

An Analysis on Syntactic and Semantic Factors Found in Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract

As a type of media text, newspaper has an important role in human's life because it presents various local, national and international information and events. In order to attract readers' attention, journalists make the headlines as ambiguous and confusing as possible so that readers are curious to know the content of the whole story and they would read it. Moreover, in presenting the information or events, different reporters will have different linguistic choices which include the choice of words and expressions and different linguistic structures. Thus, this paper analyzes how the different linguistic choices and structures used in the headlines of The Jakarta Post and Indonesian Daily News would construct different linguistic representations of events in the world.

Keywords: syntactic, semantic, headlines, linguistic representation.

The press, one form of the media which has long become a means of communication, has an important role as well as a potential power in our society. It has an important role in human's life since it gives people information about the surrounding situation or what is happening in the world. Through the language used in the newspaper, people get information about various news concerning economy, politic, sport or other local, national and international events. It is only through the mass media such as the newspaper that people know among other things, how the president and cabinet work together to improve the country, how far the government officials have run the democracy system in the country, what happens to the elite politico or how the economy condition in our country is. The newspapers even become the concern of the linguists for the way the information is written / presented to the readers and what meaning the information can give. The newspaper has the potential power in our society because it determines what news would be given to the society or who can get into the papers. The newspaper also has power in creating new words and expressions in the language used. Many new words especially slang and acronyms are used by the society because they read the words in the newspapers though sometimes people do not really know the exact meaning of the new expressions. Thus, for many people, newspapers "constitute the most substantial consumption of printed discourse" (Goatly 2000:247). As what is stated by Linda Thomas and Shan Wareing in their book *Language, Society and Power*, "One of the most important and interesting aspects of the potential power of the media from a linguistic point of view is the way people and events get reported" (1999:52). However, Thomas et al. states that people should not be too quick to consider the media as all-powerful and the public as only "puppets of media control" (1999:51) because people can have their own choice not to read or buy the newspaper. Although it is right that people can have their own choice not to read or buy the newspaper, I think the press still has

significant power in the society through the news or messages presented. The society's or laymen's knowledge about certain events or government policies is only from the media (e.g. the newspaper) because actually they know nothing about the events or the policies. If the journalists are less objective in presenting the news, the readers will get bias information. Therefore, as Thomas et al. quoted Lee (1992), Simpson (1993), Montgomery (1996), it is stated that "since the early 1970's, linguists have been interested in the relationship between how a story gets told and what that might indicate about the point of view that it gets told from" (Thomas, et al. 1999:52). Thus, in this paper I would like to analyze how the linguistic choices and linguistic structures made in media texts of different newspapers as seen in *The Jakarta Post* and *Indonesian Daily News* can construct different linguistic representations of events in the world.

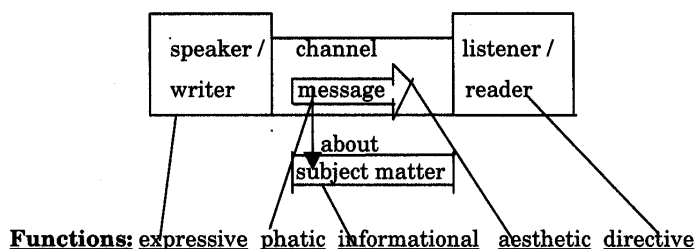
In reporting news in the newspapers, journalists are free to use words and expressions, language style and linguistic structures. These differences in the linguistic choices, the language style and the linguistic structures lead to different versions and views of the same event in different newspapers. Therefore, people who read different newspapers about the same event will get different perceptions about the event, based on the journalists' use of linguistic choices and linguistic structures. In other words, the sentences about the same event written in different newspapers are always syntactically and semantically different. Based on *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics*, syntactic or syntax refers to:

the study of how words combine to form sentences and the rules which govern the formation of sentences. In Generative Transformational Grammar, the syntactic component is one of the three main parts of the grammar. This component contains the rules for forming syntactic structures (base component/phrase structure component) and rules for changing these structures (transformational component)

(Richards, J. et al. 1985:285)

While semantic refers to the smallest units of meaning in a word (Richards, J. et al. 1985: 254).

Since language is an important means to present the information in the newspaper and the newspaper itself deals with the society as a whole; thus, it is important to look at the function of language in the society. Based on Leech (1974: 49), language has at least five functions in the society as seen in this diagram:



Language has *informational function*; that is, to convey information which is also called the subject matter. The *expressive function* is used to express the speaker's / writer's feelings and attitudes (i.e.: the poetic use of language, swear words and exclamations). The *phatic function* is used to keep communication lines open and keep social relationships well. So phatic function is the function of maintaining cohesion

within social groups. While the *aesthetic function* is the use of language for the sake of the linguistic artifact; that is, to create an artistic effect. The *directive function* is used to direct or influence the behavior or attitudes of others (i.e.: commands, requests, etc.). Therefore, the orientation of directive function is toward the listener / reader, or the receiver's end, rather than the originator's end of the message.

Similar to Leech, Jakobson (1960), also states that the language functions can be related to five essential features in any communicative situation: subject matter, originator (speaker / writer), receiver (listener/ reader), the channel of communication between them, and the linguistic message itself.

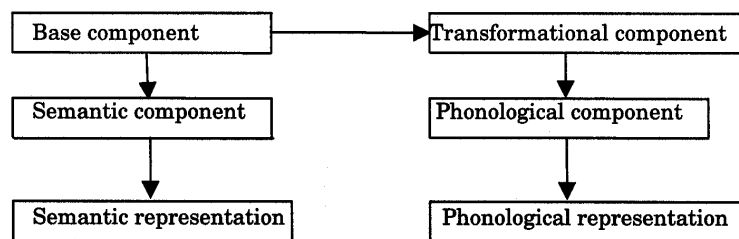
In newspapers, the language used to present events clearly has informative function since it informs the news to the readers. Besides, it also has expressive function since the choice of words can represent the journalists' feelings and attitudes toward the events. Through the newspaper, people can keep social relationships; for example, when they want to have reunion with their friends, they could give announcement in the newspaper. Thus, the language used in the newspaper has the phatic function. It also implicitly has directive function since the events presented often form people's opinion and it is not rare that people are provoked to act or to respond based on the reporter's point of view or just based on one's ideas.

According to the standard theory of transformational grammar, every sentence has two distinct levels of syntactic structure, namely deep structure and surface structure, linked by rules of a particular kind called transformations (Lyons 1995). Besides, based on the standard theory of transformational grammar,

the deep structure of a sentence is the output of the base component and the input to both the transformational component and the semantic component; the surface structure of a sentence is the output of the transformational component and the input to the phonological component.

(Lyons 1995: 212)

The diagram below shows the relationship:

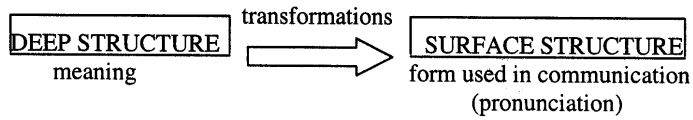


(Lyons 1995:212)

All the information needed by the semantic component is present in the base component; that is, the deep structure of sentences while all the information needed by the phonological component is present in the surface structures as result of the transformational rules operation. In other words, the deep structure is more closely related to meaning, and surface structure to pronunciation or form used in communication. As can be seen from the chart above, there is no arrow from the transformational component to semantic component; this means that “transformational do not affect meaning” as far as “the relation between syntax and semantics is

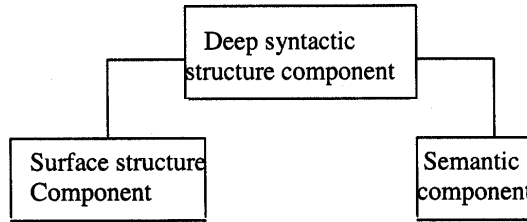


concerned” (Lyons 1995:213). In this case the relationship between the deep structure and the surface structure can be seen as:



(Jacobs, et al. 1968:19)

A similar chart is described by Corder (Corder 1973:190):



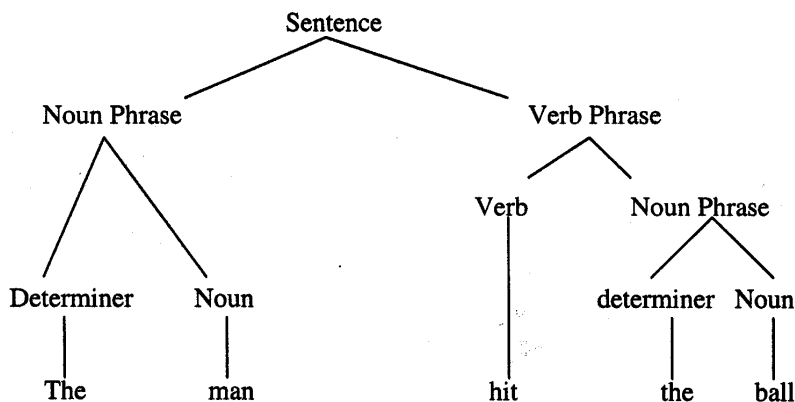
Cooper in his book *Philosophy and the Nature of Language* (1973) agrees with Chomsky who states that grammar which is closely related to mind or represents human’s mind is Generative Transformational Grammar. Grammar is a set of rules that does not only contain description of language, but also explanation of how a speaker understands and produces language or sentences. Thus, if we talk about grammar, we also talk about the aspect of human’s mind.

In accordance with Cooper and Chomsky, Corder explains that:

1. The sentence is a sequence consisting of a noun phrase and a verb phrase.
2. The verb phrase is a sequence consisting of a verb and a noun phrase.
3. The noun phrase is a sequence consisting of a determiner and a noun.
4. Examples of nouns are: man, ball, etc.
5. Examples of verbs are: hit, etc.
6. An example of a determiner is: the.

(Corder 1973:186)

Thus, the tree diagram would be:



In reporting news, reporters use different linguistic choices and linguistic structures, though the topic of the news is the same. This is common since reporters look at a certain event from different angles so that they have different focus in broadcasting the news. The different linguistic choices and linguistic structures used for the same topic in different newspapers are clearly seen in the headlines.

Newspaper headlines are considered very important since headlines could attract someone to buy the newspaper. Newspaper headlines are able to reach much more readers than the articles because those who buy newspapers would generally glance at the headlines first before they decide whether a particular issue is worth reading to them or not. Besides, headlines are often glanced at public places such as at the bus stop, at the train station, displayed on fliers, and even on the road when drivers have to stop for the red light; therefore, it is not surprising if headlines, especially the front page headlines, have a great impact on the readers. Newspaper headlines should be brief, eye catching and impacted; yet, they are memorable and effective. Therefore, they are written in short words which are quickly read and easily fitted into a small space on the newspaper. Thus, newspaper language headlines are important because they reflect the content of the whole issue or reported event.

Below are examples of how the reporters of *The Jakarta Post* and *Indonesian Daily News* use language, including the linguistic choices and linguistic structures. In one article, they write about bomb explosion that happened in a boarding house in Jakarta. What are written below are the headlines of this event. I quote the headlines because sometimes to save time, readers only read the headlines and they would get their perception of an event just from reading the headlines.

1. Three bombs explode in Pancoran boarding house.
(*The Jakarta Post*, June 20,2001:1)
2. Five injured as blast razes a house
(*Indonesian Daily News*, June 20,2001:1)

The two headlines have different sentence forms. Headline (1) is in the form of a simple sentence, unlike most headlines in general that are written in phrases, clauses or incomplete sentences. However, readers do not know what the effect of the explosion is just by reading headline (1).

As headlines in general, headline (2) is actually incomplete. It can be rewritten as:
Five (are) injured as blast razes a house.

This sentence is a complex sentence with an adverbial clause (as blast razes a house). The conjunction 'as' (which means 'when') in headline (2) shows the time when the first part of the sentence (five injured) happens. Besides, the presence of the word 'as' also shows causal link in which the first event (five injured) happens as a result of the second one (blast razes a house) so that the readers know the impact of the explosion. The use of this conjunction creates a difference in meaning between the two headlines.

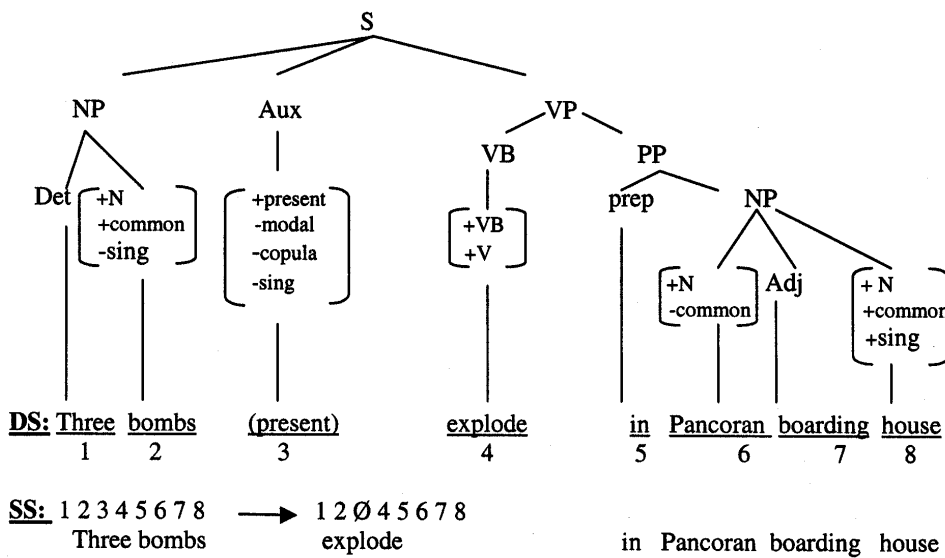
Next, there is a difference in choosing the verbs. In (1), intransitive verb ('explode') is used so that the sentence does not have an object and readers do not know what has been damaged by the bombs. However, the sentence has an adverbial phrase (in Pancoran boarding house) and this informs the readers about the place of the incident: the name of the location (Pancoran) and the exact place (a boarding house), not just 'a house' such as described in the object of the complex sentence in (2). In the complex



sentence of (2), “as blast razes a house” a transitive verb (raze) is used so that it needs additional information (in the form of what was razed); that is, the object of the verb (a house) and from it the readers know what has been damaged by the bomb explosion besides the five injured people. Furthermore, from the choice of words used as the subjects of the headlines, readers can see that in (1), the reporter focuses more on the cause of the explosion (three bombs); on the other hand, in headline (2), the reporter focuses more on the people as the victims of the explosion (five injured or five people are injured) although readers do not know how serious the injury is. Thus, the words used in the subject above show the expressive function of the language. In both headlines the reporters want to express that the bomb explosion has serious effects, but they express it in different ways. In (1), it is shown through the number of bombs that explode and in (2), it is shown through the number of victims. Besides the expressive function, both headlines have informative function which refers to the news in the sentences as what they are written.

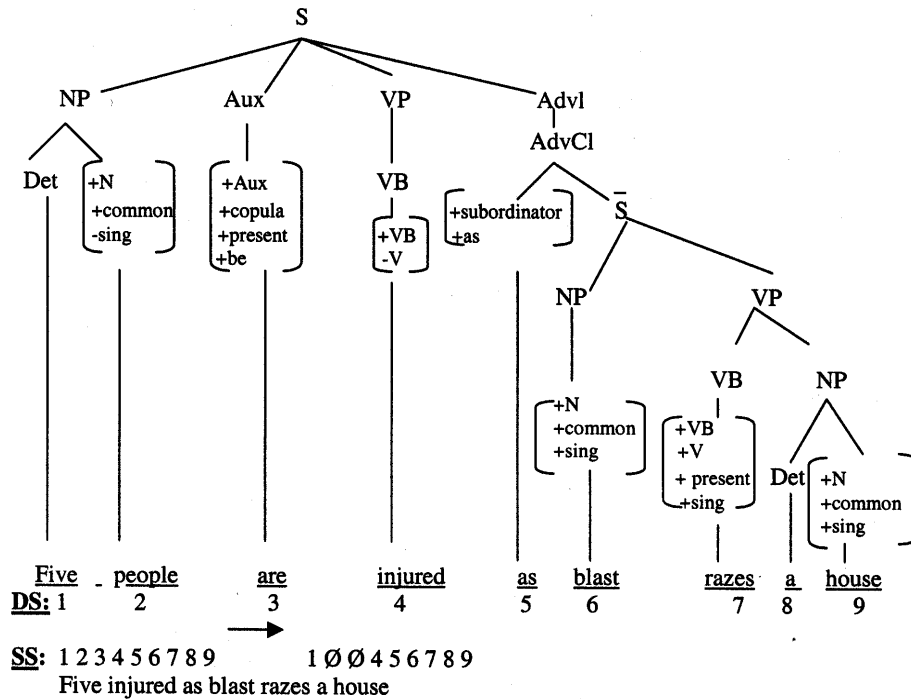
If we analyze the differences between the two headlines above, (1) and (2), based on the Generative Transformational Grammar, they would look like this:

(1). Three bombs explode in Pancoran boarding house



In the tree diagram above, the auxiliary immediately preceding the verbal is deleted because it is a non-modal auxiliary that does not carry either the (+copula) or the (+perfect) feature. Since the auxiliary does not meet the conditions for retention, the structure has verbal agreement transformation that copies the relevant features of number, person, and tense from the auxiliary onto the verbal and deletes the auxiliary segment.

- (2). Five injured as blast razes a house
 Five (are) injured as blast razes a house.



In this second tree diagram, there is no verbal agreement transformation because the auxiliary carries (+copula) feature which cannot be deleted from the sentence. However, since this sentence is written as a headline, the auxiliary ('are') is deleted and the common noun ('people') in the subject is deleted as well. It might happen to fulfill the criteria of newspaper headlines that should be brief, eye catching and impacted.

Besides the differences above, there is syntactical similarity; that is, both headlines uses simple present tense. Actually, what is written in the news is just a report of something that happened in the past since at the time the news is written, the event has already happened. Generally, when we write a story that already happened, we use simple past tense instead of simple present tense. In this case, we can see that the use of simple present tense in reporting the news is to give a stress that the evidence is a real fact and people can still see and feel the effect in the present time; that is, the incredible explosion, the injury and the damage.

The second news in the newspaper deals with Gus Dur's and Megawati's plan to attend the ritual ceremony of Soekarno's death. At that time, Gus Dur was still the president and Megawati was the vice president of Indonesia. The headlines of this news are as follow:

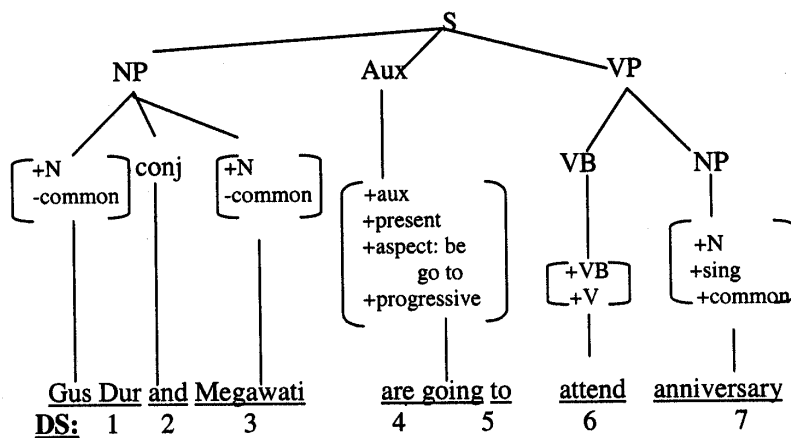
- (3). Gus Dur, Megawati to attend anniversary.
 (*The Jakarta Post*, June 20, 2001:2).
 (4). President to attend ritual celebration of Soekarno's death in Blitar.
 (*Indonesian Daily News*, June 20, 2001:1).



First, there is a difference in the choice of words for the subject matter in these two headlines. By reading headline (3), the readers might think that both Gus Dur and Megawati would go together. However, actually at that time the relation between Gus Dur and Megawati was not good since the House of Representatives issued a second motion of censure against Gus Dur. Although this condition is also written in the content of the text, if readers only read the headline, they will not know about the bad relation between Gus Dur and Megawati at that time and may have a different idea about the headline. Even when people already know about the bad relation between the president and the vice president, they might wonder whether the relation between the two people would be better after attending the anniversary. Besides, it is not clear what anniversary that Gus Dur and Megawati are going to attend and where it would be held. On the other hand, headline (4) gives clearer information by mentioning what kind of celebration the president is going to attend (ritual celebration of Soekarno's death) and where it would be held (in Blitar).

To understand the meaning of these two headlines well, we can look at the deep structure of the two headlines through the tree diagram below:

(3). Gus Dur, Megawati to attend anniversary

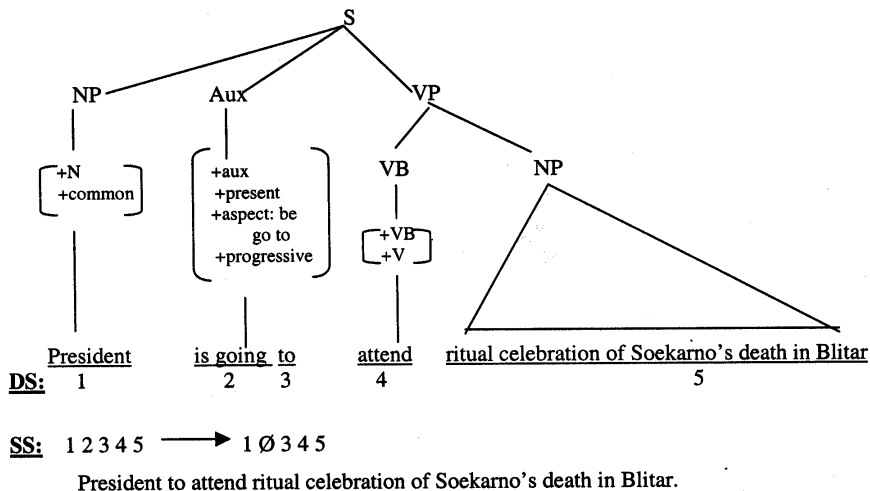


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Gus Dur, Megawati to attend anniversary

From the tree diagram, we can see that deletion is applied to the sentence; that is, the conjunction ('and') is deleted and is replaced by a comma. Besides, the future tense is only written as 'to infinitive' ('to attend'). This deletion happens because the sentence, which is used as a headline, should be brief and interesting.

(4). President to attend ritual celebration of Soekarno's death in Blitar.



Similar to headline (3), deletion is also applied to the future tense in headline (4) and it is only written in the 'to infinitive' form ('to attend'). Since we know that future tense is used to indicate an action which is still to be and can only be imagined, we can say that actually we still do not know whether the message conveyed in the headlines (3,4) above would really happen or not. Thus, here the reporters try to create a big question in the headlines.

Next, in the news of both the third and the fourth headlines, the reporter wrote about the relationship between Gus Dur and Megawati:

- (5). The relationship between Gus Dur and Megawati, Sukarno's eldest daughter, has been in trouble ever since the House of Representatives issued second motion of censure against the President and sought to launch an impeachment process against him. (*The Jakarta Post*; June 20,2001)
- (6). But Wahid's vice president, Megawati Soekarnoputri, who seems to be distancing herself from the beleaguered president, has yet to confirm whether she will attend her late father's death anniversary. (*Indonesian Daily News*; June 20,2001)

Sentence (5) only presents the information that Gus Dur does not have a good relationship with Megawati ('has been in trouble') and it also tells readers when the two people are not in a good relationship ('since the House of Representatives issued a second motion of censure against the President'). The readers also get an idea about the president's problem; that is, getting a second motion of censure and possibly an impeachment from the House of Representatives. Here the reporter presents the news neutrally and he does not take any side in the troubled relationship between the president and the vice president, and in the president's problem. However, in sentence (6), there is a relative clause modifying the words Megawati Soekarnoputri: 'who seems to be distancing herself from the beleaguered president'. First, this clause gives an idea that actually it is Megawati who tries to make a gap between herself and the president; though the reporter is not very sure about it ('seems'). Next, the adjective 'beleaguered'



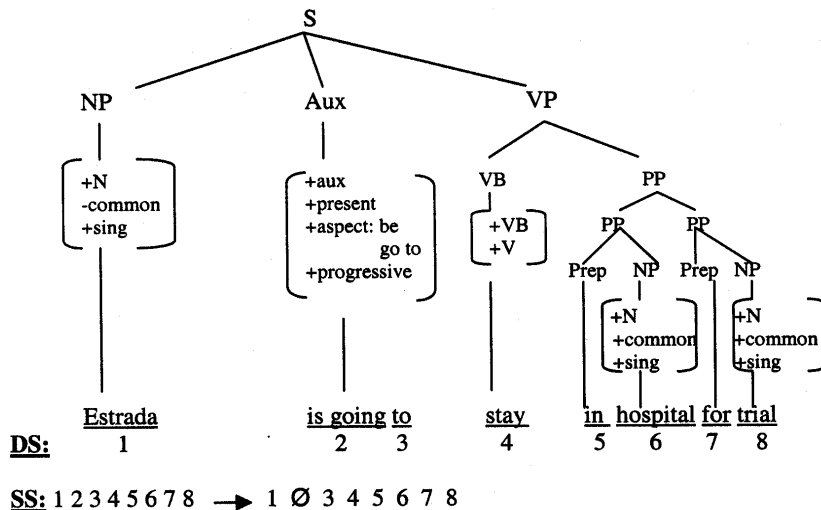
means 'attacked from all sides', so the noun phrase 'beleaguered president' shows the position of the president who is being attacked from all sides. In this case, the reporter already takes his side by giving his point of view of the president's position which is being kept away by the vice president and being attacked by others from all sides, though may be not all the government people attacked the president. From this news (6), it can be concluded that the troubled relationship between the president and the vice president is actually because of the vice president's fault since she seems to make a distance with the president. This news might give bias information to the readers. Thus, the language used in both (5) and (6) has informative function; that is, informing readers that the relationship between Gus Dur and Megawati is not good anymore and informing about the president's (Gus Dur's) problem / position. Besides, the language used in (6) has more expressive function than in (5) since the reporter expresses his feeling or idea about the cause of the troubled relationship between the president and the vice president more expressively and bravely. Because of this, sentence (6) may have directive function for Gus Dur's supporters who might think that Megawati has created problem for Gus Dur so that they might make demonstration against her.

The other example concerning the varied linguistic choices and linguistic structures can be seen in the following examples:

- (7). Estrada to stay in hospital for trial.
(*The Jakarta Post*, June 21, 2001:13)
- (8). Court allows Estrada to be detained in hospital .
(*Indonesian Daily News*, June 21, 2001:5)

Both headlines above are about the news of the former Philippines president, Joseph Estrada. However, in headline (7), the reporter stresses on Estrada as the topic of discussion. It does not explain who permits him to stay in hospital for trial, though implicitly it is understood that the permission must have been given by the court. In headline (8), the subject of discussion focuses more on the court as the doer who permits Estrada to be detained in hospital. Syntactically, the differences can be explained through the tree diagram:

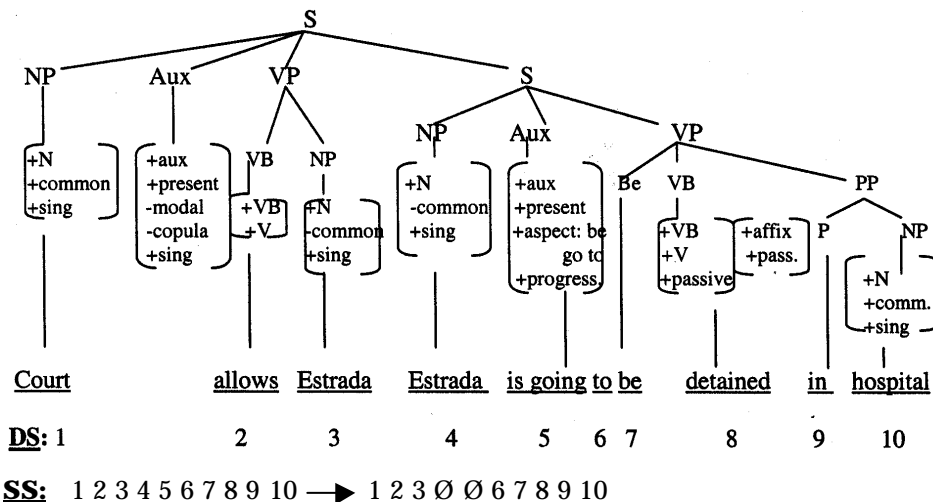
- (7). Estrada to stay in hospital for trial



Estrada to stay in hospital for trial.

In the tree diagram above, there is verb deletion in the headline. Since the trial has not happened, we can interpret the verb 'to stay' as refers to the future 'is going to stay' and it tells us about what might happen in the future. However, there are still other possibilities concerning this interpretation. Since Estrada is already in the hospital at the time this news is written, the verb 'to stay' might come from the verb 'has to stay' or 'is to stay' and it shows that there is no other choice for Estrada besides staying in hospital for the trial.

(8). Court allows Estrada to be detained in hospital



Court allows Estrada to be detained in hospital

Similar to the tree diagram of headline (1), in the tree diagram of headline (8) above, the auxiliary immediately preceding the verbal is deleted because it is a non-modal auxiliary that does not carry either the (+copula) or the (+perfect) feature. Since the



auxiliary does not meet the conditions for retention, the structure has verbal agreement transformation that copies the relevant features of number, person, and tense from the auxiliary onto the verbal and deletes the auxiliary segment.

Besides the headlines above, the differences between the reported news about Estrada's trial in *The Jakarta Post* and *Indonesian Daily News* can also be seen from the other sentences in the news:

- (9). Deposed Philippines president Joseph Estrada on Wednesday won a court order allowing him to remain in hospital instead of a prison home for the duration of his corruption trial. (*The Jakarta Post*, June 21,2001:13)
- (10). The court said Estrada, who was forced to step down amid massive anti-corruption protests in January, should remain in detention at the Veterans Memorial Medical Center in suburban Quezon City. (*Indonesian Daily News*, June 21, 2001:5)

Sentence (9) has a no named source and the phrase “won a court order” in this sentence gives a more positive report on Estrada since it shows that he has tried to get the court's approval to stay in hospital for his trial; thus, he is the one who is active to get the approval. It is different from sentence (10) which explicitly says that his stay in hospital is because of the court's instruction, not because of his effort. In this sentence, the source of information is the court as seen in the phrase “The court said Estrada ... should remain in detention” Sentence (10) has a factual reporting of Estrada's case by mentioning the court's official comment about his obligation to stay in hospital. Thus, his staying in hospital is not because of his asking for it; instead, it is because he has to obey the court's order.

Besides, sentence (9) does not inform the exact name of the hospital. The name of the hospital is not as important as the news that he does not need to stay in a prison home. While sentence (10) gives us a more detailed information concerning the name and place of the hospital, when and why Estrada has to step down from his reign.

Thus, from the discussion above, it can be concluded that both *The Jakarta Post* and *Indonesian Daily News* have syntactic similarity in the headlines; that is, both often use simple present tense to emphasize the reality of the incident and the strong effect that keeps on going in the society though the incident has happened. Both newspapers also use simple future tense with the deletion of the verb so that the verb used is only 'to infinitive' to create question of what will happen in the future. The verb deletion is also used in the headlines so that readers have free interpretation of what the complete sentence of the headline is, and thus, would create different interpretation of the meaning.

In spite of all the similarities, the two newspapers also have differences in the linguistic choices, namely in the diction. The linguistic choices made in *The Jakarta Post* and in *Indonesian Daily News* form different accounts or different linguistic representations of events in the world. The comparison of both newspapers show the relative importance each paper gives to a certain issue in a specific period of time. Therefore, it is very important for reporters to be careful in using language to present their news and to think twice before giving their personal opinion in the news they write since it is through the newspaper that the society get the news about the local, national and international events they need to know. Besides, it is also important for the readers to have correct interpretation about the written news. To avoid wrong interpretation,

they can compare an issue written in two different newspapers. Eventually, readers should be aware not to be easily provoked by the news since sometimes the news contains bias opinion.

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