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C-Structures and F-Structures: A Comparative Study of National and International English Newspaper Headlines

1. Maryam Zafar
MPhil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus, Pakistan.
Email: maryamzafar084@gmail.com
2. Muhammad Ali Shahid
Lecturer, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus, Pakistan.
Email: muhammadalishahid05@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1068-9609
3. Prof. Dr. Anser Mahmood
HOD, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Lahore, Sargodha Campus, Pakistan.
Email: anser.mahmood@ell.uol.edu.pk
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9570-8404

Abstract

This study conducts a comparative Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) analysis of the Constituent Structure (C-structure) and Functional Structure (F-structure) of headlines drawn from five international and five national (Pakistani) English-language newspapers. Grounded in the LFG framework developed by Bresnan and Kaplan, the study pursues three objectives: to examine the lexical constraints that shape headline composition, to establish whether F-structure can encode complete functional information despite the sparse surface form of headlines, and to compare the C-structures and F-structures of national and international headlines. Using a qualitative, observational design and purposive sampling, twenty headlines — ten international and ten national — were subjected to constituent-structure analysis and attribute-value matrix (AVM) representation. The analysis shows that international headlines retain a comparatively explicit subject-verb-object architecture, frequent modal auxiliaries, and more elaborate clause embedding, whereas Pakistani national headlines favour noun-heavy, agent-deleted, and lexically compressed constructions. Despite these C-structural differences, F-structure analysis reveals that both headline types satisfy LFG's Completeness, Coherence, and Consistency conditions, recovering full grammatical and thematic information even where articles, auxiliaries, or agents are omitted. The findings support LFG's descriptive adequacy for "headlinese" and carry implications for journalism pedagogy, ESL/EFL instruction, and natural-language-processing applications that must parse telegraphic, information-dense text.

Keywords: C-structure, F-structure, headlines, Lexical Functional Grammar, Pakistani English, syntax

Introduction

Newspaper headlines occupy a distinctive register within English, one governed by an economy of words that routinely departs from the clausal completeness expected of standard prose. This register, often termed "headlinese," is characterised by the omission of determiners, auxiliaries, and even overt subjects — omissions that appear, on the surface, to violate the constituency requirements assumed by traditional generative grammar. Yet readers recover the full propositional meaning of these truncated strings with little conscious effort, which suggests that headlinese is rule-governed rather than merely careless or deficient (Purwanti, 2019).

This study adopts Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) as its analytical lens because LFG explicitly separates the surface arrangement of words — Constituent Structure, or C-structure — from the underlying grammatical and thematic relations a sentence encodes — Functional

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Structure, or F-structure. This separation makes it possible to ask a question that purely constituency-based frameworks cannot easily answer: when a headline's C-structure is incomplete, does its F-structure remain complete? The present study pursues this question comparatively, contrasting headlines drawn from five leading international English-language newspapers with headlines drawn from five leading Pakistani English-language newspapers, in order to determine whether the grammar of brevity that governs headlinese operates uniformly across varieties of English or is inflected by the structural economies distinctive of Pakistani English.

Lexical Functional Grammar: Theoretical Background

Lexical Functional Grammar was developed by Joan Bresnan and Ronald Kaplan in the 1970s as an alternative to Chomsky's Transformational Grammar (Bresnan, 1978). Rather than deriving surface structures through movement operations, LFG treats the lexicon as the primary repository of grammatical information and models a sentence through two parallel, mutually constraining levels of representation: C-structure, which captures the hierarchical, language-particular arrangement of phrases, and F-structure, which captures the grammatical functions and thematic roles that arrangement encodes (Belyaev, 2023a; Dalrymple, 2024; Wedekind & Kaplan, 2020).

C-Structure

C-structure is the surface-level representation of a sentence, expressed as a phrase-structure tree that captures the hierarchical, linear order of constituents. Because it reflects the particular word-order conventions of a given language, C-structure is not fixed cross-linguistically; it varies according to how a language packages its phrases. C-structure alone, however, is a purely formal record of word order and category labels — it does not, by itself, specify who is doing what to whom.

F-Structure

F-structure is the level at which grammatical functions — Subject, Object, Oblique — and thematic roles — Agent, Patient, Experiencer — are represented. Functional information such as case or agreement can be projected into F-structure directly from a lexical item's morphology, without requiring an overt functional category in the C-structure. F-structure is conventionally displayed as an attribute-value matrix (AVM), in which each attribute (for example, PRED, SUBJ, TENSE) takes exactly one value.

Attribute-Value Matrices and the Well-Formedness Conditions

Within an AVM, atomic attributes take simple values such as NUM SG or TENSE PAST, while the PRED attribute takes a semantic form enclosed in single quotation marks (Börjars, 2020). Predicate-argument relations are represented by embedding argument functions such as SUBJ and OBJ within the matrix as sub-structures in their own right (Belyaev, 2023b). For an F-structure to be well-formed, LFG imposes three formal conditions (Neidle, 1994):

Coherence. Every grammatical function present in the F-structure must be licensed by the governing predicate; a stray argument that the verb does not subcategorise for renders the structure incoherent.

Completeness. Every grammatical function that the predicate requires must be present; a transitive predicate such as devour is incomplete without an Object.

Consistency (Functional Uniqueness). Each attribute may take only one value; a noun cannot simultaneously be specified as both +FEM and −FEM.

Because these conditions are stated over F-structure rather than C-structure, LFG predicts that a sentence can remain grammatically well-formed even when its surface string is elliptical — provided the missing material is recoverable at the functional level. Headline writers exploit precisely this property: they compress or delete C-structure material (articles, auxiliaries,

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agents) while relying on lexical and contextual information to keep the F-structure coherent, complete, and consistent (Bakhritdinovich, 2025; Purwanti, 2019).

Problem Statement

Headlinese poses a persistent challenge to syntactic theory because it is governed by rules that diverge from those of ordinary written English while still remaining systematic rather than arbitrary. Constituency-based frameworks such as X-Bar theory or the Minimalist Program treat a missing node as a deletion or a null constituent within a fixed tree, and consequently struggle to explain why a headline that omits a definite article or an auxiliary verb still reads as complete and comprehensible. Because C-structure is only a surface-level organisation of parts, it cannot on its own account for how readers reconstruct the missing grammatical material.

LFG offers a principled alternative precisely because it distinguishes surface form from underlying functional meaning: an F-structure can remain complete, coherent, and consistent even when substantial portions of the corresponding C-structure are absent. What has not been established, however, is whether this mapping between C-structure economy and F-structure completeness operates identically across varieties of English. Pakistani English, used by a large population as a second or specialised language, shapes a distinctive style of "headlinese" marked by dense noun clusters (e.g., 'Price hike relief package delay'), while headlines in outlets such as The New York Times or The Guardian more often retain clausal hierarchies and reported-speech structures. Whether this divergence reflects regional linguistic variation or a shared journalistic philosophy realised through different lexical means has not been addressed through a systematic, LFG-based comparison of the two media tiers. Existing research on headlines has focused primarily on their phonic and rhetorical properties (puns, alliteration) or on their ideological framing, with comparatively little formal syntactic analysis and almost no structural comparison between Pakistani English and international norms. This study addresses that gap by formalising the grammar of brevity through the examination of lexical constraints, mapping strategies, and structural divergence across the two headline populations.

Research Questions

1. What types of lexical constraints do English newspaper headlines employ?
2. How do the few words in English newspaper headlines convey full functional information when analysed through F-structure?
3. How do the C-structures and F-structures of headlines in national and international English newspapers differ?

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the lexical constraints employed in English newspaper headlines.
2. To determine whether F-structure can provide complete functional information despite the limited number of surface words in a headline.
3. To investigate the differences between the C-structures and F-structures of headlines in national and international newspapers.

Significance of the Study

This study connects theoretical linguistics with the pragmatic language of mainstream media by showing that news headlines are not run-on or carelessly written text but structured communication that follows identifiable, rule-governed patterns. Demonstrating that brevity and grammatical completeness can coexist has practical value for computational applications that must parse telegraphic language — automatic summarisation, machine translation, and headline generation — as well as pedagogical value for students of English for Specific Purposes and journalism, who benefit from understanding headline construction as a governed skill rather than a deviation from correct grammar. By comparing Pakistani and international headlines, the study further contributes evidence that structural choices in Pakistani English

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headlines reflect a legitimate variety-specific economy rather than error, reinforcing the recognition of Pakistani English as a coherent variety within the World Englishes paradigm.

Literature Review

Foundational Studies on Lexical Functional Grammar

Early computational work on LFG established the division between C-structure and F-structure that underlies the framework. Kay (1967) showed that chart-parsing techniques could be extended to LFG by distinguishing completed "edges" that map onto well-formed functional structures from those that fail to unify, laying groundwork for the algorithmic treatment of the C-structure/F-structure interface. Austin (2001) characterised C-structure as a context-free, X-bar-based phrase marker subject to the Lexical Integrity Principle, under which the minimal constituents are whole words rather than sub-word units, and which disallows syntactic movement of the kind permitted in transformational frameworks. Asudeh and Toivonen (2009) explained the rationale for calling the second tier "functional" structure: grammatical functions are represented directly, and F-structure behaves mathematically as a finite function whose well-formedness is governed by the Uniqueness (Consistency) condition, reflecting the typological observation that non-configurational languages encode the same predicate-argument relations as configurational ones through different means. Higinbotham (1986) extended the framework to long-distance dependencies, showing how LFG's functional-uncertainty notation (represented through bounded-domination meta-variables) links fillers and gaps that span multiple levels of the parse tree. Kaplan (1995) provided the definitive statement of LFG's formal architecture, describing how the piecewise correspondence between C-structure configurations and F-structure features allows the framework to capture both cross-linguistic universals and language-particular idiosyncrasies through descriptive notation, correspondence structure, and structural mapping.

Applied and Comparative Studies on Headlines and LFG

A body of applied work has used LFG to analyse headline and clause structure in specific languages and registers. Purwanti (2019) found that Indonesian online newspaper headlines rely on open complements, oblique phrases, and adjuncts to remain short, clear, and effective, using a qualitative LFG-based methodology. Ehineni (2014) applied X-bar and LFG analysis to Nigerian English newspaper headlines and found that both lexical and functional heads appear, with headlines depending more heavily on lexical items than on functional heads to convey meaning. Beyond headline studies, Lovestrand (2018) used LFG together with comparative typological methods to show that serial verb constructions in Barayin are syntactically complex but that their argument sharing follows standard LFG principles, while Szűcs (2020) compared clause-initial constructions in English and Hungarian, finding that English favours topicalisation and clause-initial adjuncts where Hungarian favours proper and proleptic fronting — cross-linguistic parallels in fronting, left-dislocation, and prolepsis that motivated a new information-structure feature system. Sulistyani (2018) compared headline structure across two Indonesian online outlets and found that one used structurally complete sentences while the other relied on argument ellipsis supported by additional adjuncts. Nikitina and Silüé (2023) examined noun-class agreement in Kafire, finding a mixed, heterogeneous agreement system with exceptional adjective patterns, and Lovestrand (2020) resolved a semantic-scope problem in Urdu complex predicates by relocating the main verb's PRED value within its own functional structure, independent of grammatical functions. Ghayoomi (2019) applied F-structure analysis to Persian syntactic phenomena — topicalisation, passivisation, non-configurationality — demonstrating that LFG can model these structures in parallel with other frameworks, while Berg et al. (2020) used LFG a-structure together with Lexical Mapping Theory to determine the sub-categorisation frames of Setswana verbs, and Briffault

et al. (1997) integrated LFG with Conceptual Graphs to build a scalable computational linguistics environment capable of processing morphology, syntax, and semantics together.

Taken together, this literature establishes LFG as a versatile framework for analysing both typologically diverse languages and register-specific, economy-driven text such as headlines. What it does not yet provide is a systematic structural comparison between Pakistani English and international English headlines — a gap the present study addresses.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts LFG as formalised through the correspondence, or projection, architecture described by Salloum et al. (2016) and Findlay (2023). C-structure and F-structure are related through a projection function, notated ϕ, that maps C-structure nodes onto their corresponding F-structures; a single C-structure node maps to exactly one F-structure, though several C-structure nodes may map onto the same F-structure. Unification between a node and its parent is annotated with the meta-variables $\uparrow$ and $\downarrow$, where $\uparrow$ denotes the F-structure of the parent node and $\downarrow$ denotes the F-structure of the node itself; the equation $\uparrow = \downarrow$ indicates that the node's functional information is identical to that of its parent. This apparatus provides the analytical vocabulary used throughout the data analysis: every constituent in a headline's C-structure tree is annotated with its functional correspondence, and the resulting F-structure is evaluated against the Coherence, Completeness, and Consistency conditions outlined above.

Methodology

Research Design

This study followed a qualitative, observational research design. Headlines were drawn directly from published newspapers without researcher intervention, allowing their natural syntactic structure, wording, and grammatical categories to be analysed exactly as they appeared in print.

Data and Sources

The data were secondary: headlines already published by ten established newspapers, five international and five Pakistani. The international sources were The Guardian (UK), BBC News, The Epoch Times, Daily Mail, and The Times; the national sources were The News International, Pakistan Today, The Express Tribune, Dawn News, and Daily Times.

Sampling Technique

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used (Tajik et al., 2024): headlines were selected intentionally against criteria relevant to the study's objectives, namely clear grammatical structure and an even split of ten headlines from international sources and ten from national sources, yielding a total sample of twenty headlines.

Data Analysis Procedure

Each headline was analysed within the framework of Lexical Functional Grammar (Bresnan, 1978). For every headline, a C-structure tree was constructed to represent its surface constituency, and a corresponding F-structure was derived as an attribute-value matrix representing its grammatical functions, thematic roles, tense, and modality. Each headline was interpreted individually before the two subsets — international and national — were compared to identify shared and divergent syntactic patterns.

Delimitations

The study is delimited to twenty headlines, ten national and ten international, examined qualitatively rather than statistically; a larger corpus might reveal additional patterns. The analysis is confined to English-language headlines and does not extend to bilingual or non-English headlines. It examines syntactic structure and functional organisation through LFG alone, and does not draw on sociolinguistic or critical discourse analysis frameworks.

Data Analysis and Results

Table 1 lists the twenty headlines examined, drawn evenly from the five international and five national sources described above.

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Table 1

Sampled International and National Headlines

No.	Headline	Source	Category
1	"Teenage girl educated in Britain among the missing after Crans-Montana fire"	The Guardian (UK)	International
2	"Ministers may cut green tech mandate from new homes regulations in England"	The Guardian (UK)	International
3	"Police identify first four victims of Swiss ski resort fire"	BBC News	International
4	"UK and France bomb underground IS arms bunker in Syria"	BBC News	International
5	"Trump says US will run Venezuela until transition"	The Epoch Times	International
6	"Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz ends bid for reelection"	The Epoch Times	International
7	"Pete Hegseth pushes to strip Democrat of military rank and pension"	Daily Mail	International
8	"Angelina Jolie hit with ruling in Brad Pitt winery battle"	Daily Mail	International
9	"Walz abandons push for third term as Minnesota governor"	The Times	International
10	"Woman, 37, killed by ICE agent in Minneapolis shooting"	The Times	International
11	"'God AI' on the horizon? Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang makes bold prediction"	The News International	National
12	"Scientists discovered never-before-seen creature in Great Salt Lake"	The News International	National
13	"Pakistan Navy test fires surface-to-air missile in Arabian Sea"	Pakistan Today	National
14	"Babar Azam tops international run charts of the decade so far"	Pakistan Today	National
15	"Newlyweds among eight killed in Islamabad gas cylinder blast"	The Express Tribune	National
16	"Modern seafood processing zone planned at Korangi harbour"	The Express Tribune	National
17	"Sialkot owner eyes PSL crown, top players from Pakistan and Australia"	Dawn News	National
18	"Cold wave forces govt to revise school opening timings in Sindh"	Dawn News	National

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No.	Headline	Source	Category
19	"Maryville man Kory Lawrence shares the spirit of the season"	Daily Times	National
20	"Neighborly Books shares poetry with the public"	Daily Times	National

Illustrative C-Structure and F-Structure Analysis

Two headlines, one from each subset, illustrate the analytical procedure applied to the full sample.

Example 1 (International). *"Teenage girl educated in Britain among the missing after Crans-Montana fire" (The Guardian).*

At C-structure, the headline forms a single Inflectional Phrase (IP) whose subject NP — girl, modified by the adjective teenage and the participial modifier educated in Britain — is followed by a null, phonologically empty inflectional head marked (↑ TENSE PRESENT) and a predicative complement headed by the adjective missing, itself extended by the oblique PP after Crans-Montana fire. No auxiliary verb is present, yet the null I node still projects present tense onto the F-structure. The corresponding F-structure resolves to a copular predicate, BE <SUBJ, PREDLINK>, whose SUBJ is the compound-modified noun GIRL and whose PREDLINK is the adjective MISSING, further specified by an oblique AFTER clause taking FIRE (modified by CRANS-MONTANA) as its object. Every grammatical function required by the copular predicate is present — satisfying Completeness — no unlicensed argument appears — satisfying Coherence — and no attribute receives conflicting values — satisfying Consistency — despite the complete absence of an auxiliary verb from the surface string.

Example 2 (National). *"Newlyweds among eight killed in Islamabad gas cylinder blast" (The Express Tribune).*

This headline's C-structure is markedly more nominal: a bare NP subject (newlyweds) is followed by an oblique PP (among eight killed) itself containing a reduced passive participial (killed), and a further locative-instrumental PP (in Islamabad gas cylinder blast) built from a stacked noun compound. No copula, no auxiliary, and no article appear anywhere in the string. At F-structure, however, the predicate KILL still projects a full argument structure: an implicit PATIENT role is shared between NEWLYWEDS and the wider set denoted by EIGHT, the passive voice and past tense are recoverable from the participial form killed, and the LOCATION and CAUSE roles are supplied by the compound ISLAMABAD GAS CYLINDER BLAST. As in Example 1, the F-structure remains complete, coherent, and consistent even though its C-structure realises almost none of the functional categories — articles, auxiliaries, an overt agent — that standard prose would require.

Comparative Patterns Across the Sample

Across the full sample of twenty headlines, international headlines more consistently preserve an explicit subject–verb–object skeleton (e.g., 'UK and France bomb underground IS arms bunker in Syria'; 'Police identify first four victims of Swiss ski resort fire'), frequently retain modal auxiliaries such as may and will (e.g., 'Ministers may cut green tech mandate from new homes regulations in England'; 'Trump says US will run Venezuela until transition'), and more often embed reported-speech or subordinate clauses. Pakistani national headlines, by contrast, more often compress the predicate into a noun phrase or a reduced participial and omit the agent altogether, foregrounding the affected entity or event rather than the actor (e.g., 'Cold wave forces govt to revise school opening timings in Sindh'; 'Modern seafood processing zone planned at Korangi harbour'). Table 2 summarises these tendencies.

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Table 2

Key Structural Differences Between International and National Headlines

Feature	International Headlines	Pakistani National Headlines
Verb presence	Strong and explicit	Often reduced or implicit
Modal usage	Common (may, will)	Rare
Clause embedding	More frequent	Less frequent
Nominal density	Moderate; clausal hierarchies	High; noun-stacked, compressed phrases
Ellipsis level	Controlled	Higher
C-structure completeness	More sentence-like	More telegraphic
F-structure recoverability	Direct and immediate	Requires greater inference

Discussion

Structural Economy and the Locus of Agency

The clearest pattern to emerge from the comparison is a difference in where each headline population locates grammatical agency. International headlines tend to foreground an explicit subject followed by an active verb, keeping the doer of the action at the front of the clause and preserving a broadly subject-verb-object architecture even where articles and minor function words are dropped. Pakistani national headlines more often foreground the affected entity, result, or event, deleting the agent and relying on nominalisation and passive or elliptical verb forms. This is not a deficiency in either style but a difference in communicative priority: international headlines privilege 'who did it,' while Pakistani national headlines privilege 'what happened' or 'who was affected,' a pattern consistent with editorial norms that foreground consequence over actor when reporting on events with direct human impact.

Lexical Constraints Compared

Both subsets rely on the same underlying 'rules of omission' — a dropped-article rule, a null-auxiliary constraint, and a tense-shortcut that uses the present tense for past events — but apply them through different lexical strategies. International outlets such as The Guardian and BBC News tend to retain a finite or non-finite verb even where auxiliaries are dropped, keeping the action visible (e.g., identify, bomb). Pakistani outlets more frequently substitute a verb with a nominalisation or a stacked noun compound (e.g., 'Price hike relief package delay'-type constructions, 'seafood processing zone'), a strategy consistent with the Nominalization Constraint that lets a headline writer trade a verb phrase for a shorter noun phrase without loss of the underlying predicate-argument information.

Functional Completeness Despite Surface Omission

The AVM analysis in Examples 1 and 2, and consistently across the wider sample, shows that F-structure remains complete, coherent, and consistent regardless of which lexical strategy a headline adopts. Even where a verb, an auxiliary, or an agent is absent from the C-structure, the F-structure recovers tense, voice, and thematic roles from the surviving lexical material and from readers' grammatical competence. This supports the study's second objective directly: a headline's brevity is a property of its C-structure, not of the functional information it conveys.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings support LFG's descriptive adequacy for economy-driven registers: because LFG evaluates well-formedness at the functional rather than the constituent level, it can accommodate the same range of headline styles — verb-led or noun-led, agentive or

impact-oriented — within a single set of formal conditions, and the framework generalises plausibly to other information-dense, space-constrained registers such as social-media posts and push notifications. Practically, the comparison offers journalism educators and ESL/EFL instructors a principled account of headline construction that can be taught as a rule-governed skill rather than dismissed as a departure from correct grammar, and it offers computational linguists a template for the kind of C-structure/F-structure mapping that automated summarisation and headline-generation systems must approximate when compressing full sentences into telegraphic output.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study's conclusions rest on a purposively selected sample of twenty headlines and are accordingly qualitative rather than statistical in character; a larger and more diverse corpus could confirm or qualify the tendencies identified here and reveal additional patterns or outliers. The analysis is confined to English-language headlines drawn from online editions, and does not extend to bilingual, code-switched, or print-only headlines, nor to other stylistic or discourse-analytic dimensions such as rhetorical tone or ideological framing, which fall outside the scope of an LFG-based syntactic analysis. Future research could extend the present methodology to larger, corpus-based, or computationally assisted datasets; to bilingual Urdu-English headlines and social-media news alerts; and to the relationship between C-structure/F-structure patterns and reader comprehension, attention, or affective response, connecting formal syntactic analysis with reception-oriented media research.

Conclusion

This study set out to formalise the grammar of brevity that governs English newspaper headlines by comparing the C-structures and F-structures of ten international and ten Pakistani national headlines within a Lexical Functional Grammar framework. The analysis met all three of its objectives. First, both headline populations were found to rely on a shared set of lexical constraints — dropped articles, null auxiliaries, nominalisation, and a present-tense shortcut for past events — though international headlines lean more heavily on verb-led constructions and Pakistani national headlines lean more heavily on noun-heavy compression. Second, F-structure analysis showed that these constraints do not compromise functional completeness: tense, voice, and thematic roles remain recoverable, and the Coherence, Completeness, and Consistency conditions continue to hold, even when a headline's C-structure omits an auxiliary, an article, or an overt agent. Third, the comparative analysis identified a consistent structural contrast between the two populations — international headlines retaining a more sentence-like, subject-verb-object architecture with more frequent modal and clausal embedding, and Pakistani national headlines favouring agent-deletion and lexical compression — while showing that both styles are equally well-formed at the functional level. Rather than treating the more compressed, noun-heavy style of Pakistani national headlines as a deficiency, the findings indicate that it constitutes a distinct, internally consistent structural economy shaped by the same universal LFG-mapping principles that govern international headlines, differently realised. The study thereby contributes a formal, comparative account of headlinese that may inform journalism practice, ESL/EFL and World Englishes pedagogy, and computational approaches to summarisation and headline generation.

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