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THE PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF NEWS HEADLINES' LANGUAGE (A CASE STUDY)

The readability of a news report greatly depends on the "catchy" nature of the headline. The present paper studies news headlines based on their pragmatic, semantic and syntactic peculiarities, it analyzes how the headlines are linguistically organized and what kind of attention-seeking strategies the language owns that are used in the formation of a headline. Some of the results of a social survey conducted among the non-native speakers of the English language, who follow the English press, are introduced to reveal how ordinary news readers decode the messages conveyed in the headlines.

Key words: *news headlines, attention-seeking strategies, linguistic organization of a headline, pragmatic peculiarities, semantic peculiarities, syntactic peculiarities (temporal dimensions of a headline)*

"We live under a government of men and morning newspapers". More than twenty years ago in 1995 an article having such headline appeared in "The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography" /https://www.jstor.org/ stable/4249483/. The message conveyed in the quote comes from the assumption that in the era of the overflow of information in various media sources shape the opinions of the audience, its ideas, future perspectives. Different sources of information may either motivate the audience to think analytically or have just the opposite effect – to provide already analyzed material, thus preventing people from drawing individual conclusions or to analyze the presented matters based on their subjective perceptions and abilities.

In such global status of media "government" it would be interesting to pause for a moment and to try to understand how the information is presented to us in different media sources, more particularly we are trying to aim our research at seeing whether the language by means of which news is reported in mass media plays any role in decoding the messages conveyed in the news stories.

The headline (the title given to a news article) is not an independent form of newspaper writing since its special functional and linguistic features provide sufficient basis for isolating and analyzing it as a special "genre" of journalism /Galperin, 1981/. Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines the word *headline* as "the most important item of news in a newspaper or a broadcast news bulletin, they denote a particularly notable or important piece of news", thus specifying its role, that of being more than the name given to a piece of text /OALD https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/. The Cambridge

explanatory dictionary, on the other hand, emphasizes the graphic form of the headline, defining it as "a line of words printed in large letters as the title of the newspaper or the main points of the news that are broadcast on television or radio" /CED https://dictionary.cambridge.org/.

The main functional property of a headline is to inform the reader briefly of a news story, i.e. what the text following it is going to present.

It is interesting to note that researchers single out three main functional properties of a headline:

- the attraction of a reader's attention to the stated material,
- statement about the main conceptual content of the event described,
- the formation of emotional-evaluative perception of the readers about the news story /Дехнич, Ромашина, 2010: 128/.

It follows that the headlines as the strongest propositions of the news story are supposed to have such reasonable selection of stylistic and lexical tools, that will not only be informative, but also will have emotional influence on the readers.

The main problem in understanding the headline is that it has a very distinctive language and mostly contains a high level of cultural (contextual) background, which is sometimes very difficult to grasp even for native speakers. It is difficult for the writer as well to avoid ambiguity while reconciling facts and attention-seeking strategies.

In terms of vocabulary, i.e. the lexical features of a headline, there are several points to be singled out:

- a group of headlines are summary of the information contained in the news items or article,
- headlines are sometimes abundant with emotionally colored words and phrases,
- in order to attract the readers' attention, headline writers often deliberately break up set expressions or deform special terms. It can be considered as a journalistic rather than linguistic trick to produce strong emotional effects.

In terms of syntax, there is a bunch of syntactic patterns used in headlines:

- full declarative sentences,
- interrogative sentences,
- nominative sentences,
- elliptical sentences (in such headlines the auxiliary verbs, subjects, articles can be omitted),
- verbal phrases – infinitive, participial and gerundial,
- questions in the form of statements,
- complex sentences /Galperin, 1981/.

Those lexical and syntactic features of headlines are applied both in order to contribute to the economy principle of a language and as an attention-grabbing strategy in news headlines. Later in the present paper, we will analyze their pragmatic influence on the readers revealed in a social survey.

V. Dijk covering the topic of news syntax states that rarely one can find sentences consisting of a simple clause in a news report. According to him, most sentences are complex, with several embedded clauses and nominalizations and express several propositions /van Dijk, 1988b: 77/.

There are also a number of linguistic deviations that are applied by a journalist in order to make a headline:

- ambiguity,
- omission of punctuation,
- unnecessary capitalization,
- neologisms,
- homophones,
- ungrammatical sentences,
- omission of verbs,
- omission of subjects of the sentences /Prakash, 2017: 858-870/.

Such deviations mostly do not cause any semantic changes in the headlines, but influence the readers pragmatically: they arise the readers' interest in reading and getting to know the content of the report.

The procedure of the interpretation of headlines is based on three main strategies:

- semanticized strategies,
- linguocultural strategies,
- cognitive strategies.

The **semanticized** strategies are directed to the level of semantics of a language and allow to extract content-factual and content-conceptual information from the lexical and grammatical structure of a headline.

The **linguocultural** strategies are directed to the deep level of conceptual semantics and are connected to the "translation" of headlines, not namely by translating the words or expressions but by using the cultural values and peculiarities of own and foreign language community.

The **cognitive** strategies are directed to the different levels of vertical context and help to activate local and global information, signaling explicit markers to go deep into the secret layers of the meaning of a headline. The cognitive strategies of the interpretation of a headline are subdivided into two strategies – textual and contextual. The contextual strategies use the whole known information (both local and global, as well as the background information about the world) in order to develop a hypothesis regarding the meaning of the headline of an article. Textual strategies activate areas of knowledge, frames or scenarios required for meaningful interpretation of a headline /Белова, 2010: 120-121, Николаева, 2000: 425/.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned linguistic characteristics of headlines as well as the procedure of their interpretation we tried to study news articles based on their pragmatic, semantic and syntactic peculiarities. Speaking about pragmatics in news reports we should say that adjectives are supposed to

have a great power of pragmatic influence on the readers. It is generally believed that the superlative degree of an adjective in a headline guarantees a higher readability of a news report. This is a part of a journalistic technique called *sharpening* ("summing up and selection of what angle to use") which is used in a news report in order to draw the reader's attention to the specific angle or approach the journalist used /Asp, 1986, cited from Nordlund, 2003/. News reporting is a bilateral discourse, which supposes journalists' communication with the audience, so its study means analyzing the regularities appearing in both sides. In order to check the influence of adjectives and other linguistic means in headlines we conducted an experiment on the readers of news articles to see how the degrees of adjectives attract the readers' attention (the target group of our research were non-native speakers of the English language aged between 17-60, who continually follow the English press, among the participants there have been journalists, diplomats, linguists, orientalists, etc.). In three different sentences we used the three degrees of the adjective *good*. The results show that the option containing the comparative degree of an adjective has the lowest readability – 13.4%. The option with the positive degree has the highest readability (59.6%), it shows that the degree of the adjective does not matter if the headline in its content is interesting, noteworthy and informative. In this case the headline was "A really good thing happening in America". The readers explained their choice by the positive feeling and interest they experienced while reading the option. The same regularity is observed with the adjective *bad*. In this case again the participants of the survey chose the headline with more interesting information not paying attention to the degree of the adjectives used there: "What to do when you are bad at money".

Speaking about the lexicosemantic aspect in news headlines, we should say that the vocabulary of the news headlines is usually abundant with infrequent words and expressions. During many trainings of professional journalism, the trainees are given a number of headlines to match with their meanings. These meanings can be understood only by reading the lead or the main text of the news or by consulting dictionaries finding the denotative, connotative meanings of the words, their contextual peculiarities, etc. Here are some examples of headlines and their interpretations: *"POLLS RIGGED" CHARGES*, the headline is interpreted this way: *"Allegations have been made that elections results were falsified"* /https://www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?disposition=a&ID=3117/. The word *rig* means: *"to arrange or influence something in a dishonest way in order to get the result that you want"* /OALD/. In the headline the shortest of all the synonyms of the word *to falsify* is chosen, besides the word *election* is replaced with the word *poll,* which has a slightly different meaning (election – <u>a time</u> when people vote in order to choose someone for a political or official job, polls – <u>the places</u> where people vote in a political election: /https://dictionary.cambridge. org/. Obviously this is also done in order to provide briefness in the headline. Another linguistic peculiarity of this headline is the omission of passive voice

(polls rigged) and the use of the word *charge* as a noun in plural as a short synonym of *allegation.* We observe similar semantic regularity in the following example:

"*CABINET RESHUFFLE URGED*", this headline is interpreted the following way: "*Strong appeals have been made to the Prime Minister to make changes in his ministers*" / https://www.ff.umb.sk/app/cmsFile.php?disposition=a&ID=3117/.

Here the Prime Minister and his team – the ministers are replaced with the word *cabinet,* defined in the dictionary as "*a group of chosen members of a government, which is responsible for advising and deciding on government policy*" /OALD/. The word conveys the meaning of only the members, while in the headline the prime minister as a figure who has to make changes is realized, since without his command no change can be possible in the cabinet. The word *changes* is expressed in the headline with its synonym *reshuffle,* which means "*a change in the jobs that a group of people do, for example in a government*" /OALD/, so the most appropriate word was chosen to express the intention of the news writer, since the properness of a headline may greatly depend on the selection of the synonymous words, this selection contributes to the first principle of the headline – briefness. In this example the passive voice is not used but the meaning is realized.

It is also worth analyzing how the ordinary readers of newspapers feel about decoding the news headlines containing unusual vocabulary. The survey conducted shows that people mostly prefer reading the text of the report to decode the headline. The results show that the 10.5% of the readers consult dictionaries to find the definitions of the non-standard vocabulary of the news report, the 37.7% of the readers read the lead of the news story to have a hint of what the news story is about and the majority of the readers the 51.7% read the news text in order to decode the headline correctly and to get to know what the report is about.

As for the syntax in news reports, different verbal structures – infinitive, participial and gerundial phrases are used in headlines to show future, past and present events respectively. This technique is applied to express different temporal dimensions in the headline by means of verbal phrases, instead of using verb tense-forms, which will contribute to the rule of briefness in the headlines, as well as to the economy principle of the language.

The survey conducted among non-native speakers of English shows that the profession greatly matters while decoding the temporal period expressed in the headline. Here the linguistic intuition is an important factor, which is generally typical of the people, who are professional in linguistics, other professionals (such as journalists, diplomats, etc.) have some difficulties in decoding the headlines with verbal phrases. Those who continually follow the English press and are attentive enough to observe this regularity of such phrases in the headlines and their further elaboration in the lead or in the main text are able to differentiate the three temporal dimensions in the headlines.

The object of experimentation was the headline "Dutch railfirm to apologize for deporting Jews". Only 27.9% of the readers could intuitively guess that the

headline shows future action and those readers were mainly linguists. The majority (46.6%) of the readers considered this headline to be a present action and most of them were journalists (around 70%), not linguists.

Our survey shows that gerundial phrases used to indicate present action and participial constructions used to indicate past actions can be intuitively guessed by the readers (both linguists and non-linguists).

The headline "Milk drinkers turning to powder" is guessed by the 51.7% of the readers to indicate a present action, while 6.03% thought it to be a past action according to the rule that gerundial phrases are usually used to show past actions in the patterns like *regret doing something*, *remember doing something* etc. and 42.2% thought it to be a future action saying that the present continuous (which is mostly associated with gerund by non-linguists) is also used to indicate future actions.

The headline "Thieves caught in a shop" is guessed by the 70.5% of the readers to be a past action. The 25.8% of the readers thought it to be a present action explaining that they could not guess whether the auxiliary verbs *are* or *were* are ellipted. The rest 3.5% thought it to be a future action saying that they simply did not know English well.

A number of factors can influence the readability of a news report. These factors are mostly linguistic, however there are several extra-linguistic factors as well that should be taken into consideration by the daily readers of news articles.

Firstly, the layout of the headline matters greatly, as far as the number of the readers who would pay attention to the headline and accordingly read it quite often is dependent on the layout itself. The survey conducted shows that the headlines written in capital letters have higher readability than those with small letters. We experimented the same headline "Eight dead in undercover Israeli operation" in three different ways and the results are as follows:

The headline "Eight Dead in Undercover Israeli Operation" had 31.6% readability, in contrast to the option written all with capital letters and had 40% readability. The readers explained their choice saying that capital letters show urgency and importance that is why they give preference to that option.

Pictures and other materials are also used in news reports. Sometimes it is mandatory, still often they are used intentionally as an attention-grabbing strategy and do not have much to do with the text. We experimented the news article *"Post-soviet world: what you need to know about Armenia",* enhanced with a picture depicting mount Ararat, Ararat valley and Khor-Virap monastery. The text tells about Armenia as the poorest country in the Caucasus. The readers were supposed to anticipate the content of the text after reading the headline and seeing the picture. The results showed that the option "Armenia: landscape, history, politics" gained 70.9% choices. The readers tried to guess the content of the text from the *picture*. Only 17.09 % of the readers asked for the text to give an accurate answer to the question; 7.6% of the readers paid attention to the expression "Post-soviet" and connected it to the option "The independence of Armenia", the rest of the respond-

ents (4.02%) chose the option "Armenia as the poorest country in Caucasus".

Having described the basic linguistic organization of news headlines and the way the ordinary readers decode the messages provided in them, we can conclude in general that language has several tricks by means of which headlines are formed by the journalists in order to provide higher readability of news articles. The superlative degree of the adjective is supposed to rise interests among the readers more than the positive and comparative degrees, while our survey shows that the overall meaning of the headline and its positive nature is more important to the readers than the degree of the adjective. In order to understand the complex vocabulary of headlines, news readers mostly read the text of the news report, not many of them consult dictionaries to find the definitions of separate words or expressions. The ordinary readers of news articles need well-developed linguistic intuition in order to understand in which temporal dimension (present, past or future) the events take place. The understanding of news headlines of the ordinary news readers, who learn English as a second foreign language is a bit difficult process because of the complex structure and vocabulary of news headlines, so the readers should either know the linguistic structure of headlines beforehand or read so many news articles and pay attention to the headlines and their elaborations in the texts so that they get used to their linguistic peculiarities, thus developing a linguistic intuition for a proper understanding of news headlines.

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Գ. ԳԱՍՊԱՐՅԱՆ – *Նորությունների վերնագրերի լեզվաբանական կառուցվածքի հանրային ընկալումները.* – Նորությունների «կարդացվածությունը» մեծապես կախված է վերնագրերի գրավչությունից։ Հոդվածը ուսումնասիրում է նորությունների վերնագրերը՝ ըստ վերջիններիս լեզվագործաբանական, իմաստաբանական և շարահյուսական առանձնահատկությունների, և թե ուշադրությունը գրավող ինչպիսի լեզվական միջոցներ են կիրառվում վերնագրերը ստեղծելիս։ Հոդվածում նաև վերլուծվում են անգլերենը որպես երկրորդ օտար լեզու տիրապետողների շրջանում իրականացված սոցհարցման արդյունքներից մի քանիսը, որոնք վեր են հանում այն ձևերը, որոնց միջոցով ընթերցողները փորձում են հասկանալ նորությունների վերագրերը։

Բանալի բառեր. նորությունների վերնագրեր, վերնագրի լեզվական կառուցվածք, վերնագրի լեզվագործաբանական առանձնահատկություններ, իմաստային առանձնահատկություններ, շարահյուսահական առանձնահատկություններ (ժամանակային չափումները վերնագրերում)

Г. ГАСПАРЯН – *Общественное восприятие языка заголовков новостных статей.* – «Читаемость» новостных сообщений во многом зависит от «броского» характера заголовка. В настоящей статье изучаются заголовки новостей на основе их прагматических, семантических и синтаксических особенностей; анализируется, как они организованы лингвистически и какие стратегии привлечения внимания читателя имеет язык. Представлены некоторые результаты социального опроса, проведенного среди неносителей английского языка, которые показывают, как читатели новостей декодируют сообщения, передаваемые в заголовках.

Ключевые слова: заголовки новостей, стратегии привлечения внимания, лингвистическая организация заголовок, прагматические особенности заголовок, семантические особенности заголовок, синтаксические особенности заголовок (временные измерения в заголовке)