

Usage Prescriptive Rules in Newspaper Language

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I present the results of investigating the frequency in newspaper language of a number of disputed usage features: clause-initial coordinators, stranded prepositions, split infinitives, functional shift and modified absolute adjectives. The analysis focuses on the frequency of the dispreferred usage (relative to the preferred usage) of these features in the journalistic sub-registers of two personally collected newspaper corpora: *The New York Times* (NYT) and *USA Today*. The results point to variation in the two focal newspapers and their sub-registers. Standard English in print media is found to be far from being a fixed entity, and linguistic variants of usage are attested regardless of usage pronouncements.

0. Overview

This article reports the results of investigating the frequency in newspaper language of a number of disputed usage features. In the first section, I define usage and offer a rationale for a corpus-based study of some proscribed usage features in newspaper language. In the second section, I present an overview of the corpora used in the study and the procedures of analysis, discuss the selected usage features, and summarize the judgments associated with them. In the third section, I report the results of occurrence of the selected usage features and their analysis. In the fourth section, I present a discussion of the implications for standard English in journalistic language. Finally, in the fifth section, I discuss the limitations of the study and offer directions for further research.

1. Usage

The term *usage* is potentially misleading and subject to considerable differences of interpretation. Usage can mean the record of actual language use, but this definition is not the primary sense of the term as applied in usage guides concerned about style and correctness (Finegan 1999: 538; Wachal 1998: 79). The common use of the term as understood by usage guides, and the

one intended in this study, might better be called 'usage conventions' or 'usage rules' referring to a finite set of stigmatized linguistic features (e.g. features such as split infinitives and clause-final prepositions) that attract prescriptive commentary (Berube 1996; Burchfield 1996; Garner 1998; Marger and Marger 1993; Sherwin 2002).

Usage features in this sense exemplify the aesthetic function (Biber 1988), which relates to the personal or cultural attitudes about the preferred forms of language. These features include "grammatical prescriptions established by language academies and other linguistic guardians as well as individual notions about 'good' style and rhetorical effect" (Biber 1988: 36, emphasis in original). This aesthetic sense is generally applied in edited prose. It is, for example, similar to newspapers' understanding of style involving a house style, which includes the conventions of spelling, word form, punctuation and the fine points of grammar (Peters 2004: 519). Because of their language policy and norm enforcement, many newspapers might perceive themselves as the standard-bearers of language, and thus they will be the focus of this study as a site of edited prose.

1.1. Rationale for the Corpus Based Study of Usage

Throughout its history, the entrepreneurial academy of usage commentary has been mainly prescriptive, with its judgments based solely on intuitions. The typical criterion used in the tradition of usage handbooks has been grounded not in the description of actual use but in the opinions and personal preferences of handbook writers themselves (see section 2.3). Feeding on their readers' sense of linguistic insecurity, most of these writers have always been concerned "in whole or in part with solecisms, barbarisms, improprieties and questions of precision in the use of English" (Leonard 1929/62: 12).

The connection of published usage handbooks and newspaper language cannot be overemphasized. Daily newspaper reporters and editors are highly aware of language and linguistic usage and conscious of their role in "defending" the standard variety (Cameron 1995: 34; Cotter 1999: 166; see also Cotter 1996;

Herring 2003; Milroy and Milroy 1999). Since most journalists like to perceive themselves as guardians of standard English, many American newspapers and their journalists get involved in the correctness issue by publishing their style manuals (Connelly 1999, 2002; Webb 1978; Lippman 1989; Holley 1981; Martin 2002; Goldstein 1998). In these style manuals, as in other usage guides, a prescriptive impulse prevails and informs most of the language injunctions. In other words, the issue of stylistic etiquette or conforming to language tradition is central to newspaper language.

With the prescriptions and opinions of usage and style manuals about how language should be used, we see only the ideal set up by prescriptivists and usage commentators. Looking at usage in authentic corpora representative of some part of standard English (in this case newspaper register) allows the possibility of studying the extent to which usage prescriptions are observed in newspaper language and its text types or sub-registers.

2. Methodology

2.1. Overview of Newspaper Corpora Design

The universe of newspaper discourse, even when confined to only one or two newspapers, is still large. An important step, therefore, is to define that universe of discourse in order to draw a valid and reliable sample of it that can adequately represent sufficient linguistic data (Bell 1991: 10).

I chose to build a corpus drawn from the language of two influential newspapers published in the United States: *The New York Times* (*NYT*) and *USA Today* as representative of American newspaper language. The two chosen newspapers are among the top American newspapers in circulation: *USA Today*, published by the publishing giant Gannet, has been rated for years as the first American newspaper, whereas *NYT*, the most prestigious newspaper in the U.S., occupies the third circulation position (Editor and Publisher International Yearbook 2003).

To accomplish the task of comparing the two newspapers chosen for the study, as well as to ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, it is imperative that a large corpus of data be used.

The final corpus is composed of more than 9,000,000 words, a size which was deemed adequate for the present study. Two of the major decisions entailed in collecting the corpus included the time period the sample covers and the days to be sampled within that period.

The collection of newspaper texts for the American National Newspaper (henceforward ANN) Corpus was restricted to texts (news articles and editorials) published in the calendar years January 2001-January 2005 in *NYT* and *USA Today*. To avoid over-representing certain kinds of content, the data from the two focal newspapers was collected seven times a month with a different day each week in order to have a constructed week for each month.

Because the data contains many articles written by a wide variety of authors, there is some degree of variation in the use of linguistic features due to each writer's individual style. In some cases, there are no by-lines (less than 20% of the collected texts) to indicate who wrote the article. Nevertheless, the fact that the data from both newspapers includes a large number of articles ensures that the effect of a particular writer's style does not significantly influence the results. Moreover, the fact that newspaper articles are subject to a rigorous process of editing and revision to conform to the newspaper's particular style minimizes the possibility of over-representing any one writer's style. Finally, both of the selected newspapers occasionally use the wire service. As indicated, however, these major newspapers have their own editors who edit the articles according to the paper's style practice.

The data was collected from a wide range of sections from parallel categories in the two focal newspapers. Besides the editorials, the majority of the news texts are sampled from the subject areas of National or Nation, International or World, Washington, Business, Education, Environment, Entertainment, and Sports.

To address the question of sub-registers in newspaper language, the two newspaper corpora were divided into four categories/sub-registers: Event-focused reportage (coverage of national and international political events); Information-focused reportage (coverage of special interests sections such as:

Education, Environment, Technology, and Science); Entertainment-focused reportage (coverage of sections such as: Sports, Movies and Travel); and finally, Editorials. Based on their usually argumentative or persuasive intent, the editorials represent a category by themselves.

Table 1:
Number of Texts and Words in ANN Corpus

Text type	Text source	No. of texts	No. of words
Written	<i>NYT</i>	926	4,726,844
Written	<i>USA Today</i>	1,090	4,700,203

Table 2a:
Sub-Registers of the Two Newspapers of ANN Corpus

Newspaper sub-register	Number of words in	Number of words in
	<i>NYT</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Event-focused reportage (national and international news)	1,468,831	1,328,699
Information focused reportage (education, environment, technology, science)	1,086,420	1,106,122
Entertainment-focused reportage (sports, movies, travel)	1,336,796	1,453,042
Op/Ed(editorials)	834,797	812,340
<u>Total</u>	<u>4,726, 844</u>	<u>4,700,203</u>

Table 2b:
Sub-Registers of the Two Newspapers of ANN Corpus

Newspaper sub-register	Number of texts in <i>NYT</i>	Number of texts in <i>USA Today</i>
Event-focused reportage (national and international news)	208	256
Information focused reportage (education, environment, technology, science)	263	319
Entertainment- focused reportage (sports, movies, travel)	310	337
Op/Ed(editorials)	145	178
<u>Total</u>	<u>926</u>	<u>1,090</u>

The corpus for this study is coherent in that the two newspapers represented in it are both daily American newspapers with national distribution for a mass audience of over a million readers. It is stratified in that the individual papers are similar in quality and popularity (see Jucker 1992 for a related language study in a British journalistic context).

2.2. Procedures and Steps in the Analysis

The study is based on a carefully constructed corpus of language data comparing two dimensions of newspaper types (from the quality-popular range) and four newspaper sub-registers (types of

news texts and editorials). The study does not approach the register of newspaper as fixed forms but rather as fluid constellations of language features brought together to perform a particular function in journalistic texts. The approach is empirical in that it is based on analysis of language features in actual texts, but it combines both quantitative and qualitative techniques: Quantitative in so far as the frequencies of certain usage features are counted and compared across newspaper corpora and qualitative in that detailed analyses are used to interpret the distributional patterns in functional terms.

The two newspapers and their sub-registers are taken as the independent variable or contextual factors, and the dependent variables are the linguistic features of usage selected for investigation given in Table 3.

Table 3:
Selected Usage Features Related to the
Aesthetic Function of Language

1-Starting a sentence with coordinating conjunctions
2-Stranded prepositions
3-Splitting the infinitive
4-Functional shift
5-Modifying absolute adjectives

Usage features, whether grammatical or lexical, usually involve variants but have tended to attract more attention from purists and usage commentators, with the result of one variant being selected and sanctioned as the preferred one in standard English while the other possibility outlawed and dismissed as non-standard (Stein 1997: 41). The usage features selected for this study are always associated with style and preferred variants.

The text files in the ANN Corpus were tagged for parts of speech using an automatic grammatical tagger, the *Biber Tagger* (1988), a software program that annotates texts for 67 grammatical features (Biber, Conrad and Reppen 1998: 261-262). This is a necessary step for investigating some of the grammatical features of usage. I searched the tagged and untagged corpora for the specific features listed in Table 3. The search was performed by using the commercial concordancing package Monoconc Pro 2.0, a

software program that searches for words, phrases, and tagged grammatical structures and outputs all occurrences of such searches in a stretch of discourse (Barlow 2000). The frequency of the selected features (e.g. split infinitives, etc.) is obtained through automatic searches with manual screening when necessary.

Most counts are given as percentages or raw counts per 1,000,000 words in the ANN Corpus and are thus comparable. When needed, the variation between newspapers and their register categories is tested for significance. The test used in some parts of the results and analysis sections is the Chi-square (χ^2) test, which gives the level of probability of the deviation observed in the data being due to chance alone. The χ^2 values in the results are considered for significance at 0.05 level, which means that if the differences were due to chance, then the observed figures would only be expected to occur in 5% of the possible cases. The main purpose of the figures is to establish some facts about the style of the two focal newspapers represented in the corpus, not to compare them with any other data.

2.3. Selection of Usage Features

Every usage or style manual "selects a number of locutions and offers a judgment as to their suitability, with the emphasis most often being on their suitability in writing" (Creswell 1975: 3). The list of controversial locutions or dispreferred usages might differ somewhat from one usage guide to another, but the basic pattern remains unaltered. The five features selected for this paper have been mentioned by multiple commentators. They represent a venerable part of English usage tradition and 'correctness' commentary. The grounds of their discussion, however, have mostly shifted from the dichotomy of right and wrong to the notion of style.

In Table 4 (a and b), I survey a number of popular American usage handbooks targeted for native speakers and examine their treatment of the selected five points of usage to see how far prescription, rather than description, prevails. A sample of eighteen of the most popular usage books published in the United States since 1950 was identified for this close examination. The

judgments of each book are annotated as follows: not acceptable (i.e. deemed to be incorrect and should be avoided), acceptable (i.e. deemed correct and should not be avoided), vague (i.e. commentator explains some constraints on the use of the structure or espouses an equivocal stance towards it), and not mentioned (i.e. the usage feature is not commented on in that particular usage guide).

Table 4a:
Usage Guides' Judgments on the Selected Negative Aesthetic Features

Year Author	Usage Guide	Usage	
		Functional shift: denominal verbs	Starting a sentence with coordinating conjunctions
1950 Tressler	<i>English in Action</i>	Not Mentioned	Not Mentioned
1962 Bryant	<i>Current American Usage</i>	Vague	Acceptable
1966 Follett	<i>Modern American Usage</i>	Vague	Acceptable
1979 Strunk	<i>Elements of Style</i>	Vague	Not Mentioned
1980 Copperud	<i>American Usage and Style: The Consensus</i>	Vague	Acceptable
1980 Safire	<i>On Language</i>	Vague	Not Mentioned
1981 Simon	<i>Paradigms Lost</i>	Not Mentioned	Not Mentioned
1982 Baron	<i>Grammar and Good Taste</i>	Not Acceptable	Not Mentioned
1985 Morris	<i>Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage</i>	Vague	Vague
1985 Cook	<i>Line by Line</i>	Vague	Not Mentioned

1989 Webster	<i>Webster's Dictionary of English Usage</i>	Vague	Acceptable
1993 Wilson	<i>Columbia Guide to Standard American English</i>	Vague	Vague
1996 Heritage	<i>American Heritage</i>	Vague	Vague
1996 Troyka	<i>Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers</i>	Not Mentioned	Vague
1997 Thatcher	<i>English Usage and Style for Editors</i>	Not Mentioned	Not Mentioned
1998 Goldstein	<i>Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual</i>	Vague	Not Mentioned
1998 Freeman	<i>Wordwatcher's Guide to Good Grammar and Word Usage</i>	Vague	Vague
1999 Siegal & Connolly	<i>New York Times Manual of Style and Usage</i>	Vague	Not Mentioned

Table 4b:
Usage Guides' Judgments on the Selected Negative Aesthetic
Features Continued

Year Author	Usage Guide	Usage		
		Splitting the infinitive either by an adverb or a negator	Modifying absolute adjectives	Ending a sentence with a preposition
1950 Tressler	<i>English in Action</i>	Acceptable	Not Mentioned	Acceptable

1962 Bryant	<i>Current American Usage</i>	Vague	Vague	Acceptable
1966 Follett	<i>Modern American Usage</i>	Vague	Vague	Not Mentioned
1979 Strunk	<i>Elements of Style</i>	Vague	Not Acceptable	Acceptable
1980 Copperud	<i>American Usage and Style: The Consensus</i>	Vague	Vague	Vague
1980 Safire	<i>On Language</i>	Not Mentioned	Not Acceptable	Not Mentioned
1981 Simon	<i>Paradigms Lost</i>	Not Mentioned	Not Mentioned	Vague
1982 Baron	<i>Grammar and Good Taste</i>	Vague	Not Mentioned	Not Mentioned
1985 Morris	<i>Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage</i>	Vague	Vague	Vague
1985 Cook	<i>Line by Line</i>	Vague	Vague	Vague
1989 Webster	<i>Webster's Dictionary of English Usage</i>	Acceptable	Vague	Acceptable
1993 Wilson	<i>Columbia Guide to Standard American English</i>	Vague	Vague	Vague
1996 Heritage	<i>American Heritage</i>	Vague	Vague	Vague
1996 Troyka	<i>Simon & Schuster</i>	Vague	Not Acceptable	Not Mentioned

<i>Handbook for Writers</i>				
1997 Thatcher	<i>English Usage and Style for Editors</i>	Acceptable	Not Mentioned	Acceptable
1998 Goldstein	<i>Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual</i>	Vague	Not Mentioned	Not Mentioned
1998 Freeman	<i>Wordwatcher's Guide to Good Grammar and Word Usage</i>	Vague	Vague	Vague
1999 Siegal & Connolly	<i>New York Times Manual of Style and Usage</i>	Vague	Not Acceptable	Not Mentioned

With few exceptions, most of surveyed guides use invented or unattributed negative examples to illustrate the mishaps of usage. They also have a tendency to overgeneralize in their judgments, and their judgments can be said to reflect a stage at which grammar/usage issues had become matters "of simple etiquette and were not in need of fresh scrutiny" (Nunberg 1990; cited in Peters and Young 1997: 322). This paper, therefore, subjects the occurrence of the surveyed usage features in newspaper style to more empirical scrutiny.

3. Results of Overall Distribution of Dispreferred Usage

The discussion of the surveyed usage features that pertain to the aesthetic function of language will begin with the features associated with a higher degree of prescriptiveness. In order to obtain usage frequencies representative of the newspaper language, the tokens of the dispreferred usage were excluded from the counting if they occurred in quoted matter or were part of direct speech. Newspapers do not follow the academic convention of

writing [*sic*], Latin for 'thus so,' after a non-standard usage in a citation. Their quotes, however, indicate that what is reported reproduces an original source and is intended exactly as printed without necessarily reflecting their editorial practices. The following sub-sections show the frequency of non-observance of the rules associated with the usage items chosen for the study in the two focal newspapers and their sub-registers. I also look closely at some of the examples of dispreferred usages and their context.

3.1. Modifying Absolute Adjectives

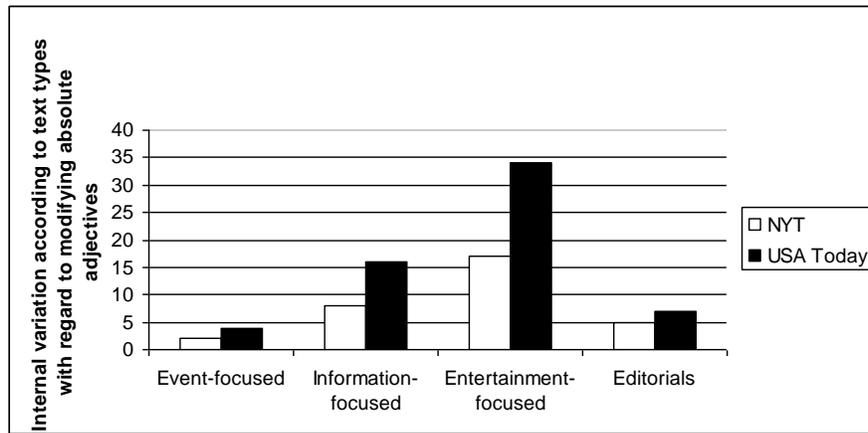
The rationale given by many usage handbooks with regard to modifying absolute adjectives such as *absolute*, *unique*, *perfect*, *obvious*, *complete*, *equal*, *parallel*, *chief*, *prime* (e.g. more complete, most unique, etc.) is that they are stylistically 'inelegant' since these adjectives cannot be compared, intensified, or modified by a degree adverb.

Table 5:
Frequency of Modifying Absolute Adjectives
in *NYT* and *USA Today*

Text Type	<i>NYT</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Event-focused	2	4
Information-focused	8	16
Entertainment-focused	17	34
Editorials	5	7

(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

Figure 1:
Frequency of Modifying Absolute Adjectives
in *NYT* and *USA Today*



(Rate per 1,000,000 word)

Figure 1 shows relatively few occurrences of this dispreferred usage in both newspapers. Entertainment and information sections are the two sub-registers that tend to make more use of this stylistic feature. *USA Today* in all its sub-registers, however, has a higher frequency of modifying supposedly absolute adjectives than in *NYT*. With the exception of *absolute*, each of the other so-called absolute adjectives listed above occur more than 30 times per million words. In general, less than 15% and 10% (in *NYT* and *USA Today* respectively) of the occurrences of these adjectives are modified. When these adjectives are modified, moreover, they always express the approximations or intensifications of the ordinary use of language as the following examples illustrate:

- (1) Unlike him, other senators have a *near perfect* attendance record (*USA Today*, editorial).
- (2) Grants' administrator Patty Lewis said the design phase is *almost complete* (*USA Today*, information).
- (3) When Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau gathered in Paris to prepare a permanent peace just two months after the armistice, they met on *relatively equal* terms (*NYT*, editorial).

The appeal to logic with regard to the prohibition against modifying absolute adjectives still has a hold on newspaper language. This hold, however, is not as strong as the prohibition against functional shift.

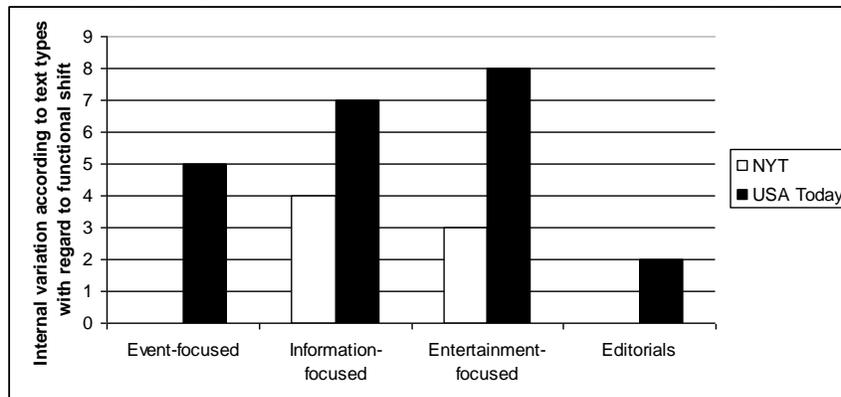
3.2. Functional Shift

Table 6:
Frequency of Functional Shift in NYT and USA Today

Text Type	<i>NYT</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Event-focused	0	5
Information-focused	4	7
Entertainment-focused	3	8
Editorials	0	2

(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

Figure 2:
Frequency of Functional Shift in NYT and USA Today



(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

Functional shift is one of the most frequent ways in which new verbs enter the English language. Because of its sparse morphological marking for parts of speech (Algeo 1998: 67), English is very flexible in shifting forms from one part of speech to another and has always allowed verbs to be pressed into service as nouns and nouns as verbs. However, a limited number of words including *impact*, *contact*, *author*, *critique*, *gift*, *parent*, *interface*, *target*, *host* and *dialogue* are often selected and assumed by usage commentary to be 'pure nouns.' Figure 2 shows the distribution of

the few tokens of the dispreferred usage of these lexical items as verbs across the text types of the two focal newspapers.

- 4) The interview with Havel was concluded with a suggestion that in case of need they will *contact* him again (*NYT*, information).
- 5) There is no more speculation now about who will *host* the next Olympics (*NYT*, entertainment).

Only *contact* and *host* were found to have less resistance in the shift they have undergone from nouns to verbs. *Contact* and *host* occur as verbs in both *NYT* and *USA Today* in the information and entertainment sections. *Impact* and *target* also occur as verbs but only in *USA Today*:

- 6) The proposed nondiscrimination policy is too broadly worded and could *impact* more than sexual orientation (*USA Today*, editorial).
- 7) But as Firefox becomes more popular, hackers may *target* it and expose weak spots (*USA Today*, information).

All of the words in the listed lexical items occur as nouns (*impact*, *contact*, *dialogue* and *target*) more than 50 times per million words. When the verbal sense is needed from these lexical items, multi-word alternative forms are sometimes used (e.g. the use of 'make contact with' rather than 'contact,' or 'have impact on' rather than 'impact' and 'engage in a dialogue' rather than 'to dialogue' as a verb. These periphrastic verbal forms, however, occur less than 10 times per million words.

- 8) No single individual *has had* as great an *impact* on television as Johnny Carson. He was the gold standard (*USA Today*, entertainment).
- 9) On the basis of that, Cinka evaluated him as suitable for recruitment and *made contact* with his family (*NYT*, information).

It is unclear why there is still resistance to the acceptability of verbs like *impact* and *contact* in standard English, but this resistance is echoing in the actual usage of print media. With the few exceptions of *contact*, *impact*, *target* and *host*, all the other lexical items in this category (*author*, *critique*, *gift*, *interface*, *parent* and *dialogue*) occur only as nouns and as verbs only in quoted matter.

- 10) And these are only some of the ethical and legal issues at the *interface* of conventional and complementary medicine (*USA Today*, information).

News language is said to be on the innovative forefront of adopting "denominalization practices" (Cotter 1999: 175). Intuitively that sounds true, but this claim is not borne out by this investigation of functional shift. There are very few tokens of 'denominalized' verbs in both newspapers, and they occur more in *USA Today* and particularly in information and entertainment sections. I note, however, that besides the force of the prescriptive disapproval, the size of the corpus may be a factor in not finding enough tokens of some of the rather less commonly used words representing the functional shift feature.

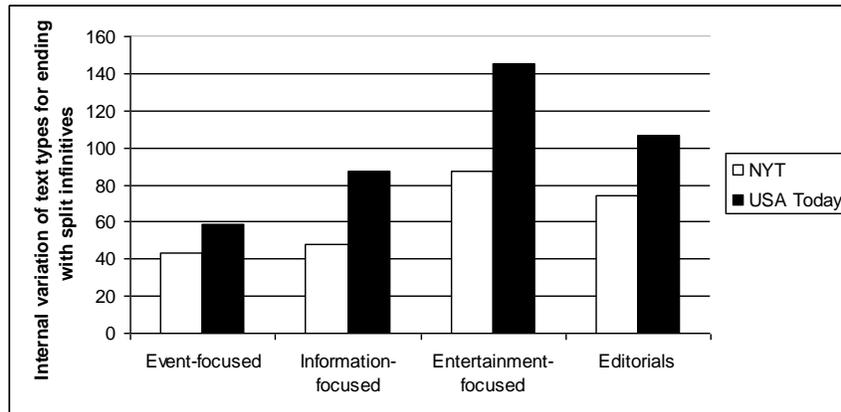
3.3. Splitting the Infinitive

Table 7:
Frequency of Split Infinitive in NYT and USA Today

Text Type	<i>NYT</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Event-focused	43	59
Information-focused	48	87
Entertainment-focused	87	145
Editorials	74	107

Note. Chi-square observed=1.579, Chi-square critical 7.82, df=3, p< 0.05
(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

Figure 3:
Frequency of Splitting Infinitive in NYT and USA Today



(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

Jespersen (1933: 345) argued that the very name of the split infinitive is "misleading, for the preposition *to* no more belongs to the infinitive as a necessary part of it, than the definite article belongs to the substantive." But that descriptive approach is not what usage guides advocate, and splitting infinitive has been vilified for almost three centuries. Many usage handbooks, as Table 4 shows, still give vague advice regarding using it in the written standard.

The regular infinitive construction without split occurs in general more than 4,000 times per million words in each newspaper. The split infinitive occurs in approximately 6% of all infinitive constructions in *NYT* and in almost 10% of all infinitive constructions in *USA Today*. Figure 3 shows the highest frequency of split infinitives occurring in all the sub-registers of *USA Today*. Most of the tokens for the split infinitive in both newspapers are infinitives split by an adverb, and only two infinitives split by the negator *not* in *USA Today*. The rare occurrence of infinitives split by *not* is a somewhat surprising finding given the spread of this construction in spoken media channels (Fitzmaurice 2000a, 2000b).

Here are the two examples of split infinitive by a negator attested in *USA Today*:

- 11) But the team seems *to not be doing* as good a job as the coach wants to believe (*USA Today*, entertainment).
- 12) Also coming under criticism was the policy of the U.S. Border Patrol *to not* take illegal border-crossers into custody when they are injured (*USA Today*, editorial).

These examples, like the rather more common split infinitives by an adverb, show a functional need for a special emphasis. The following are some examples of split infinitives by adverbials:

- 13) The new system for identifying school achievement came after years of community input about how *to fairly assess* the state's public schools in a meaningful way (*NYT*, information).
- 14) The democratic nomination was thought *to all but insure* victory at the polls (*NYT*, event).
- 15) Law enforcement must redouble their efforts to stop underage use of alcohol and tobacco if the goal is *to significantly reduce* illicit drug abuse and addiction (*USA Today*, editorial).

The typical adverbs in the split infinitive construction, as the examples above illustrate, are circumstance adverbials of manner. The split infinitive construction in news language seems to be motivated by a communicative need for emphasis. Arguably, the placement of an adverb or the negator *not* between *to* and the verb focuses them with regard to the adjacent verb adding more "rhetorical effect of emphasis on the connection" (Fitzmaurice 2000b: 180).

The split infinitive seems to have a medium position on the scale of prescriptiveness, which explains the relatively high frequency of this structure compared to the previous strongly dispreferred features. Unlike the previous usage features related to the aesthetic function of language, the use of split infinitive seems to differentiate between the two newspapers with its higher frequency in *USA Today* across all the sub-registers.

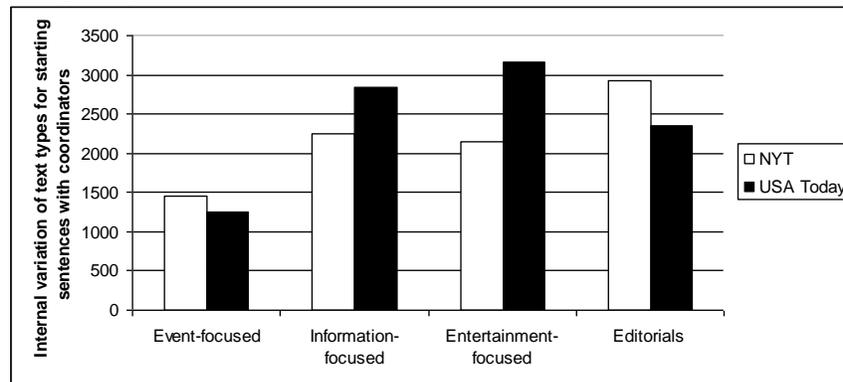
3.4. Starting Sentences with Coordinators

Table 8:
Frequency of Clause-initial Coordinators in NYT and USA Today

Text Type	<i>NYT</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Event-focused	1453	1258
Information-focused	2247	2843
Entertainment-focused	2148	3162
Editorials	2926	2348

Note. Chi-square observed=303.3, Chi-square critical 7.82, df=3, $p < 0.05$
(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

Figure 4:
Frequency of Clause-initial Coordinators in NYT and USA Today

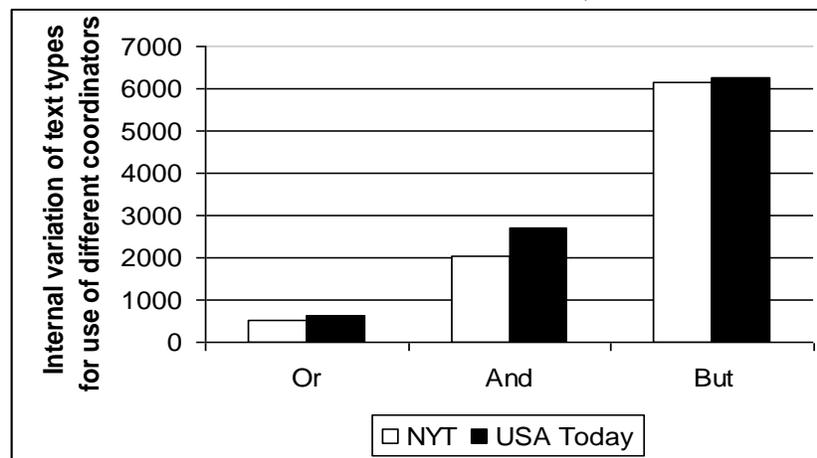


(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

The coordinators (*and*, *but*, *or*) occur generally more than 20,000 times per million words in each of the focal newspapers. As Figure 4 shows, with the exception of event –focused sections, more than 10% of these coordinators occur in clause-initial positions in both newspapers with differences across sub-registers. *NYT* exceeds in the use of this feature in its editorial and event-focused sections whereas *USA Today* has more clause or sentence-initial coordinators in its information and entertainment-focused sections.

Figure 5 shows the frequencies for starting sentences with the three major coordinators (*and*, *but*, *or*) in both papers.

Figure 5:
Frequency of Starting Sentences with Major Coordinators (*or*, *and*, *but*) in *NYT* and *USA Today*



(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

Despite some prescriptive disapproval, utterances with coordinators (*but*, *and*, *or*) introducing a new sentence or paragraph seem to be quite common in newspaper language. This relatively high frequency in both newspapers indicates how the prescriptive injunction against sentence-initial coordinators in journalistic discourse has been overridden to serve other communicative requirements. As Figure 5 shows, *but* has the highest frequency as a sentence-initial, followed by *and* and *or*. Starting a sentence with *but* and *and* seems to be a marker of news style, and using this syntactic marker might be motivated by the desire to give a communicative weight or emphasis to what follows the coordinators. The following examples highlight this extra emphasis when *but* is used as a sentence starter:

16) During pregnancy, a hormone called Relaxin is released into the body to relax the uterus to make room for the growing fetus. *But* this hormone also relaxes all the other connective tissue in the body, like the ligaments and tendons that surround the joints (*USA Today*, information).

17) Clinton was a master at that. *But* we don't have Bill Clinton running for office anymore (*NYT*, editorial).

And and *or* as sentence initials also seem to give an emphatic addition to what follows or signal introducing or moving to a new point as the following examples show:

18) That made things easier, since many of his clients were Senate and Assembly incumbents who were down the hall. *And* what's wrong with that? (*USA Today*, editorial).

19) It was Mr. Sistani who insisted that the elections not be postponed in the face of the Baathist-fascist insurgency. *And* it was Mr. Sistani who ordered Shiites not to retaliate for the Sunni Baathist and jihadist attempts to drag them into a civil war (*NYT*, editorial).

20) That conflict of interest was a direct result of the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act. *Or* consider Enron itself (*NYT*, editorial).

The use of *and*, *but* and *or* as connectives to start sentences first appeared occasionally in newspaper writing in 'quoted' material (Cotter 1996: 264). As the findings of this part of the study show, this usage seems to be a well-established practice in current news language of the two focal papers. These discursal linkers in newspaper writing are used to perform a functionally heavy role in introducing clauses, highlighting certain propositions, and indicating the sequential ordering of events. They also might reflect, as Cotter (1999: 178) argues, the way we use such words in face-to-face discourse pragmatically in order to create coherence in a world of very short paragraphs and limited available space. This feature of spoken interaction can also add a conversational tone to minimize the distance between writers and readers, and it might be a case of a drift towards more oral characteristics and more involved style (Biber and Finegan 1989: 507).

The relatively high frequency of clause-initial coordinators in both newspapers across all the sub-registers (even the more

conservative event-focused section) might be an indication that this rather weakly dispreferred usage has made its way into the standard English of newspaper writing regardless of newspaper type or sub-register.

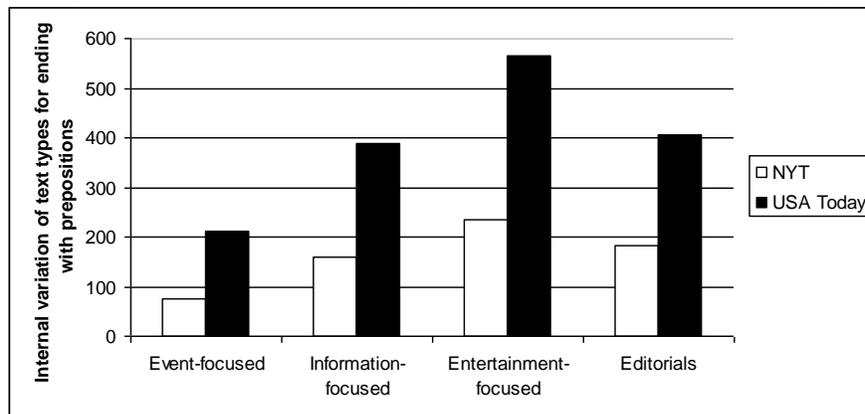
3.5. Stranded Prepositions

Table 9:
Frequency of Clause-final Prepositions in *NYT* and *USA Today*

Text Type	<i>NYT</i>	<i>USA Today</i>
Event-focused	74	213
Information-focused	159	387
Entertainment-focused	236	564
Editorials	184	406

Note. Chi-square observed=2.740, Chi-square critical 7.82, df=3, $p < 0.05$
(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

Figure 6:
Frequency of Clause-final Prepositions in *NYT* and *USA Today*



(Rate per 1,000,000 words)

From Dryden onward, writers who believed that the normative rules of Latin can also be applied to English objected to the so-called stranded preposition construction (Wardhaugh 1999: 119). A preposition is said to be stranded if it is not followed by its

complement or, where the preposition is bound to a preceding verb, by the prepositional object (Biber et al. 1999: 105).

Prepositions belong to a closed set, and they occur more than 100,000 per million words in both newspapers (the commonest being *at, by, for, from, in, of, on, to, with*). More than 50% of all the attested tokens of stranded prepositions in both newspapers were found to end with the prepositions *in* and *on*, followed in frequency by *with, for, of* and *to*, and mainly in relative clauses, coordinated and infinitival complement clauses, and passive constructions.

Figure 6 shows that there are relatively fewer tokens of clause-final prepositions in *NYT. USA Today* in all its sub-registers, especially in the entertainment section, exceeds in the frequency of this mildly dispreferred usage feature. In many cases, it would be hard to rephrase most of the stranded preposition sentences without being redundant or resorting to periphrasis. Due to space constraints, that is not always a feasible option for journalists. Here are some tokens to illustrate this construction from both newspapers:

- 21) Burundi also withdrew, though Uganda has periodically sent troops back *in* (*NYT*, event).
- 22) The administration's handling of the economic crisis had not changed their minds on the candidate they would vote *for* (*NYT*, editorial).
- 23) They become quite agitated if they believe they are being kept in the dark or lied *to* (*USA Today*, editorial).
- 24) Never is there more time to fill and less material to fill it *with* (*USA Today*, entertainment).
- 25) Like many new voices in Hollywood, she is worried about fitting *in* (*USA Today*, entertainment).

Most of the attested examples show that the potential for stranding, as Biber et al. (1999: 106), note, seem to broadly correlate with the distinction between free and bound prepositions. Most of the cases of stranded prepositions attested are often linked or bound to a preceding word, i.e. being part of a multi-word unit whether a prepositional or phrasal (e.g. *weigh in, fit in, count on*, etc.) or have these prepositions as references to certain locations.

The use of stranded preposition seems to be related to newspaper sub-registers. The frequency of this weakly dispreferred usage is higher in the more informal entertainment section and occurs less frequently in the event-focused section. The use of this feature also seems to be strongly related to newspaper type and can possibly serve as a potential style marker to differentiate prestigious and popular newspapers.

4. Discussion: Prescriptive Scale and Actual Use

By comparing the actual use of strongly dispreferred features with the actual use of weakly dispreferred features, I argue that there is a possible influence of overt prescriptiveness on actual use. As the previous sections show, there is a higher frequency of occurrence of usage features that are weakly dispreferred (splitting the infinitive, sentence-final prepositions and sentence-initial coordinators). Apart from the fact that these features are structural in nature and thus are more commonly used, I argue that their higher frequency of occurrence is partly motivated by the fact that there is less prescriptive brake applied to them. Unlike the strongly dispreferred usage features, these features are more below the level of conscious awareness or explicit attention.

Commenting on a correlation, or lack thereof, is reasonable, given the data provided. The interpretation of the results, however, may point to more than merely observing the degree to which newspaper writing correlates with commonly articulated usage rules. If the practices of newspaper writers coincide with the usage practices allowed for by those preparing usage manuals, can we be so sure that newspaper writers are 'heeding' the pronouncements of these handbooks? Not quite, since it is also possible that some of the authors of usage books have been observing what educated writers, including perhaps newspaper writers, are doing in the language. Furthermore, both groups themselves could be observing normative patterns among educated writers. In this scenario, newspaper writers may not necessarily be paying attention to what usage books say but are rather adhering to larger cultural and linguistic norms. This examination of the occurrence of some dispreferred usages in print news media, however, afforded us a

glimpse into the tension between prescriptive norms and the contingencies of communicative needs in the different sub-registers of newspaper language. The existence of a standard variety codified in style and usage manuals does not seem able to completely eradicate dispreferred usages in newspaper register. Standard English of written media is far from being a fixed entity, and linguistic variants are always in existence regardless of usage pronouncements.

5. Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

I am only able to reach my conclusions by means of analysis of a limited number of linguistic features spanning lexical and structural levels. One of the limitations, therefore, is that an inherent selectivity lies within this notion of stylistic specifying, but a study with restricted space requires decisions about which linguistic features to be studied. Another limitation is that the study is restricted to data drawn from only two newspapers. Moreover, even though the corpus of the two newspapers comprises a little more than 9,000,000 words, it is still somewhat limited in size, especially for investigating lexical usage (e.g. functional shifting and modifying absolute adjectives). The corpus used for the study could be further expanded by including texts from other large national prestige and popular newspapers.

As for directions for further research, with a larger corpus, it would be interesting to conduct a study on the vocabulary of 'journalese,' defined as certain lexical locutions and structures regarded as typical of newspaper language (Wilson, 1993). Such lexical study is an important aspect of a full stylistic analysis of newspaper language.

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