MH370 and MH17 Airplane Catastrophes: Reporting Verbs in Malaysian Online Newspaper Articles

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ABSTRACT

Reporting verbs are important in news articles on controversial events or issues because of the need to present the attitude of news sources towards the topic or even to indicate the journalist's attitudes towards information cited in the articles. The study investigated the use of reporting verbs in news articles on MH370 and MH17 airplane catastrophes in online English newspapers published in Malaysia. A total of 80 news articles on MH370 and MH17 from two online English-language, New Straits Time and The Star, were analysed for the author's stance and writer's stance using Thompson and Ye's (1991) framework on reporting verbs. The analysis identified 931 instances of reporting verbs (91.75%, author's stance; 8.25%, writer's stance). For the author's stance, 91.75% of the articles on MH370 and MH17 were reported positively using mainly the verb "said", and the various news sources were stated clearly. New Straits Time reported MH17 more positively than MH370 but the pattern was the opposite for The Star. The neutral author's stance was hardly used. There was no negative author's stance for MH370 articles in both newspapers. As for the writer's stance, counter-factive (42.51%) and non-factive (47.90%) reporting dominated. Articles on the disappearance of MH370 had more non-factive reporting verbs than counter-factive reporting verbs in both newspapers but for the MH17 articles, New Straits Time leaned towards a counter-factive writer's stance, suggesting more critical reporting. The study showed that the articles on airplane catastrophes reflected safe reporting, often affirming the validity of statements from news sources.

Keywords: Airplane catastrophe, MH370, MH17, online newspapers, reporting verbs

INTRODUCTION

The newspaper serves as an important tool for shaping thoughts, providing a platform for public debates and forum, and a channel to inform the public of wrongdoings (Martin & Copeland, 2003). Generally, news found in the newspapers consist of local and international news, business and entertainment, sports, politics and health. Sensational news includes reports on tragedies, catastrophes, crises and disasters that occur locally and internationally. In reporting tragedies, journalists inform readers of the current and updated version of news and in the process influence how readers think and feel about the event or issue. The act of reporting requires journalists to use language to achieve intended meanings.

A linguistic element that can be skilfully used to convey intended meanings is verbs or action words, in particular reporting verbs. Reporting verbs do not only describe actions but they can be used to convey the journalist's perspective without being obvious about it. Reporting verbs refers to lexical devices which allow writers to present their stance, build a connection with readers (Hyland, 2005), and express evaluations towards what is being reported (Thompson & Ye, 1991). Reporting verbs can be used to either report on the writer's own ideas or to represent the writer's take towards the claims of others (Bloch, 2010). Although there are other reporting signals such as reporting nouns and reporting adjectives, reporting verbs have been found to be the most important feature of a reporting clause and they occur in most reporting sentences (Nkansah, 2013). Reporting verbs occur in up to 90% of sentences in news articles (Bergler, 1992).

Research on the use of reporting verbs have been largely in academic and research writing because of the need for citations (Hyland, 2002; Jafarigohar & Mohammadkhani, 2015; Loan & Pramoolsook, 2015; Manan & Mohd Noor, 2014; Shaw, 1992; Swales, 1990; Thompson & Ye, 1991). In non-academic writing, reporting verbs are

important for establishing the credibility of sources in magazines (De Oliveira & Pagano, 2006) and newspaper articles (Floyd, 2000; Ruminda, 2016; Yamashita, 1998). Journalists are adept at presenting opinions as facts and since most news is reported speech, reporting verbs have an important role to play in new reports:

> Most news is in fact reported speech. It is talk about talk, with several stages of reporting often involved. Journalists depend a lot on other sources to report on events, so news is full of second-hand information, announcements, opinions, reactions, appeals, promises and criticisms. (Floyd, 2000, p. 43)

Nkansah (2013) found that in front page stories of Ghanaian newspapers, reporting verbs for author's stance is more dominant than reporting verbs for writer's stance. The reporting was primarily from the perspective of news sources, and journalists did not frequently include their evaluative stance. Stance refers to "the way speakers position themselves in relation to their own or other people's beliefs, opinions and statements about things or ideas in ongoing communicative interaction with other speakers" (Simaki, Paradis, Skeppstedt, Sahlgren, Kucher, & Kerren, 2016, p. 215).

Little is known about stance in news reports in the Malaysian context. Media framing studies have shown that mainstream newspapers tend to quote government sources whereas alternative newspapers quote opposition leaders and religious leaders as news sources in controversial events, such as the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) financial-cum-political scandal involving high-ranking politicians (Murudi & Ting, 2019) and race-related issues (Azlan, Rahim, & Basri, 2012; Ismail & Ahmad, 2014; Khalid, 2011; Yang & De Rycker, 2017; Yang & Ishak, 2012; Yang & Leong, 2017). However, as the researchers are from the field of communication, they do not analyse how the news sources are quoted. Ting, Murudi, and Chuah (2020) found that online English newspapers on 1MDB avoided evaluative judgements but the findings are obtained from content analysis. In the news reporting of controversial or sensational incidents whereby causal factors are being investigated and yet to be determined, journalists may have to rely on reporting verbs to write the news stories by citing various sources. A sensational topic is the two airplane catastrophes affecting Malaysia in 2014, namely, the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines MH370 and the shooting down of MH17. The news readership thirst for news on the parties responsible and developments in the investigation, but such information may not be forthcoming at a rate that satisfies the readership, and this is when journalists often quote various sources to sustain interest in the news. As journalists may not have definitive information on the incidents, this is where reporting verbs are particularly useful for them to write breaking news without being presumptuous. Through the use of reporting verbs, journalists can attribute responsibility without committing themselves to the claims. Therefore, linguistic analysis of the use of reporting verbs in controversial or sensational events is vital to reveal whether journalists present their stance on the events.

MH370 and MH17 airplane disasters were sensational news throughout the world because of the immensity of the catastrophe and it affected nationals of other countries, and the airline industry. Airplane catastrophe can be considered as a human-made disaster usually caused by technology disturbance, human involvement and human error (Silverman & Greca, 2002). In the case of MH370, there were suggestions of the possibility of pilot involvement, besides the possibility of technical problems which caused the flight to lose contact with the air-controllers at the point of crossing from Malaysian air space into Vietnam air space. Available satellite tracking data showed that MH370 changed course thereafter, and did not proceed to China, but flew across the Indian Ocean towards Australia, and the airplane has not been found to date. As for MH17, the airplane was shot down over Ukraine air space and initially the parties responsible for the downing of the airplane were unclear although the pro-Russian rebels, who were fighting central Kiev authorities, claimed the plane had been shot down by a Ukrainian jet (Vanguard, 2014). Because of the scale of the news and the controversies involved, it is important to study how the news on MH370 and MH17 airplane catastrophes are written, particularly to reveal whether journalists include their evaluative stance or their take towards the claims of others when reporting developments in the coverage of the news.

The study investigated the usage of reporting verbs in MH370 and MH17 airplane catastrophe in online English language newspapers published in Malaysia. The aspects analysed were the reporting verbs for author's stance and writer's stance.

METHOD OF STUDY

The data for this qualitative descriptive study were 80 articles on MH370 and MH17 airplane catastrophes taken from two online English-language Malaysian newspapers, that is, The Star and News Straits Times (40 each). The news articles on MH370 were collected from 8 March 2014 (the day of missing flight MH370) to 31 December 2018 while the MH17 articles were from 17 July 2014 (the day MH17 was shot down) to 31 December 2015. The duration of the data collection from date of incident to end of the year was considered adequate because interest had waned by the end of the year as shown by the Google Trend statistics (Figures 1 and 2). The keywords used for the search were "MH370" and "MH17". Only hard news articles were included and opinion pieces and editorials were excluded. The word count for the 80 news articles was 36,124 words.
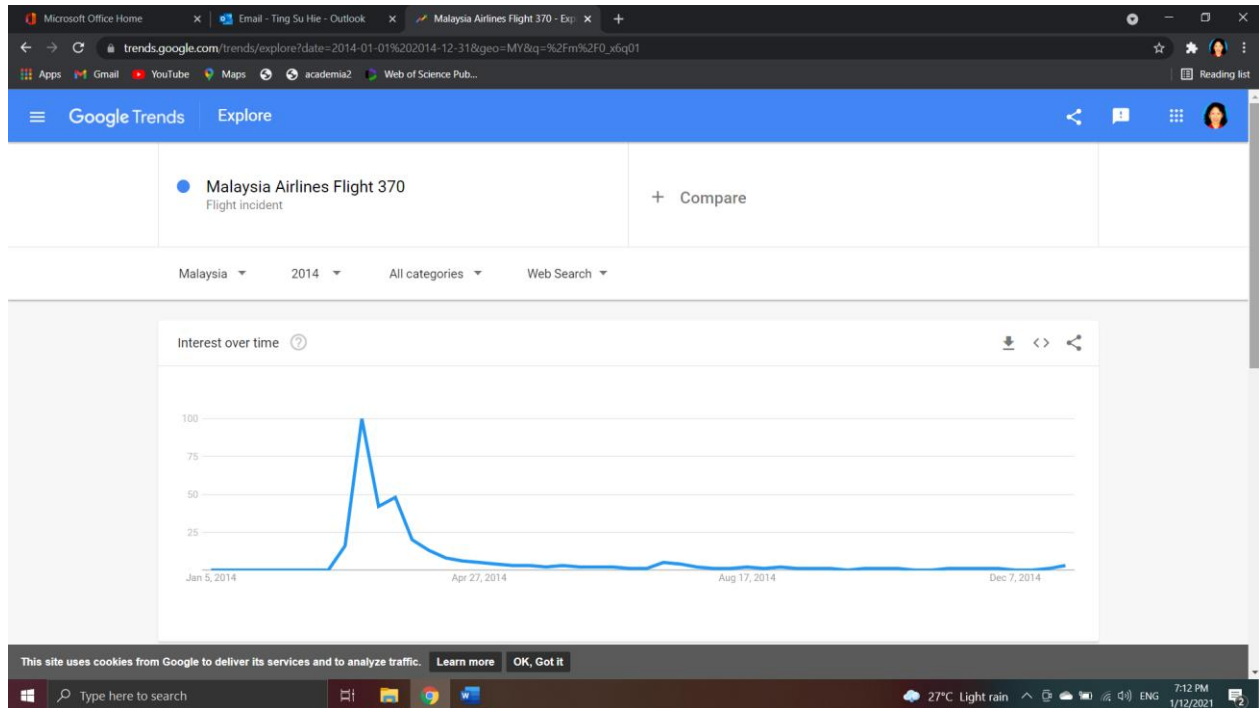

Figure 1. Google Trends showing interest in Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 in 2014
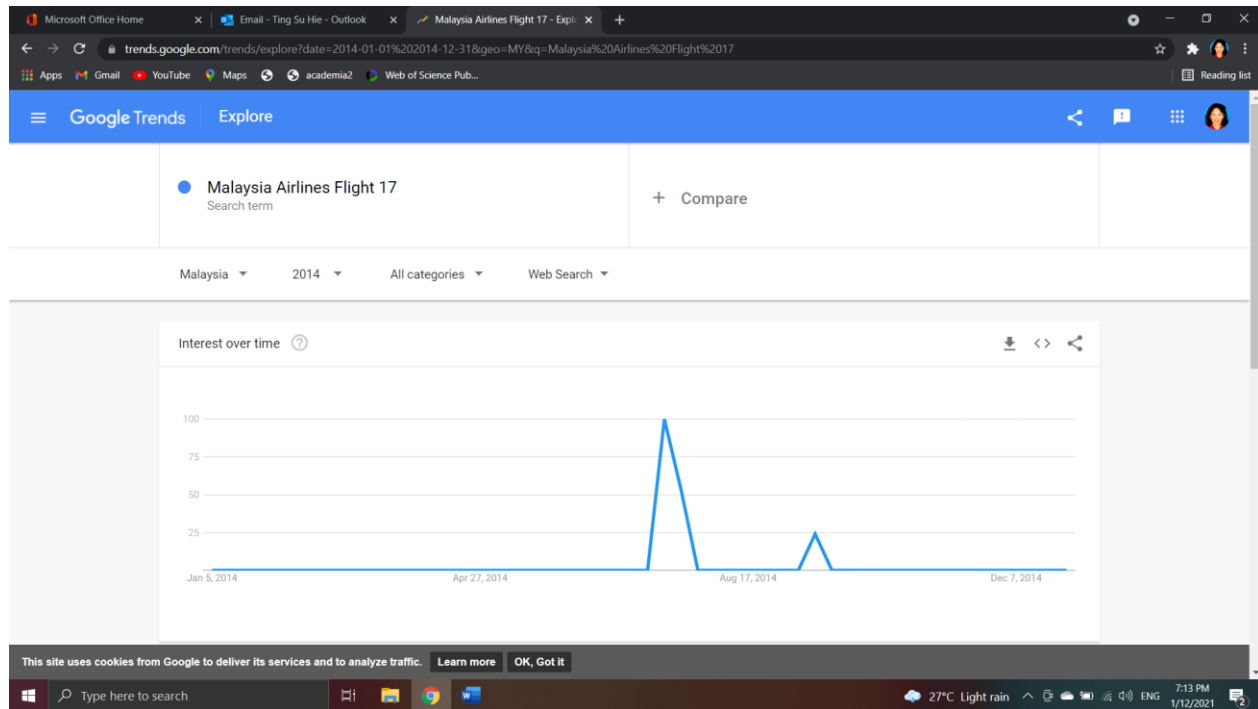
Figure 2. Google Trends showing interest in Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014

The reporting verbs in the news articles were analysed using Thompson and Ye's (1991) classification of evaluation aspects of reporting verbs into two stances. Thompson and Ye's (1991) classification was selected over other frameworks because their framework is able to provide an integrated method of analysing a varied kind of verb that is used when reporting news report, and the delineation between author's stance and writer's stance is clearly spelt out with many examples of verbs for the sub-categories, thereby ensuring reliability in the analysis.

Author's stance is "the attitude which the author is reported … as having towards the validity of the reported information or opinion", that is, whether the information is presented as positive, negative or neutral (Thompson & Ye, 1991, p. 372). On the other hand, writer's stance refers to the writer's attitude towards the author's information or opinion, that is portraying the authors as presenting factive (true), counter-factive (false) and non-factive (unclear attitude) (Thompson & Ye, 1991). In this paper, the author's stance refers to the way the information given by news sources are reported in the news articles.

Table 1 shows the framework for the analysis of author's stance which is presented as positive, negative and neutral. According to Thompson and Ye (1991), the information is presented as coming directly from the author without interference from the writer. An example of an author's stance presenting the information/opinion as positive using the reporting verb "accepted" is as follows:

It is now almost universally accepted that frequent fixations and regressions are symptoms of poor comprehension, rather than causes of it (see M. and E. De Leeuw 1965). [Alderson and Urquhart 1984:xx] (Impersonal Author Act, Mental) (Thompson & He, 1991, p. 372)

Thompson and Ye (1991) listed 33 reporting verbs for author's stance and some of the examples are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Thompson and Ye's (1991) classification of reporting verbs in author's stance

Categories	Definition	Example
Positive	The author is reported as presenting the information/ opinion as true	accept, emphasise, hypothesise, invoke, note, point out, reason, subscribe to, pointed out, asked, told, said, exhorts, commended, urged, declared, stressed, insisted, adding, pledged, called, predicted, lauded, stressed, confirmed
Negative	The author is reported as presenting the information/opinion as false	attack, challenge, dismiss, oppose, question, reject, warned, appealed, disclosed, threatened, cautioned, complains, ordered, conceded, dispute
Neutral	The author is reported as presenting the information/opinion as neither true nor false	describe, indicated, examine, quote, evaluate, assess, focused, announced

Table 2 shows the analysis framework for the writer's stance. Factive reporting verbs, counter-factive reporting verbs and non-factive reporting verbs are used to indicate the writer's attitude towards the author's information or opinion, as to whether they are considered true or false. Thompson and Ye (1991) listed 47 reporting verbs for writer's stance and some of the examples are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Thompson and Ye's (1991) classification of reporting verbs in writer's stance

Categories	Definition	Example
Factive	The writer portrays the author as presenting true information (acceptance)	acknowledge, bring out, demonstrate, identify, notice, proved, recognise, explain, direct, advise, promise, assure, observe, propose.
Counter-Factive	The writer portrays the author as presenting false information (rejection)	claim, accuse, criticise, condemn, defied, denied, refuse, betray, confuse, ignore, misuse.
Non-Factive	The writer gives no clear signal to her attitude towards the author information (neutrality)	advance, believe, generalise, suggest, insist, state, report, affirm, roll out, maintain, examine.

For the analysis, the articles were read three or more times to ensure no verbs used in the reports were missed out during the coding. The frequency of reporting verbs used were calculated to find out whether the author's stance or writer's stance dominated in the reporting of airplane catastrophes.

RESULTS

The news articles on MH370 and MH17 airplane catastrophes were about the effort of searching for the missing flight, updates about the passengers, parties who were involved in search and rescue whether they are local or international, and explanation on how the catastrophe occurred. Altogether 44 reporting verbs (or 52.4%) out of the total of 84 reporting verbs in Thompson and Ye's (1991) list were used, showing somewhat limited variety in the verbs used. There was more variety of verbs used for the author's stance (26 reporting verbs) than for the writer's stance (18 reporting verbs). Altogether 931 instances of reporting verbs were used in 80 articles on the two airplane catastrophes, a majority of the verbs showed the author's stance (764 instances or 82.06% of 931 instances) while only 167 instances (or 17.94%) showed the writer's stance.

Reporting verbs in author's stance

Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of reporting verbs for author's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star, and the author's stance was categorised into positive, negative and neutral stances. Overall, a majority (91.75% out of 764) of the reporting verbs in the news articles showed positive author's stance. The percentage of positive author's stance shows that New Straits Time reported MH17 (93.83%) more positively than MH370 (88.59%). However, the opposite pattern was found for The Star whereby MH370 articles carried more positive author's stance (95.1%) than MH17 articles (88.95%). There was no negative author's stance for MH370 articles in both newspapers. Perhaps during the MH370 crash, it was hard to validate statements of news sources as the case is still unsolved. The newspapers did not engage in speculative reporting. For the shooting down of MH17, New Straits Time had similar percentages of negative and neutral author's stances (2.47% and 3.70% respectively) but The Star clearly had more negative author's stance in the reporting verbs (8.41%) compared to the neutral stance (2.91%). In the rest of this section, examples of the reporting verbs for the three stances will be provided.

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of reporting verbs for author's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star

Category of author's stance	New Straits Times				The Star				Total	
	MH370		MH17		MH370		MH17			
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Positive	163	88.59	228	93.83	157	95.15	153	88.95	701	91.75
Negative	0	0	6	2.47	0	0	14	8.14	20	2.62
Neutral	21	11.41	9	3.70	8	4.85	5	2.91	43	5.63
Total	184	100	243	100	165	100	172	100	764	100

Table 4 shows the frequency of reporting verbs for positive author's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star. Altogether 14 different reporting verbs for positive author's stance was identified in the analysis. The reporting verb "said" was the most frequent (534 times), followed by "told" (53 times). Other less generic reporting verbs for positive author's stance were "added", "confirmed", "called" and "asked". The reporting verbs that expressed a stronger commitment to the stance were "pledged", "declared", "emphasised" and "stressed" but the frequency of use was five or less each because of the lack of definite information on the airplane crashes.

Table 4. Frequency of reporting verbs in positive author's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star

Reporting verb used in positive author's stance	Frequency
1. Said	534
2. Told	53
3. Added	31
4. Confirmed	28
5. Called	19
6. Asked	11
7. Pledged	5
8. Declared	5
9. Insisted	5
10. Urged	5
11. Pointed	2
12. Emphasised	2
13. Stressed	2
14. Noted	1

On the downing of the MH17, the analysis of reporting verbs in the articles revealed that the news was reported directly without any inclusion of the journalists' opinions in order to portray the author as telling the truth. Excerpts 1 to 3 show how positive reporting verbs were used to show that the information about the incident was true. Excerpt 1 shows that "said" was the most frequently used verb for reporting positive author's stance. "Said" was used to cite information from sources involved in the incident such as the emergency services rescue worker who said that at least 100 bodies had been found in the search and rescue for MH17.   The verb "said" ranked the highest in frequency of use in the 80 news articles. This result is not surprising because the verb "said" is in fact the simplest form of verb which is used to express statements. Excerpt 2 is an example of how "told" was used to report the source of the information (US officials). Excerpt 3 shows Malaysian Airlines as a news source for confirming that it had lost contact with MH17. However, "confirmed" was a less frequently used reporting verb for reporting positive author's stance because a lot of information were uncertain in the two airplane catastrophes. Table 4 shows that "confirmed" was used 28 times to enhance the truth value of the news, and the sources of the information was clearly stated.

1) An emergency services rescue worker **said** at least 100 bodies had so far been found at the scene (New Straits Times, MH17, Article 4)
2) Two US officials **told** AFP that intelligence analysts were reviewing the data to see whether the missile used to down the aircraft was launched by pro-Moscow separatists (The Star, MH17, Article 9)
3) Malaysian Airlines **confirmed** that it had "lost contact" with one its planes in Ukrainian airspace (New Straits Times, MH17, Article 2)

Next, the frequency of reporting verbs in negative author's stance is shown in Table 5. In contradiction with positive reporting verbs, negative reporting verbs portrays the author as telling false information. Negative reporting verbs are usually associated with harsh statements and are provocative in nature. Only five reporting verbs for reporting negative author's stance were identified in the analysis, and used 26 times. Of these "warned" was the most frequently used (9 times), followed by "ordered" and "blamed" (6 times each); "attacked" and "complained" was only used two times each.

Table 5. Frequency of reporting verbs in negative author's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star

Reporting verb used in negative author's stance	Frequency
1. Warned	9
2. Ordered	6
3. Blamed	6
4. Attacked	2
5. Complained	2

Excerpts 4 to 6 illustrate the use of negative reporting verbs in both online newspapers for only MH17 because no negative reporting verbs were used for reporting the disappearance of MH370. This is because for MH370, it was hard to confirm statements of news sources because the case is still not solved until the present day. Statements containing negative reporting verbs came across as harsh. For example, Excerpt 4 was taken from an article in The Star reporting witnesses who saw the plane being shot down by a battle plane of the Ukrainian forces. The reporting verb "attack" brought up images of weapons being used and the plane exploding into fire, and witnesses also identified the plane as belonging to the Ukrainian forces. However, the statement was carefully crafted to not state that it was the Ukrainian forces which shot down MH17. Excerpt 5 is a clearer statement by the Australian Prime Minister blaming Russia for the downing of MH17. The Russian president was reported as reacting to these statements by warning the United States not to impose sanctions as it would damage foreign relations (Excerpt 6). In all three excerpts, reporting verbs are used for negative author's stance, and the source of the information is clearly stated in Excerpts 5 and 6.

4) Witnesses saw the plane being **attacked** by a battle plane of the Ukrainian forces (The Star, MH17, Article 5)

5) Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott **blamed** Russia on Friday over the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines (MAS) flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine that killed all 298 people on board (The Star, MH17, Article 8)

6) Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier **warned** that sanctions would inflict "very serious damage" on the already tattered US-Russia relationship (New Straits Times, MH17, Article 5)

The controversy over the shooting of MH17 is partly because neither the Ukrainian nor the Russian government wanted to take the responsibility of the incident and blamed each other for causing the incident. The five reporting verbs used in negative author's stance (shown in Table 5) showed that the sources were "on the offensive" rather than defending their actions or views, namely, "warned", "ordered", "blamed", "attacked" and "complained".

Finally, the frequency of reporting verbs in the neutral author's stance is shown in Table 6. Neutral reporting verbs shows that the author presented neither true nor false information. Neutral reporting verbs, therefore, indicate some kind of detachment or objectivity in statements (Nkansah, 2013). The author does not convey his or her stand in a statement and the writer did not express his or her attitude towards the information. Examples of verbs frequently used for reporting the neutral author's stance were "announced" and "indicated" (16 and 10 times respectively, Table 6). The reporting verb "quoted" explicitly attributed the information to the news sources, thereby freeing the journalist from making any evaluative stance or commitment to the statement. In comparison, "examined" and "assessed" were infrequently used (2 and 1 time respectively), partly because not many news sources were in the position to performing these kinds of analysis and evaluations.

Table 6. Frequency of reporting verbs in neutral author's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star

Reporting verb used in positive author's stance	Frequency
1. Announced	16
2. Indicated	10
3. Quoted	7
4. Described	5
5. Focused	5
6. Examined	2
7. Assess	1

Excerpt 7 shows the journalists quoting the news source (Xinhua newspaper) that quoted Chinese aviation authorities as saying that MH370 did not enter China's air space. In effect, The Star was doing a secondary quotation by citing from another newspaper. Excerpt 8 is a neutral statement which was free of the journalist's interpretation and merely informed the readers that the acting transport minister had announced a new phase in the MH370 search. Excerpt 9 is about the focus area of the MH370 search but did not directly name a source for the information. In this way, the news on the search area in the Indian Ocean to the west of Australia came across as a fact.

7) Xinhua also **quoted** Chinese aviation authorities saying the plane did not enter China's air traffic control sphere (The Star, MH370, Article 2)

8) Acting Transport Minister Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein **announced** that the new phase in the search for Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 will be refined but will remain in the southern corridor (New Straits Times, MH370, Article 1)

9) It was the second time a Malaysia Airlines plane was lost in less than six months. Flight 370 disappeared in March en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. It has not been found, and the search has **focused** on the Indian Ocean far west of Australia. (The Star, MH370, Article 17)

To sum up, the analysis of reporting verbs for the author's stance showed a tendency to cover the two airplane catastrophes positively in the midst of a tragedy where many lives were lost. The large percentage of reporting verbs in the positive author's stance shows that Malaysian reporters presented the author as telling the truth.

Reporting verbs in writer's stance

The writer's stance was categorised into factive, counter-factive and non-factive. The overall results showed a balanced use of counter-factive and non-factive reporting of the writer's stance (42.51% and 47.90% out of 167 instances respectively, Table 7). The news articles tended to portray the authors as presenting false information due to the controversy surrounding both airplane crashes (counter-factive) and made their attitude towards the veracity of the information unclear (non-factive), perhaps intentionally because of the controversies. The articles were written such that the news writers refrained from portraying the author as presenting true information (9.58% factive), probably because they were unsure of the facts and if the sources were accurate.

Table 7. Frequency and percentage of reporting verbs for writer's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star

Categories of writer's stance	New Straits Time				The Star				Total	
	MH370		MH17		MH370		MH17			
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Factive	5	15.62	1	1.89	6	19.35	4	7.84	16	9.58
Counter-factive	8	25	32	60.38	8	25.81	23	45.10	71	42.51
Non-factive	19	59.38	20	37.73	17	54.84	24	47.06	80	47.90
Total	32	100	53	100	31	100	51	100	167	99.99

New Straits Time and The Star were similar in the writer's stance for MH370, in that over half of the writer's stances were non-factive (New Straits Time, 59.38%; The Star, 54.84%). One quarter of the writer's stance was counter-factive (New Straits Time, 25%; The Star, 25.81%). Similarly, factive writer's stance was the least common (New Straits Time, 15.62%; The Star, 19.35%). In the MH370 articles published in both newspapers, the writer's stance was non-factive and this gave the impression that the articles were objectively reported. A non-factive or neutral writer's stance is perhaps the safest option considering the many speculations and rumours of the possible causes of the disappearance of such a huge object and the inability of the authorities to find it despite the use of advanced technologies such as the ping-locator and 3-F1 satellites.

However, in reporting the MH17 catastrophe, New Straits Time leaned towards a counter-factive writer's stance (60.38%) and less towards the non-factive stance (37.73%), suggesting that the news articles were more critical of the information. On the other hand, The Star had a balance of counter-factive (45.10%) and non-factive writer's stances (47.06%). In other words, The Star strived to present a mix of critical articles and those that appeared to be neutral and free of writer attitudes. Next, the use of reporting verbs in these three writer's stances will be described with the aid of excerpts.

Table 8. Frequency of reporting verbs in factive writer's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star

Reporting verb used in factive writer's stance	Frequency
1. Identify	6
2. Advised	4
3. Promised	3
4. Proved	3
5. Assured	3
6. Demonstrated	2
7. Explained	2

Firstly, factive reporting verbs can be described as the writer portraying the news sources as giving true information or a correct opinion (Thompson & Ye, 1991). The reporting verbs associated with factive writer's stance are "identify" and "advised" (6 and 4 times respectively, Table 8). Some of the reporting verbs are more definitive (e.g., "promised", "assured") or strong assertions (e.g., "proved"), which were used three times each.

Excerpts 10 to 12 show the journalists indirectly expressing agreement with the views of the news sources. The journalists concerned believed that "Fuad explained everything in the interview with Anderson Cooper" (Excerpt 10) because the reporting verb "explained" gave the information source an authoritative tone. The use of definitive positive reporting verbs such as "assured" and "promised" signalled the writer's agreement with Azharuddin who assured the public that their team was doing their best (Excerpt 11), and with Iskandar who promised the families he would convey their requests to the Malaysian government (Excerpt 12).

10) In the interview with Anderson Cooper, Fuad **explained** that the flight which departed 41 minutes after midnight from Kuala Lumpur was supposed to have arrived in Beijing at 6.20am. (The Star, MH370, Article 1)

11) Azharuddin, who has led DCA since 2008, **assured** that every authority involved in the SAR mission were doing their very best to locate the aircraft and determine the cause of the incident, as well as ensure a similar event would not recur. (New Straits Times, MH370, Article 4)

12) Iskandar addressed the families at the end of the session, saying that he **promised** that he will convey their sentiments and thoughts to the Malaysian government. (The Star, MH370, Article 15)

Secondly, counter-factive reporting verbs are used to indicate disagreement with the contents of the news articles. Reporting verbs were cleverly chosen to suggest that the information was false as shown by the frequent use of three reporting verbs, namely, "denied" (25 times), "accused" (19 times) and "claimed" (18 times), as shown in Table 9.

Excerpt 13 shows that by using "denied" instead of the generic verb "stated", the journalist suggested that the Russian and Ukraine governments might have been involved in shooting down the MH17. Similarly, in Excerpt 14, the pro-Russian rebels was reported as claiming that a Ukrainian jet had shot down MH17. If the generic verb "stated" had been used, then there is no suggestion that the information might have been false. Excerpt 15 is a clear case of disagreement expressed using the reporting verb "criticised".

Table 9. Frequency of reporting verbs in counter-factive writer's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star

Reporting verb used in counter-factive writer's stance	Frequency
1. Denied	25
2. Accused	19
3. Claimed	18
4. Condemned	4
5. Criticised	4
6. Refused	2

13) Foreign media reported that the plane was "shot down", but the Russian and Ukraine governments had **denied** their involvement in the incident. (New Straits Times, MH17, Article 7)
14) The pro-Russian rebels, who are fighting central Kiev authorities, **claimed** the plane had been shot down by a Ukrainian jet. (The Star, MH17, Article 5)
15) MAS also **criticised** journalist Geoff Taylor and former Kiwi Travel International Airlines chief executive Ewan Wilson for their book **claiming** to offer the "scoop" on MH370. (New Straits Times, MH370, Article 12)

By using selected reporting verbs, news writers can include their judgement on the statements presented by the author and question the truth of the information.

Finally, Table 10 shows that the two reporting verbs most associated with a non-factive or neutral writer's stance were "reported" (35 times) and "believed" (28 times). Like "reported", "stated" is a generic verb that does not show the writer's stance on the statement. Excerpt 16 is about a sensational controversy in the MH370 incident whereby the captain was suspected of intentionally crashing the plane and there were other news reports of the captain having a flight stimulator at home. However, to mitigate the sensationality of the news, New Straits Time merely stated "The Sunday Times in UK reported that …". Excerpt 17 also shows a sensitive matter that may affect foreign relations if countries accuse one another of shooting down MH17. Again the reporting verb "believed" was used as a hedging device as follows, "He said that Ukrainian authorities believed that the plane was shot down …". Another reporting verb which functions well to make statements devoid of the writer's attitudes is "suggested" which is used six times in the news articles on the two airplane catastrophes (Table 10).

16) The Sunday Times in UK **reported** that the Malaysian police had regarded the prime suspect in the missing MH370 as its pilot, Captain Zaharie Shah. (New Straits Times, MH370, Article 7)
17) He said that Ukrainian authorities **believed** that the plane was shot down but that Malaysia was unable to verify this at this moment. (The Star, MH17, Article 6)

Table 10. Frequency of reporting verbs in non-factive writer's stance in MH370 and MH17 articles in New Straits Time and The Star

Reporting verb used in non-factive writer's stance	Frequency
1. Reported	35
2. Believed	28
3. Stated	9
4. Suggested	6
5. Maintained	2

In controversial news, it is important to use reporting verbs in the non-factive writer's stance to avoid giving a clear judgement on statements of news sources. Non-factive reporting verbs convey some distance between the news source and the journalist on what has been said by the source (Nkansah, 2013). MH370 and MH17 articles contained

frequent use of "reported" and "believed" to present a neutral or non-factive writer's stance. However, news which are neutral appear to be uninteresting to readers. This is why it is important to have some amount of counter-factive writer's stance in news articles to attract readers. In the case of MH370 and MH17 reporting, the reporting verbs had been carefully selected to suggest falsity of information without getting the journalists into trouble, and the commonly used reporting verbs for this purpose were "denied", "accused" and "claimed". Reporting information that are true is much easier in comparison, and a number of reporting verbs were used. There was no particular reporting verb that stood out in that the frequencies of the reporting verbs were similar.

DISCUSSION

The study on reporting verbs in articles on MH370 and MH17 airplane catastrophe in Malaysian English online newspapers (New Straits Time and The Star) shows that Malaysian news articles tended to present statements of news sources as positive statements using the reporting verb "said" for the author's stance. As for the writer's stance, a greater proportion of the reporting verbs indicated counter-factive and non-factive reporting, where the news articles either questioned the truth of the statements given by news sources or presented them neutrally. Malaysian journalists tended to emphasise use of the author's stance rather than the writer's stance to avoid expressing their attitudes towards the information given by news sources. This finding is similar to Nkansah's (2013) finding on stance in Ghanaian news articles, showing that the dominance of author's stance in news articles may be common in news reports. Nkansah (2013) analysed front page news stories and no specific topics were focussed on, whereas the present study focussed on tragedies. Yet the findings on the infrequent inclusion of the writer's stance are similar. In Malaysia, front page stories are usually on sensational news (e.g., tragedies), government announcements, events attended by ministers and major events in the society. Extrapolating from the findings, it is possible that front page stories in Malaysian newspapers would show more author's stance and less writer's stance in terms of the frequency of reporting verbs used.

The study also revealed that New Straits Time and The Star hardly used the negative and neutral author's stances in their articles on MH370 and MH17. There seems to be an avoidance of negative author's stance such as speculations, rumours and false leads which might be traumatic to families who experienced loss of lives as well as organisations and countries affected by the catastrophe. The two newspapers relied on the positive author's stance which concentrated on presenting the news as true and accurate. The positive reporting verb "said" and "told" are the two most frequently used reporting verbs because they are the most generic forms of verb. The inclination of news articles towards positive author's stance is consistent with findings from media framing studies such as Ting et al. (2020) who found that news articles on the 1MDB financial scandal were written with minimal evaluative judgements and negative adjectives, but the news sources are chosen to indirectly show their position on the scandal. For example, activists and advocate groups are likely to give opinions contrary to the government position. Floyd (2000, p. 43) rightly stated that "most news is in fact reported speech" and journalists who can interview more news sources are considered to be better at gathering news.

As for the writer's stance, both newspapers had similar percentages of counter-factive and non-factive reporting verbs in their news on the disappearance of MH370 but there was little use of factive reporting verbs. In other words, the two newspapers were inclined to either question the truth of information presented by the news sources quoted in the articles or to give no indication of the writer's attitude towards the information. The journalists did not go out of their way to portray the news sources as presenting true information. The unfolding events and information updates were presented as a matter of fact. Nevertheless, in the reporting of MH17, The New Straits Time (60.38%) was inclined towards more critical reporting compared to The Star (42.51%), evident in more frequent use of reporting verbs associated with a counter-factive writer's stance. The study showed that the articles on airplane catastrophes leaned towards safe reporting focussed on the available details of the incidents. Focussing on news sources presenting true information or opinions minimises the circulation of fake news which may mislead readers into developing beliefs,

attitudes, or perceptions which are misplaced. This is part of responsible reporting which Malaysian newspapers seemed to adhere to more than foreign press (Alias, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The present study has uncovered a link that has not been highlighted in other academic publications on reporting verbs. The low frequency of factive reporting verbs for the writer's stance may be linked to the high frequency of positive author's stance in contexts where the norm is safe reporting and where journalists do not usually engage in speculative discourse. The factive writer's stance means that the writer portrays the author as presenting true information using reporting verbs such as "emphasise" and "point out" while positive author's stance means that the author is reported as presenting the information as true using reporting verbs such as "bring out" and "demonstrate". In other words, if the journalist chose to signal that the statement given by news source is correct, there is little need to emphasise the validity of the information by proclaiming his or her positive attitude towards the truth value of the statement. The writer's stance becomes pertinent only when the information given by news source is unexpected or appears questionable to the journalist, and the journalist then feels a need to suggest that the information may be false. However, the possible link between the frequency of reporting verbs for positive author's stance and factive writer's stance needs to be further examined.

In the present study, the focus was on reporting verbs and other linguistic features of the news reports were not analysed. Alias's (2017, p. ii) analysis of MH370 news articles in 10 Malaysian and foreign newspapers showed that "the speculative discourse is reflected through immense utilisation of modals of probability, speech act verbs, apologetic quotation marks, hypothetical questions, as well as excessive utilisation of passive voice". Analysis of language features of speculative news discourse may uncover more nuances of how journalists shape readers' views of events and issues because the present study showed that journalists seemed to have refrained from putting in the writer's stance on developments in the investigation of the two airplane catastrophes. However, the journalists' attitude may be reflected in less obvious ways through reporting verbs. Therefore, future studies on newspaper articles on tragedies and other sensational news that capture worldwide attention should also investigate the use of other linguistic elements, particularly speculative language, as well as the organisational structure of the articles to attain a holistic understanding of how negative incidents with uncertainty are handled by newspapers to satisfy the curiosity of the readers for news.

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