

Pragmatic Functions of Headlines in Soccer Star: A Case Study of Deictic Expression and Illocutionary Acts

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Abstract. *This study investigates the pragmatic functions of deictic expressions and illocutionary acts in sports headlines, with a focus on the Soccer Star newspaper—an African publication centered on football reporting. Headlines in sports journalism serve not only as summaries of events but also as tools for engaging readers, evoking emotion, and constructing narratives. Drawing on pragmatic theory, particularly Stephen Levinson’s classification of deixis and John Searle’s typology of illocutionary acts, the study analyzes 100 purposively sampled headlines using qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal that person deixis (e.g., “he,” “we,” “they”) and temporal deixis (e.g., “now,” “again”) are the most frequently used, contributing to the immediacy and contextual anchoring of headlines. In terms of illocutionary force, assertives and expressives dominate, reflecting a blend of factual reporting and emotional resonance. The analysis also highlights the interdependence of deixis and illocution, as many headlines rely on deictic cues to frame their intended communicative functions. The study concludes that deixis and illocution are essential tools in headline construction, particularly in sports journalism where reader engagement and cultural familiarity are key. It recommends greater awareness among journalists of these pragmatic devices and encourages further research in media discourse, especially within African contexts. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how language functions in shaping meaning, identity, and reader experience in the media.*

Key words: *Pragmatic Functions, Headlines In Soccer Star, Case Study of Deictic.*

Introduction

Language is a powerful tool in human communication, and its strategic use is especially evident in media discourse. In newspapers, headlines play a pivotal role in drawing attention, summarizing key points, and framing how stories are interpreted. They are often designed to be brief yet impactful, containing condensed information that triggers reader curiosity, expectation, or emotion (Olumuji & Olufemi, 2022; van Hulst, Metze, Dewulf et al., 2024; Adebayo, Obumneke, Ameen et al., 2025). In sports journalism particularly football, which commands a passionate following headline not only report events but also construct narratives, idolize players, dramatize matches, and engage readers on both informational and emotional levels (Tate, 2017; Oates & Pauly, 2017; Wanta, 2023; Yar’Adua, Msughter & Aliyu, 2023).

Within this highly expressive and compact format, pragmatic elements such as deictic expressions and illocutionary acts become essential tools. Deixis involves words and phrases that cannot be fully understood without contextual reference, such as “here,” “now,” “this,” or “they.” These expressions are commonly used in headlines to create a sense of immediacy, shared knowledge, or spatial and temporal relevance (Ojo & Pane, 2024). For instance, a headline like “He Strikes Again!” depends

on the reader's ability to infer who "he" is and what the striking action refers to relying on the reader's familiarity with the current sports discourse (Alkhawaldeh, 2022; Safi'i, 2025). Similarly, illocutionary acts, a concept from Speech Act Theory, refer to the intended function behind an utterance whether it is to inform, command, question, promise, or express emotion. In newspaper headlines, illocutionary force is often implied rather than explicitly stated, requiring interpretation from the reader based on context (Mustofa, 2017; Mabaquiao, 2018). A headline such as "We Will Win It!" may function as a declaration, promise, or even threat, depending on its context in the sporting world and who is speaking (Kone, 2020; Nyagani & Musa, 2022).

In the context of African sports journalism, and particularly in publications like the Soccer Star newspaper, these pragmatic devices are not merely incidental they are central to how meaning is constructed and how readers engage with the text. Despite the crucial role headlines play in shaping sports discourse, scholarly attention has largely focused on content analysis, stylistic features, or ideological framing, with limited research on the pragmatic functions of these linguistic choices (Olagunju, 2016; Ojomo & Olomjobi, 2019; Suleiman, Aondover & Abdullahi, 2023; Enisire, 2024). This study seeks to address that gap by exploring how deixis and illocutionary acts function within the headlines of Soccer Star. The focus is on understanding how these features contribute to meaning-making, how they align with the communicative intentions of journalists, and how they reflect the socio-cultural context of football reporting. By analyzing headlines through the lens of pragmatics, the study aims to reveal the deeper linguistic strategies at play in sports journalism and contribute to broader discussions on language use in the media.

Statement of the Problem

Headlines are a critical component of newspaper discourse. They are designed not only to inform but also to attract attention, arouse curiosity, and frame readers' interpretations of news events. In the domain of sports journalism, particularly football coverage, headlines often go beyond straightforward reporting they perform communicative functions that reflect excitement, rivalry, tension, celebration, or even national pride (Molek-Kozakowska, 2016; Peterlicean & Berariu, 2020; Selimi, 2024). These functions are frequently achieved through pragmatic elements such as deictic expressions and illocutionary acts. Despite the centrality of headlines in shaping media consumption and their strategic use of language, many studies on media texts tend to focus on their stylistic, syntactic, or ideological dimensions. There remains a noticeable gap in research concerning the pragmatic analysis of sports headlines, especially within the African context and specifically in publications like Soccer Star newspaper. More importantly, little is known about how deixis and illocution are used to achieve communicative goals in such texts (Al-Saedi & Jabber, 2020; Noreen, Bano & Kanwal, 2025).

For instance, headlines like "He's Done It Again!" or "We're Coming for You!" rely heavily on shared knowledge and context. Yet, without a proper understanding of the underlying pragmatic features, the full communicative force of such headlines may be missed. This raises key concerns: What types of deictic expressions are used in Soccer Star headlines, and how do they guide the reader's interpretation? What kinds of illocutionary acts are embedded in these headlines, and what communicative intentions do they serve?

Furthermore, the interpretation of these expressions is highly context-dependent, influenced by the cultural, social, and temporal setting of both the writer and the reader. Without a framework for understanding how such context interacts with language use in headlines, the subtleties of meaning are easily overlooked. Therefore, this study seeks to fill the gap by conducting a pragmatic analysis of Soccer Star headlines, with specific attention to deixis and illocutionary force. It aims to uncover the linguistic strategies used by sports journalists to engage readers, convey meaning, and construct narratives in football reporting.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to analyze the pragmatic functions of headlines in Soccer Star newspaper with a focus on deictic expressions and illocutionary acts. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify and categorize the types of deictic expressions used in the headlines.
2. Examine the illocutionary force(s) conveyed in selected headlines.
3. Analyze the communicative intentions behind the use of deixis and illocution.

Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following questions:

1. What types of deictic expressions are predominantly used in Soccer Star headlines?
2. What illocutionary acts are performed through these headlines?
3. How do deixis and illocution contribute to the pragmatic meaning of the headlines?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Deixis in Media Discourse

Deixis context-dependent expressions like “this,” “now,” and personal pronouns are integral to media text coherence. Grüss (2025) and Vandelanotte (2024) show that journalists across national and international newspapers strategically employ various deixis types (person, time, place, discourse, and social) to frame events, orient readers, and shape perception. In Nigeria, Agbo and Oyazi (2023) find similar pragmatic use of deixis in editorial texts, emphasising its role in cohesion and contextualisation. In sports journalism, person deixis is particularly prevalent. Wideyani and Wulandari (2024) study of BBC Sport articles reveals that 34% of deixis instances are pronouns referring to players, which helps foster immediacy and reader engagement (Nur Setiakawanti & Susanti, 2018; González-Arias, Chatzikoumi & López-García, 2024).

Deixis refers to context-dependent expressions in language such as “I,” “you,” “this,” “there,” “now,” and “here” whose meaning hinges on the speaker, time, place, or discourse context (Green, 2016). In media discourse, these deictic expressions are far from mere linguistic ornamentation: they serve foundational pragmatic roles, guiding readers through texts, framing events, forging emotional connections, and subtly influencing interpretations (Wiesenborn, 2022).

Illocutionary Acts in Headlines

Illocutionary functions asserting, commanding, promising are vital to understanding how language enacts communicative intentions. Borchmann (2024) argues that headlines themselves constitute illocutionary subacts tailored to each genre, such as news, analysis, or columns, meaning that their pragmatic force depends on the headline’s genre function. Similar patterns emerge in African press, Kone (2020), Nyagani and Musa (2022) report that Tanzanian headlines frequently use representative (assertive) acts like reporting or claiming with directives or expressive illocutions appearing less often. In Nigeria, Ejiaso (2023) finds headlines perform a range of act-types, including expositive, verdictives, and behabitives, serving primarily to inform or shape impressions (Ezekulie & Umeh, 2024).

In pragmatic theory, illocutionary acts a concept introduced by J.L. Austin and further developed by John Searle refer to the communicative force or intention behind a speaker’s utterance. Unlike the literal meaning (locutionary act) or the effect on the listener (perlocutionary act), illocutionary acts concern what the speaker is actually "doing" by speaking, such as asserting, questioning, commanding, promising, or expressing emotion (Mustofa, 2017; Mabaquiao, 2018). According to Searle’s taxonomy, these acts fall into five main categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. When applied to newspaper headlines compact, attention-grabbing textual units the influence of illocutionary force becomes both salient and strategically nuanced (Mabaquiao, 2018; Salih & Othamn, 2024).

Deixis and Illocution in Sports Headlines

While literature exists separately on deixis and illocution in headlines, studies focusing on sports headlines remain scarce. Existing research on general news or editorials establishes groundwork that deixis anchors events in time/space, whereas illocution shapes their communicative force. However,

football-related headline studies (e.g., on Soccer Star) are notably lacking. This gap justifies the study's focus: sports headlines uniquely blend linguistic devices to evoke excitement, shared context, and persuasive framing.

According to Altun (2023), language plays a crucial role in shaping perception and meaning, particularly in mass communication. Among the many contexts in which language is crafted to capture attention and influence interpretation, sports journalism especially in the form of headlines offers a rich domain for linguistic analysis (Nani, 2024). Two fundamental linguistic concepts that are especially relevant in this context are deixis and illocutionary acts. Thus, Stapleton (2017) posited that deixis involves context-dependent expressions, while illocution refers to the intended function of an utterance within communication. When applied to sports headlines, these linguistic tools offer powerful insights into how meaning is constructed, how engagement is achieved, and how information is subtly conveyed or framed (Ojo & Pane, 2024). Notably, the concepts of deixis and illocution in the realm of sports headlines, illustrating how these mechanisms shape reader understanding, emotional response, and narrative framing. Through examples and analysis, we will see how headline writers use these tools to guide the reader's interpretation, often compressing complex stories into a few powerful words (Noreen et al., 2025).

Theoretical Framework

Speech Act Theory (J.L. Austin and John Searle)

At the heart of this study lies Speech Act Theory, first introduced by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). Austin argues that language is not merely descriptive but performative; that is, speaking is itself a kind of action. Austin classified speech acts into three components:

- **Locutionary act:** The act of saying something with a specific linguistic form.
- **Illocutionary act:** The intended function or force behind the utterance (e.g., asserting, commanding, questioning, promising).
- **Perlocutionary act:** The effect the utterance has on the listener (e.g., persuading, scaring, inspiring).

John Searle in 1969, refined Austin's theory by classifying illocutionary acts into five categories:

- Assertives (e.g., stating, reporting)
- Directives (e.g., requesting, commanding)
- Commissives (e.g., promising, vowing)
- Expressives (e.g., congratulating, apologizing)
- Declaratives (e.g., resigning, pronouncing)

In the context of sports headlines, most utterances function as assertives, although expressives and directives are also common, particularly when emotional tone or reader engagement is emphasized. Headlines do not merely describe sports events; they perform the act of dramatizing, judging, celebrating, or criticizing (Mabaquiao, 2018).

Theory of Deixis (Stephen C. Levinson)

The concept of deixis is central to pragmatics and is thoroughly explored in Stephen C. Levinson's seminal work *Pragmatics* (1983). Levinson defines deixis as "the ways in which languages encode or grammaticalize features of the context of utterance or speech event."

Deixis is traditionally categorized into five types:

- **Person deixis:** Refers to participants in the discourse (e.g., "he," "she," "we")
- **Time deixis:** Anchors the utterance in time (e.g., "now," "today," "next week")
- **Place deixis:** Specifies the spatial location (e.g., "here," "there," "in Tokyo")
- **Discourse deixis:** Points to parts of the text or conversation (e.g., "this," "the following")

➤ **Social deixis:** Encodes social relationships (e.g., honorifics or formal/informal address)

In sports headlines, deixis is used to create immediacy, engagement, and alignment with the reader's context or loyalties. Headlines are often ambiguous without contextual grounding, making deixis a key element in their interpretation. For instance, "We Win Again!" may refer to a national team, a local club, or even the reader's favored side, depending on shared knowledge between writer and reader (Jesuda & Mohammed, 2023).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis design to investigate the pragmatic functions of deixis and illocutionary acts in Soccer Star newspaper headlines (Mayring, 2014). Content analysis is a systematic and replicable method used for making valid inferences from texts to their contexts. It is particularly suitable for examining how language is used to convey meaning, perform communicative acts (Krippendorff, 2018), and reflect social realities (Gee, 2014).

Population and Sampling

The population of this study consists of sports headlines published in the Soccer Star newspaper from January 1st, 2024 to December 31st, 2024, with a particular focus on football-related headlines. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select headlines that contain prominent deictic expressions and/or illocutionary potential. This approach ensures that the sample is rich in the linguistic features under investigation and is suitable for a detailed pragmatic analysis (Patton, 2015).

The sample includes 100 headlines drawn from issues of the Soccer Star newspaper over a period of twelve months, specifically from January to December 2024. This period was chosen to ensure a varied representation of events, such as local league matches, international tournaments, and player transfers. Both weekday and weekend editions were reviewed to capture a diverse range of sports reporting.

Data Collection Procedures

Headlines were collected manually by reviewing both the print and digital archives of the Soccer Star newspaper. Each selected headline was documented along with its date of publication and the corresponding article (where available) to provide contextual background during the analysis. Only main page and sports section headlines were considered, excluding advertisements, opinion pieces, and photo captions.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is based on pragmatic theory, drawing particularly from:

- Stephen Levinson's (1983) classification of deixis (person, temporal, spatial, discourse, and social),
- John Searle's (1976) typology of illocutionary acts (assertives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declaratives),
- And elements of contextual and discourse analysis, which consider the socio-cultural setting and communicative purpose of the headlines.

Each headline was coded and categorized based on the following criteria:

1. Deictic Expressions

Headlines were examined for the presence of:

- Person deixis (e.g., "he," "they," "we")
- Temporal deixis (e.g., "now," "again," "tomorrow")
- Spatial deixis (e.g., "here," "there," "home")
- Discourse deixis (e.g., "this," "that," "such")

- Social deixis (e.g., titles or references indicating social status or familiarity)

2. Illocutionary Acts

Headlines were also categorized based on their illocutionary force, identifying whether they functioned primarily as:

- Assertives (stating or reporting a fact)
- Directives (calling for action or response)
- Expressives (conveying emotional reactions)
- Commissives (making a promise or commitment)
- Declaratives (bringing about a change in institutional status)

Some headlines were found to perform multiple illocutionary functions depending on context, and such instances were noted for deeper discussion.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis followed a multi-step process:

1. Familiarization: Each headline was read multiple times to understand its surface structure and possible underlying meanings.
2. Coding: Headlines were coded manually based on the presence and type of deictic expressions and illocutionary force.
3. Categorization: Coded headlines were grouped into thematic categories for deixis and illocution using tables and charts to track patterns.
4. Interpretation: Each category was analyzed qualitatively to interpret how deixis and illocution contribute to meaning-making, reader engagement, and narrative construction.
5. Contextualization: Interpretations were grounded in the broader socio-cultural and sporting context of the headlines, taking into account national football culture, audience expectations, and media framing practices.

Reliability and Validity

To enhance the reliability of the analysis, a subset of 20 headlines was re-analyzed after two weeks to ensure coding consistency. In addition, another linguist with knowledge of pragmatics was consulted to cross-check a sample of coded data and confirm categorizations.

Validity was ensured by triangulating data with contextual information from the full articles where available and considering real-time events in the football world that the headlines referred to. This helped clarify ambiguous references and strengthened the interpretation of deictic and illocutionary meanings.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study involved publicly available newspaper content, there were no human subjects or private data involved. However, due credit is given to Soccer Star as the primary data source, and excerpts are used strictly for academic purposes. The analysis respects journalistic integrity and avoids any form of misrepresentation or biased interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data Analysis

This section presents the findings from the content analysis of 100 selected football-related headlines from the Soccer Star newspaper. The analysis is organized into two main parts in accordance with the study's objectives:

1. Deictic Expressions

2. Illocutionary Acts

Each category is analyzed in terms of frequency, patterns, and pragmatic functions. Selected headline examples are also provided to illustrate key findings.

1. Analysis of Deictic Expressions

The data revealed that deictic expressions are widespread in Soccer Star headlines and serve critical functions in contextualizing events, aligning readers with narratives, and enhancing immediacy and emotional connection.

Table 1: Frequency and Types of Deixis

Type of Deixis	Frequency	Examples
Person Deixis	46	“He Strikes Again”, “We Were Robbed”
Temporal Deixis	39	“Now or Never”, “Back Tomorrow”
Spatial Deixis	28	“Here Comes Trouble”, “Battle in Lagos”
Discourse Deixis	21	“This Is It”, “That’s the End”
Social Deixis	11	“King Salah Rules Again”

Person Deixis (46%) was the most frequent. Pronouns like he, they, we are used to build identification with readers or refer to well-known figures without needing full names. This presupposes shared knowledge between the headline and the audience. Example: “He Does It Again!” (assumes familiarity with a specific player, e.g., Ronaldo or Messi). Temporal Deixis often conveys urgency, recency, or continuity. Example: “Now or Never” implies a decisive moment, increasing dramatic effect and engaging the reader’s sense of anticipation. Spatial Deixis is used to create proximity or emotional positioning, often situating the event geographically or metaphorically. Example: “Battle in Yaoundé” situates the game spatially and adds warlike intensity. Discourse Deixis often refers to the unfolding narrative in the paper or the larger media context. Example: “This Is Why He’s King” suggests a justification or explanation tied to previous knowledge. Social Deixis, though less frequent, encodes status and hierarchy, often heroizing athletes or coaches. Example: “Sir Alex Returns” implies reverence through title usage.

2. Analysis of Illocutionary Acts

The illocutionary force of each headline was determined by analyzing the communicative function it performed within its context. Most headlines were not neutral statements but carried specific pragmatic intentions such as to praise, predict, provoke, or celebrate.

Table 2: Frequency of Illocutionary Acts

Illocutionary Act Type	Frequency	Examples
Assertives	52	“Nigeria Defeats Ghana 2–1”
Expressives	25	“Heartbreak for Eagles”
Directives	12	“Watch the Magic Tonight!”
Commissives	7	“We Will Bounce Back”
Declaratives	4	“CAF Declares Match Void”

Assertives were the most dominant (52%). These headlines report factual events but often contain evaluative language. Example: “United Crush Rivals” (asserts a result but adds evaluative force through “crush”). Expressives conveyed emotional reactions, often mirroring fan sentiments such as joy, frustration, or pride. Example: “Despair in Durban” reflects the emotional aftermath of a loss. Directives, while less frequent, were used especially in digital headlines to prompt reader action or attention. Example: “Don’t Miss Tonight’s Derby!” encourages engagement. Commissives included predictions or pledges by teams or players, often in direct quotes. Example: “We’ll Win It for the Fans” reflects commitment and motivation. Declaratives, though rare, involved authoritative statements or institutional changes. Example: “FIFA Suspends Referee” performs an institutional act of power.

3. Interaction Between Deixis and Illocution

A notable finding is the interdependence of deixis and illocutionary force. Many headlines use deictic elements to enhance or clarify illocutionary intent. For instance:

- “He’s Back!” uses person deixis (“he”) with declarative illocution to announce a return, possibly of a star player.
- “We’re Not Done Yet” combines person deixis (“we”) and commissive force, expressing resolve or promise.

In many cases, the reader's interpretation of the headline depends on both deixis and context to understand who is speaking, what is being said, and why it matters.

4. Socio-Cultural Considerations

The study also found that deixis and illocution are contextually rooted in local football culture:

- National identity is often implied through the use of “we” in headlines referencing national teams or local clubs.

Example: “We Were Cheated!” appeals to collective outrage or solidarity.

- Hero-worship is reinforced through deixis (e.g., “The King Returns”) and expressive illocution.
- Headlines often reflect rivalries, emotional highs and lows, and communal experiences, aligning language choices with fan expectations and societal sentiments.

Summary of Findings

- Person and temporal deixis were the most common types, reflecting a strategy of building immediacy and shared identity.
- Assertive and expressive illocutionary acts dominated, showing the dual aim of informing and emotionally engaging the reader.
- The interplay between deixis and illocution is crucial for meaning construction in headlines, especially where references are implicit.
- Cultural context significantly influences both the use and interpretation of deictic expressions and illocutionary force.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the pragmatic functions of deictic expressions and illocutionary acts in the headlines of Soccer Star, a football-focused newspaper. Through a qualitative content analysis of 100 headlines, it was revealed that these linguistic features are not merely stylistic choices but serve significant communicative purposes. Deixis was found to be a central device in headline construction, with person deixis (e.g., “he,” “we,” “they”) and temporal deixis (e.g., “now,” “again”) being the most frequently used. These expressions help to create immediacy, reinforce shared knowledge between writers and readers, and establish relevance in time and space. By invoking familiar players, teams, or events without explicit reference, headlines leverage the reader’s contextual awareness and sense of inclusion in the football community.

Illocutionary acts—especially assertives and expressives—dominate the headlines, reflecting the dual role of reporting events and expressing emotional or evaluative stances. Headlines function not only to inform but to celebrate victories, lament losses, rally support, or provoke interest, often using a condensed and emotionally charged language. The study also demonstrated how deixis enhances the illocutionary force of a headline, providing clues about who is involved, when an event occurred, or how the speaker positions themselves in relation to the reader.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for researchers, journalists, and educators:

Journalists should be conscious of the pragmatic impact of deixis and illocution when crafting headlines. Awareness of how deictic expressions function can enhance clarity, inclusiveness, or narrative power.

Headlines should aim for contextual clarity, especially in digital formats where readers may not have immediate access to the full article or cultural context.

Suggestions Further Study

Further research should examine cross-cultural comparisons, exploring how deixis and illocution differ in sports journalism across different linguistic or national contexts.

Quantitative studies could complement this qualitative analysis to measure how specific types of deixis or illocutionary acts correlate with reader engagement metrics (e.g., clicks, shares).

Researchers should also explore other genres of headlines (e.g., politics, entertainment) to investigate how pragmatic features shift depending on subject matter and audience.

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