Potential Risks of Bringing Authentic Materials to an ESP Classroom or the Media Manipulative Techniques EFL Students should be Aware of

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Abstract

Studying a foreign language at upper-intermediate and advanced levels inevitably involves a close contact with authentic materials coming from multiple media sources. However, research identifies a high amount of headline/article discrepancies in the corpora of online articles, especially on sensitive political topics, which can establish false logical sequences and form wrong causative implicatures that may affect inexperienced readers, in particular, EFL students. Language means and manipulative strategies employed by the authors vary considerably, ranging from unintentional extensive use of expressive language, style variation to intentional information substitution, subjective modality and selective citations. Complete avoidance of authentic materials in the classroom can demotivate students and restrict their contact with "real" language; therefore, raising students' awareness about the possible language manipulation means is seen as the best means of working with authentic texts. It is suggested developing a teaching strategy incorporating regular text analysis exercises into EFL classroom routine for the students to be able to "decrypt" the online articles' style to prevent the potential harm from misinformation and manipulation techniques in the authentic materials. As a result, advanced EFL students are expected to become less susceptible to different types of misinformation.

Keywords: *headline, manipulation, metaphor, modality change, misinformation.*

1. The role of headlines in news perception

Although initially considered a phenomenon predominantly found in English-speaking countries, English newspaper headline style has transitioned to other journalistic traditions with the spread of online communication. Its current global prevalence proves that catchy headlines have become a universal rather than a culture-specific feature essentially characterized by its pragmatic function.

Influencing the reader directly through the headlines can be effective due to the following factors: the headline serves as a guide for the reader in the search and selection of preferred sources of information and relevant material; the headline often operates in the lack of a context environment, creating an information gap and multiple inferences; and there is an increasing tendency to get information from the media by viewing only the headlines.

Dor considers a headline a "multi-author and fostered text" [4]. Sub-editors and their teams often design headlines with attention attracting constraints and commercial interests in mind. They occasionally work with little collaboration with the journalist who has authored the news story itself and, as a result, are frequently criticized for creating titles that have little or nothing in common with the content they are meant to introduce. As a result, such headlines do not always objectively reflect the political reality or even the very articles they lead [1].

First of all, "space limitations make it impossible for headlines to tell the whole story; they [headlines] inevitably enhance or play up some information while suppressing other information" [12]. Secondly, the author's interpretation of the news and their commentary and assessment of the events contribute to creating a particular ideological background or a system of partisan influence. Thirdly, headlines trigger specific cognitive processes by framing the issue at hand and selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality [to] make them more salient in a communicating text" [5]. Consequently, the reader's ideas about current events in the world and attitudes to specific phenomena are often determined by the author's personal bias, the editor-in-chief's views on the headline composition, and the strategic interests of the publishing house.

Regarding the functions that are fulfilled by headlines, Dor [4] broadly divides them into:

(a) informative (or summarizing), giving the reader a general or specific idea about the topic of the story;

(b) indicative, addressing what happened in the news story;

(c) eye-catching, designed to draw readership's attention to the news event.

Following John Searle's classification of illocutionary speech acts [11], informative headlines can be identified as "assertives", or rather speech acts that commit a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition; indicative headlines can be classified as "expressives" or, in other words, speech acts that define the reporter's attitudes and emotions towards the proposal; eye-catcher headlines (also known as "clickbait") become "directives", that is speech acts which cause the website user "to take a particular action, e.g., click the hyperlink for further details" [10].

This work, however, seeks to identify another function that headlines have acquired in the information age, that of manipulation.

The scope of false information and its speed proliferates online are connected with these online networks' nature and technical capabilities.

By distorting (deliberately or not) the information in the article, an electronically multiplied headline can significantly change the reader's perception of reality and instantly become a powerful source of propaganda or misinformation. The internet empowered manipulative headlines start to function as Searle's "declaration" acts, i.e., communicative acts that "change the state of the world in an immediate way" [11].

Carston posits that almost every headline contains an implicature, which is defined as "an ostensibly communicated assumption that is inferentially developed from one of the incomplete conceptual representations encoded by the utterance" [3]. Although it is generally problematic to tie implicatures to a particular type of text, headlines, or rather the authors of headlines, often use them as assertions that convey information about the article's content. Therefore, implicatures as contextually inferred meanings can be viewed as a potential source of manipulation.

All types of implicatures that are not supported by the text of the article are referred to as "false implicatures." Previous research studying headline implicatures of Russian headlines claims that 40% of all cases where implicatures were identified contained false implicatures [1], which means that nearly half of the headlines containing implicatures were made up to distort the original article.

The studies concerned with the effects of unassisted news dissemination concluded that novelty, sensationalism, and negative emotions triggered by headlines become important impact factors promoting their broader appeal. To fully understand the dissemination dynamics of manipulated headlines, one must consider how it affects people's psychological make-up and who might be particularly susceptible to believing and sharing false news and rumors. In the research studying manipulative influence of news, Pennycook et al. prove that "participants were only slightly more likely to consider sharing true headlines than false headlines, but much more likely to consider sharing politically discordant headlines than politically concordant ones" [7], which means that the so called "hard news" on controversial political topics have a higher dissemination potential.

Scott, Edy, and Phalen studied the general effects of using leads and headlines on people's perception of news stories. The case study comparing *New York Times* articles and the headlines concluded that "we should not expect too much of the Index, for its use is fraught with pitfalls that may trap the unwary" [9]. They believe that the absence of a precise mechanism of generating a headline turns the whole process into "wild guessing" when a certain percentage of headline information "no longer accurately reflects the content of the *Times*, and more importantly, that the direction of the distortions is unpredictable."

Black compared news headlines to "media-generated shortcuts for heuristic information about politics" [2]. Relying on previous research that demonstrated potentially powerful framing effects of headlines, Black compared headlines with the stories covering the 2004 Canadian elections. The analysis showed a considerable difference between articles and their headlines in terms of emphasis and issue salience. Black demonstrated that both the content of the article and the slant of the headline matter. He also showed how the tone of the coverage appeared to change when viewed exclusively through the lens of headlines versus the reading of complete stories. Hence, according to Black in political discourse, "voters who scanned headlines were supplied with a different set of heuristic cues than those paying closer attention" [2].

The accuracy of headlines introducing environmental topics in the Danish press was studied by Vestergård, who found differences in the way participants remembered and interpreted negative headlines versus positive and neutral ones. The study also concluded that quality newspapers are only "moderately inaccurate" in quoting science publications. However, it also showed that 7% of headlines exaggerated the scientific claims [14].

Considered together, the cumulative results of these experiments suggest that headlines play a crucial role in the way people understand the news. However, although a certain number of headlines is distorted, only limited attention has been paid to the role of language in these changes. Therefore,

an attempt should be made to devise a more or less comprehensive classification of language contributing to the distortions.

2. Types of distortions

Rigotti divides all manipulations into three groups in accordance with their nature, namely organizational (procedural), logical and psychological. The first ones are the actual speech acts, e.g. interruptions in a dialogue, aimed at achieving a certain goal, for example, changing the topic. The intentional deception of the reader by the deliberate use of logical errors in a headline belongs to the second group, i.e. logical manipulations. The third group is formed by psychological techniques, such as creating the readers' feeling of outrage or flattering the audience in order to lull their vigilance [8].

However, this grouping of news is hard to apply in practice. The author's intent, such as to confuse the public, slant the reader's opinion, or cause harm, is not always transparent to the news consumer or even an expert. The typology mentioned above does not include many propaganda sources, nor does it accommodate half-truths and other misleading techniques.

This suggests that it is vital for the reader to monitor the relationship that actual mass media headlines have with the rest of the story they precede.

The web resource *The Global Investigative Journalism Network*, which belongs to an international association of journalist organizations and supports the professional training and information sharing among investigative and data journalists, mentions six methods of information warfare that unreliable media use to create compelling headlines:

- complete disinformation (publishing an actual piece of news under a false title);
- concealment of essential information (neglecting important details stated in the article that completely change the context of the report)
- presentation of opinions as facts (including those of pseudo-experts and think tanks, twisting experts' statements or faking them);
- exaggeration (sensationalism, misinterpretation of results);
- understatement for disinformation purposes;
- displacement of concepts (substitution, invalid comparisons).

Following our research objectives, we would like to emphasize those methods where manipulating the audience is achieved exclusively by language means. For these ends, special attention in this grouping should be paid to exaggeration, understatement, and displacement of concepts in the headlines. These manipulations are conducted mainly by introducing metaphors, subjective modality, and style variation in the headlines.

One likely reason for difficulties in understanding the role of the language in the manipulation process is the type of discourse where these manipulations occur. Certain types of media texts, like adverts or political reports, are more prone to media bias and low-key objectivity, whereas reporting scientific data is expected to be more accurate and impartial. Most linguists, therefore, analyze a specific kind of media text and use a specially devised distortion classification.

Besides manipulations on the structural and semantic level, consuming news through online media itself poses certain risks. Kozyreva, Lewandowsky, and Hertwig specified the digital challenges that readers of online content can face [6]:

1) Persuasive and manipulative choice architectures. These are clickable hyperlinks aimed at directing readers' choice of media content and steering their online behavior in commercial or misinformation interests;
2) AI-assisted information architectures or, in other words, algorithmic tools that filter and mediate information online, providing a personalized curation of news feeds;
3) Digital environments optimized to monopolize readers' attention and online behaviors;

The nature of digital communication is becoming more and more complex. The very detection of many of the techniques mentioned above poses a severe challenge for a researcher. In this multi-layer environment, only the last instance concerning creating inciting content seems to be achieved by purely linguistic means. An appeal to readers' feelings through the cognitive framing of an event can be viewed as a basis for emotive implicatures.

3. Implications for teaching

The first obvious conclusion that can be made from the analysis of headline distortions is that the active engagement of students in the discussion of problematic issues is an essential pre-condition of effective classroom procedure. It instills the atmosphere of openness and contributes to effective problem resolution, which may prove useful in further students' contacts with authentic language.

Classroom research results prove that specially designed follow-up activities and student-led discussions are the best way of balancing sensitive materials' authenticity and the ESP agenda [13]. It has also become evident that studying the language for specific purposes is impossible without immersing the class in the current media content. Although most teachers prefer to distance themselves from the censor's role and stand up for greater authenticity of the content as long as an alternative point of view is provided, we believe that some premeditation of the ESP courses is necessary to avoid one-sided political coverage or strongly biased discussions of current events. Finally, respectful and productive classroom communication creates an opportunity for reflection and the ability to weigh the evidence in and outside the classroom, including broadening students' consideration of other people's perspectives and enhancing their professional skills.

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