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Evolving Syntactic Patterns in Pakistani English Editorial Headlines: A Comparative Analysis of 2023 and 2025

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Abstract

Headlines play a critical role in shaping how readers engage with and interpret news content. This study investigates the syntactic structures employed in editorial headlines of two leading Pakistani English-language newspapers: The News International and The Nation. The primary dataset consists of twenty headlines focused on social issues collected between March and May 2023. A follow-up mini-sample of fifteen headlines from June–July 2025 was compiled to explore whether structural preferences have shifted over time. Each headline was categorized as a noun phrase, verb phrase, complete sentence, or adverbial phrase. The findings reveal that noun phrases remain the dominant form across both periods, with The Nation demonstrating a particularly strong inclination toward this structure. The News International displayed slightly more variation by incorporating occasional verb phrases and complete sentences. These results indicate a stable preference for concise, topic-focused headline structures in Pakistani editorial writing.

Keywords: *Headline syntax, Pakistani newspapers, noun phrase, editorial discourse, comparative study*

1. Introduction

Newspaper headlines serve as gateways to the main content, influencing whether readers choose to engage with an article. In the context of editorial pieces, headlines not only summarize the subject matter but also subtly reflect the publication's stance on issues. In English-language newspapers in Pakistan, headline construction holds added importance as these outlets target an influential, often urban readership that shapes public discourse.

While extensive research has examined rhetorical strategies and thematic framing in Pakistani newspapers, studies that focus specifically on the grammatical structure of editorial headlines are limited. This paper addresses this gap by analyzing syntactic patterns in two prominent Pakistani newspapers. The research compares findings from a 2023 dataset with a smaller supplementary set from 2025 to evaluate any changes or continuities over time.

2. Literature Review

Recent years have witnessed an increased academic interest in the syntax of news headlines, particularly as digital platforms transform how audiences consume news. Aqsa et al. (2022) conducted a corpus-based analysis of headlines from Pakistani newspapers, highlighting frequent reliance on descriptive adjectives, modal verbs, and emotionally charged vocabulary to attract readership. Similarly, a 2023 study in the *Journal of Namibian Studies* examined the linguistic construction of Pakistani headlines and found that brevity and lexical precision are critical to maintaining reader engagement.

Khaliq and Ahmed (2025) compared sentence structures in *The Nation* and *The Guardian*, noting that Pakistani headlines often favor simpler grammatical constructions, many of which resemble condensed noun phrases. Saleem and Rahaman (2023) applied a minimalist syntactic framework to Pakistani English and Urdu headlines, illustrating how compact structures convey significant semantic content with minimal lexical load. Additionally, the stylistic convention known as 'headlinesese'—marked by the omission of articles and auxiliary verbs—has been recognized as a major influence on the dominance of noun phrase constructions in headlines (News style, 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining quantitative counts of headline types with qualitative observations. Headlines were classified into four syntactic categories: noun phrase (NP), verb phrase (VP), complete sentence (S), and adverbial phrase (AP).

3.2 Data Source (2023)

The 2023 dataset, originally compiled for the author's MPhil thesis, includes ten social-issue editorial headlines each from *The News International* and *The Nation*, collected between March and May 2023.

3.3 Supplementary Data (2025)

For the 2025 update, ten headlines from *The News International* and five from *The Nation* were selected from editorials published in June and July 2025, using the same inclusion criteria.

3.4 Analysis Procedure

All headlines were analyzed for syntactic structure and categorized accordingly. The frequency and percentage of each category were calculated for both datasets, enabling direct comparison.

4. Results

4.1 Distribution of Syntactic Structures in 2023

Newspaper	Noun Phrase	Verb Phrase	Sentence	Adverbial Phrase
The News International	7	2	1	0
The Nation	9	1	0	0

In 2023, both newspapers predominantly employed noun phrases in their editorial headlines. While The News International included a small proportion of verb phrases and one complete sentence, The Nation maintained a near-exclusive reliance on noun phrase structures.

4.2 Distribution of Syntactic Structures in 2025

Newspaper	Noun Phrase	Verb Phrase	Sentence	Adverbial Phrase
The News International	8	1	1	0
The Nation	5	0	0	0

The supplementary 2025 dataset reinforces earlier patterns, with noun phrases continuing to dominate. The News International displayed slightly more syntactic diversity, while The Nation maintained exclusive use of noun phrases.

5. Discussion

Across both timeframes, noun phrases were the most frequently used syntactic form in editorial headlines. This mirrors international trends in headline writing, where brevity, topical focus, and immediate recognizability are prioritized. The persistence of this pattern over two years suggests a stable editorial convention in Pakistani English-language journalism.

The minor variation seen in The News International—particularly the inclusion of complete sentences—indicates a willingness to experiment with more dynamic headline forms. In contrast, The Nation’s consistent preference for noun phrases reflects a more traditional stylistic approach. These tendencies may be tied to each paper’s editorial identity and target readership.

6. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of 2023 and 2025 editorial headlines in The News International and The Nation demonstrates a clear and enduring preference for noun phrase structures. While The News International occasionally adopts alternative forms, The Nation remains firmly aligned with traditional noun phrase headlines. This consistency underscores the resilience of certain syntactic norms in Pakistani editorial journalism.

Future studies could extend this work by examining a broader range of newspapers, incorporating headlines from different sections, or exploring the impact of digital media on headline construction practices.

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