



The Analysis of Propositional Content of British and Latvian Newspaper Headlines in the Framework of Grice's Cooperative Principle

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Keywords: *relevance, headlines, Gricean maxims, correspondence, propositional content, presupposition, readership.*

The present research aims to explore headlines of newspaper articles in the context of their relevance to the content of the article they represent. The object of the research is headlines of articles in the British and Latvian quality press. The aim of the research is to analyse the propositional content of headlines of newspaper articles in the British and Latvian quality press in the framework of Grice's Cooperative Principle. The present article is an attempt to explore headlines from a pragmatic point of view, which is part of a more extensive research. A corpus of randomly selected headlines of articles in British and Latvian broadsheets in the period of 2013-2014 provide a background for qualitative research that addresses the issue of headlines from the point of view of a comparative language analysis.

Particular interest in the present study was triggered by the disillusionment that the headline of the article not always correlates with its content. Newspapers provide readership with latest information, critical reviews, scoops about celebrities' lives, accounts on latest inventions and achievements in science, technology, other spheres of life. The role of headlines is to help the reader find information of utmost personal interest or necessity. Article headlines help us navigate through myriads of news items offered to readers. The prime function of article headlines is to summarise the main idea of the article and that piece of information that readers could be interested in. Nevertheless, the author of the article may have other aims when he is creating an attractive and intriguing headline – to draw readers' attention to information hidden in the article. Nowadays, the language of headlines has been developing as language itself. As a result, the language of headlines has turned into an art of sending messages to readership.

Searching for particular information would be a rather time-consuming process without headlines since they help us browse newspapers page by page. Headlines provide the essence of information in the article. Seeking to grab readers' attention

authors of articles produce eye-catching and intriguing headlines. Eventually, they may intend to impose a certain opinion and influence readership's attitudes and behaviour. Attempts to be original when the headline is difficult to comprehend, often result in readership confusion and misunderstanding. Furthermore, the headline may turn out to be deceiving and hide a lie behind it. Thus, several questions arise, e.g. Do we really receive relevant information we expect to from the headline? Does the content correlate with the headline? Does the author present the main theme stated in the headline in a clear and comprehensible manner?

Authors of newspaper article, i.e. text producers, address the reader or translator in the form of a monologue which is characterized by distant time of writing. In fact, text producers do not know their readers but frequently address them as if they knew their interests, attitudes, views and thoughts. Linda M c L o u g h l i n (2000, 67) refers to the reader or imaginary addressee as '*the ideal reader*'. Seeking to effectively communicate with the ideal reader the text producer should transfer the content without ambiguity, misunderstanding or insufficient information. According to Dan S p e r b e r and Deirdre W i l s o n (1986, 9), a sentence can be interpreted differently if it is formulated differently, a mismatch between the meaning and interpretation can occur. Thus, utterances can reveal the speaker's attitude or 'propositional attitude' (Ibid., 11). Similarly, the semantics of the sentence should correlate with the linguistic structure of the utterance. However, sometimes little correlation between what is said and what is intended to say can be observed in headlines of newspaper articles. Explicitly expressed thoughts are implicitly interpreted by addressees, here readership.

The present study is based on Paul G r i c e 's theoretical assumptions about the cooperative principle of communication strategies. Since written language is a means of distant communication with the hearer/reader, article headlines are considered to be indirect communication with the reader. Thus, headlines of newspaper articles will be analysed according to conversational maxims.

H. Paul Grice distinguished four categories of maxims:

- 1) Maxim of quantity
- 2) Maxim of quality
- 3) Maxim of relation
- 4) Maxim of manner (L e e c h 1986).

Newspaper journalists, because of professional aspirations, violate these maxims to reach a specific aim implied by the information introduced in the headline and in the article itself. According to the cooperative principle, the writer, transfers relevant and accurate information that facilitates comprehension of the discourse, thus, the reader receives reliable and unambiguous information. However, the headline producer in a certain goal-oriented speech act can tend to produce a particular effect in the reader's mind and draw attention to sensationalism or exclusiveness of a certain piece of information.

Quantity: giving the right amount of information.

When constructing the headline the text producer assumes that the reader has background information or knows about a particular event that has provoked discussion in the press. He includes a portion of the news content into the headline to draw attention to the article and provide the reader with sufficient information to understand the message.

- 1) *Horse brought to hospital to say goodbye to its dying owner (The Telegraph, 07 Nov 2014)*
- 2) *Our immigration problems are a result of Britain's success (The Telegraph, 29 Oct 2014)*

These headlines are sufficiently informative since they provide the reader with the main theme. Only objective information, facts described in the stories have been included. Headline 1 allows the reader to assume that an ill person's horse was brought to the hospital before the owner died. Here, the author draws attention to a rare event that can arouse interest in many readers. Moreover, the words 'hospital', 'goodbye', 'dying' add sensitiveness to the headline. The informative background of headline 2 refers to the migrant crisis in Great Britain. The use of deictic 'our' suggests that it is the country's problem. On the other hand, although the phrase 'Britain's success' is rather general but allows the reader to think that the problem is related to the country's successful economic development in recent years. In general, there is sufficient information in the headline to grasp the main theme of the article.

- 3) *An inevitable departure (The Telegraph, 31 Oct 2014)*
- 4) *Tvaika ielas internets (The Diena, 20 Feb 2014)*
- 5) *Izmaksātas kompensācijas (The Diena, 25 Feb 2014)*

Contrary to the aforementioned examples, headline 3 is rather obscure and indefinite. Semantically, the headline as an utterance may have both, a literal and a figurative, meaning. The word 'departure' is poly-semantic, has a literal and figurative meaning. The emotively coloured descriptive adjective 'inevitable', collocated with other nouns, hooks the reader.

Headline 4 can attract a limited number of readers because of a specific geographical location 'Tvaika iela' but those related to it will not miss the article and get necessary information.

Information in headline 5 can find readership because paying out money is a keyword that normally attracts mass audiences.

Quality: providing true and reliable information.

According to Grice, supported by Alan C r u s e (2000, 355), the maxim of quality deals with telling the truth, the speaker (here, *the text producer*) should not say what lacks adequate evidence.

The main function of mass media (and the press in particular) is to provide truthful and unbiased coverage of facts and current events. We agree with Татьяна Д о б р о с к л о н с к а я (2012, 20) that mass media occasionally provide wrong and subjective information on hot topics and breaking news therefore are often accused of escalating misunderstandings and conflicts in society and the global community.

Newspapers should understand that they have a powerful impact on mass audience and that their main function is to provide truthful and reliable information. The following examples demonstrate the level of truthfulness and reliability of information.

- 6) *Queen says 'an enduring love of Scotland' will help United Kingdom come together after referendum result (The Telegraph, 19 Sep 2014)*
- 7) *David Cameron: Queen 'purred' down line over Scottish Independence vote (The Telegraph, 23 Sep 2014)*

In headline 6, speaking about Scotland's independence referendum, the author quotes the Queen (*'an enduring love of Scotland'*) thus emphasizing the well-known fact that the Queen loves Scotland. The words *'enduring', 'love', 'help', 'United, 'together'* imply peace and unity what is felt in the Queen's speeches. Thus, the headline does not distort the content of the article by focusing on the Queen's attitude towards referendum and preserves the monarch's intention to unite British society and solve national problems.

In headline 7, the author provides David Cameron's comment when he informed the Queen that Scotland had voted against independence. The Prime Minister shared his opinion about the Queen's reaction saying that she *'purred' down line'*, metaphorically meaning that she was satisfied with referendum results. This phrase attracted much comment and discussion on mass media and social networks, and the Prime Minister had to apologize to Britain's Royal family for this emotively marked expression that caused so many different interpretations.

Relevance: giving relevant information.

According to G r i c e (1989), the maxim of relevance is very simple. In this context, it is relevance of the headline to the content of the article, thus, the headline should not deviate from the topic and provide sufficient information.

- 8) *'Girls in science? Give pupils real choice in education' (The Telegraph, 26 Mar 2014)*
- 9) *Pensijas var pieaugt par 15 eiro (The Diena, 25 Feb 2014)*
- 10) *Banku pretestība – dīvaina (The Diena, 25 Feb 2014)*

Headline 8 suggests that the topic how to make the right career choice will be discussed. Such words as 'science', 'pupils', 'education' show that the semantic field of education prevails. The question-answer structure of the headline supports that. What can be expected from the headline? Does the phrase 'Girls in science?' mean surprise that girls can deal with science or does the story describe girls working in science? The second part of the headline constructed in the imparative form focuses on giving all pupils choice in education. The general meaning of 'pupils' is *any person of any gender*. Thus, the first part is hardly relevant to the second. The topic of the article could be:

- gender restrictions in science work
- not all pupils are given real choice in education
- girls have no opportunities to choose a career they prefer

Further percentage of boys and girls who choose exact sciences and humanities is provided. Moreover, the article is less imparative than the headline.

Headline 9 is definitely appealing because the words 'pensijas' (English *pension*) and a certain sum of money '15 euros' (English *Euros*) have been used. But the word 'var' (English *may*) makes the situation irrelevant to the actual situation as this information may be relevant to any period of time in the future as well as the fact that it may not occur at all. Consequently, it is highly probable that this information is not truthful, and that the maxim of relevance has not been observed.

The word 'dīvaina' (English *weird*) in headline 10 has emotional colouring and expresses the author's personal views on the issue, which may be different from that of the rest of readers. Furthermore, the use of the plural form 'banku' (English *banks*) applies to banks in general, which is rather confusing and misleading in relation to the rest of the banks.

Manner: avoiding ambiguity and obscurity of expression.

The definition of the maxim of manner, proposed by C r u s e (2000, 357), incorporates four main components, such as a) avoiding ambiguity, b) avoiding obscurity, c) avoiding unnecessary prolixity (i.e. lengthy, tediously wordy) and d) being orderly (consistent in presenting thoughts and ideas). Observing the maxim of manner in headlines leads to effectiveness and functionality of the headline construction.

11) *Is immigration really a blessing or a curse? (The Telegraph, 05 Nov 2013)*

12) *A cause for celebration, but change is inevitable (The Telegraph, 19 Sep 2014)*

13) *Banāns pret rasismu sportā (The Diena, 30 April 2014)*

14) *Kad dzīvesbiedrs de facto ir svešinieks de jure (The Diena, 25 Feb 2014)*

Initially, headline 11 in the form of an interrogative sentence immediately provokes an explicit number of interpretations. The use of the semantically contrasting words 'blessing' and 'curse' creates a double overstatement and exaggeration. The reader may sense extremity in the consequences of immigration, which may have an impact on readers, their social behaviour and attitude towards immigration as such. Secondly, addressing mass audience the headline producer does not specify for *who* immigration is a blessing or a curse, i.e. for immigrants, or the population of the countries that admit immigrants, or the country as a whole. Thirdly, the reader might expect the article to give a clear answer to this question. Consequently, the article mostly focuses on the fear of major changes in political and social systems caused by a rapid increase in the number of immigrants in Great Britain.

Headline 12 is an example of a very obscure and disorderly presentation of the content of the article. Firstly, the utterance is not homogeneous in its structure, its first part is a nominal phrase, and its second part is a simple sentence. The main topic of the article is not revealed in the headline. 'A cause for celebration' presupposes any reason (or cause) for any celebration or a new cause for celebration. However, the word 'but' instantly changes the mood of celebration or any kind of festivity implying some reverse of the event. Moreover, the word 'change' could be interpreted as a positive change and a negative change. Finally, the word 'inevitable' presupposes the only possible solution. The number of so different interpretations of the utterance may initially attract readers but distract their interest due to lack of expected information.

Headlines 13 and 14 found in the Latvian quality press illustrate the obscurity of expressions and result in flouting the maxim. Nouns from different semantic fields used in one phrase create a humorous effect and do not reveal the main topic of the article they represent. Therefore, the maxim of manner is partly violated, as the suggested theme of the article is relatively obscure. Headline 13 comprises three contrasting topics, such as banana, racism and sports. This may be misleading for the reader searching for particular information and complicated for the overall comprehension of the article.

Being very attractive and eye-catching, headline 14 is rather complicated to comprehend and grasp the main idea of the article. The presence of the two dichotomous notions 'dzīvesbiedrs-svešinieks' (English *spouse-stranger*) and 'de facto-de jure' requires profound knowledge of the meanings of the words used as well as understanding the meaning of Latin terms. The elevated vocabulary is too obscure and quasi-relevant to the article dealing with such a conventional topic as family relationships. The headline actually conveys the text producer's attitude that is not necessary for the propositional content of the article.

Summing it all up, we can refer to the assumptions of Roger Fowler (1991, 47) who states that each particular form of linguistic expression in a text has its reason. There are always different ways of saying the same thing. The use of eye-

catching and attractive headlines does not always presuppose the headlines to be relevant in terms of being informative and summative in relation to the content of the article. Referring to what has been stated before, headlines are a means of communication with readership. To make this communication possible and effective, the communicator's intentions should be recognized by the recipient. It can be concluded that, in case of newspaper headlines, ostensible communication with readership is widely applicable in both, British and Latvian, press. As Sperber and Wilson state (1986, 155), ostensible communication attracts attention, which is fundamental in newspaper language and in the headlines in particular. However, to achieve the degree of relevance, communicative intentions of the communicator (here, the text producer or the headline author) must be compatible with the required interest of the addressee.

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Avantekstinė straipsnių antraščių angliškuose ir latviškuose laikraščiuose analizė taikant Grice'o bendradarbiavimo principą

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinės sąvokos: tinkamumas, antraštė, Grice'o maksimos, atitikimas, avantekstas, spėjimas, skaitytojai.

Šiame straipsnyje analizuojamos laikraščių straipsnių antraštės ir jų ryšys su straipsnio turiniu. Tyrimo objektas – britų ir latvių spaudos antraštės.

Nepaprastą dėmesį šiam tyrimui pelnė nusivylimas, atsiradęs dėl dažno antraščių ir straipsnių turinio neatitikimo. Tyrimas remiasi H. P. Grice'o teorinėmis prielaidomis, jo bendravimo strategijų kooperacijos principais. Dėl to, kad rašytinė kalba yra netiesioginės

komunikācijas su skaitytojais priemonē, straipsnių antraštės taip pat gali būti laikomos netiesiogine komunikacija su skaitytojais.

Kaip komunikācijas priemonē, akį traukiančios ir patrauklios antraštės adresatui ne visada perteikia komunikatoriaus suteiktą reikšmę.

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The present study analyses headlines of newspaper articles as written utterances using Grice's maxims. As a means of communication, eye-catching and attractive headlines do not always convey the intended meaning of the communicator and arouse interest in addressees.

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