DECODING THE LANGUAGE OF MEDIA HEADLINES: 
ANALYSIS OF STYLISTIC FEATURES

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Purpose. The article focuses on the multifaceted functions of headlines in news media. Headlines not only provide information but also play a crucial role in capturing readers' attention and influencing their interpretation of news stories. The study aims to uncover the mechanisms through which media shape public opinion and construct narratives by examining the stylistic features employed in headlines.

Methods. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between language, style, and meaning in news headlines, the researchers adopt a multi-dimensional research approach. This includes using corpus linguistics, pragmatic analysis, discourse analysis, and stylistic analysis. The study focuses on a sample of prominent daily newspapers: The Guardian (British edition), The Washington Post, The Economist, and The Wall Street Journal.

Results. The analysis of the sample headlines reveals a wide range of stylistic devices utilized in news media. Stylistic features such as allusions, antithesis, irony, metaphors, personification, and rhetorical questions are commonly employed to convey information concisely and create an engaging impact. The findings indicate that alliteration is the most frequently used stylistic device, serving to create catchy and memorable effects. Metaphors rank second, as they effectively convey complex ideas in a concise manner while creating vivid imagery. Rhetorical questions are the third most frequently used stylistic device that engages readers and encourages them to think about specific issues. Other notable devices include personification, quotation marks, irony, and antithesis.

The research findings have significant implications for understanding the persuasive power of media headlines and their influence on public opinion.

Conclusion. By employing a multidimensional research approach and analyzing a sample of prominent daily newspapers, the study reveals the prevalence of various stylistic devices in headline construction. Alliteration, metaphors, and rhetorical questions are among the most frequently employed devices.

Key words: media headlines, stylistic devices, attention-grabbing, enhancer, the lead, means of navigating information.
In the field of media articles, headlines serve as gatekeepers, determining which stories individuals choose to engage with and shaping their understanding of current events. It is a vital component of journalistic activity, inseparably linked to the essence of the material, covering not only its content but also stylistic and functional aspects.

The headline initiates a conversation between the author and the reader, serving as its starting point. The level of attractiveness or attention-grabbing quality directly affects the effectiveness of communication. Therefore, choosing the most successful headline for an article is highly important.

The role of headlines has significantly transformed since their introduction, becoming an irreplaceable element of any publication. In the era of modern media, headlines serve not only as a means of navigating or providing information about a text but also play a crucial role in attracting readers’ attention and shaping their perception of news stories. Studying the stylistic devices of headlines provides valuable insight into the methods used by the media to convey information, evoke emotions, and shape public opinion. The careful selection of words, sentence structures, and rhetorical devices in headlines can evoke curiosity, generate emotional responses, or even manipulate readers’ perspectives.

Scientific value of the research is indisputable as headlines are designed to stand out among the vast amount of information available, competing for readers’ limited attention. Thus, understanding the strategies employed in crafting attention-grabbing headlines provides insights into effective communication techniques. Furthermore, analyzing media headlines fosters media literacy, which is crucial in today’s information-rich society. Media literacy enables the readers to navigate through the vast amount of information, evaluate its credibility, and critically assess the biases, intentions, and perspectives embedded in media messages. Understanding the techniques employed in crafting headlines enhances their ability to discern reliable information from misinformation or sensationalism.

The study offers a large-scale dataset that allows for a more thorough analysis of stylistic devices employed in headlines, providing a more representative understanding of their usage and patterns.
By collecting and compiling a database of headlines, this research amasses a vast and diverse range of examples from various sources and contexts, serves as a valuable resource for future research in the field of stylistic devices and represents a novel contribution to the field of stylistic devices in headlines. It enhances our understanding of stylistic practices in media headlines and contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the field.

2. Recent Researches Analysis

The headlines were a subject of many studies. Some researchers (Kuiken, J., Schuth, A., Spitters, M., & Marx, M., 2017) consider headlines as clickbaits that attract readers and encourage them to click on the article. They studied the elements often incorporated in clickbaits such as questions, numbers, forward referencing, spectacularization, and negativity and found significant differences between them in terms of length, signal words, pronouns, sentimental words, quotes, and questions. Ya. Hadidi, I. Taghiyev, S. Ahmadova (Hadidi Ya., Ilham Taghiyev I., Ahmadova S., 2022) state that headlines are the connectors between reader and text; almost half of the headlines have flattening effect and most of them have an eye out for ‘tactical incompleteness strategy’ as an essential and all-important ingredient in headline construction. Another study (Nypadymka A., 2023) demonstrates the distinction between bright and interesting headlines and clickbait headlines. It is believed that catchy and interesting headlines accurately reflect the content of an article and grab readers’ attention without misleading them, as well as maintain accuracy and avoid over-sensationalization. In contrast, clickbait headlines are sensationalized or misleading, designed to encourage readers to click on an article, and may sometimes exaggerate or distort content to attract readers’ attention. Daniel Dor (Dor D., 2003) argues that headlines strike a balance between contextual impact and processing effort, guiding readers to construct the most suitable interpretation. The analysis emphasizes the importance of understanding readers’ knowledge, beliefs, expectations, and cognitive styles in crafting successful headlines. Moreover, I. Dyrda, M. Maloivan, O. Tomilina (Dyrda I.A., Maloivan M.V., Tomilina A.O., 2023) claim that headlines can vary significantly across genres and publications. Tabloid newspapers tend to favor sensationalism and entertainment, while more serious publications tend to use more restrained and informative headlines.

According to the research results (Husak O., 2013) internet users go online not for the literary pleasure of reading but for information, most of them will never open a page if its title does not clearly communicate what it is about. They come to a website through search engines. Headlines are the first thing a user sees on a website, so search engines analyze them most thoroughly to determine whether the material is relevant to the reader's query. In addition, headlines are the main source of information for readers, as 60–80% of users do not read the text of news or articles at all, but get the necessary information only from the headlines.

Headlines are, according to specialists (Shaeda Isani, 2011), the most widely read part of a newspaper – five times more than the body copy – since headlines are scanned not only by initial purchasers but also by the innumerable people in their immediate vicinity.

Qais Abdul Majeed Abdulla and Younis Mehdi Salih’s study (Qais Abdul Majeed Abdulla, Younis Mehdi Salih, 2012) investigates the linguistic features of headlines, compares them to ordinary language and concludes that the language of headlines differs from ordinary language in terms of vocabulary and structure. They state that headlines incorporate specific techniques like abbreviations, special vocabulary, and ambiguity to capture readers' attention. In the article “Linguistic and Extralinguistic Aids for Reconstruction and Interpretation of Metaphors in Headlines” (Sabine De Knop, 1985: 243–261) the significance of metaphors in headlines and their impact on the readers’ interpretation and understanding of the news are emphasized. The author explores various linguistic and extralinguistic elements that assist in reconstructing and interpreting metaphors used in headlines. She concludes that these aids may include lexical choices, syntactic structures, visual cues, cultural references, and contextual information, and discusses how metaphors serve as powerful tools for condensing
and communicating multifaceted messages effectively. Metaphors can reflect and reinforce societal values, ideologies, and beliefs, shaping readers’ perceptions and attitudes. The article emphasizes the importance of readers’ background knowledge, cognitive processes, and inferential abilities in comprehending metaphoric expressions efficiently.

A headline is a kind of “advertisement” for an article, a part in front of it to grab the readers’ attention. It can also be considered as the lead, an introductory section of a news story (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The article (Batrynchuk Z. et al., 2022) states that “the lead serves as the enhancer” of the information, so it is that part that enhances interest to the article. The headline should be an interest enhancement and spark interest in the article, capturing readers from the very beginning, ensuring that the content is attractive and interesting to the news readers. The headline is effective as the first step in communication between the author and the recipient to make the addressee pay attention to an important aspect of the article. It orients the reader to the relevant information, the targeted subjective instruction, and the communicative intention (Shulska N.M., Zinchuk R.S., 2021).

The aim of this research is to highlight the mechanisms through which media influence public opinion, shape social discourse, and construct narratives by studying the stylistic means employed in headlines.

3. Research methodology

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between language, style, and meaning in news headlines this study employed combined multiple approaches, including corpus linguistics, pragmatic, discourse and stylistic analysis. Corpus linguistics was used to identify stylistic patterns frequency, such as the use of specific rhetorical devices and lexical choices. Studying headlines from a pragmatic perspective involved examining their intended effects on readers and the strategies employed to engage and persuade the audience. Discourse analysis involved word choice organization, framing techniques to uncover underlying discursive strategies. Stylistic analysis was used to examine how headlines employ alliteration, metaphors, personification, quotation marks, irony, antithesis, and other devices to create aesthetic or rhetorical effects.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Stylistic Devices and Cultural Values in Modern Media Headlines

A modern media headline is one of the main components of the media text therefore much attention is paid to it. Despite its seemingly straightforward nature, the headline encompasses numerous aspects of reality, including linguistic aspects of a particular language such as syntactic and stylistic devices, the author's individual preferences, editorial position, cultural values and more.

A headline holds a prominent position within print media, capturing the reader's attention as the first point of notice. Newspaper headlines employ a diverse range of stylistic devices, such as allusions, antithesis, epithets, irony, metaphors, personification, phraseology, similes. These expressive techniques enable authors to create a distinctive portrayal of a headline that possesses significant potential.

The analysis of headlines is based on a sample of four well-known daily newspapers, namely, the British edition of The Guardian and the largest American newspapers The Washington Post, The Economist and The Wall Street Journal. The study reveals a variety of stylistic techniques used in the foreign press to draw readers’ attention to the topics under discussion.

4.2. An Analysis of Four Prominent Daily Newspapers

The headline “Trump v Biden: who’s leading the polls?” (The Economist) incorporates several stylistic devices to make it attention-grabbing and engaging. It poses a rhetorical question to the readers, “who’s leading the polls?” This technique aims to pique the curiosity of the audience and encourages them to seek an answer. The repetition of the “p” sound in “Trump” and “polls” creates an alliterative effect. Alliteration adds a rhythmic quality to the headline and makes it more memorable. The parallel structure of “Trump v Biden” emphasizes the direct opposition between the two candidates. The use of “v” instead of “versus” adds brevity and a sense of conflict to the headline. The contraction
“who’s” instead of “who is” gives the headline an informal tone. This choice makes it more relatable and accessible to readers.

The headline “3D printing and DIY: Ukraine's drone revolution” (The Economist) employs several stylistic devices. The use of the number “3” in “3D printing” adds specificity and indicates a technological advancement. It captures attention and suggests a cutting-edge innovation. The repetition of the [d] sound in “3D printing” and “DIY” creates an alliterative effect. This device adds a rhythmic quality to the headline and makes it more memorable. The colon in the headline serves as a punctuation mark that introduces and separates the two parts of the headline. It creates a sense of anticipation and signals that the second part will provide additional information or an explanation. The use of “Ukraine's” indicates ownership or association with Ukraine, emphasizing the focus of the headline on a specific location and its connection to the drone revolution. The inclusion of “drone revolution” provides a concise summary of the subject matter. It implies a significant and transformative development in the field of drones, capturing the reader's interest.

In the headline “Russia’s weaponizing of sexual violence, and Ukraine’s response, reveals a grim war of values” (The Guardian) the phrase “grim war of values,” is the metaphor that enhances the impact of the description by invoking strong imagery associated with war, thus emphasizing the gravity and intensity of the value-based conflict. This phrase typically refers to a struggle between different sets of values, principles, or ideologies that are deeply entrenched and fiercely contested. In this case a metaphor draws a comparison between two unrelated things, emphasizing the similarities between them. It suggests a situation where opposing groups or individuals hold fundamentally different beliefs, moral frameworks, or worldviews, and are engaged in a protracted battle to assert and promote their respective values. The term “grim” conveys a sense of seriousness, tension, and often implies that the conflict is difficult, unpleasant, or even tragic. The word “war” metaphorically reflects the heated nature of the confrontation, emphasizing its hostile nature and the determination of the parties involved to protect and promote their values at all costs.

The word “weaponizing” also employs a metaphor by attributing the qualities and actions associated with weaponry to the concept of sexual violence. It suggests that sexual violence is being treated as a weapon, emphasizing its intentional and strategic use for achieving specific objectives.

The stylistic devices used in the headline “Emmanuel Macron says it would be 'cynical' for Russia to pin Moscow attack on Ukraine” (The Guardian) include quotation marks, allusion, and evaluative language. The headline employs quotation marks to highlight the specific words spoken by Emmanuel Macron. By enclosing the phrase “cynical” within quotation marks, it draws attention to this evaluative term and emphasizes its significance in Macron’s statement. The evaluative term “cynical” adds a judgmental or critical tone, suggesting that Macron views such an action as morally questionable or lacking in sincerity.

The headline attributes the statement to Emmanuel Macron, indicating that he is the source of the information, which is an allusion that indicates a reference to a famous person. The inclusion of the words “Emmanuel Macron said” adds credibility and authority to the statement being made.

The headline “Ukraine war briefing: Zelenskiy says Putin trying to falsely blame Kyiv for Moscow concert attack” (The Guardian) contains irony, pointing to Putin’s accusation that he falsely accused Kyiv of attacking Moscow concert. It implies a discrepancy between fiction and reality, often resulting in an unexpected twist. The presence of irony adds complexity and poignancy to the headline, drawing attention to the contrast between the accusation and the truth.

The headline “Ukraine races to build weapons at home” (The Washington Post) personifies the country of Ukraine, suggesting that it is actively involved in a race to create weapons. Personification ascribes human qualities or actions to non-human objects, in this case, the country of Ukraine. By using personification, the headline creates a sense of urgency and determination, portraying Ukraine as an active participant in the arms production process.
The phrase “races to build” uses a metaphor comparing Ukraine's weapons development efforts to a race. The use of the word “races” implies a sense of speed, competition, and urgency. It conveys the idea that Ukraine is making considerable efforts and working quickly to develop its own weapons capabilities.

The headline “Robots Are Entering the Ukraine Battlefield” (The Wall Street Journal) personifies robots by attributing to them the action of “entering”. Personification ascribes human characteristics or actions to non-human objects, in this case, the robots. By using personification, the headline presents robots as active participants in the warfare, capable of making their own strategic moves.

The headline “In Central Europe, Czechs Go Hunting for Arms for Ukraine” (The Wall Street Journal) employs a metaphor by using the phrase “hunting for arms.” The word “hunting” suggests an active, purposeful search or pursuit, comparing the Czechs’ efforts to acquire weapons for Ukraine to a hunting expedition. This metaphorical language creates a vivid image and emphasizes the determination and resourcefulness of the Czechs in their mission.

The headline “Russia hits energy targets in Ukraine, showing need for more air defenses” (The Washington Post) contains alliteration. The headline employs alliteration with the repetition of the “t” sound in the phrase “Russia hits energy targets.” Alliteration adds a rhythm to the words and attracts attention, making them more memorable and interesting for the reader. The headline also employs irony by using the term “hits” in the context of energy targets in Ukraine. The word “hits” typically implies success or achievement, but in this context, it suggests an aggressive action or attack, emphasizing the tension or conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The use of the phrase “showing the need for more air defenses” appeals to the emphasizing by suggesting a sense of urgency and vulnerability. It implies that Russia’s actions have demonstrated the importance of strengthening defensive measures.

The word “Dire” in the headline “The Dire Cost of ‘Peace’ in Ukraine” (The Wall Street Journal) conveys a sense of urgency and seriousness, emphasizing the negative consequences associated with the so-called “peace” in Ukraine. It implies that the situation has resulted in significant hardships or dangers. The use of quotation marks around the word “peace” draws attention and indicates that the term is being used ironically or skeptically. It suggests that the situation being described as “peace” may not reflect a true, desirable state of calm but rather has negative consequences.

Similar technique is used in the headline “Is Religious Liberty 'Under Attack' in Ukraine?” (The Wall Street Journal). Quotation marks around the phrase “under attack” indicates that the term is being used in a specific or attributed sense. It suggests that there is a debate or discussion surrounding the notion of religious liberty being “under attack” in Ukraine and the idea that religious liberty is under attack is questioned and the reader is invited to find out whether it is true or fake. Moreover, the questionnaire form of the headline engages the reader and encourages them to think about the issue of religious freedom in Ukraine.

The headline “Victory in spite of all the terror” (The Wall Street Journal) uses an antithesis: this stylistic device clearly contrasts the concepts of “Victory” and “Terror”. This antithesis creates a powerful contrast and emphasizes the triumph over fear or adversity. The contrasting elements are placed in close proximity to each other for maximum effect. Its purpose is to create a sense of tension, conflict, drawing attention to the differences between the contrasting elements and inviting the reader to reflect on the contrasting ideas.

4.3. Decoding Stylistic Devices in Media Headlines: Enhancing Media Literacy and Critical Awareness

In media headlines, stylistic devices are commonly used to convey information succinctly, and create an engaging impact. According to our study alliteration is the most frequently used in headlines to create a catchy and memorable effect. Metaphors are second frequently used to make comparisons and create vivid imagery. They help convey complex ideas concisely. Headlines often use rhetorical questions to engage readers and prompt them to consider a particular issue or topic.
and they are the third frequently used stylistic devices. The three mentioned above are followed by personification, quotation marks, irony, and antithesis. Personification is used to make descriptions more vivid and engaging by giving life and personality to inanimate or non-human subjects. Headlines often use quotation marks to highlight specific words or phrases, especially when quoting someone directly. Irony is occasionally employed in headlines to create a contrast between what is expected and what actually occurs. It adds a touch of humor or emphasizes a surprising element. Finally, antithesis is used to emphasize the sharp differences between two concepts or to emphasize the importance of a certain idea.

By decoding the stylistic features employed in headlines, readers develop a critical awareness of the techniques used to shape their interpretation of news stories. Media literacy allows people to be more critical of news content and resist potential manipulation.

5. Conclusions

The aim of the research was to highlight the mechanisms through which media influence public opinion, shape social discourse, and construct narratives by studying the stylistic means employed in headlines.

Headlines in media articles are essential for capturing readers’ attention, shaping their understanding of current events, and initiating a conversation between the author and the reader. They have evolved to become powerful tools in modern media, not only providing information but also influencing readers’ perceptions, emotions, and opinions through strategic use of stylistic devices. Studying these devices offers valuable insights into how the media conveys information and constructs narratives to engage and impact the audience.

Researchers suggest that headlines can be categorized as clickbait or informative. Clickbait headlines aim to grab readers’ attention through sensationalization or misleading information, while informative headlines accurately reflect the article’s content without misleading readers. Successful headlines strike a balance between contextual impact and processing effort, considering readers’ knowledge and cognitive styles. Headlines are particularly important for online users who rely on them to decide whether to click on an article. In fact, a significant percentage of users read only headlines and get information exclusively from them. Furthermore, headlines incorporate specific linguistic features such as abbreviations and special vocabulary to capture readers’ attention. Metaphors in headlines contribute to the readers’ interpretation and understanding of the news, and they can shape readers’ perceptions and attitudes. Overall, headlines serve as advertisements and enhancers of articles, and they play a vital role in effectively communicating with readers and sparking their interest.

The analysis of the provided headlines from different news sources reveals the use of various stylistic devices that make the headlines attention-grabbing and engaging for readers. These devices include rhetorical questions, alliteration, metaphors, personification, quotation marks, irony, antithesis and more. The most frequently employed in headlines include alliteration, metaphors and rhetorical questions.

Future research directions will include exploring the linguistic properties of headlines, comparing headlines to full-text stories, and analyzing the correlation between news values and event properties described in text.

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