



British Left Waffles on Falklands

Why Do Some Headlines Sound so Funny?

By [William Z. Shetter](#)
[Language Miniatures](#)

Do you see a comical picture in your mind's eye? The headline writer didn't intend it to sound funny, and probably never even noticed it. It's comical because in compressing the statement to a few words, the copy editor removed too many clues and thereby left the reader free to understand the same few words in an unforeseen way. This straying is even more inevitable because of the absence of any vocal inflections or expression and gesture.

For many years, the last page of each issue of the *Columbia Journalism Review* has been devoted to a column called 'The Lower Case', presenting without comment a dozen or so unintentionally comical headlines and captions from the U.S. press. But this kind of unexpected jostling of two meanings can be a gold mine for insights into how we understand and interpret our language. When something necessary for unambiguous understanding is missing, we can see for the first time how dependent we are on it. In other words, this "bare-bones" approach shows us what words and constructions are doing what. So let's do something *CJR* chooses not to do, and add a little commentary.

Sometimes the headline writer has simply forgotten that the word has other meanings, and one of them pops into the reader's mind. Like President to Sell College to High School Students, or Red Tape Holds up New Bridge (here both *red tape* and *to hold up* have physical meanings as well as the abstract ones intended). Then there are those in which the main culprit is that little comma. It replaces 'and', saving four precious spaces, but the reader is more accustomed to seeing a comma in the role of separating two independent clauses, and interprets it this way: Man Accused of Shooting Neighbor, Dog Held for Trial.

In French, Spanish, German or Russian you can always tell a verb from a noun by its endings. But in English, how do you know which the word 'walk' is? We have to depend on clues provided by neighboring words in the sentence, and when they're omitted we're free to choose either noun or verb, sometimes with comical results: Yellow Perch Decline to be Studied, or the second and third words in the title above where we read the intended NOUN-VERB as VERB-NOUN.

When we read Murder Suspect Gets Appointed Attorney, we suddenly realize how crucial it is to have that missing little 'an' in the right place: there's a lot of difference between 'an appointed attorney' and 'appointed an attorney'. When you read Jacksonville Pornography Free, Officials Say, do you know whether the missing 'is' should be before 'pornography' or after it? It makes a great deal of difference whether a verb is active or passive voice. Why do we sometimes have an impulse to supply that form of 'to be' (passive) when it wasn't intended

there? Think about Manufacturer Discharged into River. In Frozen Embryos Ruled Children the opposite is happening: here a passive was intended ('are ruled') and we perversely insist on reading it as an active 'rule'!

In English we readily form noun compounds but don't distinguish them formally as such, simply placing the two components next to each other. So it is easy for us to take almost any two words next to each other as a compound as long as it makes sense - at times comical sense. In Infant Abducted from Hospital Safe or in TV Networks Agree to Police Violence, we see the familiar but - at least here - unintended 'hospital safe' and 'police violence'. Often the writer does intend a noun compound, but something in the sentence (probably just the unfamiliarity of the compounds) invites us to interpret the words separately, as Large Church Plans Collapse and French Offer Terrorist Reward.

It gets rather involved when we see how the headline's stripping away of grammatical clues leaves us guessing what stands in relation to what. Since we are more apt to associate 'facelift' with a woman than with a jail, when we see N.J. Jails for Women in Need of a Facelift we ignore the phrase 'jails for women' and our eye sees... When you read Smithsonian May Cancel Bombing of Japan Exhibits, what do you think the phrases are? Would you paraphrase it as *bombing the exhibits concerning Japan* or *exhibits concerning the bombing of Japan*?

Often nothing more than inflections of the voice give us crucial signals how a sentence is to be understood. When we can't hear the voice pausing momentarily to indicate how the words are to be grouped, in Crowds Rushing to See Pope Trample 6 to Death we see an implied phrase 'the Pope tramples' (after all, 'Pope' is the noun right next to the verb, where subjects most often are), instead of associating 'trample' with its intended but more distant subject 'crowds'.

'Bare-bones' newspaper headlines expect quite a lot of the reader, like guessing whether 'walk' is a noun or a verb, whether 'is' should be supplied and where, whether two words beside each other belong together, and what relates to what in the sentence. So when communication occasionally takes an unexpected turn we may be amused and even get some insights, but can't be too surprised.

Used with the permission of William Z. Shetter, author of numerous books on language, including [Language Miniatures: A Selection of Essays](#)