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DISTRIBUTION OF ADDRESSEE'S ATTENTION IN NEWS HEADLINES

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The goal of the paper is to examine how readers' attention is split across different structural positions in English news headlines, drawing on denoted relations established by various morphosyntactic constructions. The latter are defined as form-meaning pairings entrenched in long-term memory in a ready-made form, requiring less cognitive effort when speakers choose a necessary linguistic unit. Three headline constituents encompass: the attractor, catching the recipient's eye; the keeper, retaining their attention; and the nudger, stimulating them to turn to the text body. The attention-distributing structure of news headlines is filled in with various communicative constructs as speech manifestations of mentally fixed morphosyntactic constructions: agentive, predicate, locative, causal, content- and recipient-naming, purpose-related, temporal. Agentive constructs, used in the attention-grabbing position of the headline, have a high persuasive status as they denote entities close to the target audience. The most convincing are constructs with one or two slots filled, as they name famous personalities, while the status of ordinary people is increased by a toponym, a component designating an unusual characteristic, and numerals indicating a large number of event participants. The keeper is filled in with the predicate pairings, which denote acts of speaking, damage infliction, social coercion, motion, transfer, aspects of the action, emotions of the participants, and entity existence. The nudger can contain various types of communicative constructs with causal being the predominant ones; locative pairings indicating a place in the proximity or vital for the readers; recipient-naming units, denoting the person getting some benefit or obtaining some object; content-naming constructs, representing the information expressed by the event participant; purpose-related pairings, reflecting an exceptional aim of the happening; and the least numerous temporal units, giving the approximate time of the event or indicating an unexpected duration of the occurrence.

Keywords: headline, news text, attention distribution, morphosyntactic construction, event.

Талавіра Н. М. Дистрибуція уваги адресата в заголовках новинних текстів

Метою пропонованої розвідки є дослідження того, як увага читачів розподіляється між різними структурними позиціями заголовків англійських новин з урахуванням відносин, позначених різними морфосинтаксичними конструкціями. Останні є поєднанням форми і значення, закріпленим у довготривалій пам'яті носіїв мови у готовому вигляді, а тому вимагають менше когнітивних зусиль під час

вибору необхідної лінгвальної одиниці. Заголовок англомовного новинного тексту має три позиції: привернення уваги реципієнта, її утримання і спрямовування. Кожна позиція заголовків новин заповнена різними комунікативними конструктами як мовними виявами ментально закріплених морфосинтаксичних конструкцій: агентивними, предикатними, локативними, каузативними, темпоральними, на позначення змісту, адресата і мети. Агентивні конструкції, що використовуються в заголовку для привернення уваги, мають високий персуазивний статус, оскільки позначають референти, близькі до цільової аудиторії. Найбільш переконливими є конструкти з одним або двома заповненими ментальними слотами, оскільки вони називають відомих особистостей, тоді як статус звичайних людей підвищується за допомогою вжитого топоніма, компонента, що відображає незвичайну характеристику особи, числівників, що вказують на велику кількість учасників події. Позиція утримання уваги заповнена предикатними конструктами, які позначають говоріння, заподіяння шкоди, соціальний примус, переміщення, передачу об'єкта, аспекти дії, емоції учасників та існування певної сутності. Позиція спрямовування уваги може містити різні типи комунікативних конструктів, серед яких переважають каузативні, що репрезентують причину певної ситуації; локативні, що вказують на місце, яке знаходиться поблизу цільової аудиторії або є важливим для читачів; одиниці на позначення реципієнта; змісту висловленого учасником події повідомлення; мети, що відображають виняткову ціль події; та найменш численні темпоральні одиниці, котрі маркують приблизний час події або акцентують її неочікувану тривалість.

Ключові слова: заголовок, новинний текст, розподіл уваги, морфосинтаксична конструкція, подія.

Introduction

We encounter news daily on various online platforms, in traditional newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio. It is pervasive, providing us with information about recent events, e.g., *Arrests made over supersized illegal rubbish dump* (BBC, 30.01.2026), ongoing happenings, e.g., *Hundreds strike over company's 'derisory' pay* (BBC, 29.01.2026), predicted state of affairs, e.g., *Builder to deliver fleet of vehicles to Ukraine* (BBC, 28.01.2026). With so much content, dwelling on everything in the world and even in space, what lures us to a particular new item? It is generally accepted that a news headline, as a graphically separated part of the text (Dykstra, 2019, p. 90), attracts (Bednarek & Caple, 2017, p. 119) and tempts addressees into reading the article (Wannakan, 2022, p. 1111).

Linguists study the functions of the headline (Imawa & Kano, 2019), its content impact on the audience (Hagar, et. al., 2022), its relevance and ability to activate emotions (Harris, et al., 2015, pp. 136-137), as well as the length, frequency, and importance of linguistic units for readers (Xie, et. al, 2019), but fail to focus on the distribution of readers' attention.

The *aim* of the investigation is to establish the potential of news headlines to allocate addressees' attention with regard to denoted relations and the position of

linguistic units in the headlines. The aim presupposes the completion of the following *tasks*: to identify structural positions of the newspaper headline; to single out morphosyntactic constructions in the headlines; to determine types of the selected linguistic units and their persuasive potential. This paper applies a constructionist *methodology* to the analysis of 300 headlines, spanning 2020-2026, which make up the *material* of the research.

Theoretical background

Headlines deliver the most important and relevant information, express the content of the article accurately and concisely (Edgerly, et al., 2020; Iwama & Kano, 2019, p. 101), and serve as advertising of the text. They are investigated as mini texts that operate as autonomous units (Ifantidou, 2023, p. 17) and have their own syntax.

The production of headlines is influenced by their main functions, deriving from three internal positions: the attractor, the keeper, and the nudger. First, headlines catch the addressee's attention foregrounding units referring to entities close to the target audience; second, they keep the addressee's attention by the units in the predicative position characterising the referent named initially; third, the final element of a headline nudges the recipient to read the text body (Potapenko, 2021, p. 2), e.g., *Australian triple murderer jailed for life over toxic mushroom lunch* (BBC, 08.09.2025). In the headline, the foregrounded construction *Australian triple murderer* in the attractor draws the recipient's attention, the predicate *jailed for life* keeps it, and the unit *over toxic mushroom lunch* in the nudger turns the addressee towards the text body since the adjective *toxic* designates a poisonous substance, while the noun *lunch* indicates a typical meal.

In our research, we rely on morphosyntactic constructions that are regarded as conventional pairings of form and meaning (Goldberg, 2024). The expediency of applying constructions is brought about by the fact that they are stored in long-term memory in a fixed form (Hoffmann, 2022) and therefore require less cognitive effort when choosing the right linguistic unit to actualise various relations of the surrounding world. In addition, morphosyntactic constructions are conceptualized as holistic semiotic schemas represented in different forms, ranging from morphemes to complex syntactic patterns (Ungerer & Hartmann, 2023).

In speech, morphosyntactic constructions are embodied by constructs formed in the short-term memory and used in specific contexts (Diessel, 2023). In some

cases, a construct represents a single construction, e.g., *the Peace Formula*, *Good morning*. More typical is the fusion of several morphosyntactic constructions in one construct, e.g., *Channel Islands Air Search plane back in service* (BBC, 21.01.2026). The headline contains the construct *Channel Islands Air Search plane* in the attention-grabbing position with several slots filled in by the lexemes: *plane* to designate a vehicle, *Air Search* to specify its type, *Channel Islands* to mark its registration place.

Methodological notes

The analysis of news headlines presupposes three stages: identifying, taxonomic, and interpretive.

At the identifying stage, we select English headlines on the online news site BBC, determine *three positions* in each headline: attention-grabbing, attention-keeping, and attention-nudging.

The taxonomic stage is aimed at establishing the type of the selected constructs, depending on the denoted relations: agentive, naming participants of the event, predicate, representing the action they carry out, locative, designating the place of the happening, temporal, indicating its time, causal, reflecting the reason for the occurrence, purpose-related, giving its aim. For example, the headline *First migrants arrive from France under 'one in one out' deal* (BBC, 24.09.2025) contains the agentive construct *First migrants* in the attractor, the predicate construct *arrive* and the locative unit *from France* in the keeper, and the causal construct *under 'one in one out' deal* in the nudger.

The interpretive stage involves distinguishing the preferences the journalist makes when using a particular subtype of constructs.

The suggested methodology helps to establish the persuasive potential of various types of morphosyntactic constructions in English news headlines.

Results and Discussion

In the headlines of English news texts, eight types of constructions are represented depending on the embodied relations: agentive, predicate, locative, temporal, causative, recipient-naming, content-naming, and purpose-related. They are denoted in the texts by corresponding constructs.

Agentive constructions name the participants of events, denoting people and organisations, living organisms, or inanimate objects.

On the mental level, agentive pairings, naming people, contain several slots to designate their various characteristics: first name (*John*) and last name (*Smith*); nationality (*Polish*); social role (*passenger*); family status (*son*); profession (*critic*); gender (*man*); belonging to a particular person (*their child*); quantity (*two workers*).

In the news text, not all slots of the constructs are filled, still several may be marked to characterise the event participant, e.g., *Four Armenian soldiers killed in new Azerbaijan border flare-up* (BBC 13.02.2024). In this example, the three-component agentive construct *four Armenian soldiers* fills in the positions for several participants, marked by the numeral *four*, nationality, embodied by the adjective *Armenian*, and profession, filled in with the lexeme *soldier*.

Agentive constructs are usually used in headlines to attract attention and have a high persuasive status due to their usage in the **attention-grabbing position** of the headline.

The most influential agentive constructs for designating participants of events are those with one or two slots filled, as they unambiguously identify the participant due to the addressees' familiarity with these people, e.g., *William visibly moved as widow tells of husband's suicide* (BBC, 10.10.2025).

In addition, a considerable influence on the addressees is achieved via constructs, denoting positions or social status, unique in the world, e.g., *Prince Harry donates £1.1m to Children in Need* (BBC, 10.09.2025), or a particular country, e.g., *Speaker Lindsay Hoyle feared for MPs' safety before Gaza vote* (BBC, 22.02.2024). In this headline, the construct *Speaker Lindsay Hoyle* refers to a person who is easily and unambiguously identified by his profession, and his exceptionality has a big impact on readers because the politician holds a high position in the UK.

Constructs, naming a country or an organisation, metonymically represent their leadership as participants in the event, increasing the influential potential of the news text, as it refers to persons in power, e.g., *South Africa and Israel expel each other's envoys in diplomatic row* (BBC, 30.01.2026). In the headline, the agentive construct *South Africa and Israel* in the attention-grabbing position reflects the leadership of the two countries.

The status of ordinary people and their ability to be interesting to the audience are enhanced in several ways.

First, agentive constructs, consisting of a toponym and a common noun, attract readers' attention by referring to ordinary citizens living in close proximity

to the addressees, e.g., *Colchester residents urged to take part in Great Winter Clean* (BBC, 12.01.2024).

Second, foregrounded construct designates an unusual characteristic of a person to grab the readers' attention, e.g., *Husband on leash breaches Quebec's Covid curfew* (BBC, 12.01.2021).

Third, numerals indicate victims of disasters and crimes, e.g., *Thousands lose access to dental appointments* (BBC, 29.01.2026).

Besides, the less famous a person is, the more slots will be filled in the construct to attract the attention of the readers: *10-year-old Maryland boy airlifted to US after being bitten by shark at Bahamas resort* (BBC, 17.01.2024).

In case of inanimate objects, used in the **attention-grabbing position** of the headline, their status is intensified by the appeal to the human need of safety, e.g., *Icelandic volcano erupts near Reykjavik* (BBC, 20.03.2021), or financial security, e.g., *US jobless rate falls to lowest level since July* (BBC, 08.12.2023). Besides, it may include names of celebrities to allocate readers' attention, e.g., *Obama memoir: what he really thought of Putin and other leaders* (BBC, 20.11.2020). In the cited headline, the name of the former American President Obama is foregrounded to attract the global audience's attention. The third way of grabbing attention is by naming an unlikely object that stands out from typical referents mentioned in news texts, e.g., *Mysterious medieval cemetery unearthed in Wales* (BBC, 03.01.2024). The pairing *mysterious medieval cemetery* denotes an entity rarely discussed in everyday life, let alone in news.

Constructs that designate living organisms, mostly animals, include components that underscore their extraordinary content to attract audience attention. Thus, in the next headline, the numeral *100* points to a large number of animals, e.g., *Over 100 whales die in mass stranding* (BBC, 23.05.2023), while in the next example the uniqueness of the event is intensified by the component *world's only known*, e.g., *World's only known white giraffe fitted with tracker to deter poachers* (BBC, 18.11.2020).

The **attention-keeping position** is filled in with **predicate constructs** designating different actions: speaking, damage, social coercion, motion, transfer, aspects of the action, emotions, and entity existence.

The most numerous ones are *constructs with verbs of speaking* where the verbal slot may be filled in by the lexemes denoting the manner of speaking: making a statement (*admit, claim, confirm, say, tell*), verbal persuasion (*order,*

propose, persuade, push for, urge), accepting a plan or an idea (*approve*), its rejection (*condemn, deny, reject*).

In news headlines, predicate constructs with verbs of speaking hold the reader's attention because they characterize the referent named in the initial position by reflecting various aspects of expressing a point of view about a particular situation by a famous person, politician, celebrity, or some expert, e.g., *Banksy confirms seventh London artwork in a week* (BBC, 12.08.2025).

The second most numerous group of predicate constructs is connected with the basic news value of negativity when news texts provide information about damage, injury or death. Journalists appeal to the security need by describing either the disaster or crime, or the actions taken to address the consequences. Thus, we have two types of predicative constructs denoting damage and social coercion.

Damage-related constructs contain verbs naming physical harm (*damage, demolish, destroy*), physiological (*injure, murder, kill*), financial (*default, lose*), social (*phish*). In most cases, the predicate is used in the passive voice, because in the keeper it's more relevant to name the victim to a wider audience, e.g., *Woman and man killed in three-vehicle crash on A75 in Annan* (BBC, 13.02.2024).

Constructs denoting social coercion reflect various aspects of criminal proceedings. The verbal slot in the passive voice is filled with lexemes reflecting the arrest of a criminal (*arrest, capture, detain, seize*), charges (*charge*), and their punishment (*fine, sentence*). The agentive construct in this case indicates the person or a group of people deprived of the opportunity to engage in illegal activity to underscore the renewal of security (*Mexican cartel leader, US fugitive*). The reason for the criminal proceedings is represented by prepositional pairings denoting crimes and misdemeanors (*for murder, over death of six-year-old boy*): *Amazon fined for 'excessive' surveillance of workers* (BBC, 23.01.2024).

Aspectual predicate constructs indicate the temporal structure of an action or event, focusing on its beginning, continuation, cessation, or completion rather than just when it happens. Being used in the attention-keeping position, aspectual constructs mainly denote the development of an event, encouraging readers to follow its continuation or return to previous publications that revealed the initial stages, e.g., *New Zealand MP resigns following shoplifting allegations* (BBC, 16.01.2024).

There are other types of predicate constructs used in the attention-keeping position of the headline. They include *verbal components designating motion*, e.g., *Giraffe Benito escapes extreme temperatures for new home* (BBC, 22.01.2024);

emotional state, e.g., *Scarlett Johansson ‘shocked’ by AI chatbot imitation* (BBC, 22.05.24); *transitive pairings*, e.g., *Parish of St Helier gives £35,000 to charities* (BBC, 22.02.2024); *ontological constructs*, highlighting the existence of some objects, e.g., *At least 34 die in India after drinking toxic alcohol* (BBC, 20.06.2024).

The **attention-nudging position** of the headline, i.e. its final position, is filled in with constructs stimulating the readers to turn to the text body, so it’s usually the units providing some additional information, which will just give the bare minimum to make the headline catchy and clickbait. The constructs are: causative, locative, recipient- and content-naming, purpose-related, and temporal.

The prevailing ones are **causative constructs** representing the reason for the event development, e.g., *Bailiff referrals rise by 20% over council debts* (BBC, 23.01.2024). They are used with the predicate constructs denoting social coercion in the attention-keeping position, e.g., *Alec Baldwin faces fresh manslaughter charge over ‘Rust’ shooting* (BBC, 19.01.2024).

The second type of units used in the attention-nudging position are **locative constructs** as they fulfil the proximity news value, connected with the event being more vital if it happens in the neighbourhood, e.g., *Motorcyclist dies after lorry crash on A14* (BBC, 30.01.2026); your country, e.g., *Federal judge denies request to block ICE surge in Minnesota* (BBC, 31.01.2026); or related to the news value of relevance, meaning the significance of the situation for the global audience, e.g., *American Moon mission destroyed over Pacific Ocean* (BBC, 19.01.2024).

Attention-nudging position may also be filled by **recipient-naming constructs** in transitive pairings, e.g., *Measles vaccine campaign targets unprotected millions* (BBC, 22.01.2024).

Content-naming constructs combine with constructs with verbs of speaking in the attention-keeping position to inform about the key ideas from any announcement or statement and nudging the audience to read the whole text, e.g., *Ex-Essex police officer admits computer misconduct charge* (BBC, 07.02.24).

Purpose-related constructs indicate the aim of some activity, which is exceptional or unexpected to reflect the news value of unexpectedness (Temmerman & Mast, 2020, p. 6), e.g., *Woman runs 55 half marathons in 55 cities for mental health charity* (BBC, 13.03.2024).

Temporal constructs are rarely used in the nudging position of the headlines; they do not carry much meaning and therefore have low persuasive status. Their impact on readers is achieved by emphasizing nonconventional situations, e.g.,

Clapham attack: Manhunt for Abdul Shookor Ezedi enters fifth day (BBC, 05.02.2024) or underscore an unusual duration of the event, e.g., *Gustav Klimt portrait found after almost 100 years* (BBC, 26.01.2024). Headlines don't indicate exact time, with the closest to a particular temporal reference being a month of the event, mainly predicted due to some source of information. Only seven headlines contained precise time, e.g., *Energy prices predicted to fall by 16% in April* (BBC, 22.01.2024).

Conclusions and Perspectives

All three positions of the headline, such as the attention-grabbing position, the attention-keeping position, and the attention-nudging position, are significant in allocating readers' attention. Still, the most effective should be agentive constructs naming people metonymically (51 cases), two-component pairing designating famous people (19) and structures representing inanimate objects (62 items). The analysis has proved that the most frequent predicate constructs are those with verbs of speaking (63) because news texts report views, and pairings indicating social coercion (54), which implies renewal of the basic need of safety. As for the nudger, causal and locative constructs prevail as the former pinpoints the established cause-effect principle and the latter underscores that the event is close to the target audience.

The perspective of further research consists in establishing the persuasive potential of communicative constructs in the text body.

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