

Lexical Choice in International Sports News Headlines: A Study of the Near-Synonyms Sack and Fire

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Abstract

This study investigated lexical choice in international sports news headlines through the near-synonyms *sack* and *fire* in reports of the same managerial dismissal event. The study aimed to examine the usage of these near-synonyms in the headlines across three outlet groups (UK-based, US-based, and international/global outlets), as well as investigate how they reflect register, tone, headline-lead alignment, and agency construction. Thirty English-language sports news headlines reporting Ruben Amorim's dismissal at Manchester United were purposively selected and divided equally among the three outlet groups. The news headlines were qualitatively analyzed using media discourse analysis with descriptive quantitative support. The findings revealed that *sack* was the dominant lexical choice, occurring more frequently than *fire* and other dismissal-related expressions. UK-based outlets strongly preferred *sack*, while US-based outlets used both *sack* and *fire*. This suggests regional preference in headline language. Meanwhile, international/global outlets also favored *sack* but showed some lexical diversity through alternatives such as *out* and *axed*. In terms of register and tone, *sack* appeared in a wider range of contexts, from neutral to evaluative and sensational headlines, whereas *fire* was mainly neutral or evaluative. Most lead sentences supported the lexical framing of the headlines by matching rather than softening or intensifying it. The analysis of agency also showed that passive voice was slightly more common. Overall, the study demonstrated that *sack* and *fire* are not fully interchangeable in sports news discourse, as their use was framed by regional preference, register, evaluative tone, and grammatical framing.

Keywords: lexical choice, near-synonym, news headlines, register, tone

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Introduction

Language plays a central role in news discourse because it does not just report events, but also shapes how those events are presented and interpreted by readers. In news writing, headlines are particularly important as they summarize the main point of a story and attract readers' attention within a limited space (Bednarek, 2006). For this reason, headline writers need to select words carefully, as each lexical choice can carry a particular communicative effect and influence how audiences would perceive events, participants, and responsibility (Bell, 1991; Richardson, 2007). Lexical choice is significant in media discourse in particular because words with similar meanings are not always interchangeable. A number of words have core meaning in common but differ in register, tone, collocation, and evaluative force. Such words are often referred to as near-synonyms. Many studies show that these near-synonyms might be different in terms of formality, collocational patterns, and pragmatic meanings, even when they have similar meanings in dictionary (Lertcharoenwanich, 2023; Kongcharoen & Chinsethagij, 2025). Previous studies have shown that near-synonyms may differ in semantic preference, semantic prosody, formality, and pragmatic meaning, even when they appear to have similar dictionary definitions (Xiao & McEnery, 2006; Liu, 2010).

Sports news headlines provide a useful context for examining lexical choice because they need to report factual events while also maintaining reader interest. In online sports journalism, headlines are often short, direct, and stylistically marked. Journalists may choose particular words not just to describe an event, but also to create emphasis, express stance, or increase the impact of the story (Peterlicean & Berariu, 2020). This is particularly clear in reports of football managerial dismissal, where several verbs may be used to describe the same event, including *sack*, *fire*, *dismiss*, *axe*, and *part company with*. Although these verbs are related in meaning, they may differ in register, tone, regional preference, and journalistic convention. For example, *sack* is commonly associated with British English and football reporting, while *fire* is often linked to American English usage. Other verbs such as *axe* may create a more dramatic or sensational tone.

Although previous research has examined near-synonymy, semantic prosody, and lexical choice in news discourse (Cruse, 1986; Bell, 1991; Bednarek, 2006; Liu, 2010), several gaps remain. First, sports news headlines have received less attention than political or general news headlines, despite their distinctive language and wide readership. Second, many previous studies have used large datasets drawn from different events, which makes it difficult to determine whether lexical differences result from word choice or from differences in the events themselves. Third, limited attention has been given to the near-synonyms *sack* and *fire* in headlines reporting the same football dismissal event. Focusing on one event allows a more controlled comparison of how different news outlets choose words to report the same story.

This study therefore examines the use of *sack* and *fire* in English-language sports news headlines from UK-based, US-based, and international/global outlets. It investigates how these near-synonyms are used to report the same managerial dismissal event and how they contribute to differences in register, tone, and framing. By comparing headlines across outlet groups, the

study aims to show how lexical choice are used in international sports journalism and how near-synonyms can shape readers' understanding of the same news event.

Literature Review

1. News Headlines and Lexical Choice

News headlines are prominent titles placed above news stories in newspapers or on news websites. They briefly present the main idea of a story and are designed to attract readers' attention (Richardson, 2007), encourage readers to continue reading, and help "sell" the story (Bowles & Borden, 1997; Smith, 1999). As a special type of text, headlines have their own structure, style, and limitations, especially because they must communicate meaning within limited space (Reah, 1998). Linguistically, headlines form a distinct register marked by brevity, ellipsis, and syntactic compression (Bell, 1991). As a result, words in headlines are carefully chosen for clarity, impact, and persuasive effect. Previous studies also show that headlines often omit function words, use active or passive structures strategically, and rely on strong verbs to capture attention (Bednarek, 2006). Therefore, lexical choice, which refers to the selection of words by speakers or writers to express meaning, construct tone, and frame events in particular ways within a specific context has become important. This choice is influenced by register, audience, purpose, and social or cultural meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Fairclough, 1995). Bell (1991) highlights that news language is shaped by professional routines, editorial norms, and audience design. Journalists do not merely report facts; they actively construct narratives through linguistic choices, including vocabulary selection. One important aspect of news discourse is evaluation, which refers to how language expresses attitudes, judgements, or stances (Bednarek, 2006, Hunston, 2000). For example, the choice between say, claim, or admit can influence how readers interpret the credibility of information. Bednarek (2006) argues that headlines often condense complex evaluations into single lexical items, which makes word choice especially significant. This is common in sports news where dramatic and emotionally charged language is usually used. Moreover, Biber et al. (1999) demonstrated that lexical choices vary systematically across registers such as spoken, academic, and news language because word choice is influenced not only by meaning but also by genre and communicative purpose.

2. Synonyms and Near-Synonyms

Synonyms refer to the words sharing a similar or closely related meaning. However, complete synonymy is rare as words often differ in use, context, style, or emotional meaning (Cruse, 1986). Despite being considered synonymous because they can express the same general concept, they may not always be interchangeable in every sentence (Murphy, 2010). Meanwhile, near-synonyms are words that have a similar core meaning but differ in register, collocation, connotation, frequency, or pragmatic effect (Edmonds & Hirst, 2002). For example, sack and fire both refer to removing someone from a job, but they may differ in regional usage and tone. Therefore, the study of synonyms and near-synonyms is useful for understanding how small lexical differences can shape meaning in real discourse. Jackson and Amvela (2000) said that a near-synonym can be used interchangeably where their meanings overlap but cannot be substituted in every context while Murphy (2010) argued that the precise

context or collocation must be considered as the definition of the word itself is insufficient. In investigating a set of English near-synonyms (chief, main, major, primary, and principal) by using a corpus-based behavioral profile approach, Liu (2010) found that although these words are similar in meaning, they show distinct patterns of collocation and contextual use. They are different in attitudinal meanings (Xiao & McEnery, 2006). In sports news headlines, this difference is especially important because headlines use limited space and rely on strong lexical choices to attract readers. A headline such as “Manager sacked after poor run” may sound more British, informal, and dramatic, while “Coach fired after poor results” may sound more American and direct. Both headlines report the same event, but the verbs create slightly different impressions. This supports the view that lexical choice in headlines does not only communicate information; it also helps construct tone, register, and framing (Bell, 1991; Richardson, 2007).

3. *Register & Tone*

Register is language variation shaped by situational characteristics and communicative purpose while tone refers to the attitude, feeling, or evaluative stance expressed through language (Biber & Conrad, 2019). In discourse, tone can be created by the combination of lexical choice, grammatical structure, and surrounding context (Martin & White, 2005). Both register and tone may be influenced by lexical choices because words are associated with particular communicative contexts and discourse styles. In the news headlines, each word carries different evaluative meanings. It can be presented as neutral, critical, dramatic, or sensational (Bednarek & Caple, 2017). Therefore, in sports news headlines, the choice between near-synonyms such as *sack* and *fire* may reveal differences not only in wording, but also in register and tone. In this study, tone is classified as neutral, evaluative, or sensational. A neutral tone presents the event in a factual and restrained manner without clear emotional or judgmental coloring. An evaluative tone is about wording to express or evoke judgment, interpretation, or assessment of the event or the people involved. A sensational tone uses dramatic and emotionally intensified language to grab audience’s attention and increase the perceived impact of the event. Variation across news outlets is another key point to be considered because English-language journalism is not stylistically uniform across regions or institutions. It might be different according to editorial tradition, target audience, and communicative purpose. Language varies across registers because texts are shaped by recurring situational characteristics (Biber & Conrad, 2019). Each news outlet may develop different lexical and stylistic preferences. Journalistic discourse often is standardized but important differences in style remain seen across newspaper types and traditions (Conboy, 2010). That is why UK-based, US-based, and international/global outlets may not use the same words when reporting the same managerial dismissal. Sports journalism adds another layer to this variation because it often combines factual reporting with narrative energy, evaluation, and audience appeal. As a result, lexical choices in sports headlines may be influenced not only by regional journalistic convention, but also by the genre-specific tendency of sports news to present events in a lively, dramatic, and audience-oriented way.

4. *Headline–Lead Relationship & Agency*

In news discourse, the headline and the lead work together to present the main event to readers. Both headlines and leads are important textual devices for building the thematic structure of news as they help readers identify the topic quickly and efficiently. The headline often highlights the main actors and action, whereas the lead elaborates on the situation in greater detail by adding key details (Van Dijk, 1985; Chana & Tangkiengsirisin, 2012). Because of this relationship, the lead may match, soften, or intensify the wording of the headline. In some cases, the lead simply repeats or clarifies the lexical meaning introduced in the headline. In other cases, the lead may soften the headline by replacing a stronger verb with a more neutral expression, or it may intensify the headline by adding evaluative details, conflict, or explanation. Another important aspect of news discourse is agency to show who performs an action and who receives it. It can be active voice, passive voice, or agentless passive constructions. In active constructions, the doer of the action is clearly foregrounded, as in *Manchester United sacked Amorim*. In passive constructions, attention shifts to the affected participant, as in *Amorim was sacked by Manchester United*. In agentless passive constructions, the actor may be omitted altogether, as in *Amorim was sacked after 14 months in charge*. Studies of passive voice in news discourse note that passive structures can be used to background, obscure, or omit agency, especially when the writer chooses not to highlight responsibility directly (Almahameed et al., 2022; Memmedli, 2025).

Previous studies have discussed lexical choice, near-synonymy, register, and news headlines. Unfortunately, the relationship between near-synonymous dismissal verbs and sports headline framing remains underexplored. The verbs *sack* and *fire* should be given more attention because they differ not only in dictionary meaning, but also in regional association, register, tone, and journalistic convention. In football news, *sack* is usually linked to British English and football reporting, while *fire* is more commonly associated with American English and workplace dismissal. However, existing studies have not sufficiently explained how these near-synonym verbs function when different news outlets report the same football dismissal event. This study therefore focuses on *sack* and *fire* to examine how near-synonyms contribute to lexical variation, tone, headline–lead alignment, and agency construction in a specific set of international sports news headlines.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the use of the near-synonyms *sack* and *fire* in English sports news headlines reporting the same event
2. To examine differences in lexical choice among UK-based, US-based, and international/global outlets in reporting managerial dismissal
3. To analyze the register and tone associated with the lexical choice of *sack* and *fire* in sports news headlines
4. To examine the relationship between headlines and lead sentences, particularly whether the lead matches, softens, or intensifies the lexical force of the headline
5. To analyze the construction of agency through active and passive voice in headlines reporting managerial dismissal

Methodology

1. Population and Samples

This study used purposive sampling consisting of 30 English-language sports news headlines about the same managerial dismissal event: Amorim's dismissal at Manchester United. The headlines were taken from three groups of news outlets: 10 headlines from UK-based outlets, 10 headlines from US-based outlets, and 10 headlines from international/global outlets. They were selected based on the following criteria:

- 1) They had to report the same sports event,
- 2) Written in English, including a word or expression related to managerial dismissal,
- 3) They were from different news outlets, and published between 5 and 7 January 2026.

2. Instrument and Coding Procedures

The coding framework was developed from the research questions and the main concepts of the study. These included lexical choice, outlet group, register, tone, headline–lead alignment, and agency. First, the researcher coded all headlines using the coding categories and definitions in the codebook. The dismissal verb in the headline was coded as *sack*, *fire*, *dismiss*, or other. The exact word form was also recorded, such as *sacked*, *fired*, or *dismissed*. The dismissal verb in the lead, if available, was coded as *sack*, *fire*, *dismiss*, other, or NA. However, if the headline contained more than one dismissal-related expression, only the main-clause verb was recorded. Register was coded as formal, neutral, or informal/tabloid-like while tone was coded as neutral, evaluative, or sensational. It was decided by looking at whether the headline sounded neutral, judgmental, or dramatic. This included the use of strong words, emotional language, or intensifiers. Agency pattern was coded as active, passive, or agent-obscured. Headline–lead shift was coded as match, soften, intensify, or NA to see whether the lead sentence used the same dismissal meaning as the headline. If the lead used softer wording, it was coded as soften. If the lead used stronger wording, it was coded as intensify. If the wording was similar, it was coded as match. If no lead was available, it was coded as NA. The reliability of the coding process was ensured using Cohen's kappa to calculate the level of agreement between the researcher and one external rater (Cohen, 1960). Cohen's Kappa was calculated for five coding variables: lexical choice, register, tone, agency, and headline–lead shift. The results showed an overall Cohen's Kappa value of $\kappa = 0.86$, indicating almost perfect agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). If the items were coded differently, the consensus agreement was sought through discussion regarding the coding framework. Therefore, the coding process in this study can be considered highly reliable and consistent.

3. Data Collection

Only one headline was selected from each outlet. The headlines were collected during the immediate reporting period so that the data would not be influenced by later analysis or follow-up commentary. The main unit of analysis was the headline. Each headline was analyzed for dismissal verb, outlet group, register, tone, and agency pattern. For the headline–lead analysis, the lead sentence was also used. In this study, the lead means the short introductory sentence under the headline. The data were organized in a spreadsheet. Each row represented one news outlet. The spreadsheet included the outlet group, outlet name, publication date, headline, lead

sentence, dismissal verb, register, tone, agency pattern, headline–lead alignment, URL, and notes. The headlines were coded as A01–A10 for UK-based outlets, B01–B10 for US-based outlets, and C01–C10 for international/global outlets.

4. Data Analysis

Five related frameworks were used to analyze. Lexical semantics and near-synonymy were for the examination of the use of *sack* and *fire* since they might share a core meaning but differ in register, collocation, connotation, and contextual use (Cruse, 1986; Murphy, 2010). To compare the use of near-synonyms across the outlets based in UK, US and international/global ones, register theory and media discourse analysis were introduced. Together with register theory, appraisal theory was deployed to compare formality and tone of verbs in the headlines to see if the selected verbs created neutral, evaluative, or sensational meanings. The relationship between headlines and their lead sentences were examined by the use of news discourse structure to check how lead sentences develop, clarify, or modify the headlines (Bell, 1991; Van Dijk, 1988; Reah, 2002). Transitivity and agency, which are concepts from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), were taken to see whether the headline used active voice or passive voice. The results are presented through frequency counts, cross-tabulation, and close reading. Cross-tabulation is used to compare patterns across the three outlet groups, while headline–lead relationships are grouped as matching, softening, or intensifying.

Results

RQ1: How are the near-synonyms sack and fire used in English sports news headlines reporting the same event?

Table 1
UK-based Outlets

ID	Outlet	Date	Headline	Verbs	Other Dismissal Verbs
A01	BBC	5 Jan 2026	Amorim sacked by Man Utd after 14 months in charge	Sack	—
A02	The Guardian	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim sacked by Manchester United and Darren Fletcher takes interim role	Sack	—
A03	The Sun	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim sacked as Man Utd manager after just 14 painful months following bombshell attack on Old Trafford board	Sack	—
A04	The Mirror	5 Jan 2026	Man Utd SACK Ruben Amorim after breakdown in board relations following explosive rant	Sack	—
A05	The Independent	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim sacked by Man United to end miserable reign	Sack	—
A06	The Telegraph	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim sacked by Manchester United after he ‘blew up’ in meeting	Sack	—
A07	The Daily Mail	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim SACKED by Manchester United	Sack	—

Table 1 (Continued)

ID	Outlet	Date	Headline	Verbs	Other Dismissal Verbs
A08	Financial Times	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United sack head coach Ruben Amorim after 14 months	Sack	—
A09	The Metro	5 Jan 2026	Man Utd sack Ruben Amorim as head coach after outburst following Leeds draw	Sack	—
A10	Sky Sports	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United dismiss head coach after 14 months in charge	—	Dismiss

In Table 1, the findings indicated that the near-synonyms *sack* and *fire* were deployed differently in reporting the same event in the UK-based news outlets. Nine outlets have used *sack* while *fire* was not picked. Instead, *dismiss* was used once with *The Sky Sports* reporting “Manchester United dismiss head coach after 14 months in charge” (5 Jan 2026). It shows that the outlets in UK prefer using *sack* rather than other synonym words including *fire* when they have to cover the dismissal of a football manager. For example, the Independent put the headline “Ruben Amorin sacked by Man United to end miserable reign” (5 Jan 2026) and *The Daily Mail* (5 Jan 2026) reported “Ruben Amorim SACKED by Manchester United” (5 Jan 2026).

Table 2

Us-based Outlets

ID	Outlet	Date	Headline	Verbs
Table (Continued)				
B01	The Athletic	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United sack Ruben Amorim after 14 months in charge	Sack
B02	CNN	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim fired by Manchester United after turbulent managerial spell	Fire
B03	CBS Sports	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim sacked by Manchester United	Sack
B04	CNBC	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United sacks head coach Ruben Amorim	Sack
B05	ESPN	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim sacked by Man United	Sack
B06	Yahoo Sports	5 Jan 2026	Official: Ruben Amorim sacked by Manchester United	Sack
B07	NBC News	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United fires coach Ruben Amorim after poor results and provocative comments	Fire
B08	Sports Illustrated	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim Sacked by Man Utd After Spectacular Rant	Sack
B09	UPI	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United fires coach Ruben Amorim	Fire
B10	USA Today	5 Jan 2026	Why was Ruben Amorim fired by Manchester United after 14 months in charge	Fire

The results show that *sack* and *fire* were both used in English sports news headlines to report the dismissal of Ruben Amorim by Manchester United. Out of ten news headlines, *sack* was used six times, two more than *fire*. On Jan 5, 2026, CBS Sports and Sports Illustrated make the headlines “*Ruben Amorim sacked by Manchester United*” and “*Ruben Amorim Sacked by Man Utd After Spectacular Rant*” respectively. Meanwhile, NBC News and USA Today opted to use *fire* in their headlines “*Manchester United fires coach Ruben Amorim after poor results and provocative comments*” and “*Why was Ruben Amorim fired by Manchester United after 14 months in charge*”, both on 5 Jan 2026. These findings also suggest that *sack* was generally used in more popular than *fire* among reporters in making the headline about the dismissal of a football manager.

Table 3*International/Global Outlets*

ID	Outlet	Date	Headline	Verbs	Other Dismissal Verbs
C01	Associated Press (AP)	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United coach Amorim out one day after provocative comments about club structure	—	Out
C02	Agence France-Presse (AFP)	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim sacked by Manchester United after 14-month reign	Sack	—
C03	Arab News	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United sack manager Ruben Amorim	Sack	—
C04	Al Jazeera English	5 Jan 2026	Amorim sacked by Man United; Fletcher named as interim manager	Sack	—
C05	Bloomberg	5 Jan 2026	Man United Fires Coach Amorim After \$290 Million Transfer Spend	Fire	—
C06	beIN Sports	5 Jan 2026	Ruben Amorim sacked by Man Utd	Sack	—
C07	Reuters	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United sack Amorim after turbulent tenure	Sack	—
C08	Times of India	5 Jan 2026	No more 3-4-3 as Manchester United sack head coach Ruben Amorim after Leeds draw	Sack	—
C09	Channel NewsAsia	5 Jan 2026	Manchester United sack head coach Ruben Amorim after months in charge	Sack	—
C10	China Daily	7 Jan 2026	Amorim axed after 14-month reign	—	Axe

From Table 3, out of 10 headlines, *sack* was used in seven times, for examples “*Manchester United sack Amorim after turbulent tenure*” (Reuters, 5 Jan 2026), “*Ruben Amorim sacked by Man Utd*” (beIN Sports, 5 Jan 2026), “*Manchester United sack head coach Ruben Amorim after months in charge*” (Channel NewsAsia, 5 Jan 2026). *Fire* was founded only one in the headline “*Man United Fires Coach Amorim After \$290 Million Transfer Spend*” by Bloomberg (5 Jan 2026), which is the global media of which focus was on business. Interestingly, two additional words – *out* and *axed*, were used to mean the dismissal of the manager. These findings indicate that *sack* was the dominant choice among the selected English news outlets.

Overall, the findings show that *sack* was the preferred lexical item for reporting this coach dismissal in English sports headlines.

RQ2: How do UK-based, US-based, and international/global outlets differ in their lexical choices when constructing headlines about managerial dismissal?

Table 4

Summary of Lexical Choices across UK-based, US-based, and International/Global Media Outlets

Outlets	Number of Headlines	Sack	Fire	Other Lexical Choices
UK-based outlets	10	9	0	Dismiss (1)
US-based outlets	10	6	4	-
International/global outlets	10	7	1	Out (1), Axed (1)

The findings show clear differences among UK-based, US-based, and international outlets in their lexical choices in reporting the dismissal of Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim. Across these three outlet groups, the verb *sack* was the most popular one choice, but its frequency compared others terms became different by region. Out of 30 headlines, *sack* was the most popular choice being used 22 times while *fire* was used only 5 times. Other three lexical choices – *dismiss*, *out*, *axe* – were also deployed. Interestingly, *fire* did not occur at all in the UK-based outlets and it was used only once in the international outlets. However, it is more used in the US-based outlets. The only alternative verb in this group was *dismiss* which was used once by *Sky Sports*. This pattern suggests that UK-based outlets strongly favor *sack* as the conventional headline verb for reporting managerial dismissal in football news while US-based outlets were more open to using *fire* alongside *sack*, reflecting a less fixed lexical preference than the UK press. It can be said while *sack* still functioned as the main sports headline verb, *fire* was also an acceptable and recurrent option in the American data. For the international outlets, they also favored *sack* but still displayed slightly greater lexical variety. Besides *sack*, the dataset included *fire* once, *out* once, and *axed* once. *Associated Press* used “Manchester United coach Amorim out one day after provocative comments about club structure” (5 Jan 2026) and *China Daily* used “Amorim axed after 14-month reign” (7 Jan 2026). It can be implied that despite *sack* being the dominant choice, some international outlets preferred other similar terms to reflect different editorial traditions, target audiences, or news styles. Among three groups of outlets, the UK-based outlets appear to be the most lexically consistent in using word *sack* while the US-based outlets show a more balanced split in their use of *sack* and *fire*, indicating a broader range of acceptable headline verbs. International headlines largely favor *sack* but allow more lexical variation, demonstrating that regional and institutional news traditions shape how managerial dismissal is linguistically represented in sports headlines.

RQ3: What differences in register and tone are reflected through the lexical choice of sack and fire in sports news headlines?

Table 5

Summary of Register and Tone Reflected in Lexical Choices in Sports News Headlines

Lexical Choice	Frequency	Register	Tone
Sack	22	Mostly neutral, but also tabloid/informal	Neutral, evaluative, and sensational
Fire	5	Neutral	Mainly neutral and evaluative
Dismiss	1	Neutral	Neutral
Out	1	Neutral	Evaluative
Axed	1	Tabloid/informal	Neutral

Table 5 shows that that differences in register and tone are reflected in the lexical choices used to report managerial dismissal, although the pattern is not absolute. Overall, *sack* appears across a wider stylistic range, from neutral hard-news reporting to tabloid and sensational coverage, while *fire* appears less frequently and tends to occur mainly in neutral-register headlines, sometimes with a more evaluative tone. In this dataset, *sack* is clearly the dominant lexical item and is used not only in straightforward factual headlines such as “*Amorim sacked by Man Utd after 14 months in charge*” and “*Manchester United sack Ruben Amorim after 14 months in charge*,” but also in more emotionally loaded headlines such as “*Ruben Amorim sacked as Man Utd manager after just 14 painful months following bombshell attack on Old Trafford board*” and “*Ruben Amorim Sacked by Man Utd After Spectacular Rant*”. In terms of tone, *sack* again shows broader variation. Many examples were coded as neutral, especially when the headline simply reported the dismissal without extra commentary. Some headlines containing *sack* were coded as evaluative, such as “*Ruben Amorim sacked by Man United to end miserable reign*” and others were coded as sensational, particularly in tabloid-style headlines such as those from *The Sun*, *The Mirror*, and *Sports Illustrated*. This suggests that *sack* is capable of carrying both routine and dramatic reporting functions depending on its surrounding lexical environment. By comparison, *fire* appears less stylistically varied. It occurs in both neutral and evaluative tones, but not in sensational ones. *CNN* and *NBC News*, for example, combine *fire* with evaluative phrases such as “*turbulent managerial spell*” and “*poor results and provocative comments*,” which make the dismissal sound more judgmental and performance-based.

RQ 4: When available, how do lead sentences align with, soften, or intensify the lexical choices used in the corresponding headlines?

Table 6

Summary of Lead–Headline Alignment across Outlet Groups

Outlet Groups	Match	Soften	Intensify	Total
UK-based outlets	7	3	0	10
US-based outlets	6	4	0	10
International/global outlets	8	2	0	10
Total	21	9	0	30

From Table 6, the dominant pattern is *match* which accounts for 21 of the 30 cases analyzed while *intensify* were not founded at all. This shows that lead sentences retained the same or close in meanings to the one used in the headline. International/global outlets showed the highest level of alignment between headline and lead sentence. Of the 10 outlets, 8 were coded as *match* and 2 as *soften*. For example, Channel *NewsAsia* reported on 5 Jan 2026 with the headline “*Manchester United sack head coach Ruben Amorim after months in charge*” followed by lead sentence “*Manchester United sacked head coach Ruben Amorim on Monday, ending his 14-month reign at the English Premier League club.*” Meanwhile, a smaller number of cases of 9 were coded as *soften*, which means some outlets preferred to restate the dismissal in less forceful or more indirect terms in the lead. For example, *The Daily Mail* made the headline on 5 Jan 2026 “*Ruben Amorim SACKED by Manchester United*” with the lead “*Manager is given the boot hours after publicly calling out his bosses - with club legend taking over on interim basis*”. Meanwhile, US-based outlets showed the greater tendency to soften the headline wording. These results suggest that leads mainly functioned to confirm and elaborate the headline rather than to heighten its force.

RQ5: How is agency constructed through active and passive voice in headlines reporting managerial dismissal?

Table 7

Summary of Agency Construction across Outlet Groups

Outlet Groups	Active	Passive	Other/Obscured	Total
UK-based outlets	3	7	0	10
US-based outlets	4	6	0	10
International/global outlets	6	3	1	10
Total	13	16	1	30

From Table 7, it was found that passive voice was the most common way of constructing agency in headlines reporting managerial dismissal. This means that the headlines focused on the dismissed manager, Amorim, by placing him in subject position. Out of 30 headlines, 16 headlines have been constructed by using passive voices. UK-based and US-based outlets both showed a preference for passive voice with the former one using 7 times. For examples, the *Telegraphs* said “*Ruben Amorim sacked by Manchester United after he ‘blew up’ in meeting*” on 5 Jan 2026, the same day *beIN Sports* came up with headline “*Ruben Amorim sacked by Man Utd*”. Meanwhile, international/global outlets more frequently used active voice, thereby making the dismissing club more explicitly visible as the agent of dismissal. For examples, *Arabs News* said “*Manchester United sack manager Ruben Amorim*” and “*Manchester United sack Amorim after turbulent tenure*”. Only one headline was coded as other/obscured, indicating that non-standard or elliptical constructions were relatively uncommon in the dataset.

Discussion

1. The Dominance of Sack in Football Headlines

Near-synonym verbs - *sack* and *fire* - both mean to make someone leave their job. *Sack* is more common in British English, while *fire* is more popular in American English. These words are strong because they show that someone lost their job due largely to a problem, mistake, or poor performance (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Using these two words in news headlines can make the news sound more serious and negative as they clearly show conflict or trouble (Bednarek & Caple, 2017). Despite sharing the same meanings, they are not used exactly in the same way. Meanwhile, *dismiss* is defined by Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (n.d.) as officially removing someone from their job and is generally more formal and is often used in official, legal, or institutional contexts rather than in casual conversation. Although the three words share a similar core meaning, *sack* and *fire* are more common in everyday spoken use, while *dismiss* is more formal in tone. Peterlicean and Berariu (2020) argues that to present an event effectively, online sports headlines use specialized vocabulary and carefully selected lexical items. These words are chosen on purpose to make sure it can have impact on audiences. For news headlines to grab readers' attention, the words which are short, direct, and easy to recognize are needed and that is why *sack* fits football headlines. Based on the study, *sack* seems to be the word that best fits football headline style as it was found much more often than *fire*, while other headline words with near-synonyms such as *dismiss*, *out*, and *axed* were witnessed only in a small number of headlines. This indicates that *sack* was the main or default choice to report managerial dismissal in football news while other near-synonym verbs including *dismiss* and *axed* will be used only when they need a slightly different style or effect.

However, it would not be only word meaning or regional language preference that lead to the dominance of *sack* as found in the present study. The repeated use of *sack* might result from football journalism where readers or audiences have become familiar with such expressions as *manager sacked*, *coach sacked*, or *sacked after defeat*. Apart from being strong genre value in football reporting, *sack* is short, direct, and dramatic enough for headline writing. For the sake of editorial efficiency, sports editors need this kind of word to grab audiences' attentions as quick as possible. *Sack* is shorter, but more forceful than *dismiss* or *remove*. Moreover, *dismiss* is more formal and institutional, so it may not be ideal for constructing the headline with *dismiss* in a fast-moving sports headline. In all, the dominance of *sack* may result from the interaction of linguistic convention, football culture, and headline economy.

2. The Use of Sack and Fire Based on Regional Variation

The use of *sack* and *fire* was different across outlet groups. UK-based outlets strongly preferred *sack*, which indicates that this word is the main choice in British football journalism. US-based outlets used both *sack* and *fire* while International/global outlets also mostly used *sack*, but with some variation. These findings support the idea that lexical choice in news headlines is often influenced by discourse community and audience as Betari et al. (2025) reports that language in news headlines is strategically used to attract attention and guide reader interpretation. The regional variation found in this study supports the idea that news headline language is influenced by editorial style, audience expectation, and regional language

preference. It aligns with the study by Thongsombat and Chatdecha (2025). They found that different newspapers use different headline-writing techniques and headline construction varies across publications and news cultures. However, regional variation should not be taken as the only explanation for lexical choices in the headlines. It should take into account editorial house styles and publication genre as well as audience expectation. For example, some outlets prefer *sack* because the word is more familiar and efficient in football discourse, while others outlets may use *fire*, *dismiss*, *axe*, or other expressions to suit their readership or to comply with their institutional styles. *Sack* can also be used in international and global news outlets because English football news is widely read outside the UK. Therefore, *sack* is popular not just because it is a British English word, but also because it is commonly used in football news, which needs a short, clear, and useful term to write headlines about a manager losing his job.

3. Lexical Choice, Register, and Tone in Sports Headlines

The findings show that *sack* and *fire* differ in tone, register, and stylistic flexibility in reporting the dismissal of a football manager. *Sack* is found across a wider range of contexts, including neutral, evaluative, and sensational headlines, and it is also used in both neutral and tabloid or informal styles. In contrast, *fire* was found in a more limited range of examples, mainly in neutral or evaluative headlines. It is not found in the most sensational cases in the corpus. This suggests that *sack* is much more adaptable and practical in football headline writing because it can work both as a simple reporting verb and as part of a more dramatic headline structure. Nonetheless, the study does not suggest that *sack* is automatically more sensational than *fire* due to the fact that the tone of a headline is not produced by the dismissal verb alone, but by its relationship with the surrounding words. Appearing in a straightforward headline such as *Ruben Amorim sacked by Manchester United*, *sack* sounds direct and relatively neutral and its tone becomes stronger when it is combined with expressions such as *miserable reign*, *bombshell attack*, or *explosive rant*. These surrounding phrases add judgement, conflict, and emotional force to the headline, while *sack* or *fire* provides the core meaning of dismissal. Overall, the findings suggest that lexical choice in sports headlines should be analyzed together with register, genre, and co-text. The frequent use of *sack* in more dramatic headlines may be linked to its familiarity in football journalism and its ability to combine naturally with sensational expressions. By contrast, *fire* may be less common in sensational football headlines because it is more closely associated with American workplace discourse. Thus, headline tone is created through lexical combination rather than isolated word choice.

4. Headline–Lead Relations: Repetition, Softening, and Framing

The lexical choices in the news headlines are likely to be repeated or kept in the lead sentence. Most cases were coded as *match* while a smaller number were coded as *soften*, and no cases were reported as *intensify*. This suggests that the lead sentences always supported or created a clear link with their headlines. Instead of changing the meaning of the headline, they repeated the same key verbs or used very similar ones. The finding that most leads matched their news headlines is consistent with Borchmann's (2024) view saying that headlines have functional and rhetorical relations with the body text.

As for *softened* cases, milder expressions such as *removed*, *parted ways*, or *departure*, were used in the leads only to give further explanation or moderation. For example, the headline “Manchester United sacks head coach Ruben Amorim” was followed by its lead sentence “English soccer giant Manchester United has parted ways with head coach Ruben Amorim, just after he raised questions over his role at the club amid rumors of tensions with the club hierarchy” (CNBC, 5 Jan 2026). This suggests that the lead sometimes reduced the force of the headline wording. There were no cases of *intensification* in the study. It suggests that the headline already carried the strongest framing needed, and the lead just gave more information or context. It aligns with Poudel et al. (2025) saying that headline framing can influence later search behavior, which supports the idea that headlines in the study already do strong framing work before the reader reaches the rest of the text.

5. Agency Construction through Active and Passive Voice

The findings on active and passive voice indicate that agency is constructed through grammar as well as vocabulary. A dismissed manager was in subject position in passive headlines, which made him the main focus of the event. In contrast in active headlines, the club was placed in subject position, which made the club’s action more visible. This can be implied that active and passive voice influence whether the dismissal is framed as something the club did or something that happened to the manager. In the study, passive voice was slightly more common overall than active voice. This suggests that focus was put on the manager who was sacked than on the club that removed him from the post. However, international/global outlets used active voice more often than the UK and US groups. For example, active headlines such as *Manchester United sack manager Ruben Amorim* (Arabnews, 5 Jan 2026) place the club first and make the club’s action clearer. In contrast, passive headlines such as “*Ruben Amorim sacked by Man Utd*” (beIN Sports, 5 Jan 2026) place the manager first, making him the main focus of the headline. Passive voice presents dismissal more as something that happened to the manager while Active one shows it more as something the club did and make the club’s responsibility more direct and visible. This result is supported by Memmedli (2025), who explains that passive voice can foreground the affected participant and background the agent. That explanation fits the present study very well. The one obscured or other case, such as *Amorim out*, is also interesting because it reduces clear agency even more. It presents the dismissal as a result or state rather than as a fully stated action. This shows that agency in sports headlines is shaped not only by verbs like *sack* and *fire*, but also by grammatical structure.

Conclusion

This study investigated lexical choice in selected English-language sports news headlines through the near-synonyms *sack* and *fire* in reporting one managerial dismissal event. Based on 30 headlines from UK-based, US-based, and international/global outlets, the findings indicate that *sack* was the dominant lexical choice within this dataset. It appeared more frequently than *fire* and other dismissal-related expressions. The UK-based outlets showed the strongest preference for *sack*, while the US-based outlets used both *sack* and *fire*, which suggested some lexical variation may be related to regional usage, editorial practice, and

audience orientation. The international/global outlets in the study tended to use *sack*, while alternative expressions, such as *out* and *axed*, were also found.

The analysis further suggests that *sack* was used across a wider range of register and tone, from neutral reporting to more evaluative or sensational framing. By contrast, *fire* appeared mainly in neutral or evaluative contexts. However, these patterns should be understood as tendencies in this particular corpus rather than fixed features of English sports reporting. The study also found that most lead sentences matched or clarified the wording of the headlines, indicating that the leads generally supported rather than intensified the headline framing. In terms of agency, passive voice was slightly more common overall, often foregrounding the dismissed manager rather than the dismissing club.

Overall, the study indicates that *sack* and *fire* were not used as fully interchangeable lexical items in this dataset. Their use also seemed to be shaped by regional preference, editorial style, register, tone, co-text, and grammatical framing. Unfortunately, this study was limited by its relatively small sample size because its focus was put only on one football event. It was also done by using the purposive selection of outlets and conducted in the short data-collection period. Moreover, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than fully generalizable due to the fact that only 30 headlines about one reported managerial dismissal were analyzed.

Recommendations

1. Implications

The pedagogical implications of this study should be understood in relation to the limited scope of the dataset. Since the study is based on 30 headlines from one football managerial dismissal event, the findings should be used as illustrative examples rather than fixed rules of English sports journalism.

Nevertheless, the selected headlines provide useful material for teaching English, particularly in courses related to journalism, media language, vocabulary studies, and English for Specific Purposes. Students should be encouraged to learn vocabulary from authentic texts like news headlines. Although *sack* and *fire* have a similar basic meaning, the findings from this dataset suggest that they are not used in exactly the same way. *Sack* appeared more frequently in the selected football headlines, especially in UK-based outlets, while *fire* was more visible in the US-based outlets. This can help teachers show students how near-synonyms may differ in regional use, register, tone, and communicative effect.

The study also offers useful examples for teaching register and tone through authentic media texts. Being short, direct, and rich in meaning, sports headlines can be effective classroom materials. Students might be asked to compare or discuss how headlines from different news outlets are being used. This kind of activity can help students become more aware to how word choice affects meaning. Another implication is critical reading because news headlines do not simply report what happened; they can also frame how readers understand the event. Therefore,

students should be trained to look carefully at the words surrounding the main verb. For instance, expressions such as *miserable reign*, *bombshell attack*, or *spectacular rant* can make a headline sound stronger or more emotional. This helps students understand that tone often comes not only from one word, but from the whole phrase or sentence.

The findings may also be useful for teaching grammar, especially active and passive voice. In passive headlines, the dismissed manager is usually placed first and becomes the main focus. In active headlines, the club is placed first, which makes its responsibility clearer. Teachers can use examples from the study to show that grammar is not only a matter of correctness, but also a way of shaping meaning and emphasis. Finally, the findings can support headline-writing practice. Students can be trained in using different verbs, tones and grammatical structures in writing the same news event. Through this activity, students can see how small lexical and grammatical changes can affect style, focus, and interpretation.

Overall, this study suggests that lexical choice can be taught as part of discourse awareness. However, these classroom applications should be treated as examples drawn from a specific case study, not as general rules for all sports headlines. Students need to understand not only what words mean, but also how and why particular words are chosen in real communication. This can help them become more careful readers, more effective writers, and more critical users of English in media contexts.

2. Further Studies

Future studies should be conducted in other dismissal sports events and with a larger corpus to see whether *sack* remains dominant in a larger football-news corpus. They could also compare sports headlines with other fields such as business or politics, where dismissal may be described by other verbs such as *oust*, *remove*, or *dismiss*. Another useful direction would be audience research. For example, future studies could examine whether readers understand *sack* and *fire* differently in terms of strength, blame, or emotional effect. Finally, the studies could combine discourse analysis with corpus tools or digital-media methods to see whether similar lexical patterns appear in larger online datasets.

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