

Reporting Dr. Death: An analysis of American and British treatments of the same news story

Tim Knight

Introduction

In this paper I will compare and contrast some of the different ways various news media reported one story. The reports followed the guilty verdict arrived at, in April 1999, by a jury in the United States on a doctor accused of murder. The doctor's name is Dr. Jack Kevorkian and it was the fifth time he had been on trial. It was not a simple case of murder because the doctor's defence was that he had done what the dead man had wanted. The case centered on the issue of euthanasia, and was therefore a story which received substantial coverage in what commentators and analysts often call the serious news media-broadsheet (large-format) newspapers and their equivalent in the broadcasting world. I have chosen to compare the start of reports of the doctor's conviction in two broadsheet newspapers and two radio news broadcasts.

One aspect of the reports I was interested in was how those in the U.S. would report the case compared to those in Britain, so I chose reports published in each country. The broadsheets are the *Washington Post* and the *Daily Telegraph* of London; the radio reports come from Britain's BBC (albeit its World Service) and the American BBC-equivalent, National Public Radio (usually shortened to NPR). Since I was in Japan at the time, I have compared the stories from the versions published by the various media on

the internet.

The Newspaper Reports

The Headlines

Let us first compare the newspaper reports, which can be found at the end of this paper: the *Washington Post* report is in appendix one, the *Daily Telegraph's* is in appendix two. A glance at these will show one big difference – the American report is about twice as long (841 words as opposed to 344). One would expect this since for the *Post* the story was a domestic one, whereas for the *Telegraph* it was a foreign story not involving any of its target readership. Now let us move on to examine in more detail the headlines and the information given before the report proper.

First, note something similar in the headlines – their length. The *Washington Post's* headline is nine words long, The *Daily Telegraph's* is ten, which shows that that they are both broadsheet, serious newspapers. A tabloid, more popular, paper would undoubtedly have a shorter headline. There is another similarity – immediately following the headline is a byline¹ giving the reporter's name. Another similarity is an agreement on what the news angle² is: it is the result of the trial – that the accused doctor, at the end of his trial, has been found guilty of murder.

Apart from those particulars, there are some significant differences. Quite clearly, the American newspaper assumes greater knowledge of the case in its readers. It states: “Michigan Jury Finds Kevorkian Guilty of Second-Degree Murder.” First, that headline assumes readers know what and probably where Michigan is; and second, it identifies the doctor at the

¹ A byline is the line which tells the readers who wrote the article, given at the beginning, or (less commonly in a news story), at the end of the article.

² The news angle is the event chosen by the writer with which to lead, or begin, the story.

Reporting Dr. Death

center of the case by his surname only. For the British readership of the *Telegraph*, the location of the case (in Michigan state) is of minor interest and, in the headline, would only confuse many readers because some might not even know *what* Michigan is. The headline omits this detail: “ ‘Dr Death’ is found guilty of murder in fifth trial.”

The decision by the respective headline writers whether or not to mention the jury has a significant impact on the grammar of the headlines. Both papers use the same verb (find), but in the *Washington Post* headline it is active, whereas it is passive in the *Daily Telegraph*. Although most guides for journalists advise writers to use the active whenever possible (Keeble, 1998; Sova, 1998; Block, 1997), this is clearly a case where the passive is justified. The important point in this story is who has been found guilty and of what, not which group of people made the decision. In a criminal trial in the USA and the UK there is always a jury which makes that decision, so it is hardly news that the verdict on the charge against Kevorkian was made by a jury. I can only think that the American paper decided it merited inclusion in the headline because he had previously been tried – and acquitted – in four other states and it was this jury in Michigan which had found him guilty. As far as the headline goes, this history also seems to be assumed knowledge, whereas in the British paper the headline includes the detail that it was the doctor's “fifth trial.”

The way the doctor is identified also shows how there is greater assumed knowledge of the case in the American paper. The *Washington Post* considers the doctor's surname is sufficient for its readers to know who the story is about. The British paper, by contrast, gives his nickname, Dr. Death. There are probably two reasons for that: First, many readers might have heard of Dr. Death, a doctor accused of killing his patients in the name of euthanasia, even if they did not know his real name; and second, such a

Reporting Dr. Death

nickname would attract the attention of many readers who were not familiar with the case at all. The inverted commas around this name show it is not a real name, but a nickname; it is like a code name for the case, a shorthand which readers can recognize, rather like the slug³ the journalist would give the story when writing it.

Finally, there is a difference of presentation: The house style of the *Washington Post*, as it is in most American papers, makes the first letter of each content word in a headline a capital, whereas in the *Daily Telegraph*, in common with most British papers these days, after the first word only names begin with capitals. This makes the headlines look like ordinary sentences, except for their larger, bold lettering.

There is one more significant difference before the main text of the story: The *Post* has an old-fashioned dateline. These days, the dateline is the name of the place from where the story was filed (Hicks, 1999; Bartel, 1994) and appears – if it does – at the beginning of a news story. News travels fast these days so there is rarely any need to include the date, thereby making this term misleading. In the early days of newspapers, however, a story was often published several days after it was filed, so a dateline included both the date the story was sent and the place it was sent from. British national newspapers tend to omit separate datelines altogether nowadays: The date the story was filed is assumed to be the day before, or, in the case of later editions and a late-breaking story, in the early hours of the same day of publication; the place is usually given in the byline, as in the *Daily Telegraph* example under discussion – “by Hugh Davies in Washington.” The only major English language newspaper which continues the full dateline tradition is the *New York Times*. The *Washington Post* includes it for its internet

³ The slug is a short, working title for the story by which everyone in the newsroom – editor and sub-editors, as well as the writer – can identify it.

version. In this case, then, the dateline reads, “PONTIAC, Mich., March 26.” As the paper clearly states just above this, the publication date is “Saturday, March 27.”

The Lead Paragraphs

The contrasting styles of the datelines affect the way the lead paragraphs of the stories are written. The *Post* reports,

Assisted-suicide advocate Jack Kevorkian, who invited a murder prosecution by injecting lethal drugs into a 52-year-old man on camera and having the videotape broadcast on television, was convicted today of second-degree murder.

Notice that it says he was convicted “today”: This only makes sense if the reader has read and understood the full dateline. The *Telegraph*, by contrast, says,

JACK KEVORKIAN, the man who became known as Dr Death for assisting the suicide of the terminally ill, was found guilty last night of second-degree murder.

As far as time references are concerned this is the usual style of hard news lead in most newspapers – they report an event which happened “yesterday” or “last night”. The latter is preferable because it is fresher, more recent, giving the impression that the paper has the latest possible news. It is also written with consideration of the reader's perspective – most readers will be reading the story the day after the event. Advocates of the full dateline, however, could argue that the “verb+last night” style is less honest than the “verb+today” because there is sometimes a suspicion that the phrase “last night” is used to make the story sound fresh even when the event happened

Reporting Dr. Death

earlier in the day. In this case, however, even though the events took place in a court of law, where decisions usually take place during the day, the use of “last night” is justified because of the time difference between Britain and America.

The two newspapers agree on the news angle and the lead sentence basically tells the same simple statement of fact – that Jack Kevorkian has been found guilty (or, in the *Post's* more formal word, “convicted”) of second-degree murder. There are two significant differences, though, which make the *Post's* lead sentence, at 32 words, six words longer than the *Telegraph's*. First, before his name the *Post* has the kind of pre-modification made popular by *Time* magazine (McArthur, 1992, p. 1043) in the 1920s and which is very often found in the tabloid newspaper reports, mainly because it is a way of packing in lots of information in a short space. Noun phrases like this act as a shorthand to remind readers quickly and efficiently who the person is. The effect is similar to when a title is used, for example, “Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo”, “President Bill Clinton”. In this case it is “Assisted-suicide advocate...”, not an official title at all, but three words which quickly explain which Jack Kevorkian is being written about. This style of writing is sometimes mocked as “journalese” (McArthur, pp. 552-4) because it is often found in journalism English but sounds unnatural in any other style of English. It is certainly not conversational. The *Post's* use of such pre-modification before the head noun in this case has a significant impact on the difference between the two lead sentences' themes-understood in systemic-functional grammar to be the “jumping off point” (Lock, 1996, p.222) of a clause, or the “starting-point for the message” (Halliday, 1994, p. 38). Table 1 makes this clear.

Reporting Dr. Death

Table 1

Newspaper	Theme of the lead sentence
The Washington Post	Assisted-suicide advocate Jack Kevorkian, who...
The Daily Telegraph	Jack Kevorkian, the man who...

Although the *Post*'s theme is typical of journalism English, it does mean the reader understands who Jack Kevorkian is and what his significance in the news is right at the beginning of the report, whereas in the *Telegraph*'s report the reader has to wait for that information until what is called the rheme – which is “everything else in the clause” (Lock, *ibid.*) after the theme.

An interesting effect of this difference, though, comes from the fact that the concepts of theme and rheme in functional grammar correspond very closely to what are also termed “given” and “new” (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992, pp.149-150). The usual way of communicating in English is to put the information already known, or most familiar, to the reader (or listener) at the beginning of the sentence. The new information comes after that. In the reports under discussion, this means that the *Post* (which is published in America) regards the information of who Jack Kevorkian is (an “assisted-suicide advocate”) as given information, whereas the *Telegraph*—which has a mainly British readership who would probably not be so aware of the Kevorkian case regards it as new. Table 2 shows this.

The *Telegraph*'s lead sentence is more conversational; it is closer to how people speak—a simple name followed by a subordinate clause explaining who he is. You can imagine the following casual conversation between friends:

- A. Have you heard about Kevorkian?
- B. Who?

Reporting Dr. Death

Table 2

Newspaper	Given	New
The Washington Post	Assisted-suicide advocate Jack Kevorkian, who...	... invited a murder prosecution by injecting lethal drugs into a 52-year-old man on camera and having the videotape broadcast on television, was convicted today of second-degree murder.
The Daily Telegraph	Jack Kevorkian, the man who...	... became known as Dr Death for assisting the suicide of the terminally ill, was found guilty last night of second-degree murder.

- A. You know, Jack Kevorkian, the man who's always helping people kill themselves.
- B. Oh, right.
- A. Well, he's been found guilty of murder.

The reporters who are told as far as possible to write as people speak are those working for radio and television (Block, 1997). We shall consider two radio reports later. Before that, though, there are some other differences in the newspapers arising from the nature of the target readership.

Some other differences between the American (domestic) and British (foreign) reports

At a most basic level there is one lexical difference resulting from a difference between American and British English. Although the jury's verdict was guilty, Dr. Kevorkian is said to be free on a "personal bond" in the *Washington Post*, but free "on bail" in the *Daily Telegraph*. There is a

Reporting Dr. Death

more striking difference in the name given to the disease that the alleged murder victim was suffering from before his death. The *Post* gives it both a formal, medical term and a popular term: “amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, known as Lou Gehrig's disease.” *The Telegraph* calls it by the name British readers would know – “motor neurone disease” – a formal term, but not so impenetrably medical as the formal American term. But the report then says it is “known in America as Lou Gehrig's disease⁴.” By giving this information, the reporter is trying to shed light on what is a foreign story and to educate his readership somewhat.

Since much more of the story and the issue surrounding it would be unknown to the British readers than the American ones, the reporter has more licence to interpret for his readers what is going on. In paragraph four, the *Telegraph* reporter suggests one decision by Kevorkian was a “bizarre twist” and then says, “The move may have been aimed at winning a mistrial in the event of a conviction.” This use of the modal “may” shows the reporter is interpreting for his readers. The reporter is using the word in its logical use which “typically deals with an inference or prediction” (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, 1983, p. 85). The *Post's* report for domestic readers has the same interpretation of the event but has more space to give a more detailed, factual basis for the interpretation using strong verbs rather than modals:

...Kevorkian's motive was unclear. However, it opened the way for Gorosh to argue that assistant prosecutor John Skrzyński had improperly criticized Kevorkian for not taking the witness chair in his own defense.

⁴ Lou Gehrig was a famous American baseball player who died in his 50s because of this illness.

The Radio Reports

Broadcasting practitioner-teachers such as Block (1997) and Boyd (1994) stress the need for radio and television reporters to write in a conversational style. The big challenge for broadcasters, though, is to strike the right balance in their writing between sounding conversational but also imparting a lot of information concisely because there is such limited time. For the present study, I have taken as examples the introductions to two reports which were broadcast after the jury's decision in the Kevorkian case. The presenter on NPR's Weekend Edition reported,

Jack Kevorkian has been found guilty of second-degree murder by a jury in Pontiac, Michigan. Yesterday's verdict came after less than two days of deliberations and it marks the first time Dr. Kevorkian has been convicted in a trial relating to his most controversial practice. NPR's Don Gonyea reports...

The news reader on the BBC World Service said,

The American campaigner for assisted suicide Dr. Jack Kevorkian has been found guilty by a jury in Michigan of second-degree murder. Dr. Kevorkian was charged with giving a lethal dose to a terminally-ill man. Stephen Sakur reports from Washington...

It is immediately clear that the lead sentences of the two radio reports are shorter than both the newspaper reports and tell the main event directly, without relative clauses – as one would expect in a style more closely connected to speech. Even the longer of the two (the BBC's) is four words shorter than the *Daily Telegraph's*. Both also use the more informal “found guilty” in the first sentence, rather than the more formal “convicted”, although NPR uses that word in its second sentence. One other similarity is that they both use the present perfect tense, rather than the newspaper style

Reporting Dr. Death

of past tense followed by a time reference, such as “last night” or “yesterday”. This – as we can see in the imagined conversation above – creates an impression of greater immediacy. It sounds closer to the present and is therefore usually favoured by broadcasters in the first sentence of reporting an event. The present perfect tense sounds more 'newsy' and is intended to grab the attention of the listener. Block says, “Use of the present perfect tense also enables you to avoid that dirty word *yesterday* in the lead” (p. 159). The simple past tense follows in the second sentence: “came” in the NPR report, “was charged” in the BBC's.

The differences mirror those of the newspaper reports: There is greater assumed knowledge in the American NPR report. Sometimes this results in more information being given – the jury was sitting not just in Michigan, but “in Pontiac”, a town unlikely to be known to most listeners on BBC's World Service. It also results in a rather oblique reference to why Dr. Kevorkian was on trial – something “relating to his most controversial practice”. The BBC does not assume its audience knows what that is and states clearly in its second sentence, “Dr. Kevorkian was charged with giving a lethal dose to a terminally ill man”. The BBC writers also decided they needed to identify Dr. Kevorkian with more than his name, which was deemed sufficient for NPR listeners, who had opportunities to listen to regular reports of the trial. Unlike the pre-modifier phrase used in the *Washington Post*, however, the BBC uses a definite article, “The”, and a preposition, “for”, in its noun phrase. This means the opening sentence does not sound like journalese, but more like conversational English, which should be the aim of broadcasters. I have quoted only from the introductions to the reports. The full reports further differed in that the American report was three or four minutes and gave greater detail of the court proceedings than the BBC report which was less than a minute long and concentrated on

Reporting Dr. Death

the general issue surrounding the case. Another difference was that the American reporter was in Pontiac, whereas the BBC journalist sent his report from the US capital, Washington.

Conclusion

Although the type of media under discussion were similar in that they were all from what purport to be the serious, quality end of the news market, there are some significant differences in their reports of this case. One division is between the print and broadcast reports: The main difference here is grammatical, including one of sentence length and complexity. Another division is between the American reports, for whom the Kevorkian case was domestic, and the British media reports, for whom the story is foreign. This different standpoint results in differences in the amount of detail given (more in the American reports) and how much knowledge of the case is assumed in readers and listeners (again, more in the American reports).

References

- Bartel, J.C. (1994). *The Metropolitan Daily News: Understanding American Newspapers*. Englewood Cliffs: Regents/Prentice Hall
- BBC *World Service* news report. 27 March 1999
- Block, M. (1994). *Writing Broadcast News*. Chicago: Bonus Books
- Boyd, A. (1994). *Techniques of Radio and TV News*. Oxford: focal press
- Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1983). *The Grammar Book*. New York: Newberry House
- The *Daily Telegraph*, 27 March, 1999. Internet edition.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1994). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (2nd edition). London: Arnold
- Hicks, W. (1999). *Writing for Journalists*. London: Routledge

Reporting Dr. Death

Keeble, R. (1998). *The Newspapers Handbook*. London: Routledge

Lock, G. (1996). *Functional English Grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

McArthur, T. (ed.) (1992). *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

National Public Radio Weekend Edition report. 27 March 1999.

Richards, J.C., Platt, J. & Platt, H. (1992). *Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*. Harlow: Longman

Sova, D.B. (1998). *How To Write Articles*. New York: Macmillan

The Washington Post, 27 March, 1999. Internet edition.

Appendix One: *The Washington Post* report, 27 March 1999

Michigan Finds Kevorkian Guilty of Second-Degree Murder

PONTIAC, Mich., March 26-Assisted-suicide advocate Jack Kevorkian, who invited a murder prosecution by injecting lethal drugs into a 52-year-old man on camera and having the videotape broadcast on television, was convicted today of second-degree murder.

A jury of seven women and five men returned the verdict after deliberating for nearly 12 hours over two days. Oakland County Circuit Judge Jessica Cooper set sentencing for April 14 and allowed Kevorkian to remain free in the meantime on \$750,000 personal bond..

The white-haired, 70-year-old retired pathologist glanced at his attorney, David Gorosh, and then stared passively ahead as Cooper elicited a promise from him that he will not participate in any assisted suicides while on bond.

“No injections? No assisted suicides?” Cooper asked. Kevorkian replied, “No,” and Cooper said, “I take your word, sir.”

The jury also found Kevorkian guilty of illegally delivering a controlled substance, secobarbital, which alone carried a maximum sentence of seven years. Oakland County Chief Prosecutor David Gorcyca said sentencing guidelines call for a minimum prison term of 10 to 25 years on the second-degree murder charge. He

Reporting Dr. Death

indicated that his office probably will seek a sentence in accordance with the guidelines.

Kevorkian left the courthouse shortly after the verdict, eluding reporters and scores of photographers. Gorosh, who during the trial acted as an adviser because Kevorkian insisted on conducting his own defense, called the verdict a “tragedy.”

“It was certainly unjust to equate an act of compassion with an act of murder,” Gorosh said. “To suggest Dr. Kevorkian is a murderer is a tragedy.”

Gorosh said he will appeal the verdict on several issues, including a claim that a prosecuting attorney improperly criticized before the jury Kevorkian's decision not to testify in his own defense. He added that Kevorkian has received thousands of letters from people “rallying to his side” and that in spite of the verdict, he will be “lauded in history as a hero.”

Gorcyca said Kevorkian forced his hand by videotaping the administration of lethal injections on Sept. 17 to Thomas Youk, an accountant who was suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Kevorkian later gave the videotape to the CBS News program “60 Minutes,” which broadcast excerpts.

“It was Dr. Kevorkian who said, ‘They must prosecute me,’ ” Gorcyca said. “He taunted me into prosecuting him.”

A CBS spokesman declined to comment on today's verdict.

Kevorkian has repeatedly said he wanted to face a first-degree murder charge to call attention to his assisted-suicide crusade in a high-profile trial. He has said that if sent to prison, he will starve himself to death.

This was the first murder case against Kevorkian, who says he has helped 130 people kill themselves since 1990 as part of his campaign to legalize physician-assisted suicide. In four previous trials on charges of violating assisted-suicide laws, he was acquitted three times; the fourth ended in a mistrial.

In those cases, Kevorkian did not inject people directly but used a “suicide machine” that allowed them to trigger the flow of lethal drugs.

Throughout the 2 1/2 days of the fast-paced trial, Kevorkian ignored Cooper's entreaties not to act as his own counsel. But he surprised the court this morning by

Reporting Dr. Death

withdrawing as counsel just as the jury began its second day of deliberations.

Since the trial proper was already over and the case was in the hands of the jurors, Kevorkian's motive was unclear. However, it opened the way for Gorosh to argue that assistant prosecutor John Skrzynski had improperly criticized Kevorkian for not taking the witness chair in his own defense.

Gorosh said he will examine the transcript to determine if Kevorkian's constitutional right to decline -- without prejudice -- taking the stand was breached by the comments, thereby resulting in a reversible error.

Apart from his opening and closing statements, Kevorkian's entire defense lasted less than 10 minutes. He called no witnesses and presented no evidence or exhibits. The prosecution called only three witnesses and used four hours for its case, the centerpiece being a videotape of Kevorkian injecting three lethal drugs into Youk's arm.

Kevorkian's case suffered a major setback Thursday when Cooper ruled that he could not call as witnesses Youk's wife, Melody, and brother, Terrance, to testify about the victim's pain and suffering and Kevorkian's intent. The judge said such testimony would be irrelevant. She also ruled that relieving suffering was not a legal defense to murder.

At times, Kevorkian's arguments during the trial were rambling and disjointed, reinforcing his own admission to the jury that "If I looked inept, I was . . . but I'm articulate in English, if not the law." At other times, he was quixotic -- bordering on bizarre -- such as when he scrawled a confusing logic equation on a blackboard, intending to prove that if the law does not necessarily equate homicide with murder but does equate euthanasia with homicide, then "therefore euthanasia is not necessarily murder."

Slamming down his chalk, Kevorkian triumphantly announced, "You can't get beyond that. That's logic," as some of the jurors blinked in bewilderment.

Appendix two: The *Daily Telegraph* report, 27 March 1999

Dr Death is found guilty of murder at fifth trial

Reporting Dr. Death

by Hugh Davies in Washington

JACK KEVORKIAN, the man who became known as Dr Death for assisting the suicide of the terminally ill, was found guilty last night of second-degree murder.

He was also convicted of delivering a controlled substance for giving a lethal injection to a man whose death was shown in a videotape on national television. It was the first time in five trials that the euthanasia campaigner had been found guilty.

The jury in Pontiac, Michigan, rejected Kevorkian's arguments that his intent was not to murder Thomas Youk, 52, who had motor neurone disease, known in America as Lou Gehrig's disease. But the retired pathologist remains free on bail until his sentencing on April 14 on condition that he does not engage in more assisted suicides. He could be jailed for any term up to life. Prosecutors had sought a first-degree murder conviction which carries a mandatory life sentence without possibility of parole.

Kevorkian, who represented himself at the trial, said he had acted to ease the suffering of Mr Youk. In a bizarretwist after the jury had begun its deliberations, Kevorkian said he would no longer conduct his own defence and hired a lawyer. The move may have been aimed at winning a mistrial in the event of a conviction.

In a strikingly short trial, in which he presented no witnesses and no evidence, the 70-year-old retired pathologist fumbled his defence so badly that Judge Jessica Cooper constantly implored him to use professional help. When he informed her that he was doing so, after the jury went out, she was aghast. She asked: "Now you're going to do it?" He said: "You said any time, your honour."

At least 130 people are known to have died in Kevorkian's presence. He has been tried four times previously on charges that he helped patients to commit suicide, with three acquittals and one mistrial. But this time he videotaped himself in the act of killing Mr Youk and had the tape shown on the CBS television programme 60 Minutes in a challenge to prosecutors to charge him.

During the trial he tried to call Mr Youk's widow and brother as witnesses. Both wanted to tell the jury that Kevorkian wanted only to end the patient's agony. But the judge ruled that their testimony was irrelevant, as mercy killing was not an issue.

Reporting Dr. Death

She said the notion that Mr Youk had consented to his death was not a legally acceptable defence. Jurors had to follow the criminal statutes, not try to change the law.