

How to do things with headlines: linguistic mechanisms of creating clickbaits

In this study, we explore linguistic mechanisms of creating clickbait headlines in the Russian and English languages, and determine the conditions that should be met for a headline to be efficient in drawing readers' attention. For the purpose of this study, we define a clickbait (or a misleading headline) as a headline that has several interpretations with the most obvious interpretation creating wrong, embroidered expectations about the actual content of the article. Consider (1) as an example of a clickbait.

(1) *70-year-old Bala Cynwyd man sets marathon world record* [WHYY, December 19, 2018]

After reading this headline, one may anticipate the corresponding article to speak about a 70-year-old man who beat the young at a marathon. However, the actual article the one will read if they click on this headline, is about 70-year-old Gene Dykes from the village of Bala Cynwyd who set a new record for men aged 70 to 75 – a far less sensational piece of news.

We reckon that the main aim of any clickbait is to make readers think that the situation described in a news story is more enthralling than it actually is so that they click on the headline and proceed to the corresponding media's website, and we will effectively prove it in our presentation.

Interestingly, while there are many recommendations on how to write an honest attention-catching headline (see, for example, (LaRocque, 2003) or (Thompson, 2013)), the mechanisms of creating clickbait are considerably more obscure. In this study we aspire to outline the existing mechanisms of creating misleading/clickbait headlines in the Russian and English language.

In order to achieve this goal, we created a Corpus of Newspaper Headlines – a big compilation of both “honest” and misleading headlines from various Russian and American Internet media. With the corpus, we have managed to demonstrate that even though clickbaits seem to be very diverse in their structure, there are actually 10 common strategies that all journalists use to compose misleading headlines. Each of these strategies possess some interest to the field of Formal Semantics and Pragmatics, and we plan to discuss some of them in detail in our presentation, including the so called *false implicature* strategy, which can be demonstrated by the following Russian example:

(2) *Судно, построенное для обеспечения энергетической безопасности Калининграда, ушло в Европу* [РБК,]

'Ship built to ensure energetic security for Kaliningrad sailed off to Europe'

In this example perfective form of the verb *уплыть* 'swim/sail off' causes a strong implicature that the rather important for the Russian economy ship sailed off to Europe **permanently**. Yet, in the article we find that the ship was only **temporarily** rented to EU. Thus, the particular wording of this headline triggers a *false implicature* - strong implicature which does not go in accordance to the content of the article.

These type of headlines from the corpus might serve as a good material for studying the ways implicatures are formed and used in the languages under consideration. In fact, we have already published a paper that revealed some previously undescribed context that consistently yield implicatures in the Russian language - the work is not cited for the purpose of anonymity). In this presentation, we will continue our description of new implicature-yielding contexts that exist in both languages. Moreover, we will tell about the differences in culture, language grammar, and language pragmatics that affect both the frequency and the manner of the implementation of implicatures in Russian and English news agencies.

Furthermore, we will point out a number of conditions that should be met for a headline to be efficient in drawing readers' attention.

To outline these conditions, firstly, there was conducted an experiment with 2 000 participants, which was based on the Russian material. The aim of this experiment was to define the exact condition which can make a headline seem more relevant, or more interesting. As a result, it was provide that the headlines were pragmatic- and stylistic-wise closer to the well-described genres of advertisement and oral political discourse. In the experiment we demonstrate that in order to augment the number of visits to a page, a clickbait should meet several conditions of relevance found in a number of classical studies on stylistics and pragmatics of advertising and of oral political discourse, such as (Atwood 1981; Rogers & Dearing, 1988; Carter, 1978; Goddard, 2002; Harris, Sturm, Klassen, & Bechtold, 1986).

Second, to describe the conditions, under which clickbaits are more efficient, we conducted a thorough empirical study of news agencies whose headlines were presented at the Corpus of News Headlines. As a result, it was discovered that not all types of media benefit equally from clickbait implementation. Clickbait headlines are not frequently used by either analytical news sources with reliable original content or tabloid-like media with fake news. Yet, they are mostly exploited by honest media that lack original content and tend to avoid controversial topics.

In this research we have also developed means for detailed metalinguistic description of a news agency and created a framework that allows researchers to predict metalinguistic characteristics of a media outlet based on the headline analysis.

This work is rather interdisciplinary and can prove to be useful not only for researchers in the field of Experimental Pragmatics and Theory of Communication, but also for practicing journalists and managers of various media outlets.

References

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