

A Comparative Syntactic Analysis of WH-Headlines in Dawn and BBC E-Newspapers

Dr. Afsheen Ekhteyar¹, Bushra Khanum^{2*}

¹PhD Linguistics, Assistant Professor in English at National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Lahore, Pakistan, aekhteyar@numl.edu.pk

²MPhil Scholar, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Lahore, Pakistan, bushrakhanum2353@gmail.com, *Corresponding author

Abstract

Readers first come across headlines in a newspaper. However, the studies show that journalistic discourse shows syntactic deviations in news reporting. WH-clause in headings exhibits different functions of declarative statements and rhetorical questions. Studies have indicated that syntactic constructions of WH-statements in newspaper headlines pique curiosity, eagerness, and attentiveness among readers. Nevertheless, no substantive analysis has been conducted to present the syntactic comparison of a national Dawn and an international BBC e-newspaper headline with WH-clauses. The present study compares the syntactic construction of 20 WH-statements using stratified sampling, 10 from each e-paper following Noam Chomsky's Minimalist Program (MP). Results indicated that most of the WH-statements in news headlines have few syntactic deviations. All the headlines carried WH-words including what, why, how, and whose. All the statements were either rhetorical questions or declarative statements. The voice was kept active. Similarly, in most of the sentences, subject-auxiliary inversion was observed, while a few statements showed explicit syntactic reduction of the question mark "?", and the auxiliary verb. Hardly, 1-2 sentences showed subject omission. In almost 2-3 statements, phrases were added before WH-words. Future researchers, students, teachers, and linguists can use this research for a better understanding and knowledge of WH-syntactic construction in journalistic discourse. Therefore, these headlines engage readers by manipulating their ideologies. Additionally, future researchers can analyze and compare more Pakistani and international English or other languages' WH-headlines in newspapers. Future researchers could determine more syntactic deviations in newspaper headlines.

Keywords: Headlines, WH-constructions, Minimalist Program (MP), e-news, syntax, Dawn, BBC, syntactic analysis

Introduction

In this technological era, people are more occupied online rather than physically. Likewise, people tend to read news online. Before, people used to read news physically from print newspaper but now electronic-news (e-news) media has boomed. Similarly, certain changes have been seen in syntactic structure of news headlines. News headline was supposed to provide information to the reader previously (Van Dijk 1988). In contrast, these days, headlines function to grasp the reader's attention in order to fully engage reader to comprehend complete article in a single sitting.

Syntax helps to understand the formation of sentence structure and their meanings. Syntax is highly based on standard grammatical rules where each syntactic category has its proper function and impact on the sentence structure. Though, newspapers usually do not follow traditional grammatical rules in forming headlines yet their information is fully packed and intact. Newspaper headlines shows deviations in the form of ellipsis, contraction and reduced sentence structures.

According to the *Newspaper Headlines - English Grammar Today - Cambridge Dictionary* (2019), "a newspaper headline is a very short summary of a news report" with large letters above the report having non-standard grammar and use of ellipsis. It often uses the present tense to add intensity. Newspaper headlines usually do not retain the whole grammatical structure. They tend to deliver information and news with minimal words. Therefore, these headlines often show the omission of subject, auxiliary verb, verb, articles and object. The WH-based statements in newspaper headlines shows these qualities instead of complete interrogative structure. They usually follow a following pattern for their construction:

WH-word + helping verb / modal verb + subject + main verb + object + ?

Questioning in interrogative structures is implied by the WH-word. Whereas, declarative statement can also exhibit WH-formatting. Declarative statements exhibit questioning format and their syntactic structure usually end with period (.).

According to Nazarova Mukhayyo Khaydarovna (2022) common WH-words and their uses include:

- **Who:** Inquires for a person.
- **What:** Enquires for thing or action information.
- **Where:** Demands information about a place or location.
- **When:** Requests information about time.
- **Why:** Asks for a reason or purpose.
- **How:** Asks for a method or process.
- **Which/Whose/Whom:** Asks for a choice or relates to specific people.

As Searle' (1969) *Speech Act Theory* proposed WH-clauses are indirect speech acts proposing different intention rather than just asking. In headlines WH-statements hardly ask for answers, they serve to introduce topic, provide a glimpse of whole article and develops curiosity in audience to read further in order to attain answers for those particular rhetoric questions. Thus, the interrogative syntax helps authors to engage audience for further reading through illocutionary acts of directedness and expressiveness. This reverse the role of audience from passive readers to active participants.

As WH-clause formation in e-newspaper headlines demonstrate syntactic deviations. These headlines generally miss one or more syntactic units. Thus, they determine deviations from traditional grammatical rules. Journalistic

discourse constructions lack traditional syntactic formulation rules and regulations. This develops a gap in research regarding the constructions of WH-questions or statements in newspaper headlines and their impacts. Thus, the present study develops the contrasting syntactic analysis of Dawn and BBC newspaper headlines with WH-words.

It is hoped that such knowledge will help linguists and students to understand the media discourse. They would be able to analyze journalistic headlines structurally. They will be able to understand different newspaper syntactic pattern and their impacts. This study represents what kind of deviations occur in headlines discourse and how their syntax differ. Also, they showcase the deviations from standard grammatical rules presenting real-world usage connecting grammatical theory to actual journalism typology.

Research Objectives

This study aims:

1. To explore WH-words and syntactic structures in Dawn headlines.
2. To discover WH-words and syntactic structures in BBC headlines.
3. To compare the syntactic constructions of WH-statements in Dawn and BBC news headlines and examine the omission of any syntactic categories (subject, auxiliary verb, main verb, ellipsis of any syntactic unit, etc).

Research Question

This study aims to find out:

1. Which syntactic patterns and WH-words are used in news headlines of "Dawn" e-newspaper?
2. Which syntactic patterns and WH-words are used in news headlines of "BBC" e-newspaper?
3. How syntactic constructions and syntactic reduction of WH-statements in Dawn and BBC news headlines differ from each other?

Literature Review

The language analysis of journalistic discourse remained a crucial element in linguistics, discourse studies and media studies. Different studies pinpoint the non-neutral use of language in newspaper. Likewise, Fairclough (1995) showed power relations and social ideologies are presented by news media where certain ideologies are maximized by the use of particular choice of words. News headlines do the same. The reader is provided with a specific interpretation before dwelling into further details.

Although, syntactic structure of news headlines shows linguistic deviations. Their structure differ from traditional grammar structures. Due to space constraints, newspaper headlines omit certain syntactic units to maximize information delivery through minimal linguistic choices. Serdali et al. (2016) analyzed newspapers headings structure as being functional. Headings served both functions of architectural design and independent meaningful unit. The research found that headings adopt a variety of roles of attracting attention, creating importance of text and systemizing readability. The data was hierarchically arranged between priority and secondary information describing the multidimensional nature of newspaper headings. The

interrogative syntax structure headings inflict persuasiveness and emotiveness.

Additionally, other studies provided support for the inclusiveness of rhetoric questions in newspaper. The study conducted by Khan et al. (2018) provided similar evidence. The result shows that Pakistani newspaper influence persuasion in readers through the use of rhetorical devices. Thus, newspaper might manipulates the ideologies of readers simply by playing with syntactic order. The analysis of this research revealed that the third most used rhetorical device in newspaper editorial comprised of rhetorical question.

Here, findings of this study are similar to the findings of Ifantidou (2023) and the findings of Bonyadi and Samuel (2013). Bonyadi and Samuel (2013) found newspaper headlines helps in defining the topic, summarizing the main content and helping the readers to grasp meaning of text. The writers used rhetorical and textual strategies to instruct subjectivity. Moreover, Ifantidou (2023) investigated that headlines are used to draw inquisitively among readers which increases as the degree of explicitness decreases. This means syntactic reduction increase curiosity among readers. This study concluded that headlines primarily persuade rather to inform.

Previous studies regarding WH-clause structure reveals that questions are syntactically suitable for newspaper headlines. Questions are meant to be answered while interrogative structure newspaper headlines do not ask a real question. They explain the details in the report.

In his research, Finkbeiner (2020), argues that WH-clausal syntactic structures determine their functionality. The main function of these headlines is to attract readers and drive their attention to specific event. Thus, they optimize relevance as they reflect the real reader question. This shows reader gets most of the information from headline compelling them to read more and more.

While, Benard Kiplagat Rotich et al. (2024) compared linguistic features and structures of different newspaper headlines using Michal Halliday' framework revealed that public perception are constructed by certain linguistics choices sometimes, overpowering accurate news reporting.

One of the standards of textuality is to provide information in journalism discourse. Yet, Selimi (2024) showed news headlines in print journalism carried ellipsis. These headlines provided extra information despite necessary content. In Western Balkan newspaper, there were diverse headlines on the front page, varying from attractiveness to informativeness regardless of trustworthiness. While other countries' newspaper showed credibility prior to attractiveness. Thus, attractiveness just arose curiosity despite true content. The study imposes that journalistic discourse should be credible sources of information.

In light of above discussed studies, it is evident that newspaper uses a different syntactic structure. This deviation from traditional grammar rules allows the reader to pique for more information. Thus, the persuasive and attractive structure of newspaper headlines involves syntactic reduction. However, keeping in view the need for analyzing syntactic

patterns and choice of WH-words, this paper analyses news headlines containing WH-constructions.

Methodology

This study used qualitative and descriptive linguistic analysis approach for analyzing WH-formation in two leading newspaper: national “Dawn” and international “British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)” news headlines using stratified sampling technique. In total, 20 WH-interrogative structure headlines published in the period of 2025-2026 have been chosen manually, 10 from each e-paper. Qualitatively this study analyzed which type of syntactic structure, WH-word and syntactic reduction is used in news delivery. Data was analyzed on the basis of syntactic structures in interrogative sentences and linguistics ellipsis (missing units in structure). Each headline was examined in the lens of following parameters of syntactic constructions:

- Sentence type
- WH-word
- Structure
- Auxiliary Inversion
- Ellipsis
- Voice

This study used the framework of Noam Chomsky/ Minimalist Program (MP), which defined the optimality of human language. It determined that syntax implement minimal operations by eliminating unnecessary data. This analysis utilized the core ideas of minimalist program to analyze the syntactic patterns of WH-headlines of newspaper. The core concepts of minimalist program included merge operations, ellipsis, syntactic movement and linguistic economy.

Results and Discussion

An Analysis of WH-Headlines of Dawn Newspaper

Headline 1: “What is the F-35 fighter jet that Trump has promised Modi?” (Dawn.com, 2025)

Headline 2: “What’s next for Nepal after ‘Gen Z’ protests forced its prime minister to quit?” (Reuters, 2025)

Headline 3: “Why is Trump picking a fight with the pope?” (News Desk et al., 2026), *Source: Dawn e-paper*

These WH-headlines starts with WH-word “what” and “why.” These are rhetoric questions with a question mark at the end of each statement. They follow subject-auxiliary inversion where subject comes after the helping verb. After the WH-word the helping verb “is” is present followed by the subject of statements. There is no syntactic reduction found in these statements. However, verb contraction is present in headline 2 as “what’s” (what is). These headlines follow Standard English grammar structure of an interrogative sentence. These are all active voiced.

Headline 4: “The US-Iran ceasefire appears to be holding. What next?” (Amin, 2026), *Source: Dawn e-paper*

This headline has used interrogative structure with WH-word “What.” Nonetheless, there is presence of a statement before question statement in this headline. As the headline starts with standpoint declaration, but the interrogative part of this headline is composed of only two words; the WH-word “What” and adverb “next.” Conversely,

the syntactic structure is incomplete exhibiting the omissions of subject, auxiliary verb, and main verb within the interrogative statement. Though, the voice is kept active. This elliptical sentence implies hidden verbs, *will and happen*:

What will happen next?

Headline 5: “Why did Argentina withdraw from WHO?” (Dawn News English, 2026)

Headline 6: “What does a US naval blockade of Iran mean for oil flows?” (Reuters, 2026)

Source: Dawn e-paper

In these headlines, WH-words “why” and “what” are used followed by auxiliary verbs “did” and “does.” The auxiliary verbs appear before the subject indicating subject-auxiliary inversion. The noun phrases, “Argentina” and “US naval blockade” are followed by prepositional phrases of “from WHO”, “of Iran” and “for oil flows”. These statements implicit Standard English grammatical syntax with proper structure and no ellipsis. The voice is kept active.

Headline 7: “How we got here: Inside Pakistan’s backchannel diplomacy that led to the US-Iran ceasefire” (Khan & Huma, 2026)

Headline 8: “How international media covered Pakistan’s defining role in the US-Iran ceasefire” (News Desk, 2026) *Source: Dawn e-paper*

In these sentences, the interrogative adverb “how” is used. The syntactic order begins with WH-word, then noun, and predicate is observed. There is no auxiliary inversion found in these headlines. The subjects appeared prior to main verbs. Though the voice is kept active yet auxiliary verb and question mark are omitted. There is an insertion of colon “:” in headline 8 which indicates further explanation of the interrogative statement.

Headline 9: “The Worst Effects of Climate Change—What Needs to Be Done” (Dawn News, 2026)

Headline 10: “Whose fear counts?” (Khan, 2026)

Source: Dawn e-paper

These headlines retains WH-words “what” and “whose.” The verb is used in its base form. In headline 9, the sentence started with assertive statement following an underscore then proclaiming a question. The first part of headline 9 declared and predicts the bad impacts of climate change, then there is presence of rhetorical statement without any punctuation mark or question mark. This headline aims to emphasize the unfavorable effects of climate change and the urgent need to take particular actions. Despite that, headline 10 is a full WH-interrogative question in active voice with no syntactic reduction. In headline 10, there is WH-word with main verb. Additionally, question mark is present at the end of headline 10 despite its absence in headline 9.

An Analysis of WH-Headlines of BBC Newspaper

Headline 1: “How bad smells affect your health” (Marshall, 2026)

Headline 2: “OpenClaw: What China’s frenzy says about its AI ambition” (Wang, 2026)

Headline 3: “Back to Earth: What happens to the Artemis II astronauts now?” (Rannard, 2026), *Source: BBC e-paper*

These headlines contained the WH-word “how” and “what.” There is no subject-auxiliary inversion in these

declarative statements. The subject is followed by the verbs in all of three headlines. All these headlines are in interrogative sentences and are active voiced. However, headline 1 and 2 reveals the obliteration of question mark while headline 3 retained it.

In headline 2 and 3 there is presence on an extra information or detailing prior to the interrogative statement. This extra part is composed of phrase. The headline 2 starts with the noun phrase and headline 3 starts with the adverbial phrase of place, then there is a colon “:”. Yet, afterwards there is a rhetoric statement. All these sentences contained present base forms including “smells”, “says”, and “happens” with an interrogative construction.

Headline 4: “How is online abuse putting young people off politics?” (Blake, 2026)

Headline 5: “Why are trees dying beside a major road and how can it be fixed?” (Prickett, 2026)

Headline 6: “What is a naval blockade and how would it work in Strait of Hormuz?” (Wright, 2026)

Source: BBC e-paper

In these headlines, the WH-words “how”, “why”, and “what” are used subsequently. All these headlines are active voiced, containing interrogative punctuation mark “?”. These headlines followed traditional English grammar syntactic structures. There is no syntactic reduction found in these headlines. The headline 5 and 6 encompassed two declarative statements within a single sentence. These declarative statements are interconnected with a coordinating conjunction “and.” All these headlines explicit subject-auxiliary inversion where subjects appeared first and then auxiliary verb is added.

Headline 7: “Why wildflowers are moving from meadows to the city” (Bradley, 2026)

Headline 8: “Why some travellers are rethinking trips to the US” (Galloway, 2026), *Source: BBC e-paper*

These headlines used the WH-word “why.” In both headlines, there is no subject-auxiliary inversion. The subject appeared before the auxiliary verb. Both sentences are written in active narration. There is no question mark at the end of these interrogative statements. The reduction of other syntactic units was not found. These headlines followed proper conventional grammar rules of syntax constructions despite the use of question mark at the end of these interrogative statements.

Headline 9: “How knitting can help you kick harmful habits” (Brown, 2026)

Headline 10: “Eat the peel: Why you might be throwing away the best bit of your fruit” (Gerretsen, 2025)

Source: BBC e-paper

These headlines composed of “how” and “why” WH-words which made them declarative in nature. Both headlines showed rhetoric questioning without the use of question mark. These headlines used model verbs “can” and “might” expressing certain possibility. These headlines exhibit the advisable tone of authors. But, headline 10 started with verb phrase then the colon mark “:.” is being used. The occurrence of verb phrase in headline 10 marked the presence of an extra

information before the author declared any thought-provoking question.

Table 1

Syntactic Comparison of WH-Headlines of Dawn and BBC Newspaper

E- Newspaper	Dawn	BBC
Sentence	Rhetorical and declarative	Rhetorical and declarative
WH-words	How, What, Why, Whose	How, What, Why
Subject-auxiliary inversion	Present in many headlines	Present in few headlines
Voice	Active voice	Active voice
Syntactic reduction	Omission of ?, subject, and auxiliary	Omission of ?, and auxiliary
Use of phrases before WH-word	Only in one headline.	Present in three statements.

The findings of this research aligns completely with minimalist program of Noam Chomsky. The newspaper headlines showcased syntactic reduction through the omission of certain syntactic units such as subject, auxiliary verb or punctuation marks. According to Noam Chomsky, these reductions displayed the phenomenon of linguistic economy. Linguistic economy refers to the minimization of syntactic categories although the meanings are delivered completely.

This research analysis showed some headlines excluded subject-auxiliary conversion while most of the headlines retained them. Also, few of the headlines added phrases before using interrogative structures. Also, this study found that WH-words are used in news headlines either in the form of declarative statements or rhetorical questioning. These structural patterns also align with the remarks of Serdali et al. (2016) and Khan et al. (2018). Serdali et al. (2016) discovered newspaper headings structure as being functional. Thus, headings adopt a variety of roles of attracting attention, creating importance of text and systemizing readability. The interrogative syntax structure headings inflict persuasiveness and emotiveness. While, Khan et al. (2018) provided similar evidence. The analysis of this research revealed that the third most used rhetorical device in newspaper editorial comprised of rhetorical question. However, the findings of Ifantidou (2023) suggested that the writers used rhetorical and textual strategies to instruct subjectivity.

Conclusion

From the comparative syntactic analysis of WH-clauses, this study concluded that WH-word statements occurred in both national Dawn and international BBC e-newspaper headlines published in the period of 2025-2026. Employing Noam Chomsky’ Minimalist Program (MP), the study analyses the syntactic patterns, syntax reduction and WH-words used in news headlines. This research found that WH-clauses in Dawn and BBC e-newspaper headlines are not random rather they are thought-provoking and attention-

grabbing. Table 1 demonstrated the syntactic comparison of both newspaper headlines highlighting its tactical organization to fascinate reader's concentration. Above all, the prevalence of WH-words emphasizes its essential role in news headlines. They impart active reader to content engagements.

Additionally, the comparative analysis of this research showed Dawn e-newspaper has used subject-auxiliary inversion in most of the sentences while the presence of phrases before WH-clause is seen in most of the BBC e-newspaper headlines.

In conclusion, this research highlighted the fundamental role of syntactic reductions in headlines of newspapers. By analyzing their structural patterns, it can be evident that news headlines are structured to perform different perspectives despite mere information provision. This subtle differences in the implementation of rhetorical statements mirror differing editorial styles or audience preferences.

However, future researchers could explore the evolving use of syntactic reductions and their impacts in journalistic discourse. These findings are helpful for researchers who want to do in-depth study of their national newspaper or might explore international news headlines. Moreover, this analysis could be used to analyze advertisement' and literature' language.

Recommendations

This paper is limited to only one national English e-newspaper Dawn headlines and one international English e-newspaper BBC headlines. Only 10, 10 WH-based headlines from each e-paper were taken which shows its limitations. Other types of news headlines and rhetorical devices can be examined. The sample size could be increased. Also other researchers can add more national and international newspaper for in-depth study. Also researchers can draw a comparison between traditional grammatical structure and modern use of ellipsis in newspaper. Additionally, instead of news headlines, complete news articles can be analyzed and other stylistic variations can be examined.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

Dr. Afsheen Ekhteyar: review, supervision. **Ms. Bushra Khanum:** Writing –review & editing, Writing – original draft

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