ATTRIBUTING AND DEPERSONALISING: SOURCE PRACTICES IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH ONLINE NEWS DISCOURSE

Amimova Mahfuza Jamoladdinovna
Mamun University, Uzbekistan
ORCID:0009-0005-4567-4046
aminova.m@mamunedu.uz
Bekberganova Hilola Maqsud qizi
Urgench State University, Uzbekistan
ORCID: 0009-0009-6025-9990
bekberganova.h@mamunedu.uz

Abstract

This study examines how sources are attributed and how agency is grammatically suppressed in Uzbek and English online news discourse. Four pragmatic functions connected with evidence presentation were coded in a genre-balanced corpus of 50 editorial articles (26,210 words) published between September 2025 and August 2026. Results show that attribution practices converge across the two languages, that a recurrent pattern of named and unnamed sourcing within a single text is attested in both, and that the two systems nevertheless differ in one respect: English employs reporting-verb selection and explicit epistemic commentary as distancing devices for which the Uzbek subcorpus offers no equivalent. The divergence is argued to be a matter of journalistic convention rather than grammatical possibility.

Keywords: source attribution, agentless passive, evidentiality, contrastive pragmatics, online news discourse, Uzbek, English.

1. Introduction

News discourse is built on attribution. A report acquires authority not from the writer's own standing but from the sources it names, and the grammatical means by which those sources are introduced — or withheld — have long been treated as carriers of ideological work rather than neutral conventions (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1988). Bell (1991) describes attribution as the structural backbone of the news text, while Richardson (2007) and Machin and Mayr (2012) show how the suppression of agency

through passive constructions redistributes responsibility without altering propositional content.

Research in this tradition has been conducted overwhelmingly on English-language material. Where contrastive work exists, it tends to compare languages of similar typological profile, and the methodological problem of comparing an agglutinative with an analytic language has received little attention in this particular domain. Uzbek realises source attribution through bound morphology — the reported-speech suffix *-ishicha* and the passive participle *-ilgan* — whereas English distributes the same work across the agentless passive and the choice of reporting verb. A comparison that begins from form would simply record the absence of one device in the other language.

The present study therefore proceeds from function rather than form, following the tertium comparationis principle as formulated by James (1980) and Krzeszowski (1990). Its research question is narrow: when attribution practices in Uzbek and English online news are compared on a common functional basis, do they converge or diverge, and if they diverge, in which specific respect?

2. Methods

2.1 Corpus. The corpus comprises editorial articles from four online outlets: Kun.uz and Spot.uz for Uzbek, The Guardian and Reuters for English. All texts were published between 1 September 2025 and 31 August 2026, a full twelve-month window chosen to neutralise seasonal variation. Only editorial material was admitted; commercially labelled texts, columnists' pieces, live blogs, readers' letters and personal profiles were excluded on stated grounds, with fifteen exclusions recorded individually.

Table 1. Composition of the comparative corpus

Parameter	Uzbek	English
Texts	25	25
Total words	9,470	16,740
Mean length	379	670
Hard news / analytical	20 / 5	17 / 8
First / second half of period	10 / 15	10 / 15

2.2 Coding. Four pragmatic functions connected with evidence presentation were operationalised as language-specific markers: attributed sourcing, source depersonalisation, quasi-statistical claiming (a quantified assertion with no retrievable source) and causal linking. Coding was binary — presence or absence in the text — because presence is an externally verifiable fact that requires no judgement of degree, which maximises the prospect of agreement between independent coders.

2.3 Controls. Because evaluative and evidential resources are genre-sensitive, the analysis was repeated separately within hard news and analytical writing. A chronological control was also applied: the twelve-month period was divided in half and marker frequencies compared within each language, with no substantial variation detected.

3. Results

3.1 Convergence in the evidence cluster. All four functions showed limited divergence between the two subcorpora, with differences not exceeding sixteen percentage points in either direction (Table 2). On two of the four, the Uzbek subcorpus scored higher.

Table 2. Evidence-related functions (share of texts)

Pragmatic function	Uzbek	English	Difference
Attributed sourcing	100%	96%	–4
Source depersonalisation	92%	100%	+8
Quasi-statistical claiming	32%	28%	–4
Causal linking	84%	100%	+16

The single English text lacking attributed sourcing drew all figures from a company's own earnings report without external reference. The genre control confirmed convergence in both registers: attributed sourcing stood at 100% and 94% in hard news and at 100% in analytical writing for both languages.

3.2 Density of agentless forms in Uzbek. Although the presence of depersonalisation is comparable, its density is not. In a 150-word administrative report on a patent registration, seven agentless forms were recorded — one per twenty words. A 390-word public-health warning contained nine, and a 540-word policy announcement more than fourteen. Crucially, in each case the responsible institution was named at the outset, after which every subsequent action was presented without a grammatical agent. This is the naturalisation mechanism described by Fairclough (1989) in its clearest form: institutional action is detached from the institution and presented as process.

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An inverse relationship also emerged: the more sparse a text's evaluative layer, the denser its agentless forms. Passive morphology does not substitute for evaluation; it performs a different function, marking the register as official.

3.3 A shared pattern of mixed attribution. A recurrent configuration was attested in both subcorpora: named and unnamed sources appear side by side within a single text, with facts tied to an identified institution and the interpretive conclusion assigned to an unnamed collective. Constructions such as "Mutaxassislar fikricha…" ("According to specialists…") and "Shifokorlarning ta'kidlashicha…" ("Doctors emphasise that…") were recorded eight times in the Uzbek subcorpus; English equivalents ("experts say", "nurses are seeing an increase") were recorded six times. In both languages the vague attribution characteristically occupies the closing position, where it carries the evaluative inference that the preceding sourced material does not license.

3.4 A one-directional lacuna. The two systems diverge in one respect. English news writing employs reporting-verb selection as an epistemic device: "Agency officials claim this will ensure…" signals editorial reservation that "said" would not. Two stronger variants were also attested — explicit assessment of a claim's evidential standing ("arguing, without evidence, that some effects may not appear for years") and explicit acknowledgement of what remains unknown ("However, it is unclear how many extra training places it will produce"). A fourth form, disclosure of the publication's own calculation ("a Reuters calculation showed"), locates the figure's provenance in the newsroom itself.

No functional equivalent of any of these four was recorded in the Uzbek subcorpus. Uzbek reporting verbs (*dedi, aytdi, ta'kidladi*) differ stylistically but do not encode editorial stance towards the claim, and official statements are characteristically relayed without distancing: "…mazkur hamkorlik… mustahkamlashga xizmat qiladi" ("this cooperation will serve to strengthen…") is presented as the publication's own statement rather than as an attributed claim.

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4. Discussion

The results support a narrow conclusion. The two languages do not differ in whether sources are attributed, nor in the availability of agent-suppressing morphology, nor in the tendency to mix named and unnamed authority within a single text. They differ in the presence of a conventionalised repertoire for marking editorial distance from an attributed claim.

This divergence is unlikely to be grammatical in origin. Uzbek possesses the resources to mark such distance — evidential and modal morphology is well described in the Uzbek pragmalinguistic literature (Safarov, 2008) — and the contrastive grammars of the two languages (Bo‘ronov, 1973; Yusupov, 2013) identify no structural obstacle. What the data suggest is a difference in journalistic convention: in the English tradition, calibrating the epistemic status of a claim has become a stylistic norm, comparable to the metadiscursive practices Hyland (2005) documents in academic

writing, whereas in the Uzbek editorial practice represented here no such norm has crystallised.

An alternative explanation cannot be excluded. In the Uzbek subcorpus only two of twenty-five texts are independently authored journalism; fourteen derive from official documents and nine from reworked foreign-agency material. Both registers suppress editorial stance by convention. The English subcorpus, by contrast, consists entirely of staff-written material. This asymmetry is recorded as an unexcluded limitation rather than resolved, since the genre and chronological controls eliminate the two other candidate explanations but not this one.

A further qualification concerns the interpretation of such differences in cultural terms. Accounts of communicative cultures that rest on the high- and low-context distinction (Hall, 1976) would predict less explicit marking in the language conventionally classified as high-context, which is what was observed; but the model's applicability to institutional written discourse has been challenged on methodological grounds (Cardon, 2008), and the present data cannot adjudicate between a cultural and a professional-conventional explanation.

5. Conclusion

Attribution practices in Uzbek and English online news discourse converge more than they diverge. Both languages name their sources, both suppress agency when relaying institutional action, both mix identified and unidentified authority within a single text, and both do so at comparable rates across genres. The one systematic difference lies in a repertoire of four English devices for marking editorial distance from an attributed claim, for which the Uzbek material offers no equivalent.

For translation practice, the finding implies that rendering an English reporting verb by its nearest Uzbek lexical counterpart loses the epistemic signal it carries. For media-literacy instruction, it suggests that the diagnostic question put to Uzbek readers should concern the identifiability of the source rather than the emotional register of the text — quasi-statistical claiming being the one function on which the Uzbek subcorpus

scored higher. Both conclusions are offered as tendencies: with twenty-five texts per language, the study establishes direction rather than magnitude.

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