

TENSE SHIFT IN NEWS DISCOURSE: HOW HEADLINES AND BODY TEXTS DIVERGE IN TEMPORAL REFERENCE

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Abstract: Tense shift — the systematic departure from default tense-to-time mappings is a defining feature of news language. Yet existing research has treated news tense largely as a single phenomenon, rarely distinguishing between the radically different grammatical behaviour of headlines and the body texts that follow them. This paper addresses that gap by analysing tense patterns at two structural levels headline and body text across a corpus of 1,000 news items: 500 English-language texts (BBC, CNN) and 500 Uzbek-language texts, published between January 2023 and December 2025. Drawing on data from the author’s dissertation on tense transformation in English and Uzbek news discourse, the study demonstrates that headlines and body texts operate under fundamentally different tense regimes in both languages, and that the direction and degree of tense shift diverges sharply between English and Uzbek journalistic traditions. In English, the headline deploys the Historic Present to simulate immediacy, while the body transitions to Past Simple for factual narration, creating a Present–Past tense shift at the text boundary. In Uzbek, the headline uses the Definite Past (–di form) to signal verified fact, while the body may introduce Present Simple for contextualisation, creating an inverse Past–Present pattern. These cross-linguistic asymmetries reflect deeper cultural differences in how journalistic credibility is constructed through grammar.

Keywords: *tense shift, news headlines, body text, journalistic present, Uzbek past tense, corpus linguistics, English–Uzbek contrastive linguistics, media discourse, temporal reference*

1. INTRODUCTION

When a journalist writes a news headline, they face a grammatical decision that is also a rhetorical one: which tense to use for an event that, by the time the reader encounters it, has already occurred. The answer differs dramatically between English and Uzbek newsrooms and it differs again when the same journalist turns from the headline to the body of the story. This divergence is the subject of the present paper. Tense shift in news language has been studied as a general phenomenon since Straumann first described the “headline present” in British newspapers. Subsequent scholarship — Bell, Reah, Chovanec has documented the tendency of English headlines to use Present Simple for past events, contrasting with the Past Simple that dominates body text. But these accounts treat news language as a largely monolingual object of study, and they rarely interrogate the structural boundary between headline and body as a site of systematic grammatical transition. Two research questions motivate this investigation. First: how do headlines and body texts differ in their tense patterns, within each language and across the text as a whole? Second: how do these differences compare between English, a language with an institutionalised “journalistic present,” and Uzbek, a language in which the Definite Past tense (–di suffix) has been argued to function as a credibility marker in journalistic register?

The study draws on original corpus data collected for the author’s dissertation on tense transformation in English and Uzbek news discourse 1,000 texts annotated for tense form, structural position (headline vs. body), and temporal reference. The findings reveal not merely different tense preferences, but structurally opposite tense-shift patterns at the headline–body boundary, with significant implications for translation, bilingual journalism training, and cross-linguistic media analysis.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Headline Grammar as a Distinct Register

News headlines constitute what Biber would classify as a functionally distinct register: a variety of language defined by its situational parameters (brevity, mass readership, competitive attention economy) rather than by topic alone. The grammatical consequences of these parameters are well documented: deletion of articles and auxiliaries, preference for active constructions, heavy nominalisation, and crucially a systematic preference for the simple present tense in describing recent past events. This last feature what Straumann called the "headline present" and what contemporary linguists term the Historic Present is the central tense phenomenon in English headline grammar. Its function is not primarily to misrepresent the time of events but to simulate their proximity to the reader's present moment: the present tense invites the reader into the event rather than positioning them as a retrospective audience. The result is what Bell describes as an "ongoing present" a grammatical fiction in which events that concluded hours ago are presented as still unfolding. In contrast to the dramatic present of the headline, the body text of a news article typically operates in what we may call factual narration mode: events are reported in the Past Simple as completed actions, anchored to specific time references (yesterday, on Tuesday, last month). This shift from headline to body represents the most significant intra-textual tense transition in English news discourse a transition from rhetorical time (designed to attract and engage) to referential time (designed to inform and document). Comrie's deictic model of tense provides the theoretical vocabulary for this contrast: the headline operates in the deictic present, positioning the event at speech time; the body operates in the deictic past, positioning the event at an anterior reference point. The shift between them is not incidental it is structural, occurring at the boundary between two functionally distinct sub-texts within the same news item.

2.2 Uzbek Tense in News Discourse

Uzbek presents a typologically distinct tense system. The language distinguishes several past-tense forms, of which the most significant for news discourse are the Definite Past (–di suffix, encoding witnessed or verified events) and the Indefinite Past (–gan suffix, encoding events not directly witnessed by the speaker). This evidential dimension — absent from English grammatical tense proper means that Uzbek tense choices carry an additional layer of epistemic meaning: not merely when did this happen, but how does the speaker know it happened. Madvaliyev argues that Uzbek journalistic style has conventionalised the Definite Past (–di) as the default headline tense precisely because it encodes evidential certainty: by choosing –di, the editor signals that the reported event has been verified before publication. This is the structural inverse of English headline grammar: where English editors reach for the present to signal urgency, Uzbek editors reach for the past to signal reliability. The cultural logic differs, but both choices are strategic deployments of tense as a credibility-building device. The cross-linguistic divergence in tense patterns is not merely a linguistic accident it reflects deeper cultural orientations toward time and communication. Hall's distinction between monochronic (M-time) and polychronic (P-time) cultures maps onto the English–Uzbek contrast with instructive precision. Anglophone journalism operates within an M-time framework in which news value is inseparable from temporal proximity: the fresher the information, the more valuable it is, and the present tense grammatically instantiates that freshness. Uzbek journalism, shaped by both pre-Soviet oral traditions and Soviet-era norms of official, documented reporting, operates under a different compact with its audience: reliability takes precedence over immediacy, and the –di form grammatically instantiates that reliability.

3. METHODOLOGY

The empirical foundation of this study is a corpus of 1,000 news texts drawn from five outlets: BBC News (250 texts) and CNN (250 texts) for English; Xalq so‘zi (200 texts), Kun.uz (150 texts), and Daryo.uz (150 texts) for Uzbek. All texts were published between January 2023 and December 2025 and span four thematic domains: politics, science and technology, economics, and social affairs. Each text was selected to include a full headline and a minimum of five body sentences, ensuring sufficient material for intra-textual tense analysis. Annotation was conducted at the sentence level, coding each finite verb phrase for: (i) tense form; (ii) structural position (headline, lead sentence, body, closing); and (iii) temporal reference (past, concurrent, future relative to publication date). Tense shift was operationalised as any change of tense form between consecutive structural positions within a single text, with the headline serving as the baseline. Two trained annotators coded independently, achieving an inter-rater reliability of Cohen's $\kappa = 0.87$ for English and $\kappa = 0.84$ for Uzbek, both indicating strong agreement. The analysis reported in this paper focuses specifically on the headline–body tense boundary: the tense form used in the headline, the tense form used in the opening body sentence (the lead), and the direction of any shift between them. Frequencies are reported as percentages of the relevant sub-corpus; chi-square tests confirm statistical significance for all major distributional differences reported.

4. FINDINGS: THE HEADLINE–BODY TENSE BOUNDARY

In the English sub-corpus, Present Simple dominates at the headline level: 72% of all 500 English headlines use Present Simple to describe events that, at the time of publication, had already occurred. The remaining 28% divide between the infinitival future (to + verb, 16%), Past Simple (6%), and other forms (6%). This headline dominance of the present is consistent with prior descriptions of the journalistic present across Anglophone media. At the body level, however, the pattern reverses. In 84% of English texts, the tense of the opening body sentence (lead) differs from the tense of the headline. Of these transitions, the most common is the shift from headline Present Simple to lead Past Simple, which accounts for 68% of all English tense shifts at the text boundary. The second most common transition is from headline Present Simple to lead Present Perfect (17%), signalling the ongoing relevance of a recently completed action. The functional logic of this Present–Past shift is clear: the headline deploys present tense as a rhetorical hook, creating a sense of immediacy; the body then anchors the event in the past with specific temporal markers (on Monday, last week, yesterday), providing the factual record that the headline deliberately withholds. The reader is first pulled into the present of the event, then repositioned as a retrospective witness. This two-stage temporal architecture is a structural feature of English news narrative, not a random variation.

Table 1. Headline–Body tense transitions in English news corpus (n = 500)

HEADLINE	BODY TEXT (opening sentence)
<i>Government Announces Tax Reform (Pres. Simple)</i>	The government announced sweeping tax reforms on Tuesday... (Past Simple)
<i>Scientists Discover Cancer Breakthrough (Pres. Simple)</i>	Researchers at MIT revealed last month that... (Past Simple)
<i>Markets Surge on Fed Decision (Pres. Simple)</i>	Global markets have surged following the Federal Reserve's... (Pres. Perfect)

<i>Ukraine to Receive New Aid Package (Infinitival Future)</i>	Ukraine will receive a \$2 billion aid package, officials confirmed... (Future)
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The examples in Table 1 illustrate the typical pattern: a headline in Present Simple is followed by a lead sentence in Past Simple, which introduces the specific time anchor that the headline omits. The shift is abrupt and deliberate the journalist exploits the tense boundary as a structural device to serve two different communicative goals simultaneously.

The Uzbek sub-corpus presents a structurally inverted pattern. At the headline level, the Definite Past (–di) dominates, occurring in 80% of all 500 Uzbek headlines. The remaining 20% divide between the infinitival future construction (11%) and the Present Simple (9%). As noted above, the –di form's evidential dimension makes it particularly suitable for the headline function in Uzbek journalistic culture: by choosing –di, the editor signals completedness and verification, not mere temporal anteriority. At the body level, the Uzbek pattern diverges from the headline in a direction opposite to English. In 71% of Uzbek texts, the lead sentence introduces a shift away from the headline tense but here the shift is most commonly from Past Simple (–di) to Present Simple (38% of Uzbek transitions) or to Present Perfect–equivalent constructions (22%), with a return to Past Simple in subsequent body sentences. The opening of the body thus moves temporarily toward the present, contextualising the already-verified headline event within a frame of ongoing relevance, before the body proper resumes its factual past narration. This Past–Present shift reflects a different narrative architecture. The Uzbek headline has already established the factual baseline; the body's task is not to anchor the event in the past (as in English) but to connect it to the reader's present concerns. The lead sentence therefore reaches toward the present — "The decision affects thousands of families across the country" before the body resumes its documentation in the past. The movement is from verified past fact (headline) to present relevance (lead) to detailed past narration (body): a three-stage temporal structure that mirrors the rhetorical logic of verification-then-contextualisation.

Table 2. Headline–Body tense transitions in Uzbek news corpus (n = 500)

HEADLINE	BODY TEXT (opening sentence)
<i>Prezident yangi qonunni imzoladi (–di, Definite Past)</i>	Bu qaror minglab oilalarga ta'sir qiladi (Present Simple)
<i>Olimlar yangi usulni topdilar (–di, Definite Past)</i>	Kashfiyot tibbiyot sohasini o'zgartirishi mumkin (Present Modal)
<i>Valyuta kursi yangilandi (–di, Definite Past)</i>	Iqtisodiy ko'rsatkichlar barqaror holatda qolmoqda (Present Simple)
<i>Muzokaralar muvaffaqiyatli yakunlandi (–di, Definite Past)</i>	Ikki tomon keyingi uchrashuvni kelishib oldi (Past Simple –di)

Placing the English and Uzbek findings side by side reveals a striking structural asymmetry. In English, the dominant tense trajectory across the headline–body boundary is Present Simple → Past Simple: the text moves from rhetorical present to factual past. In Uzbek, the dominant trajectory is Definite Past → Present Simple → Definite Past: the text moves from verified past to present relevance and back to factual past narration. The two patterns are not merely different they

are mirror images of each other at the headline–lead boundary. This asymmetry has a coherent functional explanation. Both patterns serve the same underlying communicative goal: to simultaneously attract reader attention and establish factual credibility. But they achieve this goal through opposite grammatical strategies, grounded in different cultural-journalistic traditions. English journalism bets on the present for attention and uses the past for credibility. Uzbek journalism uses the past for credibility first and the present for relevance second. The order of rhetorical operations differs, and tense is the grammatical index of that difference. A further quantitative difference is worth noting: English texts show a higher mean number of tense shifts across the whole text (2.8 per text) compared to Uzbek texts (1.4 per text). This suggests that English news narrative is temporally more dynamic it moves the reader through multiple tense frames within a single story while Uzbek news narrative tends toward greater temporal consistency, with the –di baseline maintained across most body sentences and departures from it serving specific contextualising functions.

The findings support a view of tense shift in news discourse not as grammatical inconsistency but as structural grammar: a systematic, functionally motivated exploitation of the contrast between tense forms to serve different communicative goals at different positions within the text. This view extends Halliday and Matthiessen's framework of register variation to the intra-textual level, treating the headline and the body as distinct sub-registers within the same news item, each governed by different tense norms. The headline–body tense boundary functions, in both English and Uzbek, as a grammatical signal of a rhetorical transition: from attention-seeking to fact-providing, from the reader's present to the event's past. The direction of that transition Present→Past in English, Past→Present→Past in Uzbek is language-specific, but the existence of a systematic transition is cross-linguistic. This cross-linguistic regularity has not been previously documented in the literature, to the best of the authors' knowledge. The inverse tense architectures documented here create specific challenges for translators working between English and Uzbek news language. A literal translation of an English headline into Uzbek preserving the Present Simple will produce a grammatically possible but culturally incongruous result: an Uzbek reader encountering a bare present-tense headline may read it as describing an ongoing or unverified event, not a completed one. Conversely, translating a –di Uzbek headline literally into English Present Simple loses the evidential meaning of the original but produces a grammatically natural English headline. The asymmetry is not merely cosmetic: it reflects a genuine difference in what the headline communicates about the speaker's relationship to the reported event. For bilingual journalism training, these findings suggest that explicit instruction in tense conventions including the functional rationale for each convention should be a component of cross-language media literacy. Students trained primarily in one journalistic tradition may reproduce its tense norms when working in the other language, producing text that is grammatically correct but register-inappropriate. Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. The corpus is confined to five outlets over a two-year period; inclusion of regional Uzbek media and a broader temporal range might reveal variation within the Uzbek sub-corpus that the present sample obscures. The study also focuses on written digital news; broadcast news headlines, which operate under different temporal constraints, may show different patterns. Finally, the present paper does not include reader reception data: the claim that certain tense choices create specific cognitive effects (immediacy, credibility) rests on functional inference rather than experimental evidence. Future research might profitably extend this framework to other languages with rich tense-aspect systems Russian, Turkish, Korean to test whether the cross-linguistic divergence documented here

is a general property of news language across different journalistic traditions, or specific to the English–Uzbek contrast. A psycholinguistic study measuring readers' temporal interpretations of matched headline pairs across languages would provide experimental validation for the functional claims advanced here.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that the headline and body text of a news article operate under fundamentally different tense regimes and that the direction of tense shift at the headline–body boundary differs systematically between English and Uzbek news discourse. In English, the dominant pattern is a shift from headline Historic Present to body Past Simple: tense moves from rhetorical fiction (the event as happening now) to factual record (the event as having occurred). In Uzbek, the dominant pattern is a shift from headline Definite Past to lead Present Simple, followed by a return to past narration in the body: tense moves from verified fact, to present relevance, to factual documentation. These inverse architectures are not arbitrary stylistic preferences. They reflect structurally different theories of what a headline must accomplish: in English journalism, attention comes first; in Uzbek journalism, credibility comes first. Both theories are coherent; both are served by specific tense choices; and both produce systematic tense shifts at the boundaries of structural positions within the news text. Tense shift, in this analysis, is not a deviation from grammatical norms but the enactment of genre norms a grammatical signature of the news text as a specific form of social communication. The cross-linguistic comparison reveals something that a single-language analysis necessarily obscures: that tense is not merely a grammatical category encoding time, but a discursive resource encoding trust. The journalist who chooses Present Simple in an English headline and the journalist who chooses –di in a Uzbek headline are both making claims about the relationship between information and the present moment they are simply making them through grammatically opposite choices. Understanding those choices, and the cultural logics that motivate them, is essential for anyone who works with language across the boundary between these two journalistic traditions.

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