

# A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE DISTINCTIVE PROPERTIES OF NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper was to analyze linguistically the distinctive properties of *Education News* headlines, *Education News* is a bi-weekly newspaper that provides a comprehensive coverage of education matters in the county. It sets to investigate how journalists and editors package and craft their headlines by manipulating language and visual images to attract the readers. The properties that foreground the headlines are analyzed linguistically. The study falls under the qualitative research approach where text analysis method and qualitative phenomenology research designs were intergrated and used concurrently. Analytical research design was employed in the study where facts and available information were analyzed to make a critical evaluation of the material. Text analysis and informant interviews were the tools used to obtain data of which secondary data based an extensive library research and sampled headline were studied over a period of six months. The data analysis was based on the relevance theory. It was concluded that there are distinct properties which are only particular to headlines which the editors must pay attention to and take into consideration while crafting headlines in order to achieve relevance optimization. News editors, journalists and newspaper readers will greatly benefit from the findings of this study as well as the academic contribution it makes to the other fields such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics and Discourse analysis.

**Keywords:** Distinctive properties, Education News. Linguistics, Headlines, relevance optimization.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper linguistically analyses the distinctive properties of the headlines of the *Education News* newspaper. Linguistics is the scientific study of language and involves an analysis of language form, language meaning and language in context. The study is premised on the discourse analysis a sub-discipline of linguistics which generally refers to a number of approaches used to analyze written, vocal or sign language use or any significant semiotic event. The purpose of the study therefore is to identify and analyze the distinctive properties which justify that particular attention be given to headlines.

A number of studies have been conducted on the various aspects of headlines. F.T. Marquez (1980) and Blake Andrew (2017) conducted researches on the content and use of headlines. Marquez, a journalism researcher investigated the accuracy of news headlines in four Philadelphia newspapers. He found out that a quarter of the headlines examined were

## 2. CONTEXTUAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Headlines are the marques of news stories. Headlines are short statements located at the beginning of an article which frame the information that is to follow. They encapsulate a portion of the story, presenting a snapshot of reality. News headlines have changes with the changes associated with digital journalism. Sperber and Wilson (1986) functionally define newspaper headlines as relevance optimizers, which are designed to optimize the relevance of their stories for their readers. The functional definition positions the headlines in its appropriate role as a textual negotiator between the story

and its readers. It explains why the construction of a successful headline requires an understanding of the readers—their state of knowledge, beliefs and expectations and their cognitive styles no less than it requires an understanding of the story.

Dor (2003) posits that importance of the role of headlines in the communicative act performed by newspaper headlines can hardly be exaggerated, yet the nature of this role has virtually been explicated in the literature. The different types of newspaper headlines namely news headlines in quality newspapers, news headlines in ‘tabloid newspapers’, summarizing headlines; localizing headlines, quotation headlines target the same functional goal, that of relevance optimization, although they do it in different ways.

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Ullrich Ecker et al. (2014) examined the effects of misinformation in headlines. In their study they tested the effects of a mismatch between information presented in a headline and the more detailed information presented in the full news story. They examined two factual news stories: one about burglaries and a second about death rates during natural disasters. In the full news stories, the burglary and fatality rates were described as spiking in the short term, but decreasing in the long term. When the headlines only emphasized that the burglary or fatality rate had increased recently, people who read the headline and news story did not remember the long term decreasing trend mentioned in the news article. The researchers found something similar with opinion articles. When a headline highlighted a partisan position about genetically modified foods or fluoride in drinking water that did not match the political position of the full opinion article, readers were likely to misremember whether the article was for or against GM foods and fluoride in water, headlines can hurt news. The effects of mismatches between headlines and news stories might be troubling when put into context. If the information presented in a news article and a news headline do not consistently match, readers might be misled by the headlines they are skimming online. It is therefore on this background that this study commits to discover the effects of misinformation of headlines in *Education News* newspaper and how this affects the readers.

Headlines can draw attention to negative events and portray issues in a negative light. Floyd Allport and Milton Lepkin (1943) examined the effect of negativity in headlines. In their study, they examined how headlines affected citizens attitudes toward participating in the World War II war effort. When headlines stressed bad news, individual news readers said they felt like taking a more active role in the war effort than headlines that presented good news. It is of great importance to note that this studies relies on and heavily borrows from the past studies which are of particular relevance to it. The author will use those studies in explaining and analyzing the distinctive properties of headlines in general and appropriate them to the headlines of *Education News* newspaper in particular.

### 3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE DISTINCTIVE PROPERTIES OF HEADLINES.

Christine D. & Elizabeth R. (1995) in their study of discourse analysis of newspaper headlines concentrated on the broader theoretical and methodological issues involved in using headlines in research and identifies the linguistic features which are typical of headlines. They argue that headlines are particularly revealing of the social, cultural and therefore national representations circulating in a society at a given time. They posit that there exists certain characteristics which justify that particular attention be given to headlines in press analysis, namely: the prominence headlines acquire through diffusion; the role they play in orienting the interpretation of the reader and the shared cultural context which they evoke. In a nutshell there are three distinct properties which justify that particular attention be given to newspaper headlines. These properties therefore must be factored in by the news editors and journalists when constructing and crafting newspaper headlines. Similarly, newspaper readers should be aware, take cognizance and be a lert of these distinctive properties in order to understand and headlines and the full texts. These properties includes: diffusion, perspective and cultural knowledge.

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### 3.1 Diffusion:

Diffusion in this context refers to the ability of headlines to reach an audience considerably wider than those who read the articles. This is because all those who buy the paper will glance, if only fleetingly at the headlines. Moreover their impact is even wider on those who actually buy the paper, since headlines are often glimpsed on public transport and displayed on fliers. This assertion is particularly true of front page headlines which also of course draw the casual observer to conclude the importance of a particular issue which has been given prominence in this way. The impact of headlines on the reader is likely to be all the stronger because certain linguistic features namely puns, alliteration, emotive vocabulary and other rhetorical devices make them particularly memorable and effective.

The literature on newspaper headlines covers a wide range of theoretical and empirical topics, all the way from the grammar of English headlines to the effects of headlines on news comprehension and recall. Lindemann (1990) claims that "...the headline contains the main highlight of the story. Since it is the most conspicuous part and the part that is read first, the copy editor must present the essence of the news before he goes further."

An analysis of this headline:

*Pay rise shock for 115,000 teachers (EN 13/8/2016)*

revealed that many readers got attracted because of the emotive language which makes it captivating hence appealing to the readers who would want to understand comprehensively the details in the full text. It was also found to be attention drawing due to the contradictory nature of the words used. Ordinarily, pay rise is good news hence not expected to cause shock.

The analysis of the following headlines:

*Teachers travel allowances raised. (EN 2/7/2016)*

*TSC moves to arrest teachers' pay poachers (EN 22/4/16)*

showed the use of alliteration. Alliteration is a figure of speech and stylistic device which is identified by the repeated sound of the first or second letter in a series of words or the repetition of the same letter sounds in stressed syllables of a phrase. In these examples the letter t in teachers and travel have been alliterated and the letter p in pay and poachers exemplify alliteration. It can therefore be said that this device (alliteration) has been used in the above headlines to add textual complexity making it more engaging, moving and memorable. It also captivates the reader's auditory senses thereby helping to create a mood.

It was deduced that newspapers readers easily notice and get attracted to headlines where figurative language has been employed compared to those with plain language.

### 3.2 Perspective:

As a property of the newspaper headlines that justifies that particular and keen attention be given to headlines by the readers in press analysis, perspective refers to the role played by headlines in orienting the reader's interpretation of the subsequent facts. As Claude Abastado (1980, 149) puts it, headlines encapsulate not only the context but also the orientation, the perspective that the readers should bring to their understanding of the articles. This property is anchored in the relevance theory, which takes the mind of the individual as one of its tenets. The theory proposes that every individual mentally represents in his or her mind a huge set of assumptions, which has a strength for that individual. The strength of the assumption for the individual is the level of confidence with which the individual holds to the belief that the assumption is true.

In the analysis of this property, a number of subtle findings were made; that the newspaper editors write to the audience that they know and they can predict their reactions, therefore the editors need to take their orientation and perception into consideration. It was also found that the audience or readers are not tabular rasa; they possess a huge set of assumptions which help them in understanding the newspaper headlines and consequently attraction them.

Therefore both the newspaper editor and the reader must be aware of this property in order to achieve relevance optimization.

### 3.3 Cultural Knowledge:

Headlines are a particularly rich source of information about the field of cultural references. This is because titles “stand alone” without explanation or definition: they depend on the reader recognizing instantly the field, allusions, issues, cultural references necessary to identify the content of the articles. They thus rely on a stock of the cultural knowledge, representations and models of reality that must be assumed to be widespread in the society if the headlines are to have meaning.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986) cultural knowledge is one of the tenets for the relevance theory necessary for relevance optimization. They opine that assumptions may include among other things, information on the immediate environment, expectations about the future scientific hypotheses, religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the personal lives of our acquaintances, knowledge about politics and history, beliefs about our emotions, fears and hopes. These assumptions help in the interpretation by comparing new assumptions with the subset of assumptions represented in the individual’s memory.

Common shorthand in headlines such as TSC (Teachers Service Commission) help to situate the readers within the education sector as seen in the following headlines.

*TSC absorbs “Relief Teachers” (EN 27/5/2016).*

The recognition by the reader of various types of puns and plays on words also relies on general and cultural knowledge. These can take several forms such as:

A play on double meaning

*Pain as teachers’ salaries credited to wrong accounts (EN 26/04/2016).*

*Pay rise shock for 115,000 teachers (EN 18/8/2016).*

It can be concluded that the cultural knowledge helps to create and maintain a sense of shared community and collective identity. This may be true of all the cases in which cultural knowledge specific to a certain society must be mobilized to aid understanding. Robert G. Allison (1995) argues that successful decoding proves that the reader is an ‘insider.’ It is the particular characteristic of headlines that they rely on to a greater extent than the articles themselves on the reader supplying the missing cultural links.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to analyze linguistically the distinctive properties of the headlines of *Education News* newspaper, with a view to facilitating the interpretation and comprehension of the newspapers and contributing to the writing and crafting appropriate newspaper headlines. It is noteworthy to state that there are three distinct properties that justify that particular attention be given to headlines namely: the prominence they acquire through diffusion, perspective and cultural knowledge. Newspaper headlines have a language specific to them therefore editors need to use the appropriate language to achieve the intended purpose; relevance optimization. A good headline therefore must incorporate these properties. Having analyzed these properties, it is my hope that this paper will be significant to the newspaper editors, newspaper readers and will greatly contribute to the knowledge base in the fields of Pragmatics, Discourse analysis and Sociolinguistics.

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