, and not specific to one newspaper.

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