

# Linguistic Characteristics of Feature-Story Headlines in Native English Newspapers and Magazines

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**Abstract:** Headlines are often among the most vital parts of every newspaper and magazines as they play a key role in attracting readers' attention, especially headlines of news stories and feature stories which are the two kinds of headlines focusing on information and discussion respectively. This paper aims to investigate linguistic features of English feature-story headlines in terms of general characteristics, structure, word choice and stylistic devices. By using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the paper has found several features of English feature-story headlines, which have been discussed to provide a deeper insight into the prominent characteristics of English feature-story headlines. This in turns helps enhance readers' comprehensive skills when they deal with this kind of headlines in English newspapers and magazines.

**Keywords:** Feature-story headlines, linguistic characteristics, headlines, word choice, stylistic devices.

## 1. Introduction and aim of the study

We are living in an information era when printed newspapers and magazines offer readers a huge amount of information through hundreds of articles daily. However, people just 'selectively expose themselves to messages they feel will be of interest or help them, and perceive them according to their biases' [1: 5] because it is impossible to read and remember everything from articles. In such a context, headlines could be considered an indicator that 'sells the story' [2: 118]. Headlines are often among the most vital parts of every newspaper

and magazines as they play a key role in attracting readers' attention, especially headlines of news stories and feature stories which are the two kinds of headlines focusing on information and discussion respectively. This paper aims to investigate prominent linguistic features of native English feature-story headlines in terms of **general characteristics, structure, word choice and stylistic devices**.

Characteristics of feature-story headlines have been observed as a combination of those of news stories and feature stories to enhance their prime function of attracting readers. The question that many experts have been concerned about is 'What are these characteristics?'. Therefore, the topic of

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'Linguistic characteristics of feature-story headlines in native English newspapers and magazines' has been chosen for this research.

## 2. Feature stories

### 2.1. A brief description of feature stories

Feature stories have been defined as 'nonfiction stories written using the writing techniques of fiction' [1: 238]. What decisively makes them different from each other is that 'fiction originates in the imagination (...) features, on the other hand (...) although may be treated imaginatively and creatively, (...) must tell the truth and provide accurate information'. Another definition says that a feature story is 'a short or moderate length account intended primarily to entertain, and usually dealing with a matter of not great intrinsic importance. It is likely to be a 'sidelight' on a news event, to be about persons or places of news interest, or merely intended to arouse a smile or a tear' [3: 5]. Moreover, a feature story aims to 'humanize the news, that is, to give it increased interest and meaning, without distortion' [3: 5].

### 2.2. Comparing feature stories and news stories

The pair of feature stories and news stories, or soft news and hard news respectively shares some common characteristics. Firstly, they are both based on real events and people. Secondly, like any other journalistic products, they use words economically and clearly. Each article of the two types has its fixed space and this condition does not allow a clumsy and wordy writing [1: 239].

Despite some of their similarities, feature and news stories still have differences. Firstly, while the latter makes information its priority, the former focuses not only on information but also on emotion, analysis and discussion [4: 2]. The royal marriage between Prince Charles and Camilla is an example. If the event is reported in a hard-news article, it may still be described

in detail but without emotion. However, with the intention of writing a feature story, Time (February 21, 2005) in [5: 5] introduced an eight-page article under the headline 'THE 34-YEAR COURTSHIP' and the lead of 'Charles and Camilla are finally to wed'.

Another difference is that feature stories tell less timely events [1: 239]. Besides this, the main function of soft news is not informing news, but providing 'entertaining, optional stories that don't have to be written but that nonetheless offer readers an enjoyable reading experience' [1: 237], so the timeliness of features does not play a vital role.

## 3. Headlines

### 3.1. A brief description of headlines in native English newspapers and magazines

Headlines are considered to be one of the most striking elements of a newspaper page when they are often read initially together with illustrations before any other parts. The action of buying a newspaper seems not to guarantee that the buyer will read through all articles included. On the contrary, it is very likely that the buyer will spend several minutes, right after buying the newspaper or magazine, to have a look at all headlines inside. Only catchy headlines can attract the reader's attention and convince him or her to read or return to the whole text when there is a need [6]. In this way, headlines are apparently more accessible to readers than articles.

*Headline*, or *head*, is defined as 'line of words printed in large type at the top of a page' (Oxford, 1993), but this definition seems to be so general that it fails to describe sufficiently a newspaper or magazine headline. Headlines can be more clearly described as 'An integral element of the newspaper page. It directs the readers to the significant aspect of a story...the headline is not just a label on a story, an identifier or an index.' [2: 113].

### 3.2. Characteristics of headlines in native English newspapers and magazines

In order to 'convey as much information as possible' and 'capture the most important element of a story' [7: 123], it is necessary for headlines to have some fundamental features. Some distinguishable characteristics of headlines in English newspapers and magazines have been pointed out.

Firstly, 'it is not always necessary to have a verb' [7: 123]. Headlines constructing from noun phrases are especially common to improve the referential and emotive functions of headlines [5: 24]. The headline 'THE MYTH OF STABILITY' (Newsweek, November 28, 2005) is an example of a noun-phrase headline.

Secondly, 'headlines are in the present or future tense unless a specific time element in the past is mentioned or understood' [7: 5]. Specifically, headlines use the present tense for past events while the infinitive almost always for coming events. These choices aim to create a sense of fresh news for headlines [5: 17]. Examples for this feature are the headlines '21 FIRMS TO COMPLETE IN NEW TREASURY INITIATIVE' (Washington Post, September 26, 2005) and 'RITA SPARES CITIES, DEVASTATES RURAL AREAS' (Washington Post, September 26, 2005). The past participle is still used for headlines as a short form of the passive voice [5: 19]. For example, 'KOIZUMI FAVORED IN POLL' (International Herald Tribune, October 13, 2003).

The third notable feature is that articles, titles, auxiliary verbs, and forms of the verbs TO BE may be usually be omitted [7: 123]; [5: 15]. This characteristic has some overlap with the second one. Examples for this characteristic are the headlines 'ELENOR LAMBERT, FASHION PROMOTER' (International Herald Tribune, October 9, 2003), 'BUSH TO ASIAN: SORRY, I CAN'T SLEEP OVER' (International Herald Tribune, August 20, 2003) and 'OFFICIALS STILL IN DARK ON BLACKOUT' (International Herald Tribune, August 20, 2003).

The fourth characteristic is the ambiguity resulting from the identical spelling of different parts of speech [5: 22]; for example, 'REPUBLICANS DUCK RISKY SENATE RACES' (International Herald Tribune, October 13, 2005). In this example, *duck* is used as a verb while, in reality, it is usually mentioned as a noun. It is possible for readers to get confused when reading this headline.

Finally, headlines can contain different nouns with the preceding supporting the following. This feature can cause trouble for readers to understand. It can be seen in the example 'FURNITURE FACTORY PAY CUT ROW' [5: 23]. This headline may be analyzed as *a row over the pay cut in a furniture factory*.

Briefly, it is difficult to impose fixed rules on headlines. These characteristics are just relative and they are not always applied to every headline. For instance, *will*, *not to infinitive*, is used to indicate the future tense in the headline 'A SLOWDOWN WILL EXPOSE THE ECONOMY'S SOFT UNDERBELLY' (Guardian, November 10, 2005).

## 4. Collection of data

The data of this study have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Regarding primary data, the information has been headlines collected from English printed newspapers and magazines including *Times*, *Newsweek*, *Economic*, *International Herald Tribune* and *Washington post*. A small number of headlines have also been collected from *Review*, *Guardian*, and *Observer*. Totally, around 110 English feature-story headlines have been collected from more than 20 English issues of these newspapers and magazines. Topics of the chosen articles have fallen into four main areas such as economics, science and technology, politics, and society and culture. Meanwhile, the secondary data have been collected from encyclopedias, dictionaries and books. The information has been discussed

mainly about linguistics and journalism in English varieties.

The study has been conducted by using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Through a study of the collected English feature-story headlines, their prominent characteristics have been revealed. The characteristics are divided into four main types including general, structure, word-choice and stylistic-device characteristics.

## 5. Data analysis and results

It is often said that the language of headlines has something in common with that of book titles, posters and advertisements, as they are not appropriate in literate texts. This remark perhaps is deduced from a look at the very first signs of headlines. These signs of English feature-story headlines will be discussed as follows:

### 5.1. Findings on morphological categories of feature-story headlines in native English newspapers and magazines

Firstly, probably to meet the demand of space limitation, headlines often use the shorter words of synonyms. For example, 'hit' is used for any action meaning 'criticize' or 'attack', 'probe' for 'investigate', 'rift' for 'disagreement', 'slug' for 'change' or 'surcharge', and 'rife' for 'anger'. This could be proven in these English headlines 'GAZA BOMBER HITS U.S CONVOY' (The Telegraph, October 16, 2003), 'RUSSIA'S MARS PROBE: THE LONG ARM OF THE GHOUL' (Economist, November 23, 1996) and 'UN IS LIKELY TO PASS IRAQ RESOLUTION, DESPITE RIFTS' (International Herald Tribune, October 16, 2003).

Moreover, also to save space, headlines can use shorthand and contractions, which is regarded as not suitable in many other printed texts. For example, 'cont'd' is used for 'continued', 'Sept.' for 'September', and 'isn't'

for 'is not' as in the following headlines 'BEST-LAID PLANS, CONT'D' (Washington Post, November 8, 2005), 'RISING ENERGY COSTS LEAD TO SEPT. SURGE IN CONSUMER PRICES' (Washington Post, November 14, 2005) and 'LIFE ISN'T BEAUTIFUL' (Newsweek, October 11, 2004)

Thirdly, the shorter version of variant spelling is preferred. It is notable that the shorter version is in the sense of space taken, not necessarily in the number of letters. For instance, 'jail' instead of 'gaol' is used in headlines, though these synonyms have the same number of letters. The similar case happens with 'ties' and 'bond', when 'tie' must be in its plural form to obtain the same meaning with 'bond'. Examples of this could be taken from the headlines 'OFFICER INJURED IN BLAST NEAR D.C. JAIL' (Washington Post, December 18, 2005) and 'SHOWCASING GERMAN-RUSSIAN TIES' (International Herald Tribune, October 9, 2003).

Fourthly, abbreviations, symbols and figures are also used to ensure compact but clear headlines, as in 'LOCKHEED IN TALKS TO ACQUIRE TECH FIRM CSC' (Washington Post, October 27, 2005), 'MD. & VA, TO STUDY BELTWAY TOLL LANES' (Washington Post, October 27, 2005) and 'ENROLLMENT IN ARMY ROTC DOWN IN PAST 2 SCHOOL YEARS' (Washington Post, April 24, 2005). It is, therefore, important that editors must choose abbreviations and symbols that are either popular or easy for readers to interpret or understandable to readers after they have read the whole articles. For instance, in the given examples, readers still can guess that 'tech firm' equals 'technology firm', or '&' equals 'and' without reading the text. Besides, readers can find out that 'CSC' stands for 'Computer Science Corp.', or 'MD.' and 'VA.' for 'Maryland' and 'Virginia' respectively.

The final characteristics of English feature-story headlines is their use of foreign languages, as in the two following examples 'PASTA ALLA FISICA' (The Economist, August 11, 2005) and 'DEVILLEPIN, LE

MAROCAIN' (The Economist, September 29, 2005). It can be seen from these examples that the use of foreign languages not only catches readers' attention, but also creates rhythm and rhyme, which empower headlines in feature stories. In the first example, the same letter *a* is repeated again and again, creating rhyme for the whole headline. In the second example, the two parts have the same numbers of syllables, on which stresses are both on the second ones, for example *-vil-* and *-ma-*, creating the same pattern of unstressed-stressed-unstressed-unstressed and leading to rhyme of the headline. This headline contains still rhyme, which results from the pronunciation of *-pin-* and *-cain-*. Although this use of foreign languages can cause some trouble for readers to understand the headlines, it still makes readers excited by the exotic sound that it brings about and persuades them to read to find out the meaning of headlines.

In brief, the requirements of saving space and drawing attention have allowed English feature-story headlines to display various external characteristics. Though the application of these characteristics seems to be simple, it has proven its effectiveness in the newspapers and magazines.

### 5.2. Findings on structure of feature-story headlines in native English newspapers and magazines

Although English feature-story headlines have various structures, it is possible to divide them into four types including headlines constructing from one word, those from a phrase, those from a sentence, and the last type being labeled as *others*.

Firstly, as it is shown in Table 1 that there are headlines which include only one word, such as 'EVICTED' (Economist, August 4, 2005) or 'SWAMPED' (Economist, September 22, 2005). In fact, these headlines share the mentioned common characteristics of all headlines in chapter 1, that is the verb to be has been omitted. In other words, headlines

belonging to this type are just the short form of those constructing from a phrase. The number of these headlines seems to be rather small, only 3 out of 110 collected English feature-story headlines having this structure.

Table 1. Different structures of English feature-story headlines

Structure of headlines	Number of headlines	Percentage (%)
Word	3/110	2.7
Phrase	67/110	60.9
Sentence	36/110	32.7
Others	4/110	3.6

Secondly, English feature-story headlines consisting of a phrase accounting for the largest part, among which noun-phrase headlines contribute most: 40 noun phrase headlines were found in comparison with 27 verb phrase ones. An example of a noun-phrase headline is 'CHILDREN OF THE DUST' (Time, May 20, 2002). Noun-phrase headlines can be presented in different manners, such as in the pattern of 'introducing noun plus main noun' as in 'INDEPENDENCE BANK VOTE: ANOTHER ROUND OF DRAMA' (Washington Post, October 27, 2005) or 'main noun plus supporting clause' like 'THE MAN WHO SPOKE STYLE TO TRUTH' (Time, October 11, 2004).

Ranking the second most popular among headlines constructing from a phrase is verb-phrase headlines. Most of the verbs in these headlines are in the *-ing* form such as 'HOLDING UP HALF THE SKY' (Time, February 21, 2005) or 'CULTIVATING A TASTE FOR MERGERS' (Washington Post, November 14, 2005.)

The two smallest parts are made by prepositional-phrase headlines; for example, 'INSIDE KARZAI'S CAMPAIGN' (Time, October 11, 2004) or 'OUT ON THE STREET' (Newsweek, June 27, 2005), and adjectival-phrase headlines, as in 'FLASHY, TEACHY AND DEEP IN DUST' (International Herald

Tribune, October 16, 2003) and 'BIG-BIGGER-BIGGEST' (Economist, February 28, 2008).

The third type noted is headlines constructing from a sentence, which maybe subcategorized according to two criteria which are their function and their structure. Regarding the former one, sentences in English feature-story headlines can be further classified as declarative, imperative and interrogative sentences. Regarding the latter, sentences in English feature-story headlines can be divided into simple, compound, complex and elliptical sentences.

An example of declarative headline is 'AILING POPE UTS HIS INNER CIRCLE IN ORDER' (International Herald Tribune, October 16, 2003). Sentences in this subtype have diverse form; for example, a part of conditional sentence or a directed speech. As for those basing on a conditional sentence, few examples are found, e.g. 'ALASKA WOULD BE MORE AT HOME IN RUSSIA' (Washington Post, November 23, 2005). Declarative-sentence headlines holding the form of a directed speech are especially common in interview pieces. The following is an example 'WE ARE PREPARED' (Newsweek, October 11, 2004). An equivalent small amount comes from headlines constructing from comparative sentences like 'NEW ORLEANS TODAY: IT'S WORSE THAN YOU THINK' (Time, November 28, 2005).

Imperative-sentence headlines also contribute their part to the findings, for example, 'BLOW IT OUT YOUR EAR, KID' (Washington Post, November 8, 2005), and they present different forms, too; for example 'WANT TO BUY SOME COLD MEDICINE? YOUR ID, PLEASE' (Washington Post, November 8, 2005) (directed speech) or 'IF YOU DON'T FIT IT, FAKE IT' (Washington Post, November 10, 2005) (conditional sentence).

Regarding headlines consisting of an interrogative sentence, there are two subtypes,

including those with a question mark, and those without a question mark. The former can be seen in the example 'WILL THEY COME?' (Washington Post, November 14, 2005) and 'ARE THESE TOWERS SAFE?' (Time, June 20, 2005). Examples of the latter are 'WHY CARLY'S OUT?' (Time, February 21, 2005) and 'WHY EVERYTHING MAY NOT HAPPEN FOR THE BEST' (International Herald Tribune, October 16, 2003).

As mentioned above, sentences in English feature-story headlines can be structurally divided into simple, complex, compound sentences. Simple sentence headlines contribute the most, as in the example 'EXXON MOBILE PROFITS SOARS 75%' (Washington Post, October 28, 2005). Only a small number of complex-sentence headlines are found; for example 'CAUTION PREVAILS AS CHINESE PLANNERS SKIRT POLITICAL REFORM' (International Herald Tribune, October 16, 2003) or 'A RACE IS WHAT WE'VE NOW GOT' (Time, October 11, 2004). Compound-sentence headlines are as rare as complex-sentence ones; for instance, 'BLAIR IS RECKLESS, BUT LABOUR MUST NOT ADD TO THE DAMAGE' (Guardian, November 10, 2005).

Headlines with the subject omitted, such as 'RESCUED FROM OBLIVION' (Newsweek, January 10, 2005) or 'BORN TO STUMP' (Time, October 11, 2004) can be considered to be verb-phrase headlines. They can contain sentences with an auxiliary verb or forms of the verb *TO BE* omitted, as in 'DISASTERS AVOIDED, FOR NOW' (The Economist, September 28, 2005), or 'RULLING POSTPONED ON DELAY MOTION' (Washington Post, November 23, 2005). A headline of this type can also be an elliptical sentence with the subject and part of or the whole predicate omitted. In this example, only the subordinate clause remains 'WHEN BRAD MET ANGIE' (Time, June 20, 2005).

It can be seen that headlines in English feature stories have different structures, ranging from a word, a phrase to a sentence.

Furthermore, each structure is subdivided into numerous categories, which helps to create a colorful picture of English feature stories.

### 5.3. Findings on word choice of feature-story headlines in native English newspapers and magazines

In terms of word choice, headlines can use words which in other contexts are regarded as slang or spoken language. This feature, like in advertisements, seems to draw attentions from readers immediately, for example, 'WHY THE HELL NOT?' (Time, May 20, 2002).

Another feature is that many headlines tend to use set expressions. Moreover, famous quotations, familiar book titles, or favorite songs, which are also used to reinforce the power of headlines in feature stories. However, the use of these is flexible and can be further divided into four subtypes as follows:

- **Firstly, headlines can preserve the original form of materials**, as in the headline 'BROTHERS IN ARMS' (The Economist, October 29, 2005) or 'NO PAIN, NO GAIN' (The Economist, August 27, 2005), the idiom and proverb remain exactly as they are always seen. Another example is the use of a famous quotation in the headline 'TO BE, OR NOT TO BE' (The Economist, August 4, 2005). In this headline, the sentence is so well-known that not only native speakers but also many foreigners may know it. In its original use, this sentence reflects a struggle inside Prince Hamlet, so there must be something prime that the writer wants his readers to consider.

- **Secondly, they can add new constituents into original materials**. The headline 'DOWN...BUT NOW OUT' (Time, June 20, 2005) based on the idiom *down and out*, but the writer added two more constituents, both of which can create and implication of opposite meaning and change the meaning from affirmative into negative. Another example is the headline 'FOR WHOM THE SCHOOL BELL TOLLS' (The Economist, October 29, 2005). Just by adding one more word *school*,

the writer managed to turn a serious book title For Whom The Bell Tolls by Earnest Hemingway into a catchy headline. In addition, it may partly orientate readers towards education.

- **Thirdly, writers can change constituents of original materials**. For example, 'RIDE AND PREJUDICE' (The Economist, October 29, 2005). It may be amusing reading this headline. Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen is known as one of the most famous novels worldwide, so the use of the title 'RIDE AND PREJUDICE' is likely to draw attention of a large number of readers. What makes it even more interesting is that this title was modified. Another example of this type of headline is 'BETWEEN CAESAR AND CHERNEKO' (The Economist, September 29, 2005) based on the original idiom *between Scylla and Charybdis* (a situation that one finds it difficult to decide as both ways are equally unpleasant or dangerous). This headline manages to tell the complex situation of Germany's election when considering the roles of two parties named after Julius Caesar and the Soviet leader.

- **Finally, writers can combine both eliminating and changing constituents**, as in 'NEW DOGS, OLD TRICKS' (Review, August 19, 1999). This saying has its original form of (*you can't teach an old dog new tricks*); however, the writer has omitted the first part as well as changed the forms and positions of constituents.

### 5.4. Findings on stylistic devices of feature-story headlines in native English newspapers and magazines

The stylistic characteristics in headlines of English feature stories is the integration of alliteration, rhyme and vowel rhyme, and both of them are used in English feature-story headlines. The example of the headline with full rhyme is 'PROSTITUTION AND CONSITUTION' (Economist, August 18, 2005) and the example of the headline with vowel rhyme is 'BAD DATES IN BAGHDAD' (Newsweek, November 14, 2005).

Regarding the stylistic device of rhythm, it is not difficult to find one example of rhythm along collected English headlines 'SMALL WORLD, BIG STAKES' (Time, June 27, 2005). In fact, rhyme sometimes creates rhythm and vice versa, which makes the border between these two devices rather dim, as in 'TRUFFLE KERFUFFLE' (Time, February 21, 2005). Rhythm in English feature-story headlines sometimes results from the use, either in original or modified forms, of proverbs. An example can be found in the headline 'BEND THEM, BREAK THEM' - (Economist, October 22, 2005) which bases on the proverb *better bend than break*.

Apart from the above-mentioned stylistic features, headlines of English feature stories present many others, though the number of them is not really big. One of them is the use of metaphor such as 'MOTHER NATURE'S BIOLOGICAL WARFARE' (Economist, August 8, 2002). Without deciphering words in the context, *nature* can still be considered human beings' *mother*.

However, it is sometimes necessary to look at the text in order to grasp a metaphor. In the headline 'A NEW JEWEL OF A SCHOOL IN WARD 8' (Washington Post, October 27, 2005), it is not difficult to guess that 'a new jewel' is not a real jewel, but must be something precious. Only after reading the whole article can we understand that this jewel is newly-upgrade facilities of the school in a ward lacking social attention. This method apparently has the advantage a metaphor can offer.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed headlines in feature stories in native English newspapers and magazines through a research on their prominent characteristics. It has obtained the goal of finding out prominent characteristics of native English feature-story headlines,

including the findings on general characteristics of feature-story headlines, structure of feature-story headlines, word choice and stylistic devices of feature-story headlines in English newspapers and magazines. Those characteristics have helped bring about a thorough look to the readers. The mentioned four aspects of characteristics of English feature-story headlines have been studied through the investigation of magazines and newspapers by both quantitative and qualitative methods. However, in its framework, this study only covers a small part of English newspaper and magazine headlines.

To sum up, it is expected that the findings of this paper would yield good outcomes, regarding enhancing readers' comprehensive skills when they deal with English feature-story headlines.

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## Đặc điểm ngôn ngữ trong các tiêu đề bài phóng sự trên báo và tạp chí tiếng Anh

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**Tóm tắt:** Tiêu đề các bài báo luôn có vai trò quan trọng nhất trong mọi tờ báo và tạp chí đặc biệt là những tiêu đề của các bài tin tức và các bài phóng sự, bởi vì chính chúng giúp thu hút sự quan tâm của độc giả. Đây là hai loại bài tập trung vào việc cung cấp thông tin và thảo luận. Bài viết này nhằm tìm ra các đặc điểm ngôn ngữ bao gồm các đặc trưng chung, cấu trúc, cách lựa chọn từ ngữ và các biện pháp tu từ của các tiêu đề bài phóng sự trên báo và tạp chí tiếng Anh. Bằng việc sử dụng cả phương pháp định tính và định lượng, bài viết đã đưa ra một số đặc điểm của các tiêu đề bài phóng sự trên báo và tạp chí tiếng Anh nhằm đưa ra một cái nhìn sâu rộng hơn về các đặc trưng nổi bật của chúng. Điều này sẽ giúp độc giả nâng cao kỹ năng đọc hiểu toàn diện khi đọc loại tiêu đề này trên các báo và tạp chí tiếng Anh.

**Từ khóa:** Tiêu đề các bài phóng sự, đặc điểm ngôn ngữ, tiêu đề, lựa chọn từ ngữ, biện pháp tu từ.