

You can speak the language - but can you speak headline?

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You must know English, otherwise you wouldn't be reading this newspaper. So what do you make of this English sentence: "Tribe Homer Barrage Salvages Split"?

That was a headline I came across some years ago in an American newspaper. I reckon that for most British people it's almost totally incomprehensible.

People sometimes say, when talking about learning a foreign language, that they only want to learn enough to be able to read the newspaper headlines. In fact, reading the headlines is just about the last thing you'll be able to do when learning a language. The vocabulary may be different from what you've encountered elsewhere. Telegraphic style is used, with words omitted. And, if you're a foreigner trying to read a British newspaper, including this one, you'll have to cope with all the puns the editors enjoy using.

But the most serious problem is the amount of background knowledge that journalists, and particularly headline writers, are normally able to assume on the part of their readership. That's why you probably weren't able to understand the headline in my first paragraph, even if you did know all the words.



■ Baseball has its own language - even headlines need a glossary, says Peter Trudgill.

Here's the background you need. That headline appeared in the sport section of the daily newspaper published in Cleveland, Ohio. The Cleveland baseball team are called the Indians, and are informally known as the Tribe. A homer is a home run, the baseball equivalent to a six in cricket. Barrage refers to the fact that the Cleveland batters hit a whole series of home runs.

But what about "salvages split"? Vast distances are involved in teams travelling to away games in the USA, so when a team arrives in a city, they normally stay and play a number of matches there, not just one. Sometimes they play two games on the same day, one immediately after another, called a "double header". This is

what had happened in the case of the match referred to in this headline. The Indians were playing two games on the same day and, having lost the first one, they won the second - as a result of the barrage of home runs. So they managed to save the "split": that is, the two teams split the games between them.

We always need background information to understand what's being said, but with headlines we need even more than usual. I wonder what Americans would make of "Canaries Go Nap At Town".

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■ Prof Trudgill's latest book is **Dialect Matters: Respecting Vernacular Language**, a collection of his EDP columns, published by Cambridge University Press.