

## THE RHETORIC OF HEADLINES IN ROMANIAN AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE MEDIA COVERING THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT. INSIGHTS FOR JOURNALISM LITERACY

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**Abstract:** *This research examines elements of headlines' rhetoric and their role in shaping the perception of news content by the larger public. By analyzing the linguistic and contextual factors that contribute to the construction of a particular type of media discourse, the study aims to explore how headlines function not only as informative tools but also as powerful devices that influence audience interpretation. Informed by a critical discourse analysis approach to the so-called "headlinese", the study seeks to conduct a parallel exploration of headlines in Romanian and English media dedicated to the coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The study of a dataset of 250 headlines (125 in Romanian language and 125 in English) collected from the websites of Digi24® (for the Romanian corpus) and CNN® (for the English corpus), spanning from February 2022 to February 2024, identified the main semantic properties of the sample (through frequency and keyness), subsequently examining the figures of speech deployed in the construction of headlines, with the goal of creating and fostering newsworthiness. As a conclusion, this paper aims to offer insights into journalism literacy, emphasizing the need for critical engagement with headlines as a tool for better understanding the power of language in shaping public discourse. By enhancing awareness of the semantic strategies used in headline construction, this study encourages a more informed consumption of news and fosters a deeper understanding of the role language plays in modern journalism.*

**Keywords:** semantic, analysis, figures of speech, headline, conflict, Russian, Ukrainian

### 1. Introduction

In the field of journalism, headlines are critical instruments that serve as the first point of contact between the information and the reader, greatly influencing whether a piece of news is worthy of attention or can be overlooked. A well-crafted headline grabs the reader's interest, providing a summary of the story's essence while conveying its importance. In a fast-paced, information-saturated world, headlines play a pivotal role in shaping public perception and guiding readers to the content that

matters most to them. Additionally, headlines impact search engine visibility, social media engagement, and overall readership, making them essential for effective journalism and news dissemination. According to Molek-Kozakowska, headlines serve several purposes: they "introduce the issue covered in the news article, generate audience's interest in it, and indicate the news outlet's attitude towards it" [1]. In specialized literature, the rhetorical and pragmatic potential of headlines to spark the

audience's interest and create engagement [2, 3, 4] construct newsworthiness [5] and sensationalism [6] has been widely researched, with the aim of identifying the specific discourse strategies that package information and shape the public's understanding.

Critical stylistics is used as an instrument of analysis in order to identify the morphological, syntactic, and semantic characteristics of the headlines. Their location at the beginning of the news text, as well as their linguistic and graphic particularities are the main mechanisms through which headlines directly influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour of the larger and heterogenic public (with different ages, profession, cultural background, education, interests, values, lifestyle) in what regards the political, social, economic, cultural, educational etc. reality. The semantic approach of headlines in this context is oriented towards the enrichment of linguistic analyses, contributing to a better understanding of how media discourse constructs and manages shared mental models, thus facilitating a more informed and comprehensive collective social cognition. The existence of an epistemological common ground is critical for the public's understanding of the contemporary social realities, underlying the creation of a well-informed framework for filtering and interpreting news.

The present paper is part of a project entitled "The coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Polish, Romanian and English-language media: A comparative critical discourse study with recommendations for journalism training" – CORECON (<https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/>), which aims to apply the eclectic toolkit of Critical Discourse Studies to raise public awareness of the extent, techniques, and implications of media technologies and discourses regarding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, through academic publications and popularization events. Given the conflictual

nature of war news, essentially implicit in the often sensitive and polarizing nature of the topics covered, we argue that the larger audience needs to be educated in terms of how to understand and react to the various conflicting narratives or interpretations of events [7, 8, 9]. The educational purpose of the mentioned project also intends to offer some recommendations for journalism training and media literacy, which constitutes a necessary premise for preserving the democratic character of the societies in which we live, without violating the ethical principle. In the era of fake news, Ireton and Posetti point out that "While journalism is based on the exercise of freedom of expression, which is every individual's right, it is a specialized exercise which sets itself up as adhering to specific standards that mark it out from other forms of expression (e.g., poetry, public relations, advertising, disinformation, etc.)" [10].

In what concerns the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, written media represents it through a variety of lenses, often shaped by the political, geographic, and cultural perspectives of the different news outlets. Western media generally frames the conflict as an unprovoked invasion by Russia, focusing on Ukraine's sovereignty, the humanitarian crisis, and international efforts to support Ukraine. Russian media, on the other hand, tends to present the conflict as a *necessary military operation*, often justifying actions through narratives of defending Russian interests and combating Western influence [11]. Media coverage also varies in tone and focus, with some outlets emphasizing the geopolitical implications, such as energy politics, NATO involvement, and global security, while others highlight the human stories, including civilian casualties, refugee crises, and war crimes.

News that covers conflict and is constructed based on antagonism automatically captures the attention of the audience, especially through the presence of intrigue. The use of

language, imagery, storytelling, and framing can differ dramatically, influencing public opinion and shaping the broader narrative of the conflict.

## **2. Headlines**

In market-driven journalism, which by definition is audience-oriented, the focus shifts from objective reporting to producing content that attracts higher ratings, readership, or clicks, often prioritizing sensationalism, entertainment, and stories that generate strong emotions over in-depth, investigative, or socially significant journalism. Following the news is both a social experience and an informative process set in motion by headlines: “Headlines are aimed to capture the readers’ attention; to accomplish this, a large array of stylistic devices and rhetorical tricks are used. Some strategies are pragmatically motivated, while others attract the readers’ attention by using a limited number of words” [12]. Although the manner of presenting headlines has changed alongside the evolution of media, the basic form of headlines has remained the same: the language is intended to be brief, summative, and clear. The verbal economy of headlines must win the interest of the audience without, ideally, compromising the essence of the story. Headlines lure, attract the attention of the reader, and more importantly, frame a story. Well-written news turn events into stories, and headlines are the first element of this transformation. As previously mentioned, headlines are critical in grabbing the reader’s quick and undivided attention. Placed in front of the text itself (sometimes followed by the subtitle), the headline is indicative of the content, in a concise and suggestive way, being a key element that causes the reader to continue reading or give up. Sometimes, a large journalistic text can also contain intertitles, with the role of recapturing the reader’s attention.

Analyzed from a linguistic perspective, headlines prove to be a fertile ground

facilitating an informed discursive exploration leading to the identification of the linguistic resources typifying the so-called “headlines”. According to a definition provided by the “Oxford English Dictionary”, *headlines*, which was a term used for the first time in 1916, is “The condensed, elliptical, or sensationalist style of language characteristic of (especially newspaper) headlines” [13]. In his 2018 article about “The Deviant Syntax of Headlines and its Role in the Pragmatics of Headlines”, Moncomble discovered that the term *headlines* originated in a journalistic hand-written book in 1933 by two “New York Times” journalists, Garst and Bernstein [14]. Over time, the notion has been defined as a sub-genre of headlines, primarily concerned with grabbing the readers’ attention through wordplay and cryptic turns of phrase [15], or simply as “the language used in headlines” [16]. In a nutshell, headlines can be labelled as the distinctive, condensed style of writing used in titles, typically characterized by brief, impactful language [17, 18, 19].

## **3. A Stylistic Analysis of Headlines - Figures of speech**

### **3.1. Research design**

The main proposition that guides the present study is grounded in Halliday’s systemic functional model of linguistics (SFL) that pivots on the social use of language in social contexts, emphasizing language function rather than language structure [20]. According to this theory, language is a system that creates meaning and informs choices.

Against this background, we use critical stylistic instruments of analysis in order to determine and explain how the figurative language of headlines acts as a mediator between language structure and language in context. Consequently, the present study mainly aims to identify the linguistic resources and stylistic patterns deployed in the construction of headlines, in order to

present conflict-related news as attractive and interesting for the audience. We argue that this is achieved at the intersection between “the textual metafunction” of headlines (stylistic features of the language), “the ideational metafunction” (the manner in which headlines condense the news in perspective) and “the interpersonal metafunction” of headlines (how they impact the readers, shaping their attitudes regarding the social-political reality) [20]. After having located and analyzed the discursive mechanisms of style that go into the textualizing of headlines as triggers for catching readers’ attention and interest, we will pin down the prevalent similarities and differences between the figurative devices deployed in the construction of the analyzed headlines in Romanian and English. Overall, the analysis aims to shed more light on the semantic choices journalists can make use of if they aim to turn headlines into that magical wand that transforms news into stories and stories into histories.

The research question that has informed the research design is the following: *Which stylistic elements are used in Romanian and English mainstream media headlines to make them attractive to the reader/audience?* Our work hypothesis is that figures of speech (especially those based on semantics or tropes) are the stylistic elements that make headlines attractive to the readers.

### 3.2. Data Collection and Sampling

The study uses a corpus of texts compiled from the available online repository (<https://corecon.omeka.net/>) of the international project CORECON: “The coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Polish, Romanian and English-language media: A comparative critical discourse study with recommendations for journalism training” (<https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/>). The analysis was conducted on a number of 250 headlines: 125 in Romanian and 125 in English, retrieved from two mainstream

online media outlets: Digi24<sup>®</sup> (<https://www.digi24.ro>) and CNN<sup>®</sup> (<https://www.cnn.com>), respectively. Online television (part of *new media*) has an extremely high capacity to disseminate information.

The 250 analyzed titles are the headlines of conflict-related news selected according to: the relevance of the media source, based on Reuters Institute – *Digital News Report 2022, 2023, 2024* [21, 22, 23], which situate the two selected platforms on the second place in both Romania and the United States; keyword search: *Ucraina* (Ro)/*Ukraine* (En); period Feb 24, 2022 – Feb 28, 2024, –and relevance of the news: first most relevant 5 pieces of news for each month in the interval, selected with the help of the Google search engine, at the moment of corpus collection.

#### 3.2.1. The Romanian Corpus

For the Romanian language headlines, we opted for the online platform Digi24<sup>®</sup> which is a Romanian-owned 24/7 TV news channel with leading positions both online and offline, covering several areas: current news, economy, foreign news, sports, TV (including live TV), opinions, etc. The site can be accessed for national and international news and information in different domains. The choice is substantiated by three relevant reasons: familiarity with the content of the articles, given that the Romanian corpus was compiled by one of the authors; the second position in the top preferences of the Romanian public, the accessibility of the platform, which is online, a medium of communication that is preferred by today’s audiences: “online use is typically over-represented and traditional offline use under-represented” [22]. The consulted *Reuters Digital News Reports* indicate that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and its economic and social consequences have prompted media to make a quick and informed transition to digital outlets, which generated different types of narratives and their varied delivery.

### 3.2.2 The English Corpus

The English headlines have been collected from the CNN<sup>®</sup> online platform, which was chosen for being one of the most representative news outlets covering the Russian-Ukrainian conflict due to its global reach, established reputation, and comprehensive reporting. CNN<sup>®</sup> has established itself as one of the world's leading news organizations, with its digital news platforms ranking second in the US in 2022, 2023, 2024 [21, 22, 23]. The selection of this particular online news platform is based on the fact that CNN<sup>®</sup> offers extensive coverage of international events, providing real-time updates, in-depth analyses, and expert opinions on the conflict. Furthermore, the outlet employs correspondents on the ground in Ukraine and neighbouring regions, ensuring first-hand reporting of developments, humanitarian issues, and geopolitical implications. Additionally, CNN<sup>®</sup> engages diverse perspectives, featuring insights from political analysts, military experts, and affected civilians, which allows audiences to grasp the multifaceted nature of the conflict. We are well aware that no news source is free from bias; however, we grounded the choice on the belief that CNN's<sup>®</sup> commitment to journalistic standards and its ability to distil complex events for a global audience make it a key source of information for understanding and shaping a pertinent perception of the ongoing conflict.

## 4. Results

Overall, figurative language facilitates the stylistic analysis, enriching it with new perspectives on the language. In many cases, the denotative meaning of a word/construction is complemented with one or more affective/subjective/connotative meanings, updated according to various factors: the extralinguistic context, the speaker's emotional state or attitude, or stylistic variants (fictional, colloquial, journalistic).

Among the identified tropes, the most relevant occurrences in studied corpus, in both Romanian and English are the following: synecdoche, metaphor, hyperbole, and personification.

Against the political-economic-social background of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, journalists prefer to use the names of key institutions, political, or journalistic entities instead of the people who represent them, thus increasing the impact at the macro level. Consequently, the generalizing **synecdoche** is prevalent in both analyzed corpora:

(1) **Presa occidentală este restricționată în Rusia pentru că „dezinformează” despre războiul din Ucraina** (04.03.2022) / **Western media restricted in Russia for “misinforming” about war in Ukraine** (Ro)

(2) (...) **Biserica Ortodoxă ucraineană vrea să-i evacueze pe oameni** (22.04.2022) / (...) **The Ukrainian Orthodox Church wants to evacuate people** (Ro)

(3) **Kyiv and Moscow agree deal to resume Ukraine grain exports from Black Sea ports, UN chief says** (22.07.2022) (En)

(4) **NATO and Russia to hold long planned exercises of nuclear forces as tensions over Ukraine remain high** (16.10.2022) (En)

Sometimes, a synecdoche can create a divisive effect, being used as a rhetorical way of drawing a distinction between two elements:

(5) **‘Russia is not Putin’: 76-year-old Russian uses her art to speak out** (22.06.2022) (En)

The **metaphor** is used as a stylistic device that illustrates the creativity of journalists, which is employed in headlines in order to enhance the semantic richness of the discourse. Given that decoding and understanding metaphors involve complex mental processes; their use is an efficient mechanism for creating vivid images in the mind of the readers, appealing to their imagination, and creating impressions that accompany mere facts:

(6) (...) **Propaganda rusă spune că e „foc de artificii” de ziua lui Medvedev**

(14.09.2022) / (...) *Russian propaganda says it's "fireworks" on Medvedev's birthday* (Ro)

(7) (...) „**Orașul morții**” ar putea deveni sigur abia peste ani (17.11.2022) / (...) *The “City of Death” could become safe only years from now* (Ro)

(8) **Joc de-a șoarecele și pisica** între ucrainenii și rușii în tranșeele de lângă Bahmut. Militarii aruncă unii în alții cu grenade (30.04.2022) / **A game of cat and mouse** between Ukrainians and Russians in the trenches near Bakhmut. Soldiers throw grenades at each other (Ro)

(9) **Putin's winter of inhumanity** takes Ukraine war and US aid to a new level (01.12.2022) (En)

(10) **Dogs of war:** the conflict in Ukraine is displacing pets as well as people (12.03.2022) (En)

**Hyperboles** are used in order to generalize a situation or to complement factual information with a spectacular dimension:

(11) **Daună totală:** Ucrainenii au distrus cea mai modernă navă „stealth” a flotei ruse din Marea Neagră cu o rachetă Storm Shadow (07.11.2023) / **Total damage:** Ukrainians destroyed Russian Black Sea Fleet's most modern “stealth” ship with Storm Shadow missile (Ro)

(12) **Incredibila** poveste a lui Vasile, câinele-soldat care și-a ros singur laba pentru a nu cădea prizonier la ruși (04.02.2023) / **The incredible** story of Vasile, the soldier dog who chewed off his own paw to avoid being captured by the Russians (Ro)

(13) **Russians steal vast** amounts of Ukrainian grain and equipment, **threatening this year's harvest** (05.05.2022) (En)

**Personification** devices are rare, but when used in special contexts, they emphasize the cruel and violent dimension of the conflict:

(14) **Disperată** că rușii nu mai vor să moară pentru Putin în război, Moscova vrea să elibereze deținuți ca să-i trimită pe front (23.08.2022) / **Desperate** that Russians no longer want to die for Putin in

war, *Moscow intends to release prisoners and send them to war* (Ro)

(15) **Ucraina își plânge eroii.** Soldatul executat în pădure, tată și fiu uciși în aceeași tranșee, erou național la 27 de ani mort în luptă (13.03.2023) / **Ukraine mourns** its heroes. Soldier executed in the forest, father and son killed in the same trenches, 27-year-old national hero dead in battle (Ro)

(16) **Europe's warm winter is robbing** Putin of a trump card (16.01.2023) (En)

## 5. Discussion

In journalism studies, considerable attention is focused on how headlines condense information via various journalistic practices and textual conventions. Semantic categories are often studied to identify how factual information gains expressive power that make it resonant with the interest of the target audiences. The present study has looked at the elements of headlines' rhetoric, with the aim of identifying the linguistic mechanisms by which headlines function not only as informative tools but also as powerful devices that captivate the audience's attention.

In what concerns the validation of the proposed work hypothesis, the analysis has unveiled that figures of speech are the stylistic elements that make headlines attractive to the readers in both English and Romanian.

Given the fact that the primary function of the headline is to catch the interest of the reader, and that headlines represent the essence of the news, they are extremely instrumental for a quick understanding and become “hooks” that motivate the audience to continue reading the text of the news report. The use of stylistic devices serves well such a purpose. Abrams and Harpham argue that “figurative language is a conspicuous departure from what competent users of a language apprehend as the standard meaning of words, or else the standard order of words, in order to achieve some special meaning or effect” [24].

Therefore, the language used in the headlines of news is not only appealing, but by employing expressive word order, for example, it also becomes malleable and can develop multiple contextual meanings.

Using figures of speech in headlines is important because they add creativity, engagement, and memorability, making the headline worth of attention and further exploration. The identified figures of speech in both corpora – synecdoche, metaphor, hyperbole, personification – were deployed in the formulation of conflict-related headlines in order to transform them in intriguing and eye-catching attention-grabbers, encouraging readers to delve deeper into the story. Personification and hyperbole evoke emotions and help connect the audience with the story on a deeper level. In virtue of its stylistic role as “a trope of representation”, the synecdoche indicates the key elements, i.e., powerful actors in the discourse [25]. The imagery of metaphors creates memorability and in addition to illustrating the writer’s creativity, they also appeal to the reader’s imagination and stimulate their curiosity to decode the cryptic message hidden between the words of the headline. Subjects such as battlefield developments and military tactics and strategy, aid and relief efforts, the political, diplomatic, and economic dimensions of a conflict, the involvement of global entities or proxy actors or the legal and ethical issues entailed by conflict can become more noticeable if presented through symbolical representations, imagery, exaggerations, exemplifications, etc.

## 6. Conclusions

“The 24/7 online world” requires an information flux that needs constant updates [10]. In this rapidly changing world of media and information sharing, headlines have become powerful instruments that shape how audiences perceive and engage with content. In their role as the first point of contact with news stories, headlines have

the capacity to capture attention, spark curiosity, and influence readers’ reactions to the articles they interact with. This research has explored the semantic strategies that turn headlines into effective tools that captivate the readers’ interest.

In the context of the CORECON project, this article can open new avenues of research targeting an answer to the question: *What criteria do journalists use to determine whether a news story will be of interest to the general public or not?* In this regard, John B. Bogart famously stated: “When a dog bites a man, that is not news because it happens so often. But if a man bites a dog, that is news” [26]. Mark Grigoryan names three elements that a journalist could consider when creating an attractive news story: “**Area of influence.** A news story is all the more interesting when its content and the consequences it implies concern a larger number of people. **Celebrities.** Man is curious by nature, therefore he will read with great interest news about famous people, about their activities, as well as about their private lives, about their passions. **The unusual, sensational element.** Extraordinary facts or people, out of the ordinary, bizarre phenomena always arouse the interest of the readers” [27]. Conflict-related news becomes of interest to the public, since an armed conflict has consequences on several levels: territorial-administrative, military, political, economic, social, influencing not only the life of the population of a state, but creating implications at a macro, even global level. Moreover, in case of a conflict between states, the journalist must know that people are interested in what is happening at the present moment, in their immediate vicinity.

Our study pivots on the idea that headlines have evolved beyond their traditional role as simple news summaries. They have become influential tools that package information, shape perceptions, and affect beliefs. Against this background, we argue that media literacy is critical, especially for

knowing what words and linguistic structures can be used in titles, subtitles, and intertitles, and what semantic “tricks” could have a lasting impact on the audience. Consequently, the choice of words, the tone, or the structure of headline can directly or indirectly influence how readers interpret events. For example, headlines that incorporate emotional language or create contrasts can sway the audience’s perception of the issue, either sensitizing or inciting them. Likewise, emphasizing certain aspects (or omitting others) can affect how significant a topic might demand a thoughtful and ethical approach.

The figurative language employed in headlines can either enhance understanding or distort the information presented. As such, it is essential for media consumers to approach headlines critically, recognizing the power they hold in shaping opinions and framing discourse. We argue that it is the responsibility of media outlets and of the journalists to ensure that they serve to inform rather than manipulate.

In conclusion, the journalist or the news agency must know the target audience very well in order to select and apply the appropriate stylistic key. In a media landscape saturated with information, the semantic value of headlines remains a key factor in how news is covered, received, consumed, and interpreted.

### Acknowledgements

This work was funded by the EU’s NextGenerationEU instrument through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of Romania - Pillar III-C9-I8, managed by the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, within the project entitled *The coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Polish, Romanian and English-language media: A comparative critical discourse study with recommendations for journalism training* (CORECON), contract no. 760244/28.12.2023, code CF 25/27.07.2023.

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