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How British Newspapers Represent Road Collisions: A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Study

Rakan Alibri

Correspondence: Rakan Alibri, Languages and Translation Department, University of Tabuk, Tabuk, 71491, Saudi Arabia.

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Abstract

This paper examines how British newspapers represent road collisions, drawing on corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis of 5434 articles (4.26 million words) published over three years (2017–2019). It asks what the most frequent reference to road collisions is and how it is used, and how *crash*, *collision*, and the plural forms compare with it. Findings indicate that the term *accident* is the most frequent reference, and its typical collocates relate to situational context, negative consequences—particularly death and injury—and humans. The language of reporting often has the effect of deflecting blame from drivers and dramatising collisions, and episodic reporting appears more frequently than thematic. *Crash* is the preferred headline term, but all references share the same agentless grammar. General factors such as alcohol and mobile phone use are named more often with the plural forms, when newspapers report aggregate figures rather than individual collisions. Guidelines that only replace *accident* with *crash* or *collision* therefore change the word but not the grammar. The findings suggest that British newspaper reporting may naturalise road danger, obscure responsibility, and reproduce a public discourse in which the systemic causes of collisions remain largely invisible.

Keywords: road collision, critical discourse studies, corpus linguistics, media representation, news media, agency

1. Introduction

Road collisions remain a major public health issue (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023) and a form of societal violence (Culver, 2018). They cause approximately 1.19 million deaths and 50 million serious injuries worldwide each year, and 20- to 50-year-olds are the most affected (WHO, 2023). In the United Kingdom, an average of 32 people die every week, and more than 29 000 are killed or seriously injured annually. Car drivers and passengers account for the largest share of road deaths (45%), followed by pedestrians (24%), motorcyclists (20%), and cyclists (4%) (Department for Transport, 2025).

One reason for these continued deaths may be how road collisions are perceived and framed in public discourse. When automobiles first appeared on American streets in the early twentieth century, they were widely rejected as an invasion of public space and blamed for the deaths of adult and child pedestrians. Manufacturers and lobbyists then shifted blame to pedestrians through education campaigns for children and new regulations criminalising behaviour such as "jaywalking," which justified prioritising cars on streets (Norton, 2008). By the 1930s, streets were widely accepted as being mainly for cars, and the automobile had become a symbol of freedom and progress, despite rising road deaths (Borowy, 2013). These peaked in the 1960s and 1970s in developed countries, when an annual mortality rate of 20 per 100 000 was considered an acceptable cost of modernisation (Borowy, 2013).

In the United Kingdom, high numbers of deaths between the 1980s and 2000s led to road safety being framed as an "urgent issue" on the political agenda. As fatalities declined, a "resolved" framing emerged in the 2010s, when the UK gained the reputation of having "the safest roads in the world." This likely lowered the perceived risk of road collisions and pushed them off the public and political agenda (Greenwood, Jamson, & Marsden, 2024).

News media play a crucial role in shaping public perception, including that of road collisions and safety (Keller, Ledesma, Poó, & Peden, 2024; Magusin, 2017). Through agenda setting, they have "the ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda" (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002, p. 1), telling people *what* to think about. At a second level, by emphasising certain attributes of an issue, they also influence how people think about it (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). This aligns with the concept of *framing*: "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). For example, news reports may frame road collisions as "accidents," implying inevitability and unpredictability and downplaying responsibility (Norton, 2008; Ralph, Iacobucci, Thigpen, & Goddard, 2019).

Increasing numbers of studies have examined how news reporting of road collisions shapes public perception and societal tolerance of this threat to life. This paper adopts a corpus-assisted critical discourse studies (CDS) approach (Baker & McGlashan, 2020). Representation is understood here as "using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people" (Hall, 1997, p. 15). It asks how British national newspapers represent road collisions, through two research questions:

> RQ1. What is the most frequent reference to road collisions in the corpus, and how is it used to represent road collisions?
>
> RQ2. How are the other references to road collisions (*crash*, *collision*, and the plural forms) used in comparison, in terms of where they appear (headline or body) and how agency is represented when deaths are reported?

To answer them, the study analyses 5434 news articles published over three years (2017–2019), a 4.26-million-word corpus that is likely the largest dataset of news articles about road collisions to date. Section 1.1 reviews previous studies, Section 2 presents the data and methods, Section 3 presents the results, Section 4 discusses them, and Section 5 concludes.

Media Representations of Road Collisions

Studies of road collision representation in news media have emerged from diverse contexts, including Singapore (Heng & Vasu, 2010), Canada (Magusin, 2017), the United States (Ralph et al., 2019), the Netherlands (te Brömmelstroet, 2020), and Argentina (Keller et al., 2024). Most use content analysis to examine linguistic choices, blame attribution, and framing. Framing may be episodic, presenting events as isolated, or thematic, linking them to a general pattern (Iyengar, 1996).

Ralph et al. (2019, p. 664) analysed 200 local news articles published in the United States in 2018 and found *accident*(*s*) widely used. They argue that the term presents road collisions as inevitable and faultless, whereas most are predictable and preventable (see also Borowy, 2013; Culver, 2018; Kwakman, te Brömmelstroet, & van Emmerik, 2025). Reporting was mainly episodic rather than thematic, as also found by Fevyer and Aldred (2022) and Magusin (2017). Ralph et al. also examined blame attribution through focus (who or what is foregrounded), agency (who is represented as responsible), and object-based language, which refers to vehicles rather than drivers (e.g., "a car struck a man" instead of "a driver struck a man"). In their data, 35% of sentences lacked an agent. Where an agent was present, the focus was mainly on vulnerable road users (VRUs), namely pedestrians, cyclists, and motorcyclists, in 74% of cases, rather than on vehicles (13%) or drivers (11%). References to drivers were also mostly object-based (81%). The passive forms "a VRU was hit" and "a VRU was hit by a car" were the most common sentence types, and 27% of articles never mentioned a driver. Ralph et al. argue that news media seem to use these patterns to shift blame away from drivers.

Similar results were reported in Hawai'i, where Keliikoa et al. (2022) examined 162 newspaper and television reports and found that 77% of headlines were non-agentive, 77% focused on VRUs, and 69% mentioned neither vehicles nor drivers, while 60% of articles were episodic. In the Netherlands, te Brömmelstroet (2020) found episodic reporting in 92% of 368 local newspaper reports, with 70% of headlines centred on the consequences, 60% non-agentive, and 64% of agentive headlines focused on VRUs.

Magusin (2017) combined content analysis with CDS to examine headlines on VRU deaths in Edmonton, Canada, in 2016. Of 71 headlines, 69 used the passive voice, with victims often the focus and drivers referred to as vehicles or omitted. Magusin argued that drivers were linguistically and rhetorically distanced from blame, constructing "a social reality of pedestrians, one that prioritises vehicle traffic over pedestrian safety and enforces both physical and rhetorical car dominance" (Magusin, 2017, p. 89). However, the study also found resistance to this discourse in headlines that humanised victims, quoted relatives and friends, and acknowledged road deaths as a systemic issue.

In the United Kingdom, Fevyer and Aldred (2022) applied CDS to 17 *London Evening Standard* articles about fatal road collisions. Drivers were often represented impersonally, as vehicles, while pedestrians were placed in grammatical focus through the passive voice. Drivers were almost always partially excluded, that is, not mentioned but inferable from the context. They tended to be named explicitly as "drivers" when involved in unacceptable behaviour, such as hit-and-run or drink driving. Fevyer and Aldred argue that this presents the threat as arising from exceptional drivers rather than from normative driving (see also Bonham, Johnson, & Haworth, 2020).

These findings are consistent across countries and outlets, and such reporting choices influence how blame is assigned. In a perception experiment, Goddard, Ralph, Thigpen, and Iacobucci (2019) found that driver-focused rather than pedestrian-focused language reduced victim blaming and increased the blame attributed to drivers, while thematic framing increased support for infrastructure improvements.

Fevyer and Aldred (2022) is perhaps the only UK study of road collision reporting with a linguistic (CDS) approach, and it is limited to one newspaper in one city. The present study extends this work to eight national titles (ten newspapers including Sunday editions), applying corpus linguistic methods to a substantially larger dataset and comparing how different references to road collisions are used. The data and methods are presented in Section 2.

2. Data and Methods

The data comprise news articles published by British newspapers, collected from LexisNexis, a database of articles published by national and international news outlets. The newspapers included are *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Mail on Sunday*, *The Sun*, the *Daily Mirror*, *The Telegraph*, *Metro*, *The Independent*, and *The Guardian*. According to Agility PR Solutions (2020), the first six were among the UK's highest-circulation newspapers in 2020. *The Independent* and *The Guardian* were added to include a wider range of political viewpoints.

The corpus includes the national editions of these titles and their editions for Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland. Overseas editions were excluded. Articles were collected in their print editions, except for *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, which were collected in their online versions as archived by LexisNexis (*The Independent* ceased print publication in 2016). Duplicates were reduced using the LexisNexis Group Duplicates function (set to high similarity), which groups near-identical articles and retains a single lead document from each group, followed by a manual check. Near-identical articles appearing in different regional editions of the same title were retained, as each edition is a separate publication.

The data include any article referring, even once, to road collisions between 1 January 2017 and 1 January 2020. The search terms were: "road accidents" or "road accident" or "car accident" or "car accidents" or "traffic accident" or "traffic accidents" or "motor accident" or "motor accidents" or "cyclist accident" or "cyclist accidents" or "road collision" or "road collisions" or "car collision" or "car collisions" or "vehicle collision" or "motor collision" or "cyclist collision". *Crash* was deliberately excluded because of its many non-road meanings (e.g., *plane crash*, *stock market crash*) and figurative uses (e.g., *a car-crash interview*), which would have retrieved a large number of irrelevant articles. The search therefore prioritised precision over recall.

The cut-off point was the beginning of 2020, when newspapers became highly preoccupied with the Covid-19 pandemic, possibly influencing road collision reporting. Since no previous study had examined British newspaper reporting of road collisions on this scale, a time frame unaffected by the pandemic was selected. The study can also serve as a point of comparison for future research on road collision reporting after the pandemic.

Table 1 shows the number of articles from each newspaper (*The Times* and *Daily Mail* include their Sunday editions). The corpus was not balanced across titles, since the aim is to examine the coverage as a whole rather than to compare newspapers (Brookes & Baker, 2021). As titles with more articles contribute more to overall frequencies, patterns concentrated in a single newspaper were checked and are noted where relevant. The corpus (4 261 390 words) was analysed using AntConc (version 4.3.1; Anthony, 2024).

Table 1. Number of news articles with a reference to road collisions in British newspapers

Newspaper	*Number of articles*
Times	1187
Sun	921
Mirror	830
Independent	801
Guardian	617
Telegraph	533
Mail	384
Metro	161
Total	5434

This study adopts a corpus-assisted CDS approach (Baker & McGlashan, 2020). CDS analyses language to uncover ideologies, power relations, and taken-for-granted assumptions, viewing discourse as a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by social reality through the ways it represents events, social actors, and relationships (Fairclough, 1989; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Corpus linguistics uses "computer software to examine frequencies and relationships between words in (often large) sets of authentic texts that have been electronically encoded" (Baker & Ellece, 2011, p. 25). Corpus-assisted CDS is therefore a form of discourse analysis that uses corpus linguistic methods to identify linguistic and discursive patterns in large collections of texts, which can serve as empirical evidence for the existence of particular discourses or ideological positions.

Corpus methods offer quantitative and qualitative analyses (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998), and the analysis of *accident* used both, combining frequency, collocation, and concordance in three steps. First, a word list ranked all words in the corpus by frequency. The most common words help identify frequent topics or discourses appearing when newspapers report road collisions, providing a starting point for investigation (Baker, 2023; Mautner, 2016). The word list was used to identify the most frequent references to road collisions. Second, the collocates of *accident* were calculated. Collocation is the co-occurrence of words more often than expected by chance, and the association between the node (i.e., the word under investigation) and its surrounding words can be calculated using various statistical measures. This study uses

LogDice (Rychlý, 2008), which measures the typicality of a collocate: a high score indicates a strong lexical association with the node, meaning the two words typically appear together. Collocates were ranked by LogDice, with a span of five words either side of the node and no minimum frequency threshold (AntConc's default of 1). From the top 100 collocates, function words (articles, determiners, pronouns, auxiliaries and modals, prepositions, and conjunctions) and tokenisation fragments (*s*, *t*) were then excluded, with three exceptions: pronouns referring to people, retained under Humans as markers of personalisation; prepositions and conjunctions with temporal meaning (e.g., *after*, *before*, *when*), which locate collisions in time; and *in*, retained for its role in the recurrent pattern verb + *in* + collision noun (e.g., *killed in*, *died in*, *involved in*). This left 76 collocates, which were grouped into themes of related meaning or function (Table 2). Third, selected collocates were examined in concordance lines. While frequency and collocation are quantitative analyses, concordance allows a qualitative close reading of the context surrounding the word under investigation, showing each occurrence with a few words to the left and right. All concordance lines for each pattern were read and sorted to the left and right of the node to identify recurrent patterns, which were then counted across all lines. Where necessary, lines were extended to the full article to avoid misinterpretation.

Accident was then compared with *crash*, *collision*, and the plural forms on three points (Section 3.2). First, headline position was identified from the structure of the LexisNexis files, the headline (including any standfirst) being taken as the text between the end of one article and the publication and date line of the next. Second, agency was examined in all concordance lines in which *killed* occurs within five words of each term. Three types of line were excluded: those referring to unreal collisions (fiction, film, television), those with a non-road sense (e.g., *air crashes*), and those in which *killed* is not related to the term. The remaining lines were sorted into passive (including reduced passives such as *a man killed in a car crash*), active with the term as subject (e.g., *the crash killed*), and active with a person as subject. The pattern *killed in* + a reference to road collisions was also counted. Third, the included lines with the plural forms were read to establish whether they report a single event, a round-up of several events, or road death in general terms, such as statistics and trends (thematic reporting).

3. Results and Analysis

Frequency analysis shows that only three of the 100 most frequent words in the corpus relate to road collisions: *car* (66th; 7206), *accident* (82nd; 5648), and *road* (83rd; 5602). The plural *accidents* occurs a further 1891 times. Other references to road collisions are *crash* (2442), *crashes* (322), *collision* (1192), and *collisions* (198). The singular *accident* alone occurs more often than *crash* and *collision* combined, including their plurals (4154), making it the most frequent reference in the corpus, consistent with Ralph et al. (2019). Although the search terms included *accident* and *collision* but not *crash* (Section 2), the ranking is not simply produced by the search: *crash* is more frequent than *collision*, which was a search term.

Given its frequency and the critical attention the term has received in research and reporting guidelines (Active Travel Academy, 2021; Ralph et al., 2019), the analysis first examines the singular *accident* in depth, through its collocates and concordance lines (Section 3.1). Section 3.2 then compares these patterns with the other references to road collisions.

Accident

The study considers the 76 lexical collocates among the top 100 collocates of *accident* (Section 2), grouped into themes of related meaning or function (Table 2), and analyses selected collocates further (Baker, 2023). Each collocate's LogDice score and co-occurrence frequency with *accident* are given in parentheses.

Table 2. Thematic categories of the lexical collocates among the top 100 collocates of *accident* (LogDice; co-occurrence frequency)

	Collocates
Traffic	*car* (9.27; 2423), *road* (8.66; 1393), *traffic* (8.03; 590), *motor* (4.61; 45), *vehicle* (4.60; 50)
Occurrence	*involved* (7.28; 341), *happened* (5.45; 91), *involving* (5.07; 62), *caused* (4.96; 61), *cause* (3.89; 29), *occurred* (3.80; 25)
Death	*killed* (7.68; 518), *died* (7.62; 576), *fatal* (6.49; 172), *dies* (5.15; 65), *death* (5.04; 89)
Severity	*serious* (6.24; 160), *tragic* (5.39; 78), *horrific* (5.17; 65), *minor* (4.86; 53), *terrible* (4.70; 48), *freak* (4.33; 35), *bad* (4.12; 35), *tragically* (4.09; 30), *seriously* (3.95; 29), *badly* (3.83; 26), *major* (3.79; 27)
Impact	*injured* (6.27; 161), *left* (6.03; 174), *injuries* (5.64; 110), *suffered* (4.88; 60), *paralysed* (4.75; 48), *injury* (4.51; 47), *result* (4.40; 41), *sustained* (4.34; 37), *hurt* (4.16; 33), *survived* (4.03; 30)
Body parts	*leg* (4.69; 49), *brain* (4.07; 34), *neck* (3.88; 27), *arm* (3.88; 27)
Time	*after* (7.11; 744), *following* (6.46; 191), *ago* (5.80; 121), *years* (5.45; 165), *when* (5.40; 241), *last* (5.32; 130), *before* (5.25; 119), *while* (5.21; 113), *since* (4.96; 76), *months* (4.82; 67), *yesterday* (4.71; 58), *July* (4.25; 39), *August* (4.16; 37), *earlier* (4.14; 35)
Location	*near* (5.70; 111), *scene* (5.18; 77), *hospital* (4.71; 66), *Paris* (3.89; 28)
Humans	*his* (5.70; 525), *aged* (5.64; 107), *son* (4.77; 64), *I* (4.70; 365), *driver* (4.67; 57), *wife* (4.53; 54), *victims* (4.41; 42), *victim* (4.34; 39), *duke* (3.88; 28), *we* (3.82; 88), *they* (3.78; 90)
Insurance	*claims* (4.76; 57), *compensation* (4.08; 31), *fault* (4.07; 30)
Miscellaneous	*in* (7.07; 3927), *report* (4.39; 42), *rates* (3.79; 25)

Table 2 shows the themes on which newspapers focus when reporting road collisions. Traffic is expected, since *car*, *road*, *traffic*, *motor*, and *vehicle* appear in the search terms used to compile the corpus. Collocates in Time and Location (e.g., *after*, *following*, *last*, *near*, *scene*) show when and where events occur, which suggests a focus on consequences and factual reporting. Humans suggests an interest in personal narratives, with references to age (*aged*), family members (*son*, *wife*), and pronouns (*we*, *I*). Reports also include insurance-related words such as *claims*, *compensation*, and *fault*.

Table 2 also shows a focus on dramatic and negative aspects of road collisions. Negativity is a well-known news value (Bednarek & Caple, 2017; Bell, 1991), and Death, Severity, and Impact include many dramatic and negative words (e.g., *killed*, *tragic*, *suffered*). Collisions involving death or injury therefore seem more likely to be reported than minor ones. In Severity, only *minor* refers to less serious collisions, and its 53 concordance lines describe collisions without fatalities or serious injuries.

The analysis below examines the collocates in Death, Severity, Impact, and Occurrence, drawing on other themes where relevant (e.g., *car* in the analysis of *killed*).

Death

Killed and *died* are the fourth and fifth most typical collocates of *accident* (518 and 576 co-occurrences). Both describe events with participants, but *killed* requires an agent to perform the act. Its concordance lines can therefore show how the participants are represented.

Of the 518 concordance lines of *killed* near *accident*, 53 were excluded as unreal (e.g., film and television), non-road, or not related to *accident*, leaving 465. These overwhelmingly report single events, in which individuals are killed in a particular collision. The passive is the most frequent structure (430 lines, 92.5%), and the active appears in only 35 (7.5%). Passives put the focus on the victims, who become the sentence subject, and can leave the agent unstated, as in Example 1.

Example 1

Wizard player Rasual Butler has been killed in a car accident alongside his wife. (*Independent*, 31 January 2018)

Example 1 also shows the most frequent pattern in these lines, *killed in* followed by a reference to road collisions (e.g., *car accident*), which appears 423 times (91.0%). Although most lines are passive, the preposition here is *in*, which introduces the event, rather than *by*, which would introduce an agent. *In* is also the eighth most typical collocate of *accident* (3927 co-occurrences; Table 2). This pattern has the effect of leaving blame unassigned, as the focus moves from the agent of the killing to the fatal event itself.

On the other hand, the active voice may show how newspapers assign blame, since it names an agent. In 30 of the 35 active lines, however, the agent of *killed* is a reference to road collisions (Example 2). Referring to road collisions as killers likewise has the effect of not assigning blame to humans. In Example 2, the neutral verb *involved* (Section 3.1.3) also attributes no responsibility, so only *the crash* seems responsible.

Example 2

She was involved in a fatal car accident. The crash killed 69-year-old driver Kim Howe and injured four others. (*Sun*, 7 March 2019)

The other 5 active lines blame the driver or a cause of death more directly, but tend to explain rather than criticise. A report about Princess Diana's 1997 crash, for instance, expresses blame by describing the driver as drunk (*Drunk driver killed Diana*), without treating this as a serious issue or connecting it to a larger pattern.

Died, by contrast, implies a natural event without mention of a cause, and its subject is the victim. Its most frequent pattern is *died in* (458 lines, 79.5%) followed by a reference to road collisions (Example 3).

Example 3

They had two daughters: Marianne, who died in a car accident in 2001, and Adrienne, who has worked in marketing and survives her. (*Times*, 2 December 2017)

Other prepositions used are *after* (30 times) and *following* (23 times), as in Example 4, which refers to the victim by age, as *an 11-year-old girl*. Extending the line shows that she *was hit by a wheel that flew off a Land Rover Discovery*, but what seems newsworthy is the lives saved rather than the fatal collision, as the headline *Our girl saves 4 lives* shows.

Example 4

An 11-year-old girl who died after a freak road accident has helped save the lives of four people through organ donation. (*Mirror*, 6 May 2018)

Both verbs show a focus on individuals rather than underlying causes or general patterns, which indicates episodic rather than thematic reporting. The people reported may be individuals or groups, referred to by nomination, social role, age, or gender (Examples 1–4).

Death with *accident* also shows a focus on individuals, through the structure [someone's *death* + *in* + a reference to road collisions] in 60 lines (67%). These mention the death in passing rather than as the focus of the article, as in Example 5, from an article about a father's message to US President Donald Trump.

Example 5

A Tennessee father bought a Super Bowl advertisement slot in West Palm Beach, Florida to send a message to US President Donald Trump about his daughter's death in a car accident. (*Independent*, 5 February 2018)

Such articles seem less concerned with the collision or the death than with how it influences someone else's life or actions. Road collisions are mentioned even in reports that are not about them, and these passing mentions might contribute to societal tolerance of this threat, making it appear part of normal (modern) life.

Finally, *fatal* modifies a reference to road collisions in 160 lines (93%), typically when the collision results in death (see Example 2). This systematic use points to a wider pattern of dramatic description, examined in Section 3.1.2.

Severity and Impact

Severity contains adjectives and adverbs that describe intensity (e.g., *serious*), express subjective evaluation (e.g., *terrible*), or indicate the extent of damage (e.g., *major*). *Serious* ranks 14th among the collocates of *accident*. It modifies a reference to road collisions in 125 lines (78%), as in "a serious car accident" (*Guardian*, 2 May 2018), and *injuries* in a further 15 (9%), as in "suffered serious injuries in a car accident" (*Independent*, 26 June 2019).

Newspapers use other modifiers consistently to represent road collisions as dramatic events. Each of the following modifies a reference to road collisions in most of its lines: *horrific* (94%), *freak* (91%), *tragic* (86%), *terrible* (83%), and *major* (70%), and to a lesser extent *bad* (46%). They are used mainly when collisions cause death or severe injury, as in "the tragic teenage couple who lost their lives after a horrific car accident" (*Mirror*, 30 March 2017). *Tragically* appears only in the context of death (all 30 lines), modifying *killed* or *died* in 27 of them, while *seriously* (all 29 lines) and *badly* (23 of 26) report injuries.

Impact covers physical effects (e.g., *injured*, *paralysed*) and outcomes such as survival and long-term effects (e.g., *suffered*, *left*). As with *killed*, the most frequent structure for *injured* is the passive followed by *in* and a reference to road collisions (137 lines, 85%), as in "his mother was seriously injured in a car accident" (*Times*, 24 June 2017). With *left*, road collisions are often the agent that leaves people dead or injured (134 lines, 77%), as in "the accident … which left him with a broken

neck, punctured lung and 30 fractures" (*Times*, 26 August 2018). *Injuries* is most often followed by *in* and a reference to road collisions (43 lines, 39%), and almost half its lines (51 of 110) carry dramatic modifiers such as *serious*, *severe*, *catastrophic*, and *devastating*. Injury descriptions often name body parts (the theme Body parts in Table 2). Together, Severity and Impact show that newspapers report road collisions through their consequences, and describe both the collisions and the injuries they cause in dramatic terms.

Occurrence

Occurrence consists mainly of verbs that report the happening of road collisions (*happened*, *occurred*) and causation or involvement (*caused*, *involved*, *involving*). These verbs show a systematic pattern in which blame and responsibility are rarely attributed. *Happened* (91 times) and *occurred* (25 times) are neutral verbs that focus on time and place. Example 6 reports that three people were *seriously injured* but assigns no responsibility. Instead, it focuses on where and when the accident *happened*.

Example 6

Two women and a man have been seriously injured after a serious car crash near a holiday park. The accident happened on the A81 at the entrance to the Trossachs Holiday Park, near Gartmore, at 8.55pm on Sunday. (*Metro*, 29 August 2017)

The absence of blame is probably clearest with the lemma INVOLVE (419 times), which identifies who and what were part of the collision without assigning agency. In 323 of the concordance lines of *involved* (95%), the pattern is *involved in* followed by a reference to road collisions. The two uses of *involved* in Example 7 are blame-free and neutral.

Example 7

Six-times Paralympic champion David Weir is recovering at home after he was involved in a car accident yesterday. The wheelchair-racer was driving when he was involved in an accident with another car in south London. (*Times*, 13 December 2018)

Unlike *involved*, *caused* (61 lines) might be expected to name a cause, especially a human one. The most frequent pattern does refer to humans (25 lines), but 10 of these concern unreal collisions (e.g., in film reviews), and the remaining 15 refer to humans less directly. In 7 of them, newspapers echo an official investigation or court decision that someone caused a collision. Responsibility is then attributed to a person, but on the basis of the official finding (Example 8, with *killed* in the active voice).

Example 8

A pensioner who ran over and killed his 14-month-old great-grandson was found by an inquest to have caused death by road traffic accident. (*Times*, 15 June 2017)

A further 6 lines refer to unacceptable behaviour, such as texting while driving, and 2 to a celebrity interview about their past. Example 9 is the only line in the concordance of *caused* that indicates thematic reporting, as it uses statistics to highlight an underlying cause of road collisions.

Example 9

The figures show one road accident in eight is caused by the driver texting at the wheel. (*Sun*, 5 October 2017)

Excluding 2 irrelevant lines, the others refer either to what caused a road collision (17 lines), as in "a road accident caused by a falling tree" (*Times*, 21 December 2019), or to what a road accident caused (16 lines), such as injuries or traffic chaos in a specific area. Both indicate episodic reporting. The latter, like Example 2 and the uses of *left* (Section 3.1.2), represent road collisions as actors in the event.

The remaining line is an exception. It comes from a *Guardian* article (29 November 2018) about a man who, at 19, "caused a freak traffic accident in which a woman lost her life" and who now speaks to others in similar situations. Here, responsibility is attributed to a driver who admits fault and accepts it.

Comparing References to Road Collisions

Section 3.1 analysed *accident* in depth, looking at how newspapers use the word and at the words and contexts around it. Offering the same account for each reference to road collisions is beyond the scope of this paper. It is possible, however, to compare the main findings with the other terms, *crash* and *collision*, and with the plural forms. They are compared on three points: where they appear (headline or body), how *killed* is construed with each (both shown in Table 3), and the kind of reporting in which the plurals occur.

Table 3. Comparison of references to road collisions: frequency, headline position, and *killed* with each term

	accident	*crash*	*collision*	*accidents*	*crashes*	*collisions*
Frequency and position						
Frequency	5648	2442	1192	1891	322	198
Per million words	1325.4	573.1	279.7	443.8	75.6	46.5
In headlines	196 (3.5%)	563 (23.1%)	82 (6.9%)	52 (2.7%)	53 (16.5%)	5 (2.5%)
Killed with each term						
Concordance lines	518	253	75	96	23	16
Excluded lines	53	21	1	6	2	0
Included lines	465	232	74	90	21	16
Passive	430 (92.5%)	191 (82.3%)	69 (93.2%)	87 (96.7%)	19 (90.5%)	16 (100%)
Active: term as subject	30 (6.5%)	37 (15.9%)	5 (6.8%)	3 (3.3%)	2 (9.5%)	0
Active: person as subject	5 (1.1%)	4 (1.7%)	0	0	0	0
Killed in + term	423 (91.0%)	172 (74.1%)	64 (86.5%)	78 (86.7%)	16 (76.2%)	13 (81.3%)

Note. Percentages for headlines are of each term's total frequency, and those for *killed* are of included lines (see Section 2).

As noted in Section 3, *accident* is the most frequent reference to road collisions in the corpus, followed by *crash*. A closer look at where newspapers place these terms shows that *crash* and *crashes* appear in headlines far more often than the other terms (Table 3). In headlines, *crash* outnumbers *accident* by almost three to one, the reverse of their order in the corpus as a whole. The high frequency of *accident* therefore comes mainly from the body of articles, while newspapers prefer *crash* in headlines. This may be because *crash* is shorter and more dramatic than the other terms, and so attracts attention.

Reporting guidelines recommend avoiding *accident*, at least until the facts are known, and using *crash* or *collision* instead, as these leave the question of responsibility open (Active Travel Academy, 2021). *Crash* in particular carries a dramatic sense that may affect how seriously readers perceive the event. The term alone, however, does not seem to change how these events are constructed at the grammatical level. When *killed* collocates with any of the six forms, the passive is the most frequent structure, at over 90% for every term except *crash* (82.3%). Even with *crash*, the active does not bring in the agent. In 15.9% of the lines the term itself is the subject, mostly in a relative clause such as "Tragic Orla dies two days after car crash that killed her pal" (*Mirror*, 7 June 2017). The person responsible stays in the background, appearing at most as someone "involved in" the crash: "Trump defends diplomat's wife involved in car crash that killed British teenager" (*Independent*, 9 October 2019). *Killed in* is less frequent with *crash* (74.1%) than with the other terms mainly because *crash* is more often the subject. One agentless construction replaces another, and the preference for referring to the location or circumstances (*in*) rather than the agent remains, as with *accident*. Active sentences with a person as subject are under 2% for *accident* and *crash* and absent for the other terms. This suggests that the agent, the driver, tends to be absent around all these references.

The plural forms are used differently. Of the 90 lines in which *killed* collocates with *accidents*, 72 (80%) occur in thematic content. They report statistics and trends ("160 people were killed in reported road accidents in Scotland" [*Metro*, 20 June 2019]) or treat road death as a general issue ("far too many people are injured and killed in road accidents every day" [*Times*, 29 May 2018]). The same holds for *collisions* (14 of 16). *Crashes* is the exception: only 9 of its 21 lines are thematic, and the other 12 lines are round-ups of several events ("FIVE people were killed in separate crashes yesterday" [*Mirror*, 12 September 2017]). With the singular forms, by contrast, almost all lines refer to a single event: only about 1% of included lines for each term are generic, as in "far more likely to be killed in a road accident than in a terrorist attack" (*Telegraph*, 27 December 2019). General factors in road deaths, such as alcohol, mobile phone use, speed, and seatbelt use, are named more often in the plural lines than in the singular ones.

4. Discussion

The findings confirm, on a larger scale, patterns reported in other national contexts. As in Ralph et al. (2019), *accident* is the most frequent reference to road collisions, and, as in studies of agency in road collision reporting (Fevyer & Aldred, 2022; Magusin, 2017; te Brömmelstroet, 2020), drivers are largely absent from the clause: when *killed* collocates with *accident*, 92.5% of lines are passive, and 91.0% follow the pattern *killed in* + collision noun. Whereas earlier studies analysed samples of up to a few hundred articles, the corpus approach shows how routinely this construction recurs across 5434 articles, and identifies the preposition *in* as a small but systematic means by which the event, rather than an agent, becomes the focus.

The comparison in Section 3.2 shows that this agentless grammar is not tied to *accident*. With all six forms, *killed* is construed mostly in the passive. Where the active occurs, the subject is usually the collision itself, and a person is the subject in under 2% of lines. Reporting guidelines recommend replacing *accident* with *crash* or *collision* (Active Travel Academy, 2021), and the replacement may remove the implication that the event was unexpected or unpreventable. However, *killed in a crash* places the driver no closer to the clause than *killed in an accident*: changing the noun addresses the lexical level of reporting but not the grammatical one. The same guidelines also advise referring to drivers rather than their vehicles (Active Travel Academy, 2021), and the present findings suggest that this advice, which concerns grammar rather than vocabulary, has the greater potential to change how responsibility is represented. This is supported by Goddard et al. (2019), who found that driver-focused language reduced victim blaming and increased the blame readers attributed to drivers.

Crash, in turn, is the headline term. Although second to *accident* in the corpus as a whole, it outnumbers *accident* in headlines by almost three to one, while *accident* is used mainly in the body of articles. The reference that first presents the event to readers is therefore more often *crash*. An analysis of *accident* alone, the term that has received most critical attention, would miss this division of labour between headline and body, which also links term choice to the dramatic language discussed below.

A further contrast concerns the level at which causes are named. With the singular forms, the *killed* lines report the deaths of individuals in particular collisions, consistent with the predominance of episodic reporting found in previous studies (Keliikoa et al., 2022; Ralph et al., 2019; te Brömmelstroet, 2020). With the plural forms, by contrast, most lines report statistics and trends, and it is here that general factors such as alcohol, mobile phone use, and speed are named more often. Thematic content is therefore present in British newspapers, as Keliikoa et al. (2022) also found in Hawai‘i, but in the lines analysed here it is attached mainly to the plural forms rather than to the singular forms. This matters because thematic framing has been found to increase support for structural solutions such as infrastructure improvements (Goddard et al., 2019). Reporting road danger as a statistical problem while presenting individual collisions as isolated events may limit how far readers connect the two.

Newspapers also use dramatic language when reporting death and injury, an aspect less often discussed in the literature. Modifiers such as *horrific*, *tragic*, and *freak* consistently describe the severity and impact of road collisions, and the themes Death, Severity, Impact, and Humans correspond to the news values of Negativity, Superlativeness, Impact, and Personalisation (Bednarek & Caple, 2017). Since road collisions are frequent, such language may help construct their newsworthiness, and may be legitimate where death or severe injury is concerned. However, Lucas, Alonso, Faus, and Javadinejad (2024) point out that news with low emotional intensity might not attract readers' attention, while too high a level of aggressiveness may lead audiences to reject the message. Habitual dramatisation may therefore lose its effect over time.

These patterns can also be situated within the wider culture of automobility, in which the car is the most common form of transport and is framed as a necessity associated with convenience and freedom (Borowy, 2013). In this context, the risks of driving are more easily accepted as an inevitable trade-off, and restrictions are often resisted as constraints on freedom rather than as safety interventions (Meyer, 2011). Journalists are part of the same car-dependent society and may identify with drivers as ordinary citizens rather than as agents of risk. Attributing direct blame may then seem to hold the public, and at times oneself, responsible. The economic weight of the automotive sector, about 12% of UK manufacturing output (Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, 2023), and the press's reliance on advertising may form part of the same context, although whether such ties influence reporting cannot be established from news texts alone. Together, these factors may help explain why constructions that background agency persist, so that road danger appears normal rather than a systemic public health problem.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown how British newspapers represent road collisions, in ways broadly consistent with patterns documented in other national contexts. In answer to RQ1, the most frequent reference is *accident*. Its collocates form themes related to context (Traffic, Occurrence, Time, and Location), consequences (Death, Severity, and Impact), and

Humans, and the reporting focuses on individuals and single events rather than the wider context. Two overlapping patterns are salient: the absence of blame attribution, with drivers omitted or backgrounded through the passive, the preposition *in* after *killed* or *injured*, and verbs such as *died* and *involved*; and dramatic language describing the severity and impact of collisions.

In answer to RQ2, the other references differ in where they appear but not in how agency is represented. *Crash* is the preferred headline term, while *accident* predominates in the body of articles, and with all six forms, *killed* is construed mostly in the passive, with a person rarely or never the subject. The plural forms *accidents* and *collisions* occur mostly in thematic content, and *crashes* in both thematic content and round-ups of several events; general factors in road deaths are named more often with the plural forms than with the singular ones.

The study has several limitations. First, the analysis is lexical and covers only clauses that contain a reference to road collisions, so agency in sentences that do not name the collision (e.g., *a driver hit a cyclist*) is outside its scope. Second, within this focus, *accident* was analysed in depth and the other terms only comparatively. Third, the finding on the plural forms is based on the lines in which *killed* collocates with each term, and may not hold for other verbs, such as *injured* or *died*. Fourth, *crash* was excluded from the search terms to prioritise precision, so articles that refer to road collisions only as *crashes* are not in the corpus, and the frequency of *crash* is probably underestimated. Fifth, near-identical articles in the regional editions of a title were retained, which may increase the frequency of some patterns.

Since this study examines the coverage as a whole, future research might compare how different newspapers report road collisions, for example between broadsheets and tabloids. It might also compare coverage published since the Active Travel Academy (2021) guidelines with the findings of this study. In Colombia, training journalists in good reporting practice was followed by reduced use of *accident* and more thematic reporting (Saporito et al., 2023). As one of the main sites where public understanding of road danger is formed, news media can influence whether societies recognise—or overlook—road collisions as a public problem, and scrutinising the language of that coverage is one place where change can begin.

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