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# **RAHEEM STERLING IN BRITISH NEWS MEDIA**

A linguistic discourse analytical approach

Faculty of Information Technology and Communication Sciences

Bachelor's Thesis

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

Miika Sutinen: Raheem Sterling in British news media: A linguistic discourse analytical approach  
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Tämä kandidaatintutkielma tarkastelee brittiläisten sanomalehtien ja verkkojulkaisujen uutisointia jalkapalloilija Raheem Sterlingiä koskien. Sterling herätti huomiota toukokuussa 2018 jaettuaan kuvan rynnäkkökivääriä esittävästä tatuoinnistaan sosiaalisen median palvelu Instagramissa, sekä *The Sun* -lehden julkaistua samankaltaisen kuvan etusivullaan. Tutkimus pyrkii vastaamaan seuraaviin kysymyksiin: 1) Minkälaisia kielellisiä piirteitä ja diskurssistrategioita on esillä brittiläisten sanomalehtien uutisoinnissa koskien Raheem Sterlingiä? 2) Minkälaisia kuvauksia nämä piirteet ja strategiat luovat Sterlingistä?

Tutkimuksen teoreettisen viitekehyksen muodostavat Bellin teoria uutismedioiden kielestä, Fairclough'n teoria mediadiskurssista, sekä van Dijkin teoriat uutisdiskurssista sekä diskurssianalyysistä.

Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu yhdestätoista uutisartikkelista koskien jalkapalloilija Raheem Sterlingiä ja hänen rynnäkkökivääritatuointiaan. Artikkelit ovat peräisin viidestä eri sanomalehdestä, sekä näiden lehtien verkkojulkaisuista. Aineistoanalyysissä keskitytään tarkastelemaan artikkeleita kielitieteellisestä näkökulmasta, tutkien lauseiden rakenteita ja sanajärjestystä, verbilausekkeita sekä artikkelien sisältöjen asettelua ja järjestystä.

Tutkimustuloksista selviää, että laatulehdistön ja populaarilehdistön uutisoinneissa on huomattava ero. Laatulehdet muun muassa käyttivät neutraaleja verbejä, kuten *say* (sanoa) ja *write* (kirjoittaa), kuvatessaan Sterlingin kommentteja ja lausuntoja tatuointiin liittyen. Populaarilehdet *Daily Mail* ja *Daily Mirror* puolestaan käyttivät verbejä kuten *claim* (väittää) ja *insist* (intää), jotka kuvaavat Sterlingin lausuntoja mielipiteinä eikä tosiasioina, ja näin ollen mahdollisesti kyseenalaistavat Sterlingin uskottavuuden. Lisäksi populaarilehdet käyttivät laatulehtiä enemmän passiivirakenteita kuvaillessaan Sterlingistä ja hänen tatuoinnistaan otettuja kuvia ja niiden leviämistä, minkä vuoksi kuvien lähteet – Sterlingin Instagram-julkaisu sekä *The Sun* -lehden julkaisema artikkeli – jätettiin usein mainitsematta.

Avainsanat: press, media language, discourse analysis, news discourse, representation, Raheem Sterling

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# ABSTRACT

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This Bachelor's thesis examines news reports about Raheem Sterling in British print and online media. Sterling aroused attention in May 2018 after sharing a picture of his assault rifle tattoo on the social media platform Instagram, and after *The Sun* published a similar picture on its front page. The study attempts to address the following questions: 1) What kind of linguistic features and discourse strategies are present in news reporting in British print and online media about Raheem Sterling? 2) What kind of representations do these features and strategies create?

The theoretical framework of the study is based on Bell's theory of language of news media, Fairclough's theory of media discourse, and van Dijk's theories of news discourse and discourse analysis. The research material consists of eleven news articles about Raheem Sterling and his assault rifle tattoo. The articles are from five different newspapers and their online releases. The analysis of the material focuses on inspecting the articles from the point of view of linguistics, examining sentence structure and word order, verb phrases, and the overall structure and ordering of the contents of the articles.

The results of the study show that there is a notable difference in reporting between the quality press and the popular press. The quality papers used neutral verbs such as *say* and *write* when describing Sterling's comments and statements regarding his tattoo. The popular papers, however, used verbs such as *claim* and *insist*, which portray Sterling's statements as opinions rather than facts, and thus potentially undermine Sterling's credibility. Furthermore, the popular papers used passive constructions more frequently than the quality papers when describing the pictures of Sterling and his tattoo, which often left the sources of the pictures – Sterling's Instagram post and the article on *The Sun* – unmentioned.

Keywords: press, media language, discourse analysis, news discourse, representation, Raheem Sterling

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## 1 Introduction

Raheem Sterling is an English footballer born in Jamaica in 1994, who plays for the England men's national team and Manchester City Football Club. Despite his young age, Sterling has received media attention throughout his professional career, for his efforts and performances on the football pitch, as well as for his private life outside of it. News reporting on sports as well as celebrity gossip around footballers is very ordinary in the British press, yet Sterling seems to have been the subject of news stories a lot more frequently than many of his peers and colleagues in recent years. Despite this, no academic research seems to exist on media coverage regarding Sterling.

This study aims to examine and analyze news reporting about Raheem Sterling from several UK-based newspapers and their online news websites. Based on theories of discourse analysis, and theories of language and discourse in media, the study attempts to discover what kind of linguistic and discourse conventions are used in news reporting about Sterling, and what kinds of representations the use of these conventions creates. The goal is to investigate if there are any notable differences, or even biases, between the reporting of different news outlets.

The material for the analysis consists of 11 news articles from five newspapers and their online affiliates: *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, and *Daily Mirror*. On May 28, 2018, Raheem Sterling posted a picture of himself on the social media platform Instagram, with a tattoo representing an assault rifle on his calf visible in the picture. On the following day, UK newspaper *The Sun* put a picture of Sterling's calf on its front page, accompanied with the headline "Raheem shoots himself in foot", and a story which included comments from anti-gun campaigners demanding Sterling to be removed from the England national team. All 11 articles studied here revolve around the tattoo and the subsequent article by *The Sun*. While the total number of articles is quite small, and any results should be treated

accordingly, the fact that all articles share a common topic is beneficial for the comparison of reporting and portrayal between different newspapers.

This thesis consists of five sections. Following this introduction, a literature review will be provided in section two, containing relevant theory on media language and discourse analysis. The third section will introduce the methodology of the study, as well as the study material. The fourth section contains the results of the analysis, including examples from the study material. The final section consists of a discussion of the results, and a tentative evaluation of any prospects for subsequent studies on the same or similar subjects.

## **2 Literature review**

This section introduces relevant theory on news discourse and discourse analysis, as well as the differences between broadsheet and tabloid format newspapers.

### **2.1 Language and power in media**

News is most often our sole source for information about current events, and many people regard news as the undeniable, objective truth. As Webb points out, mass media is capable of presenting things precisely as they are (2009, 107). While it is possible for news media to be completely objective, this is most often not the case. Van Leeuwen sees the social function of journalism both as objective and subjective, capable of both impartiality and social control (qtd. in Fairclough 1995, 86). On the other side of this spectrum of objectivity versus subjectivity, news can be seen as a frame within which the social world is constructed, rather than a picture of reality (van Dijk 1988b, 7–8). Webb also acknowledges that what is "true, right or accurate" is so only when it fits a certain perspective (2009, 7), and quoting Bourdieu, states that media often provides a dominant, mainstream perspective, rather than an objective one (ibid. 107).

News is not only subjective, but often a one-way affair in terms of the flow of information. Media is in monologue when transmitting news, and the audience of this

monologue most often cannot directly or instantly respond to it, at least in traditional press and broadcast media (Fairclough 1995, 40). Bell additionally acknowledges the importance of language in this uneven relationship, where media is the dominant presenter and user of language (1991, 1). News media is often aware of this, and of their audience, having the ability to shape the language they use according to the specific audience (ibid. 7; 89). Being in the dominant position of this transaction, media holds substantial power.

Fairclough uses a rather extreme example to display the power of media, the victorious election of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy in 1994 (1995, 1). Owning three television channels, Berlusconi was able to promote his party for a mass audience very effectively in a short period of time. Not always is the use of power in media this obvious. News executives especially have an influential role prescribing the ideologies, guidelines, and the language their subordinates such as editors and journalists use, even though the executives themselves are rarely seen or heard in print or broadcast news (Bell 1991, 40). The power that media hold, then, is strongly tied to actions and use of language.

## **2.2 Discourse analysis**

Brown and Yule explain the term discourse as “language in use” (1983, 1). Fairclough gives a more specific explanation on the same basis, stating that discourse is language used when "representing a given social practice", in a certain context, and from a certain point of view (1995, 56). A scientist, for example, may explain the same thing very differently to a colleague, and to a friend who is not an expert in the same academic field. Several other definitions exist, since the term is involved in multiple different academic disciplines. In addition to Brown and Yule's definition, discourse is often seen in linguistics as "anything beyond the sentence" (Tannen et al. 2015, 1). This is not to say that individual sentences or smaller elements within those sentences are irrelevant for discourse, but that the relationship of more than one sentence make new meanings, and these meanings can be multiple and varied (ibid. 7). Fairclough

provides a further explanation, stating that discourse is the relation between linguistic elements and choices, and the ideological meaning these elements and choices make (Fairclough 1995, 25). Additionally, the word *discourse* often appears as a count noun, and several discourses are listed, categorized, and compared by their properties (Tannen et al 2015, 1; Fairclough 1995, 18–19).

It is this diversity of meanings, contexts, and points-of-view that often interest linguists conducting discourse analysis. Linguists study the meaning-making by examining different aspects of the language used, such as lexical items, positioning and ordering of information (Cotter 2015, 797), and what is explicit and what implicit (Fairclough 1995, 108). Revealing biases and power relations is often a primary objective in discourse analysis (Cotter 2015, 797). Since news media work according to their own ideologies, and hold significant power, news texts are often the subject of discourse analysis.

### **2.3 News Discourse**

According to van Dijk, news does not project a picture of reality - be that picture biased or non-biased - but a frame within which the "social world is routinely constructed" (1988b, 7–8). This frame, and the contents of it, depend heavily on the reporters and media institutions who produce and distribute news (ibid.). In other words, news is always written from a point of view, regardless of how neutral it may seem to the reader.

#### **2.3.1 Sentence syntax**

According to van Dijk (1988a, 11), it is possible for the perspective of the newspaper or journalist to come across through sentence syntax. Word order, the position of subject and object, as well as activity and/or passivity are ways in which the roles of the participants are described in a sentence. In a process of passivization, the subject and the object of the canonical word order of English are reversed. To use an example from van Dijk (1988a), the sentence "Democrats cut funding on schools" appears in what Birner calls the canonical word order, or



CWO (Birner 2012, 228). In this sentence, "Democrats" is the subject and the agent of the sentence, "cut" is the verb, and "funding on schools" is the object and the patient. A passivized form of the same sentence with the same syntactic meaning would read "Funding on schools (is) cut by Democrats". Here, "Democrats" is still in the role of agent, but the reversal of the CWO has made it the object, whereas "funding on schools" is now the subject of the sentence. In this study, these kinds of constructions are referred to as agented passives. Moreover, a sentence such as "Funding on schools (is) cut" has the object (and thus the agent) completely omitted, yet grammatically it would function perfectly well in what is called an agentless passive construction. It should be noted that the auxiliary verb "is" would be required in spoken language and written prose but would most likely be omitted in newspaper headlines.

According to Birner, passivization is a process used to structure and arrange information so that old or given information is mentioned before new information (*ibid.*). In passive sentences, then, the subject noun phrase (NP) should not be newer or "less familiar" information than the by-phrase NP (*ibid.* 229). Bell indicates that in news reporting, passivization can be used to rearrange relevant actors to the beginning of a sentence (1991, 180). In Bell's example sentence, "Two Aborigines have been found dead...", passivization is likely the only way to place the relevant event, the death of two Aborigine inmates, to the beginning of the sentence. Otherwise less relevant actors would appear before the more important ones (*cf.* "Prison guards find two Aborigines dead"). Van Dijk, on the other hand, notes that passivization can also be an ideological choice, as he indicates that in his example sentences, the agented passive construction puts emphasis on the funding on schools being cut rather than the democrats, and moreover, that an agentless passive could be used to avoid blaming someone, or anyone, for the decrease in funding of schools (1988a, 11). Similarly, Fairclough states that passivization may be ideologically motivated, allowing for agency to be "systematically backgrounded or elided" (1995, 26). Quoting research by Trew, Fairclough

points out that in an article from *The Times* about police shootings in Zimbabwe, the role of the police was postposed and passivized in both the headline and the lead (Trew, qtd. in Fairclough 1995, 26). Passivization and passive constructions, then, are important factors when discussing ideologies in newspaper texts.

### **2.3.2 Structures of sentence sequences and coherence**

Ideologies are not constructed solely on the level of single sentences, but between multiple sentences as well (van Dijk 1988a, 11–12). The structures of these sentence sequences often affect the interpretations of individual sentences within them, and a sequence also requires coherence for its contents to be understandable within the relevant context. Sequences of multiple sentences are subject to what van Dijk calls coherence conditions (1998, 190), which can be divided into conditional relations between the facts introduced in the sentences, and functional relations (e.g. generalization, specification, contrast) within propositions.

One way to indicate coherence is through the properties of cohesion. One of these properties is referential devices, which are used to refer to something previously mentioned, whilst avoiding repetition. In our previous example, the agent "Democrats" could be substituted in a following sentence with the pronoun "they", or by a new description referring to the same agent, such as "the party". Van Dijk notes that coherence often depends on previous knowledge and beliefs of "what is possible in the world" (1988a, 11–12.), but can also be an ideological process (1998, 190-191). With this in mind, it is often the case that journalists similarly rely on the readers' knowledge and ability to understand coherence, as well as a typical script of a news report.

### **2.3.3 Macrostructures and topics**

The previously introduced aspects of sentence syntax and sentence structure could be categorized under what van Dijk calls microstructures, or local structures (1988a, 17; 1988b, 26). While these microstructures together make comprehensive sentences to tell or report about

something, the overall topic or theme "must be accounted for" on a global level, rather than a local one (van Dijk 1988a, 13). In van Dijk's example, the two specific propositions "U.S. planes flew to Libya. They bombed the harbor of Benghazi..." fall under a wider macroproposition "The U.S. attacked Libya". Macropropositions and -structures again make use of our previous knowledge to make the connection between planes flying to and bombing Libya to it being an attack (ibid. 14). Additionally, van Dijk (ibid.) points out that the topic is often what a reader remembers after reading a news report, rather than an individual sentence or a word. This is largely due to the structuring of the entire text, or the superstructure.

### **2.3.4 Superstructures and schemata**

The organization of a text in its entirety is determined by a schematic superstructure. A schema consists of different categories which are considered typical or essential for it. Referring to Labov, van Dijk states that a narrative schema containing the categories Summary, Setting, Orientation, Complication, Resolution, Evaluation, and Coda is typical for the Western culture (ibid.). Often these categories are not specifically mentioned, but it is for the reader or listener to understand which category a specific passage is a part of. News reports follow their own schema as well. The categories of news schema listed by van Dijk are Summary, consisting of Headline and Lead, and Body or Story, which in turn consists of for example Main Events, Backgrounds, Context, History, and Verbal Reactions or Comments (ibid. 15).

An important factor of news reporting is that reports are typically ordered in a way that the highest macroproposition, or topic, is often expressed in the schematic category of Headline, followed by the Lead containing other important information from the top of the macrostructure, after which more specific details and lower macropropositions are introduced in the other, "less prominent" schematic categories (ibid.). This means that news reports often apply a top-down organization in regard to the importance of the information. Since readers tend to acknowledge this top-down organization as well, the opportunity exists for newspapers

and journalists to strategize the structuring of a news story, and to some extent, select what they regard as important in their articles (ibid.). Additionally, this leaves room for journalists to publish their reports through biased or ideological perspectives, by foregrounding some information while backgrounding or omitting other information entirely (ibid. 15–16).

If the general principle regarding the fronting of important information in the superstructures is accepted, van Dijk notes that same organization based on importance can be seen at sentence level as well, due to what is called relevance structuring (ibid.). This means returning from the superstructures and macrostructures to the microstructures and examining if the same relevance in ordering is visible in the lower levels of discourse.

### **2.3.5 Rhetoric**

Rhetorical dimensions can have an effect on a text on all levels of structure, and they are used to make the text "more persuasive" (van Dijk 1988a, 16). According to van Dijk, journalists use rhetoric to over- and/or understate certain content (ibid.), making the use of rhetoric somewhat similar to foregrounding and backgrounding. Furthermore, news reports often include numbers in order to signal exactness and objectivity, even if the numbers are not correct (ibid.). Similarly, Bell states that using numbers as rhetoric is quite common in popular newspapers especially (1991, 203). Moreover, Bell investigated misreporting on climate change in New Zealand newspapers by studying articles which contained comments from experts, and by interviewing the experts themselves to find any inaccuracies. An important finding was that whenever numbers were incorrect, they were always exaggerated, and never understated (ibid. 222). It seems that this rhetorical tactic of using large numbers is indeed a tactic of persuasion, even if at surface level it would come across as objective, as van Dijk noted.

### 2.3.6 Reporting speech

As news often deals with issues involving people, and contains opinions and comments of people, replicating speech is an important part of news reporting. Journalists often rely on other people's accounts of events, which can sometimes be the sole source of the news report (Bell 1991, 52–55). Transmitting information regarding what was said is not however a straightforward process. Speech reporting varies from direct, word-for-word quotations to indirect speech, where what the source has initially said has been rewritten or reshaped by the journalists and editors, and sometimes the source can be unattributed entirely (Bell 1991, 205). Moreover, Bell states that elite speakers are more frequently quoted directly (*ibid.*), while van Dijk indicates that even direct quotations are often summaries instead of word-for-word reduplications of the original (1988b, 132; *qtd. in* Bell 1991, 220).

The choice of direct or indirect reporting does not happen at random. Quoting Scalfani, Hodges points out that "framing reported speech is an ideological process" where the writer has the power to elevate some voices and opinions, including their own (2015, 51). Similarly, Fairclough indicates that reporting speech is not an even affair, and some voices in reporting are given prominence over others (1995, 51). The choice of verbs used to report speech is a prominent feature of this framing process, as the verbs may show the reporter's stance towards what has been said (Hodges 2015, 51). Verbs such as *say* and *tell* are common in news reporting, and could be classified as neutral, while *claim* and *make out* question the truthfulness of the speech that is being reported, and are thus clear indicators of framing by the reporter (Fairclough 1995, 83). Additionally, Bell found that *say* was often attributed to reliable sources, whereas *claim* was used with sources that were framed as untrustworthy (1991, 207).

Surprisingly, there is a lack of recent research in what Caballero and Paradis call "intriguing questions in an emerging area of research where very little has been done" (2018, 46). In a corpus-based approach, Caballero and Paradis studied what kind of verbs are used in

speech framing expressions with direct reported speech, in works of fiction in English and Spanish, categorizing the different verbs by the way of saying, activity, and cognition (2018, 54). While these categorizations include verbs concerning manner (*mutter, shout*) and action or event in dialogue (*add, interrupt, continue*), discussions on verbs indicating the speakers' attitudes are left rather shallow by Caballero and Paradis, who merely state that there were more of these verbs, such as *declare* and *enunciate*, in Spanish than in English (ibid. 57–58).

#### **2.4 Broadsheets, tabloids, and online news**

Daily press in the United Kingdom is typically divided into two subsections: the quality papers and the popular papers, often referred to as the broadsheets and the tabloids, respectively, due to their publication format. This size-based division, which is regularly used to differentiate between the two types of papers, is somewhat archaic, since several newspapers have changed their size, yet the transformation into a more compact format is unlikely to make dramatic changes in the style and language of the coverage. Noting that the division between quality and popular is somewhat "loaded", Bell suggests "popular vs. non-popular" or "quality vs. quantity" as potentially more appropriate comparisons (1991, 20). The former suggestion, however, seems problematic as well, as it would indicate that the elite papers would not be accessible for the general public, which is not the case (ibid.). Moreover, in the latter suggestion Bell seems to overlook an alternative division, quality vs. non-quality. Although the popular papers are certainly produced in the same modern manner as the quality ones, the coverage in the British tabloids is frequently deemed as "trash" (Sieff 2011).

The division of the two types of press manifests itself in their expected target audiences. The quality papers are aimed at a middle-class audience, while the populars are targeted towards working-class readers. Jucker has further divided British newspapers into three groups, quoted in Bell (1991, 109).

Upmarket: *The Times, Financial Times, Guardian, Independent, The Daily Telegraph*  
 Midmarket: *Daily Mail, Daily Express, Today*  
 Downmarket: *Daily Mirror, Star, Sun*

The political alignments of *The Guardian* and *Daily Mirror* are center-left and left, respectively, with both endorsing the UK Labour Party in the most recent elections. *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph* are both right-wing conservative papers. *The Independent* was established to be on the center of the political field, but is often seen as leaning towards left, and having liberal views and values (Smith 2017). In terms of language use, the popular press has relatively more freedom and is more innovative than the linguistically more conservative quality papers (Bell 1991, 26).

### **3 Methods and material**

Here methodology, research questions, and research material are introduced.

#### **3.1 Methods**

The study is conducted through a qualitative discourse analysis. Select news articles from print and online media regarding the same subject, footballer Raheem Sterling's assault rifle tattoo, are researched. The articles were analyzed through the aspects of news discourse introduced above, including sentence syntax and sentence sequence structure, macrostructures and superstructure, and rhetorical structures and devices.

Sentence syntax will be investigated through the constructions of sentences regarding Sterling's Instagram post by examining Sterling's role and how the contents of the post are described. The verbs used when referring to Sterling are also analyzed. This analysis includes verbs describing the release of Sterling's Instagram post, as well as reporting verbs used to describe Sterling's comments regarding his tattoo. Moreover, references which are used as a substitute for Sterling's name are studied.

Macrostructures and superstructure are inspected by evaluating the overall arrangement of the articles, with the assumption that essential information is placed first, or towards the top of the article.

### 3.2 Research questions

The research questions for this study are 1) What kind of linguistic features and discourse strategies are present in news reporting in British print and online media about Raheem Sterling? and 2) What kind of representations do these features and strategies create?

### 3.3 Material

The research material consists of 11 news articles from print media and online releases. The articles are from five different UK newspapers and their corresponding websites. Three of the newspapers are quality newspapers, and two are popular papers. The division of articles is further explained in Table 1 below.

Type of Newspaper	Name of Newspaper and Online affiliate	Political Alignment	Number of Articles
Quality (Broadsheet)	<i>The Guardian</i> <i>TheGuardian.com</i>	Center-left	1
	<i>The Independent</i> <i>Independent Online</i>	Center	2
	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> <i>The Telegraph</i>	Right	1
Popular (Tabloid)	<i>Daily Mail</i> <i>Mail Online</i>	Right	3
	<i>Daily Mirror</i> <i>Mirror Online</i>	Left	4

**Table 1.** The division of newspaper types, newspapers, and the number of articles.

The articles were accessed through the NexisUni service, which provides the articles in a text-only format. However, as the service requires an academic license, internet links for each article in their original format are provided in the references section<sup>1</sup>. It should be noted that while the

<sup>1</sup> One of the *MailOnline* articles studied here has since been removed from the website, while another one from the *Daily Mirror* was not found in the *Mirror UK* website but could be recovered from the website of the Irish version of the paper. It should also be noted that some of the websites may require registration for the articles to be accessed.



original online articles include material such as pictures and embedded social media releases, the analysis is mainly performed based on the texts alone.

## 4 Results

In this section, the results of the analysis are introduced, using examples from the research material. To save space, shortened versions of the headlines of the articles appear in this section, while the full titles are spelled out in the references section. Additionally, all emphases in citations in this section, namely bold font, are mine.

### 4.1 Sentence syntax

In the sentence syntactic analysis, only sentences describing Sterling and the Instagram post were analyzed.

*The Guardian* mentions Sterling posting the picture on Instagram, and that the tattoo is visible.

- (1) Sterling **had posted a picture of himself** on Instagram training with his England team-mates at St George's Park, with a tattoo of an M16 assault rifle visible on his right calf. (*The Guardian*, "FA backs Raheem Sterling")

This construction would suggest that the tattoo is not the main subject or purpose of the picture.

One similar construction was used in *The Independent*. In other instances, *The Independent* omits mentioning the Instagram post entirely in the body texts, and focuses on the subsequent publication by *The Sun*.

- (2) On Sunday the former Liverpool player **posted a picture of himself** training with his England team-mates at St George's Park, with a tattoo of an assault rifle on his right calf clearly visible. (*The Independent*, "England star hits back at criticism")
- (3) Sterling **has a tattoo** of a gun on his right leg which was put on the front page of *The Sun* newspaper on Tuesday morning, with the headline 'Raheem shoots himself in foot'. (*The Independent*, "Football Association stands with England forward")
- (4) The 23-year-old's new **body art is highlighted** on the front page of Tuesday's edition of *The Sun* with anti-gun campaigners furious at what they see as the

Manchester City star glamourising the use of firearms. (*The Independent*, "England star hits back at criticism")

However, in the latter web article, the original Instagram post is placed within the article, with the caption "Sterling showed off his new tattoo at England training". Contrary to *The Guardian's* reporting, the caption from *The Independent* implies that Sterling's post was about the tattoo specifically. Likewise to *The Independent*, *The Telegraph* embedded the original post into their web release but used Sterling's own Instagram caption. There are no other mentions about the initial post in the article, the main focus of which is on *The Sun* front page and Sterling's subsequent explanation.

The tabloids showed slightly more variation within the sentences regarding the pictured tattoo. For the most part, the *Daily Mirror* opted to disregard the role of Sterling's Instagram post, mentioning it in only one of their four articles.

- (5) England star Sterling has faced criticism for **having the picture** of a machine gun on his right leg. (*Daily Mirror*, "FA show support for Sterling")
- (6) **Images emerged** of the England and Manchester City star's new M16 assault rifle ink on his leg as he continues his preparations for the World Cup. (*Daily Mirror*, "I was two when my father was gunned down")
- (7) Wing ace Sterling **was revealed to have got** an M16 assault rifle inked onto his right leg while training with the England ahead of the World Cup (*Daily Mirror*, "Sterling's girlfriend Paige Milian responds")
- (8) The England and Manchester City star came in for criticism earlier this week when **he posted pictures** of a new gun tattoo on his leg. (*Daily Mirror*, "Tragic story behind death of Sterling's father")

Especially interesting is the construction "images emerged" in (6), since the Instagram post preceded the headlines and photos on *The Sun* and was likely the source for the article. Despite this, the *Daily Mirror* did not show Sterling in an active role in sharing the picture in the first three articles. In the fourth article, however, it was mentioned that he himself posted the picture, and that the tattoo was at the centerpiece of it.

The two articles from *Mail Online* which mentioned the picture showed a notable difference between each other.

- (9) Critics slammed the £170,000-a-week Manchester City star after **he displayed the new inking** during training for this summer's World Cup yesterday. The new design of an M16 assault rifle - which Sterling claims is a tribute to his late father - **was shared with his 3.6 million Instagram followers** - many of whom are young fans. (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")
- (10) The Manchester City winger was heavily criticised after **he was pictured** with the new ink during training at St. George's Park on Monday. (*Daily Mail*, "I promised I would NEVER touch a gun")

The first article depicts Sterling deliberately showing the tattoo on Instagram and emphasizes the potential influence of the post by mentioning explicitly the number of followers as well as underlining the young age of them. The second article, again, reduces Sterling's role in the matter by using the verb phrase "he was pictured".

While overall the verb phrases that were used to describe the Instagram post and the picture displayed a spectrum where the images were described to have emerged without a specific source on one end, and Sterling deliberately showing his new tattoo to the world on the other, this variation was not limited to a particular newspaper, or newspaper type.

The analysis of passivized constructions revealed a clear difference between newspaper types, as no passive constructions were used in *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Independent*. *The Guardian* used one agentless passive in their article:

- (11) In 2015, the Daily Mirror accused him of being "greedy" in pay negotiations. **He has also been criticised for taking nitrous oxide.** In 2016 The Sun ran a story headlined "Obscene Raheem" accusing him of... (*The Guardian*, "FA backs Raheem Sterling")

However, the sentence appears between two other sentences where the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* are in active roles, and the criticism mentioned in the passive phrase is likely related to at least one of the two news outlets.

Both the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* used passivized constructions more frequently than the quality papers in general. On several occasions, the murder of Sterling's father was described in passive, likely because the identity of the murderer is unknown, or their identity was not considered important for the articles. As mentioned earlier, both of the popular papers

used agentless passive constructions such as "Sterling was pictured" and "Sterling was revealed to have a tattoo" in their reporting, but it should be noted that the *Daily Mail* especially stood out with their use of agentless passives, which clearly outnumber the use of these constructions in all the other newspapers studied. These constructions downplay the role of both Sterling himself posting a picture on Instagram, and *The Sun* who published the picture in their paper. One article from the *Daily Mail* used two consecutive passive constructions, in example (10) above. This phrase highlights Sterling while mystifying the source of the picture as well as the source of the critique.

Agented passives were used by the popular papers to establish the topic of the article in the headline in (12), and to rearrange previously introduced content to the beginning of a sentence in (13) and (14).

(12) Raheem Sterling **backed by the FA and girlfriend Paige Milian** after controversial assault rifle tattoo sparks outrage (*Daily Mail*, "Sterling backed by the FA")

(13) Sterling's tattoo **was branded "disgusting" and "totally unacceptable" by anti-gun campaigners** (*Daily Mirror*, "I was two when my father was gunned down")

(14) He **has been supported by the FA** over the tattoo... (*Daily Mirror*, "Tragic story behind death of Sterling's father")

The last two examples are in line with Birner's statement regarding familiarity, and with van Dijk's statement about relevance structuring, by making Sterling, the most prominent character of the article, also the most prominent component of a single sentence. The full distribution of passive constructions can be seen in Table 2 below, with superlatives in bold font.

Name of paper	Number of articles	Number of agentless passives	Number of agented passives	Total number of passives	Passives per article	Passives per article per newspaper type
<i>The Guardian</i>	1	1	0	1	1	0.25
<i>The Independent</i>	2	0	0	0	0	
<i>The Telegraph</i>	1	0	0	0	0	
<i>Daily Mail</i>	3	<b>5</b>	1	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1.29</b>
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	<b>4</b>	1	<b>2</b>	3	0.75	

**Table 2.** Distribution of passive constructions between newspapers and newspaper types.

#### 4.2 Reporting verbs attributed to Sterling

Several different reporting verbs were used to describe Sterling asserting the meaning of the tattoo, using both direct and indirect quotations. Many articles used the verbs *say* and *write*, which are the most neutral verbs used.

- (15) England footballer **says** image relates to father's fatal shooting and his favoured foot (*The Guardian*, "FA backs Raheem Sterling")
- (16) Sterling **had written** that he has 'made a promise'... (*The Independent*, "Football Association stands with England forward")
- (17) But Sterling **said** gun is a tribute to father... (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")

Other frequently used verbs were *explain* and *defend*.

- (18) But Sterling **explained** the tattoo's significance in his Instagram post. (*The Guardian*, "FA backs Raheem Sterling")
- (19) Manchester City and England winger Raheem Sterling **has explained** his latest tattoo, an assault rifle on his right calf. (*The Telegraph*, "Sterling reveals meaning behind new gun tattoo")
- (20) England footballer Raheem Sterling **has been forced to defend** his new tattoo... (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")

These verb choices depict Sterling facing accusations and a situation where he needs to explain his reasoning for doing something that is completely his own business, highlighted in (20)

where he has been made to do so by external forces, i.e. his critics. *The Independent* used similar constructions with added emphasis:

(21) Raheem Sterling **has fiercely defended** his decision... (*The Independent*, "England star hits back at criticism")

(22) But Sterling **issued a personal defence** on Instagram... (*The Independent*, "Football Association stands with England forward")

Rather than using a more neutral construction such as "issue a statement", (22) shows that *The Independent* clearly depicted Sterling being under attack.

While the previous examples show Sterling having to justify his personal decision, some verb constructions from the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* did not regard Sterling's statement as undeniable truth.

(23) ...which Sterling **claims** is a tribute to his late father... (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")

(24) The 23-year-old **insists** it reflects a vow he made to 'never touch a gun'... (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")

(25) Sterling has **insisted** the tattoo has yet to be finished... (*Daily Mirror*, "FA show support for Sterling")

(26) But the 23-year-old has moved to explain the tattoo, **insisting** it relates to his late father... (*Daily Mirror*, "I was two when my father was gunned down")

Verbs *claim* and *insist* are typically used when describing someone maintaining their stance or opinion on something. In this sense the verb choice is odd, since as the owner of the tattoo, Sterling should know the meaning behind it better than anyone else. *Claim* and *insist*, however, describe Sterling's explanations as interpretations rather than facts, reducing his validity to that of his critics.

### 4.3 References

Several different references were used for Sterling in the articles studied as a substitute for his name. The pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his* were used frequently, but did not attribute any information about Sterling, and will not be examined further. In many articles, Sterling was described

through his profession as a footballer, his playing position, and his team. This was often accompanied with words praising Sterling's ability, such as "star" and "ace".

- (27) **The Manchester City winger** was heavily criticized... (*Daily Mail*, "I promised I would NEVER touch a gun")
- (28) ... after **the Manchester City star** was slammed for getting a gun tattoo. (*Daily Mirror*, "Sterling's girlfriend Paige Milian responds")
- (29) But **the England forward**, who is currently training... (*The Independent*, "England star hits back at criticism")

The tabloids showed a tendency to make more of these kinds of references, with there being none in the articles from both *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*.

Another way in which Sterling was referred to was via his age.

- (30) **The 23-year-old's** new body art... (*The Independent*, "England star hits back at criticism")
- (31) But **the 23-year-old** has moved to explain the tattoo... (*Daily Mirror*, "I was two when my father was gunned down")
- (32) 'When I was two my father died from being gunned down to death,' **the 23-year-old** said. (*The Guardian*, "FA backs Raheem Sterling")

In the last example, the mention of the age seems to highlight the passing of time since the death of Sterling's father. In the other two, the age is mentioned along with the tattoo. One article from *Mail Online* in particular seemed to highlight Sterling's age by mentioning it several times, as well as contrasting it with the age of Lucy Cope, who was reported to be the voice of the critique towards the tattoo.

- (33) Gun is latest in several tattoos inked on **23-year-old** Manchester City winger. (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")
- (34) **The 23-year-old** insists it reflects a vow he made to 'never touch a gun' after... (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")
- (35) But activists ... called for **the 23-year-old** to be dropped from England's World Cup squad. (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")
- (36) **The 63-year-old added:** 'If he refuses he should be dropped from the England team.' (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")

This repetition of Sterling's relatively young age compared to Cope, as well as mentioning age in relation to the tattoo, seem to portray tattoo art as part of youth culture. This in turn also shows Cope as criticizing the body art rather than just what it depicts, portraying her as anti-tattoo as much as anti-gun.

Additionally, the article that highlighted Sterling's age also emphasized his salary.

- (37) Critics slammed **the £170,000-a-week Manchester City star** after he displayed... (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")

The deliberate mention of Sterling's substantial weekly earnings in an article that otherwise speaks of him in a rather negative tone portrays Sterling as someone who has more than he deserves, or has received too much, too young, too fast. Furthermore, the same article mentions Sterling buying a mansion for his mother, describing him as a big spender.

#### 4.4 Macrostructures

Following van Dijk's theory of superstructure and macropropositions, the articles were analyzed by examining what was mentioned in headline and lead, and in which order other information was given. Sterling providing an explanation for his tattoo and the English Football Association supporting Sterling were the two most frequently mentioned events in headlines across all newspapers. One article from the *Daily Mirror* and another two from the *Daily Mail* used a direct quotation from Sterling in the headline in connection to his explanation, while *The Independent* used a quotation from a representative when reporting the FA's backing. Moreover, *The Independent* mentioned *The Sun* in one headline, additionally highlighting the front page from *The Sun* as an important part of the article. Most of the articles followed a pattern where some background regarding the critique was given after the headline and lead, followed by Sterling's own explanation. The latter part of each article was often used to provide comments by others on the matter, as well as describing Sterling's current situation as a footballer for the English national team, preparing for the World Cup.



While most of the articles followed van Dijk's expected pattern, some peculiarities were prevalent as well. Firstly, one article from the *Daily Mail* mentioned the risen outrage before Sterling's defense.

- (38) England star Raheem Sterling sparks outrage with 'sick' assault rifle tattoo on his leg but defends it as a tribute to father shot dead when he was two and says: 'I promised I'd never touch a gun' (*Daily Mail*, "England star Sterling sparks outrage")

It is noteworthy that Sterling is portrayed in an active role by sparking the outrage, and while the defense and direct quotation are mentioned later, the negative (the outrage) is mentioned immediately after his full name, while the positive (defense, tribute) is not.

Secondly, a different *Daily Mail* article mentioned the gun tattoo being a metaphor for his shooting foot first, and it being a tribute to his father only after that. This is in strong contrast with Sterling's own message, which primarily described his father's death and his own commitment to stay away from guns, and with coverage from other newspapers, some of which omitted the shooting foot metaphor altogether.

Finally, an article from the *Daily Mirror* mentioned Sterling's girlfriend Paige Milian and her supporting Sterling in the headline and the lead. The detailed description about Milian's comments, however, are not mentioned until rather late in the article, the body text of which is partially identical to another article from the same outlet. Assuming van Dijk's top-down arrangement by importance, Milian's comments are not given as much prominence as other events reported by the *Daily Mirror*, despite her support being mentioned in the headline and lead.

## 5 Discussion

Overall, the analysis of the articles showed a great deal of variety in reporting between the five news outlets studied. Some notable patterns, however, appeared as well. The quality papers most often opted to show Sterling in an active role responding to the criticism, and in cases

where he was given an active role in sharing a picture of himself, the tattoo was not depicted as the centerpiece of the picture, with the sole exception being *The Independent* including the Instagram post in the article with the accompanying caption "Sterling showed off his new tattoo". Both active and passive were used by popular papers, and their activation and passivization was somewhat more intense, as both the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* used constructions where no source was given for the pictures, as well as constructions where Sterling was depicted deliberately boasting with his tattoo.

Similarly, the quality papers mainly used neutral reporting verbs such as *say* and *write*, with *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* additionally using the verb *explain*, and *The Independent* using constructions such as "issued a personal defence" and "fiercely defended". The popular papers used similar constructions slightly more frequently, but additionally used verb choices which potentially question Sterling's honesty (*claim* and *insist*), which was never done by any of the quality papers.

Moreover, Sterling's ability is praised by the tabloids, as both the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* frequently use the word *star* in their articles as a substitute for Sterling's name. Both popular papers, but the *Daily Mail* especially, also highlight his young age, while additionally mentioning his salary, which for the context of the article is irrelevant. While on the surface level the references are positive and neutral compared to some used by *The Sun* in other earlier contexts, the *Daily Mail* uses the references to portray an image of a flashy young star whose financial success is disproportionately high compared to his age and abilities.

In terms of the analysis of macropropositions and superstructure, the two most important events are no surprise: *The Sun* ran their story without any comment from Sterling, which is why other outlets focused on Sterling's explanation. As Sterling was called to be removed from the national team, The FA backing him is another rather predictable story. But once again, the *Daily Mail* is a prominent exception, since in one of the articles they mention the outrage before

the defense, showing Sterling in an active role as the catalyst of it. Considering these observations, it is noteworthy that the coverage is somewhat similar within all three quality papers, whose reporting differs notably from the two popular papers, which in turn are quite similar with each other.

The research questions for this study were 1) What kind of linguistic features and discourse strategies are present in news reporting in British print and online media about Raheem Sterling? and 2) What kind of representations do these features and strategies create? The newspapers used strategies and choices such as activization and passivization, varied reporting verbs, cohesive substitutes for Sterling's name which highlighted certain attributes, and foregrounding. These strategies created different portrayals of Sterling: The quality papers were more subtle in their use of these strategies, and portrayed Sterling as a footballer whose tattoo, and harmless sharing of it on social media, created an unwanted outrage on the brink of the World Cup. The popular papers, on the other hand, displayed Sterling as a rich young man and a show-off, who came up with a hasty explanation when his body art decision was scrutinized. Furthermore, considering the theory regarding the power of media introduced in the second section, it could be said that by opting to use certain reporting verbs, the popular papers portrayed Sterling as untrustworthy, a liability, upon appeals of him being dropped from the national team just days before entering the most prestigious stage in international football.

The results show that the difference in these portrayals of Sterling does not seem to be a question of political alignment (liberal vs. conservative) but of newspaper type (quality vs. popular) and thus, potentially, of social class. This, however, is no news to those who have been following Sterling for a long time, as was noted in a tweet by Adam Payne, quoted in *The Guardian* article studied here:

Raheem Sterling's treatment shows classism if [sic] alive and well in British football. Working-class kid dares to reach beyond his station, held to bizarre standards/double standards. 'Prem rat.. footie idiot.' Same happened with Rooney. Probably some underlying racism with Sterling. (*The Guardian*, "FA backs Raheem Sterling")

Biases in reporting have been noted even by Sterling himself, as in late 2018 he stated that unfair media coverage “fuels racism” (*National Post*, “Sterling says coverage fuels racism”), but revealing media racism or racial prejudice towards Sterling or any other footballer of ethnic minorities is an endeavor far beyond the scope of this study. What this study has shown, however, is that biases can be uncovered with the methods used here, and any subsequent studies could shed light on other situations with footballers in general, as well as with Sterling in particular. Additionally, analyzing reporting verbs was one of the more revealing parts of this study, and if it indeed is the case, as Caballero and Paradis mentioned, that little research has been done in this area (2018, 46), an abundance of opportunities remain for future studies.

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