

## TENSE SHIFT IN NEWS HEADLINES: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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### **Abstract**

News headlines are a distinctive genre of written language characterized by their brevity, informativeness, and unconventional grammatical structures. One of the most notable features is the strategic use of tense shifts deviations from standard temporal reference norms. This paper examines the phenomenon of tense shift in English-language news headlines, exploring how present simple, past simple, and future constructions are deployed to achieve rhetorical and cognitive effects. Drawing on a corpus of 200 headlines from major English-language newspapers, including The Guardian, The New York Times, and BBC News, this study identifies three primary tense patterns, analyzes their functional motivations, and discusses the implications for readers' temporal interpretation. The findings suggest that tense shift in headlines is not arbitrary but serves to heighten immediacy, attract reader attention, and frame events within specific narrative perspectives.

**Keywords:** *tense shift, news headlines, newspaper language, historical present, media discourse, corpus linguistics*

### **1. Introduction**

Language in the media operates under a unique set of constraints. Space limitations, the need to capture attention instantly, and the pressure to convey maximum information in minimal words all contribute to a headline grammar that differs markedly from standard prose. Among the most studied features of this grammar is the handling of tense the grammatical expression of time. A reader scanning a morning newspaper may encounter a headline such as "President Signs New Bill" describing an event that occurred the previous day, or "Scientists Discover Hidden Galaxy" reporting a finding made weeks earlier. This use of the present simple tense to describe completed past events the so-called "historic present" or "journalistic present" is one form of tense shift that pervades headline writing. Equally common is the use of the bare infinitive to signal future events, or the omission of auxiliaries to compress verb phrases. Despite the frequency of these patterns, tense shift in headlines remains a relatively underexplored area in linguistics. Much scholarship has focused on headline grammar broadly, but the temporal dimension specifically its range, regularity, and rhetorical function merits dedicated investigation. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a systematic analysis of tense patterns in contemporary English-language news headlines.

### **2. Theoretical Background**

#### **2.1 The Grammar of News Headlines**

News headline grammar has long been recognized as a semi-autonomous register. Key features include the deletion of articles and auxiliaries, heavy use of nominal structures, and preference for active constructions. Straumann was among the first to systematically catalog headline grammar, noting the widespread use of what he termed the "headline present" the deployment of simple present tense for recent past events. Bell situates headlines within a broader theory of news discourse, arguing that they function not merely as summaries but as independent communicative acts that orient readers' expectations. From this perspective, tense choices are not purely grammatical but carry pragmatic weight signaling the temporal proximity of events, their ongoing relevance, or their anticipated consequences.

## 2.2 Tense and Temporality in Language

In standard linguistic theory, tense encodes the relationship between the time of utterance (speech time) and the time of the described event (event time). Present tense canonically marks simultaneity between speech time and event time; past tense marks anteriority. Tense shift, broadly defined, refers to a departure from these default mappings using present tense where past is expected, or vice versa. The cognitive underpinnings of tense shift have been explored within mental simulation theory and narrative transportation theory. These frameworks suggest that present tense creates a stronger sense of immediacy and "nowness" in readers' mental models, increasing engagement and vividness of perceived events.

## 3. Methodology

This study analyzes a corpus of 200 news headlines collected from three major English-language news outlets: BBC News Online (UK). Headlines were collected during a two-week period and span six topic categories: politics, science and technology, economics, sports, culture, and international affairs. Each headline was manually coded for: the primary tense or tense-equivalent construction used in the main verb phrase; the temporal reference of the described event (past, concurrent, or future relative to publication); and any mismatch between and, constituting an instance of tense shift. Coding was performed independently by two trained annotators, with an inter-rater agreement of Cohen's, indicating strong reliability. Three tense-shift patterns were identified for detailed analysis: historic present (simple present for past events); the infinitival future ("to + infinitive" for anticipated events); and omitted auxiliary constructions (e.g., "[are] set to," "[has] revealed"). Functional analysis drew on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar to account for the ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions of each pattern.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Frequency of Tense Patterns

Of the 200 headlines analyzed, 164 (82%) contained at least one instance of tense shift as defined above. The historic present was by far the most frequent pattern, occurring in 118 headlines (59%). The infinitival future appeared in 61 headlines (30.5%), and omitted auxiliary constructions in 47 headlines (23.5%). A number of headlines (26, or 13%) combined two or more shift patterns simultaneously. Cognitively, this aligns with Zwaan's event-indexing model: present tense activates a mental simulation in which the reader is a temporal witness to the event, increasing engagement and information retention. Our corpus further suggests a topic bias: the historic present was most frequent in political and sports headlines, where immediacy is particularly valued, and less common in science (44%) and culture (39%) headlines.

The infinitival construction ("to + base verb") functions as a prospective marker in headlines: "Prime Minister to Address Nation," "NASA to Launch New Mission." Unlike the auxiliary "will," which asserts futurity with a degree of certainty, the infinitival form encodes intentionality and planned action. This subtle distinction positions the subject as agent of a deliberate future act, lending the headline a sense of narrative momentum. The infinitival future was found to be particularly prevalent in economics and policy headlines (occurring in 41% of that subcorpus), consistent with their focus on decisions and planned actions. It also appeared frequently in headlines reporting on scheduled events, press conferences, and legislative processes contexts where intentionality is foregrounded. The third major pattern involves the ellipsis of modal and primary auxiliaries: "Revealed New Treatment," "Set to Resume." Beyond the space-saving motivation traditionally cited, these constructions have a temporal consequence: the omission of the auxiliary collapses the temporal scaffolding of the verb phrase, placing the event in an indeterminate present-

relevance zone. Readers must infer the full temporal structure from context, drawing on world knowledge and discourse expectations. This ambiguity is arguably functional: by omitting temporal markers that would anchor an event firmly in the past, editors ensure that headlines retain a sense of present relevance even when describing events that occurred several news cycles earlier. The practice represents a systematic exploitation of grammatical underspecification for rhetorical ends.

### 5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that tense shift is a systematic, and functionally motivated feature of English news headline grammar. Across a corpus of 200 contemporary headlines, 82% exhibited at least one form of tense shift, with the historic present being the dominant pattern. Rather than representing grammatical error or carelessness, these departures from standard tense usage serve identifiable rhetorical and cognitive purposes: the historic present creates immediacy and reader engagement; the infinitival future foregrounds agency and anticipation; and auxiliary omission sustains a sense of present relevance for events across temporal distances. These findings have implications for media literacy education, computational linguistics (particularly in training models for headline generation and temporal information extraction), and cross-linguistic analysis of headline grammar. Future research might extend this corpus to non-English-language headlines to determine which features of tense shift are universal to the genre and which are language-specific. A psycholinguistic study measuring readers' temporal interpretations of matched headline pairs (present vs. past tense) would also strengthen the cognitive claims advanced here.

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