

Abbreviations in Newspaper Headlines: A Linguistic Study

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Abstract:

Abbreviations, one of the minor forms of word formation, studied under 'Morphology' in the discipline of Linguistics, are extensively used by the people of every age group in different fields of knowledge. It is hard to imagine any field without the use of abbreviations. The language of the journalistic register has always attracted attention of researchers. Newspaper headlines have been studied from different perspectives. As formation of abbreviated words is a linguistic process, this study deals with the classification of abbreviated forms of the names of persons and places used in the Indian newspaper headlines of the daily The Times of India (TOI). The study not only notes the creativity and innovativeness in newspaper headlines against the constraint of space but also points towards linguistic patterns and their frequency in the formation of abbreviated forms.

Keywords: *Abbreviations, Acronyms, Pronunciation, The Times of India, Word formation processes.*

Introduction

Nowadays abbreviations have occupied almost every field of knowledge. The governments in a country like India and its states are either run by the UPA or the NDA, the LDF or the UDF. The political parties in India are AIMIM, BJP, DMK, NC, NCP and TMC, to name a few. A government resolution is a GR. The schemes launched by the government are AMMA, GOBAR, KAUSHAL and SAKSHAM, for instance. The youngsters know the films as JJWS, MPK, MP3, RHTDM and HAHK. They also watch 'H₂O' (a 2002 Kannada-Tamil bilingual film). They are either on FB or Insta. They communicate when TINA, TIA is the message received and they assure CUL&r. Use of acronyms is very common in intra-family communication as well. Dasgupta (2004) observes that the frequent use of abbreviations across all domains of the modern use of language is to save our valuable time but paradoxically we lose our precious time in learning and relearning standard lists of abbreviations (p.12). Another reason for using abbreviated forms is space and character limit for texting (SMSes) and social media sites like 'X' (previously Tweeter). Urgency of communicating a message and availability of time with senders and receivers are also other reasons for the use of abbreviations. Abbreviations are also used as mnemonic devices, that is, they help you in remembering words, phrases, etc. (Mohanraj and Mohanraj, 2001). Thus, abbreviations are used in almost every sphere of life. Each field has its own pattern of using abbreviated forms and the journalistic register is no exception to it.

Types of Abbreviations

An abbreviation is a shortened form of a word or phrase used freely in almost every kind of writing like reference works, bibliographies, military and technical writing (Mohanraj and Mohanraj, 2001). The NTC's Dictionary of Acronyms and Abbreviations compiled by Kleinedler (1998) includes acronyms and abbreviations that appear on food packaging, in the sports and financial pages of newspapers, in recipes, in telephone books, in hardware stores, and in a hundred other places. The term "abbreviation" includes initialisms, blends, clippings, and shortened written forms (Kleinedler, 1998). Abbreviations are generally formed from the initial letters of a term and usually use all capitals as in AIDS. Articles, conjunctions, and prepositions are usually not part of abbreviations, e.g. EFLU (The English and Foreign Languages University).

Kafi (1991) has classified abbreviations into four major and five minor classes. The major classes include 'initialism', 'acronym', 'clipping' and 'blending' and the minor classes include combination of two or more of these major classes like 'initialism and acronym' and 'initialism and clipping', for example (Kafi, 1991 as cited in Falahati, 2016). Abbreviations like SBI and HDFC pronounced letter by letter are called initialisms. An initialism is made up of the first letter or letters of one or more words. The resulting letters are not pronounced as a word, but are sounded out one by one as is CBI 'central bureau of investigation' and FDI 'foreign direct investment'. An initialism also can be formed from the first letters of the syllables of long polysyllabic words as in DDT, 'dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane,' an insecticide (Kleinedler, 1998).

An acronym is a shortened form of a compound or a phrase where the initial letters are pronounced as if they spelled a single word (Kleinedler, 1998). Many acronyms like scuba (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus) are pronounced as words and they lose their capitals to become everyday terms like laser, radar and scuba (Yule, 2016). In fact, acronyms have become part of language vocabulary (Mohanraj and Mohanraj, 2001). Words that are formed from the beginnings of two or more words, such as pixel from picture and element, are also acronyms (Kleinedler, 1998). Recent innovations in banking such as the *ATM* ('automatic teller machine') and the required *PIN* ('personal identification number') are regularly heard with one of their elements repeated, as in *I sometimes forget my PIN number when I go to the ATM machine* (Yule, 2016). Acronyms pronounced as sequences of letters can be called 'alphabetisms' (Quirk, et al, 2010).

The pronunciation of individual abbreviations is not predictable and must be treated on a word-by-word basis (Cambridge English Pronouncing Dictionary, 2003) (CEPD, 2003). Some titles always abbreviated and used with proper names, e.g. Dr, Mr, Mrs, Ms are spoken in full while some may be pronounced the way it is written as in Bros. (brothers) and some are pronounced as they are spelt (CEPD, 2003). Different punctuation marks are used with abbreviations depending on what we are abbreviating. Most general abbreviations in a technical text usually end with a full stop, e.g. Jan. vol. univ. pl. jr. dept. whereas clippings like chemo, photo and exam are used without full stops. Similarly, slashes are used in abbreviated forms like 'a/c' and 'w/o'.

Literature Review

Many scholars have studied abbreviations linguistically. In one of the detailed studies on abbreviations, Cannon (1989) takes a review of the history of abbreviations in the English language. Taking note of the criticism against the use of initialisms by some scholars and newspapers, he mentions the growth of numerous dictionaries on initialisms. In his sources 70 acronyms (54%) are proper nouns which include seventeen names of organisations, committees, government with multiple omissions of function words like prepositions as is TESL. Graphemically, his abbreviations from different fields consist of 1-5 letters. He concludes that the vast number of initialisms is expanding at ever-higher rates and that they are moving ever more easily and quickly into general English. In their study of sports headlines in a non-Iranian (*The Times*) and an Iranian (*Tehran Times*) newspapers Roohani and Esmaeili (2010) found the similarities in the use of verbs, voice, tense and types of functional sentences and differences in types of modifications, sentences and nouns. In their psycholinguistic research on naming of acronyms Izura and Playfoot (2012) investigated the lexico-semantic properties of 146 acronyms with the help of 120 English native speakers (34 males and 86 females). The study dealt with number of syllables and number of letters of acronyms and print to pronunciation patterns. The study also took into account classification of acronyms based on the pronunciation as typically and atypically pronounced acronyms. The researchers conclude that acronym reading requires a mechanism for reading in which letters are processed individually.

In the study by Tereszkiwicz (2012) of syntactic and lexical properties of headlines in British and German newspapers, it was found that hard news headlines carry out the informative and summarising functions whereas soft news headlines focus on the appeal to the readers and exploit word play, puns, or intertextuality and interactivity. Taking into account the ever-increasing accessibility of newspapers to the language practitioners and the semantic and pragmatic functions

of the newspaper headlines in shaping the public opinion, a contrastive textual analysis of the select editorial headlines of the English newspaper, *The New York Times*, and those of Persian newspaper, *Tehran Times* was carried out by Bonyadi and Samuel (2013). The study revealed that headlines in the two newspapers presented a subjective attitude of the writers (newspapers) toward the topic and there were certain differences between the two sets of headlines in terms of Presupposition, and certain Rhetorical devices. After comparatively studying the frequency of use of abbreviations in two Iranian newspapers - *Etela'at* and *Keyhan* in Persian language and one Indian newspaper – *Bangalore Mirror*, in English published on Sep. 25, 2015, Falaheti (2016) concludes that Indian newspapers comparatively use more short forms as there is no scope for formation of acronyms in Persian language. The study focuses only on frequency and it doesn't mention examples.

Thus, apart from the studies on proportion and classification of abbreviations, newspaper headlines have been mostly studied for structures, punctuation marks and length. Hence, this study aims to deal with patterns of abbreviation formation in newspaper headlines.

Research Problem

The use of abbreviations is found in every field of knowledge. The previous studies on the newspaper headlines mostly focus on the aspects like the length of headlines, grammatical structure of headlines and use of punctuation marks in the headlines. Owing to the registral features of journalistic writing, the abbreviations used in newspapers differ from those in other types of printed materials, for example, the codes used for Indian railway stations. The patterns of abbreviations in newspaper headlines may also differ. Hence, the main objective of this research is to study linguistically the process of formation of abbreviations in the newspaper headlines.

Research Questions

This study investigates the following research questions.

- 1) Why is the use of abbreviations preferred in newspaper headlines?
- 2) What abbreviation patterns are used for names of persons and places in newspaper headlines?
- 3) Which sub-category of abbreviations is used most in the newspaper headlines?

Research Methodology

a) Corpus

News reports are classified as informal reports and use of abbreviated forms of words and phrases also indicate informal writing. On almost every page of newspapers we come across a large number of abbreviated forms. Merriam Webster's Dictionary (2023) defines an abbreviation as a shortened form of a written word or phrase used to save space and time and to avoid repetition of long words and phrases. The abbreviations studied in this article are 'Shortened Written Forms' as mentioned in Kleinedler (1998). Such abbreviations are not usually pronounced and (in newspaper headlines) they do not end with a full stop. As the words added to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) are taken from local English-language newspapers (see Salazar, 2014, p. 99), this research prefers to study abbreviations from Indian newspapers in English.

Almost all newspapers published in English from India use abbreviations. However, it is commonly noticed that compared to a British newspaper like *The Guardian* or Indian newspapers like *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* and *The Hindustan Times*, *The Times of India* (TOI hereafter) uses relatively more abbreviations in its headlines. Besides, TOI asserts its use of abbreviations by encouraging readers through competition to find out the abbreviations used in its daily issues and give prizes for it [see 5 Abbreviations help you win BIG! (TOI, Dec 19, 2019, p.19)]. Hence TOI has been selected for this linguistic study of abbreviations - one of the minor processes of word formation in English.

b) Data Collection

In the previous studies reviewed above, data from more than one newspaper was used. This study delimits to the corpus of news headlines from the daily TOI. All the examples studied here are from the print edition of TOI and Sunday Times of India (STOI), Pune during the years 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021. In addition, a couple of examples date back to 2016. The headlines of editorials and articles are beyond the scope of this article. The source of abbreviated forms used in newspapers do not come under purview of this study.

Data Analysis

Abbreviations are one of the most used minor forms of word formation in newspapers. As among the proper nouns, the names of organisations are abbreviated by omission of function words (e.g. TEFL, EFLU) and are common to almost all forms of writing, the present study is limited to the abbreviations of names of persons and places in newspaper headlines. This research classifies abbreviations on the lines of a study by Tasildar (2021).

A) Types of abbreviations for the names of the persons

i) Initialisms

- (1) PC arrested amid high drama, 90 min after he emerges to address media (Aug 22, 2019, p.1)
- (2) Capt appoints PK his principal adviser (Mar 2, 2021, p.10)
- (3) BSY takes oath for 4th time, to prove majority on Monday (July 27, 2019, p. 1)
- (4) Biden outraged, but MbS gets free pass for Khashoggi killing (Feb 28, 2021, p.12)

ii) First letter, third and fourth letters (e.g. Aishwarya)

- (5) Ash, daughter test –ve, home (July 28, 2020, p. 1)

iii) First two letters of first name and first two letters of surname

- (6) BoJo for stronger India ties, greater role in Indo-Pacific (Mar 17, 2021, p.8)
- (7) CBI moves court for sanction to attach NiMo's properties (Aug 29, 2019, p. 8)

iv) Names of two persons (e.g. sportspersons)

- (8) Inglorious Exit for Lee-Bops (Aug 7, 2016, p. 24)
- (9) SanTina marches into semifinals (Oct 29, 2016)

v) Couple names (either beginning with female or male name)

- (10) Priyanka likes 'Prick' as our couple nickname: Nick (*Pune Times*, Sept 10, 2018, p.1)
- (11) Life comes Full Circle for Nickyanka at the Gala (*Pune Times*, May 8, 2019, p.1)

vi) First five letters

- (12) Kejri to be sworn in on Feb 16, all ministers may be retained outlets (Feb 13, 2020, p. 7)

vii) Informal or nicknames

- (13) Diggy uses sadhus to fight Sadhvi, gives Cong a bold shade of saffron (May 9, 2019, p.7)
- (14) Plea to ban Sanatan sent to Chidu in 2011: Chavan (Aug 24, 2018, p.4)

Here one may notice that four examples 1 to 4 are of initialisms, abbreviated forms in four examples 5, 12, 13 and 14 are of clipping with some difference. Similarly, the remaining six examples (6 to 11) are abbreviations like pixel where combination of two minor processes of clipping and blending is seen.

B) Types of abbreviations for the names of the places (countries, states and cities)

a) Initialisms

- (15) Desi cabbie is NZ woman cop (Apr 18, 2021, p. 8)
- (16) United to make Delhi-SFO flight a year-round daily from Dec 5 (Aug 23, 2019,

p.10)

- b) First letter and any two letters (excluding the last letter)
 - (17) Court orders FIR against Hry BJP min outlets (June 4, 2019)
- c) First two letters
 - (18) US def secy meets Af prez amid peace talks (Mar 22, 2021, p.11)
- d) First two and the last letter
 - (19) AAP to Cong: Make Haryana, Chd seats part of Delhi pact (April 7, 2019, p.15)
 - (20) Mum-Ahd pvt train from Nov (Aug 29, 2019, p. 01)
- e) First two letters of the word and the third or the last letter
 - (21) Hyd firm's IPO subscribed 201x (Mar 6, 2021, p.1)
- f) First three letters
 - (22) BSF prevents Pak drones from entering Indian territory (Apr 25, 2021, p. 7)
 - (23) Raj, Kerala, K'taka top Niti's first school edu rankings (Sept 29, 2019, p. 9)
- g) First four letters
 - (24) Maha cabinet OKs 5-day week for govt staff (Feb 13, 2020, p.1)
- h) First letter, apostrophe and the last three or four letters or more letters
 - (25) B'desh slams China over Quad warning (May 12, 2021, p.7)
 - (26) 10 Naxals die in encounter in C'garh forest (Feb 8, 2019, p.9)
 - (27) 1L cases each in AP, K'taka; nat'l toll 33k (July 28, 2020, p. 1)
 - (28) M'rashtra economy grew at 5.7%, lowest in 8 years: Survey (Mar 6, 2020, p.1)
 - (29) H'bad co MTAR Tech's IPO subscribed 201x (Mar 6, 2021, p.19)
 - (30) M'luru girl Srinidhi beats 80 contestants to win Miss Supranational 2016 title (Dec 04, 2016, p. 12)
 - (31) 'Local boy' cruises home in Kol seat Didi left for N'gram (May 03, 2021, p. 9)
- i) Any three letters from the word, beginning with the first letter and not ending with the last letter
 - (32) Mumbai-Delhi plane flies 3.5 hours, lands in Lko with 5 mins of fuel left (July 17, 2019, p. 1)
 - (33) Gzb covid patient gets lungs, Mum girl arms from dead man in Chennai (Aug 29, 2020, p.1)
 - (34) IIT-Kgp professor suspended for abusing SC/ST students (May 13, 2021, p. 9)
- j) First letter, any middle letter and last letter (only consonants)
 - (35) Chinese held for illegal entry ran Ggn hotel (June 12, 2021, p.1)
- k) Totally different abbreviation
 - (36) Quad meet most significant to protect country's security: Oz PM (Mar 17, 2021, p.8)

Here we come across two examples of initialisms in 15 and 16 and seven examples of clippings in 18 to 24. The thirteen examples of different types of shortened forms of words are relatively more in proportion to other forms of abbreviations. The first one is in 17. In examples 25 to 31 the words have been shortened by using the punctuation mark 'apostrophe'. The examples in 32 to 35 are also of shortened words. The last example in 36 is a totally different one.

Main Findings

Some major observations in the process of formation of abbreviations are given below.

- A. In initialisms used for names of persons, initial capital letters are taken into account as 'PK' stands for Prashant Kishore (2) whereas the abbreviation used for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in TOI is 'Mbs' (4) where the medial capital letter is replaced by the small letter. In this study of newspaper headlines abbreviated forms of family names were not found.
- B. There are some differences in the conventions used for names of countries, states and cities. Initialisms are also preferred mostly for names of countries like NZ and US. However, the abbreviated form for the Indian state of Haryana is 'Hry' (17) and Australia is 'Oz' (36). In the

former the last letter has been excluded whereas in the latter the abbreviated form is totally different.

- C. Initialisms used for the names of persons are usual as in BSY (3) but for the names places there is a slight difference as in SFO (16). Here the last letter of the word has been included and that too in capital.
- D. The different types of abbreviations for the names of countries and cities are used in the same headlines.
 - (37) Bid to ease citizenship process for Af, Pak, B'desh minorities (May 30, 2021, p. 9)
 - (38) Mum-Ahd pvt_train from Nov (Aug 29, 2019, p. 01)
- E. Abbreviations are used to save needless repetitions, space, and time (Mohanraj and Mohanraj, 2001). The purpose of using abbreviations in a newspaper is to give more information on a page, and to speed up reading. The constraint of space compels the section editors to use abbreviations and acronyms. Abbreviated forms in newspaper headlines depend on the availability of space (number of newspaper columns in print editions) for headlines. It is reflected in the following examples.
 - (39) Maha cabinet OKs 5-day week for govt staff (Feb 13, 2020, p.1)
 - (40) M'rashtra economy grew at 5.7%, lowest in 8 years: Survey (Mar 6, 2020, p.1)
- F. Similarly, it is interesting to note that for the same news item on different pages the abbreviations used for 'Hyderabad' are different.
 - (41) Hyd firm's IPO subscribed 201x (Mar 6, 2021, p.1)
 - (42) H'bad co MTAR Tech's IPO subscribed 201x (Mar 6, 2021, p.19)
- G. There is a clear distinction made between 'Chandigarh' and 'Chattisgarh'. 'Chd' for the city and 'C'garh' for the state.
 - (43) AAP to Cong: Make Haryana, Chd seats part of Delhi pact (April 7, 2019, p.15)
 - (44) 10 Naxals die in encounter in C'garh forest (Feb 8, 2019, p. 9)
- H. The abbreviations in newspaper headlines range from two letters to a maximum of six letters. Almost all the abbreviations begin with the first letter of the word and end with the last letter of the word (though there is difference in the number of letters). There are exceptions like Ash (5). Such abbreviations are read as they are written, e.g. Ash /æf/ for Aishwarya (5). Though some abbreviations do not end either with the last letter or with the last sound as in Af and Pak (37), yet are read as full words. Some abbreviations like AP and NZ are also usually read as full words. Some abbreviations are either difficult to read aloud or pronounce when a reader comes across them for the first time as Lko for Lucknow (32) and Gzb for Ghaziabad (33), for instance. Here Lko is the Air Traffic Association (ATA) code while Gzb is not an ATA code.
- I. In formal writing like research articles abbreviations are given in the brackets after the full form used for the first time whereas in newspaper headlines studied here, we directly come across abbreviations and after reading the content of the news we are able to understand what the abbreviations stand for as in 'SFO' for San Francisco (16), 'Hry' for 'Haryana' (17) and 'Ggn' for 'Gurgaon (now Gurugram) (35). Here as well SFO is an ATA code while other abbreviations are not ATA codes. Such abbreviations do not end with the last letter, these not only pose challenges of reading comprehension but also create problems in pronunciation (reading aloud) and are stumbling blocks for reading speed.

Thus, we find certain unwritten rules for the abbreviated forms used in the print edition of TOI headlines.

Conclusions

One can notice that perhaps the ease of abbreviating words has given some scope for the creation of neologisms as in examples 6 to 11. The formation of all types of abbreviations appears to be a reductive mechanical process rather than a creative process. All the words studied here are curtailed by the deletion of letters resulting in the change in spelling but not in the pronunciation every time. The usual process like reduction of a syllable or ellipsis of a vowel sound is not generally noticed in the words abbreviated in newspaper headlines. Here the purpose of shortening is not to reduce any polysyllabic word to a monosyllabic word. According to Rúa (2005) the use of abbreviating devices is a language specific quality that depends on its morphological, orthographic and phonotactic peculiarities and English is prone to initialisation (p. 153).

Abbreviations are used extensively in the newspaper headlines. Among the sub-categories, shortened forms of words are the most preferred forms (around 36%) of abbreviations. The next frequently used abbreviations in the newspaper headlines are clippings. They are around 30%. In the newspaper headlines considered here we find that clippings for names of persons and places are unique and innovatively used. Though blends save space, these are not used separately. These are used in combination with clippings. Their proportion is around 17%. We also find use of initialisms in newspaper headlines. Since this study considers select examples of initialisms from newspaper headlines, its frequency cannot be defined here.

A list of abbreviations used in formal writing is generally provided as in the user guides of learner's dictionaries. Besides, these dictionaries are quick with their updates in relation to abbreviations popular mostly among the teenagers. The OED has updated itself to the digital age and added a number of acronyms used extensively on social media and by text-addicts. Some examples are JK (Just kidding), GTG (Get to go), TTYL (Talk to you later), TBH (to be honest) and l8r (later) (TOI, July 8, 2016, p. 13). Nevertheless, clippings for names of persons are yet to find a place in the dictionaries. There is a need to prepare a glossary of abbreviations used in newspapers. Though there are some sources like NTC's dictionary (Kleinedler, 1998), such a list can be updated regularly as most of the abbreviated forms in newspaper headlines being open class words, new abbreviations are created almost every day.

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