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LINGUISTIC BASIS OF MODERN CLICKBAIT NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

The problem of a headline as a “strong position” of a text is relevant and constantly attracts attention of researchers of both fiction and journalism texts. In fiction, a title is an organically part of the artistic structure of the composition (book), unlike newspaper headlines. Newspaper headlines are sometimes not so much the informational key to the conceptual structure of an article, but rather an important emotional and semantic element. Clickbait headlines refer to such emotional and meaningful elements in a strong position. A special place in the article is devoted to the study of difference between a bright and interesting headline and a clickbait one. Bright and interesting headline differs from clickbait in focus, language, content, tone, purpose, appeal, call-to-action and length. While both types of headlines aim to capture attention, a bright and interesting headline focuses on genuine engagement and curiosity, whereas clickbait relies on sensationalism and deceptive tactics to generate clicks, often leading to a negative user experience. This research focuses on linguistic patterns in obvious clickbaits in The Washington Post, a morning daily newspaper, the most authoritative source of information, and one of the dominant newspapers in the USA. Specific objectives arising from the purpose of the work are: to identify clickbait headlines, identify the linguistic basis on which the clickbait headline transformation of a headline is carried out, and study the ways of implementing clickbait headlines on the ideological and emotional levels of articles. This paper analyses 75 headlines with clickbait marks, selected from materials across all newspaper sections in 2022.

Key words: communication, clickbait, headline, title, newspaper, digital publishing, sensationalism.

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**ЛІНГВІСТИЧНА ОСНОВА СУЧАСНИХ КЛІКБЕЙТНИХ
ГАЗЕТНИХ ЗАГОЛОВКІВ**

Проблема заголовку, як «сильної позиції» тексту, є актуальною і постійно привертає увагу дослідників як художнього, так і публіцистичного тексту. У художній літературі заголовок органічно входить до художньої структури твору, на відміну від газетних заголовків. Газетні заголовки іноді є не стільки інформаційним ключем до концептуальної структури статті, скільки важливим емоційно-смісловим елементом. До таких емоційно-сміслових елементів у сильній позиції відносимо клікбейтні заголовки. Окреме місце в статті відведено дослідженню відмінностей між яскравим і цікавим заголовком та заголовком-клікбейтом. Яскравий і цікавий заголовок відрізняється від клікбейта фокусом (зосередженням уваги), мовою, змістом, тоном, метою, закличком до дії та довжиною. Хоча обидва типи заголовків мають на меті привернути увагу, яскравий та цікавий заголовок фокусується на справжньому залученні та цікавості, тоді як клікбейт покладається на сенсаційність та оманливу тактику для генерування кліків, що часто призводить до негативного користувацького досвіду. Це дослідження фокусується на лінгвістичних закономірностях очевидних клікбейтів у ранковій щоденній газеті The Washington Post, найавторитетнішому джерелі інформації та одній з домінуючих газет у США. Конкретними завданнями, що впливають з мети роботи, є: виявити заголовки-клікбейти; визначити лінгвістичну основу, на якій здійснюється трансформація заголовка у клікбейт. У статті проаналізовано 75 заголовків з ознаками клікбейту, відібраних серед заголовків усіх розділів газети The Washington Post за 2022 рік. Дослідження виявило поширеність таких прийомів, як приголомшливі обіцянки, гіперболізовані твердження, нечітка або ймовірна інформація, сенсаційна мова, перебільшені думки, надмірно спрощені описи, опущені деталі, ньюсджекінг, хибні дихотомії, протиріччя фактів, а також сильні емоційні слова-тригери.

Ключові слова: комунікація, клікбейт, назва, заголовок, газета, цифрова публікація, сенсаційність.

Introduction. The problem of a headline as a “strong position” of a text is relevant and constantly attracts the attention of researchers in both fiction and journalism texts. In fiction, a title is an organic part of the artistic structure of the composition (book), unlike newspaper headlines. Newspaper headlines are sometimes not so much the informational key to the conceptual structure of an article but rather an important emotional and semantic element.

The most traditional definition of a headline characterizes it as an element of a text that names a common theme. However, this approach does not fully reveal the complex relations of this element with the entire text.

A headline refers to those compositional elements of a text that attract the reader’s increased attention when first encountering a publication, making it an important link between a text and a reader. Without an audience, there is no mass communication in any form. Printed words are messages prepared for specific audiences, and the audience’s acceptance or rejection of these messages determines the shape and direction of the medium. Nowadays, in the digital era, the audience is changing in terms of literacy, tastes, interests, and priorities. There is no doubt that newspapers remain a powerful force, even in the face of electronic media and the desire to take in key information at a glance. As businesses, newspapers seek to make a profit and must compete not only with television, magazines, online editions, and multimedia but also with new media, distribution systems, and modern messengers like Telegram. One of the most challenging creative tasks for news authors (news editors) is to create headlines that are informative, brief, easy-to-understand, catchy, and intriguing as they compete for audience attention. Both new media and traditional media depend on consumer acceptance.

An author often uses the stylistic device of quotation to make a newspaper headline informative and expressive, achieving its optimum emotional and aesthetic effect on the reader. They may introduce a text of another’s speech or quote authoritative sources. A headline, as the name of the text, is capable of representing the entire article, and its function is to help the reader adequately decode the information.

Headings allow the author to reveal the meaning of an article (text) and to express thoughts, views, attitudes, positions, and moods. The headline and the first sentence of the text are linked in relation to the topic of the article. As an informative key, the headline falls within the realm of linguistic and structural-syntactic research. The purpose of conceptual linguistic and structural-syntactic analysis is to examine the language and structural elements used in headlines,

aiming to understand their persuasive and attention-grabbing techniques.

Despite its inseparable connection with the text, the headline is materially separated from it in media communication. It is often placed at the top of the article or on the front page of a publication to draw readers in and entice them to read further. While the headline is designed to provide a glimpse into the content of the article, it is separate from the main body of text in terms of its format and placement. It is usually written in a larger font size, bolded, or otherwise emphasized to stand out from the rest of the text. The separation between the headline and the main text allows readers to quickly scan and identify articles of interest based on the headlines before deciding whether to invest more time in reading the full article. In extensive reading and professional-philological usage, the headline functions separately from the main text and acts as its “plenipotentiary representative”. In other words, the headline has the authority and power to represent and convey the essence of the entire text on its own.

The subject of headlines is so significant that no matter how much has been discussed or written about them, it is unlikely to cover the topic entirely. The role of a headline in the text is crucial, as it serves as the initial point of contact for readers, influencing whether they choose to engage with the rest of the content. Due to this pivotal role, the exploration and analysis of headlines can be an ongoing and never-ending process, and there will always be more to learn and understand about them.

Aim. The aim of the paper is to comprehend the clickbait headlines as informational clues to the article on the material of The Washington Post. Specific objectives arising from the purpose of the work are: to identify clickbait headlines; identify the linguistic basis on which the clickbait headline transformation of a headline is carried out.

Review of recent research. While it is not clear when the term “clickbait” was first used, the concept of using sensational or misleading headlines to entice readers has been around for a long time. In the early days of the internet, clickbait was often used by spammy websites to get people to visit their pages and click on ads. More recently, clickbait has become a common tactic used by publishers and content creators on social media platforms to drive traffic to their websites or increase engagement on their social media pages.

In recent decades the term “clickbait headline” have been already actively used in scientific community (Kuiken J., Schuth A., Spitters M., Marx M.; Lai L., Farbrot A.; Ekström, Patrona and Thornbor-

row; Palau-Sampio D.; Moura P., Riberio F.; Bronakowski M., Al-khassaweneh M., Al Bataineh A.).

According to Kuiken et al., “Clickbait can be seen as a specific style of writing, aiming at inducing the curiosity of the reader and to lure that reader into clicking and opening the article. Often attributed to clickbait is the use of questions, numbers, forward referencing, spectacularization, and negativity” (Kuiken et al., 2017: 1311). Researchers identify features that have a significant positive impact on the effectiveness of a headline. “Average word length, absence of a question, absence of a quote, containing a signal word, containing personal or possessive pronouns, containing sentimental words, containing negative sentimental words and starting with personal or possessive pronouns. The performance of headlines that contain one of those features is on average 14–33 percentage points higher than headlines without the feature” (Kuiken et al., 2017: 1310).

Palau-Sampio researches the complex and multifaceted issue of disinformation from the perspective of the pseudo-media sites and the role of clickbait patterns in twisted journalistic mimicry. Findings of this research allowed an observation of how clickbait patterns played a dual role. On one hand, they attracted readers’ attention through the use of a variety of expressive resources, and on the other hand, they favored the building of a communicative style that, following the path of populism, included strengthened emotionality, dramatization, and the use of colloquial language and particular jargon (Palau-Sampio, 2022: 15).

Lai and Farbroth explore the effectiveness of question headlines on readership in computer-mediated communication. The findings from their research suggest that “question headlines represent a more effective headline strategy compared to traditional, declarative headlines. General question headlines with self-referencing cues were also found to be more effective than rhetorical question headline for three of four products investigated” (Lai & Farbroth, 2014: 289).

Bazaco et al. explore clickbait as a phenomenon arising from the adaptation of the media industry to the digital environment. Researchers believe that clickbait “is a strategy used by news media companies that affects the quality of news through the use of banal and exaggerated stories that integrate expressive resources that serve as bait on social networks” (Bazaco et al., 2019: 112). Researchers of clickbait content identified the prevalence of techniques such as incomplete information, pre-eminence of soft news, repetition, and serialization, and the use of hyperboles.

Statement of basic materials. A bright and interesting headline is one that accurately reflects the content of an article and is designed to grab the attention of readers in a non-misleading way. A clickbait headline, on the other hand, is one that is designed to be sensationalized or misleading in order to entice readers to click on an article or link. One key difference between a bright and interesting headline and a clickbait headline is their level of accuracy. A bright and interesting headline should accurately represent the content of an article, while a clickbait headline may exaggerate or distort the content in order to grab the attention of readers: “Ebola in the air? A nightmare that could happen” (CNN, October 6, 2014), “Coronavirus outbreak: Can face masks protect you? Stores sell out of masks” (TODAY, February 26, 2020). Another difference is the level of sensationalism. A bright and interesting headline may be eye-catching and attention-grabbing, but it should not be overly sensationalized or misleading. Clickbait headlines, on the other hand, are often designed to be as sensationalized as possible in order to entice readers to click on an article. Overall, the main difference between a bright and interesting headline and a clickbait headline is their level of accuracy and honesty. A bright and interesting headline should accurately reflect the content of an article and be non-misleading, while a clickbait headline is designed to be sensationalized and may be misleading in order to attract readers.

It seems important not only to define this linguistic phenomenon in the practice of journalism as a special type of headline but also to determine its typological means, including the linguistic and speech elements represented by clickbait headlines and the markers of clickbait headlines.

The present paper explores the presence of clickbait headlines in The Washington Post. This choice is not an accidental one. The Washington Post, a morning daily newspaper, is the most authoritative sources of information and one of the dominant newspapers in the USA. The clickbait headlines phenomenon has spread so widely that clickbait headlines can even be found in news discourse, despite a stereotype, that clickbait is only used by yellow journalism. We have collected 75 clickbait headlines from The Washington Post. The selection was made from materials across all newspaper sections in 2022. This research focuses on linguistic patterns in obvious clickbaits.

In the headlines of the Washington Post, there is a high frequency of the expression “You won’t believe it” with an informal tone. The expression “You won’t believe” is a linguistic tool used to provoke interest, evoke emotions, and make information stand out in a crowded information landscape. Linguisti-

cally, it serves as a persuasive and attention-grabbing device. The primary function of this expression is to create intrigue and curiosity. By using “You won’t believe”, the writer is suggesting that what follows is so extraordinary, surprising, or incredible that the reader might have a hard time accepting it. For example, “You. Won’t. Believe. What. Happened. Next”, “Teacher of the Year was suspended for a day and fined \$225. You won’t believe why”, “7 vegan soup recipes so creamy you won’t believe they’re dairy-free”, “You won’t believe what the head of the agency charged with protecting consumers said to bankers”, “You won’t believe where you might encounter bedbugs these days” (The Washington Post). Each of the mentioned headlines falls under the category of mind-blowing promises. The headline “Teacher of the Year was suspended for a day and fined \$225. You won’t believe why” suggests that the reason for the teacher of the Year’s suspension and fine is highly unexpected or surprising, enticing readers to find out the unusual cause. The headline “7 vegan soup recipes so creamy you won’t believe they’re dairy-free” makes an extraordinary claim about vegan soup recipes being exceptionally creamy despite not containing dairy, which could be seen as surprising to readers. The headline “You won’t believe what the head of the agency charged with protecting consumers said to bankers” hints at a sensational or controversial statement made by a person in authority, implying that the content will reveal something shocking or unexpected. The headline “You won’t believe where you might encounter bedbugs these days” plays on the fear of encountering bedbugs in unexpected places, suggesting the article will provide surprising or alarming information about their potential locations. The headline “You. Won’t. Believe. What. Happened” uses excessive punctuation and phrasing to create curiosity and intrigue, implying that the content of the article contains something extraordinary or shocking. Also, it has not only mind-blowing promises but exaggerated opinion, hyperbolic statement and sensationalized language.

The versatility of the catchphrase “This is how” makes it applicable in various situations, such as giving instructions, explaining a concept, describing a sequence of events, or sharing personal experiences. The expression implies a specific explanation will follow. It is a concise way to direct the audience’s attention to the core content because suggests that the information to be presented is well-defined and leaves little room for ambiguity. While “This is how” is common, there are variations that serve a similar purpose, such as “Here’s how”, “This is the process”, or “The following steps show”. For example, “Now this is

how to lose an election: With a smile and a hug”, “I’m a food writer. This is how I manage to feed a picky kid”, “This is how thin people’s weight talk makes me feel as a fat person”, “This is how far Republicans will go to subvert the will of the voters”, “At school, we prepare to be shot at. This is how it feels”, “Dear grads: This is how to write a real thank-you note”, “This is how journalists figure out if all those Ukraine videos are real”, “Restaurant workers are quitting in droves. This is how they are being lured back” (The Washington Post). The headline “Officer faces probe for telling Black driver, ‘This is how you guys get killed’” contains a short explanation as clickbait. The use of phrases like “Officer faces probe” and “telling Black driver, ‘This is how you guys get killed’” are intended to pique the reader’s curiosity and entice them to click on the article to find out more about the incident and the officer’s actions. The headline presents a controversial and attention-grabbing statement that is likely to generate interest and clicks from readers who want to know the full details of the situation. Moreover, this headline uses the strong emotional trigger word “killed”, which evokes strong feelings of fear and concern, especially in the context of police interactions with Black individuals.

“This is how” is a straightforward and informative linguistic expression that makes the mentioned headlines fall under the category of hyperbolic statements. For example, the headline “Now this is how to lose an election: With a smile and a hug” suggests that the method of losing an election mentioned in the article is extremely unconventional and unexpected, exaggerating the impact of a simple action. The phrase “this is how to” implies that the described method of losing an election is incredibly unconventional or surprising, making it sensational. The headline “Now this is how to lose an election: With a smile and a hug” contains a false dichotomy. The headline presents only two options for how to behave after losing an election: “With a smile and a hug”. This implies that these are the only acceptable or effective ways to handle defeat, leaving out other possible reactions such as crying, getting angry, feeling dejected, or expressing other emotions. By offering only these two options, the headline creates a false dichotomy, as there are numerous ways a losing candidate can respond to election defeat, and each individual may react differently based on their personality, circumstances, and emotions.

The expression “X Things You...” is a common construct in English, particularly used in online content such as blogs, articles, listicles, and how-to guides. This phrase structure has become a standard way of presenting information, particularly in digi-

tal media. It is formulaic because it follows a certain pattern and can be filled with different types of content, depending on the context. “X” represents a numerical value and is used to quantify the “things” being discussed: “5 things you need to know about Russia’s intelligence failures ahead of the invasion of Ukraine”, “10 things you need to know about riding Amtrak overnight”, “We tested Samsung’s newest flagship phones. Here are 6 things you should know about the Galaxy S22s”, “15 things you can do to improve your home for less than \$100 each”, “Want in on the great retirement boom? Here are the five things you should know” (The Washington Post). Clickbait headline containing the phrase “X Things You...” can also contain “piggybacking”. This involves not only referencing a well-known figure or company but aligning a brand or message with breaking news or viral stories to insert a fresh perspective or promotional angle into the ongoing conversation. “Piggybacking” or “newsjacking” are terms made popular by marketer David Meerman Scott, and is the practice of joining in on breaking news stories to generate positive coverage and publicity for your brand, product, or message. Examples of such headlines are “Mark Zuckerberg just laid out his vision for the metaverse. These are the five things you should know”, “The 14 things you need to know about Trump’s letter in the Wall Street”, “Things you learn about Jon Stewart from talking to him and his friends” (The Washington Post).

The causal structure “X Reasons Why...” is another common linguistic construct in English, frequently used in titles, headings, and introductions to present a list of reasons or explanations. The phrase sets the stage for a list of reasons or causes that explain a particular phenomenon, event, decision, or situation. The word “reasons” implies that the following content will provide logical explanations or arguments. Like the “X Things You...” expression, “X Reasons Why...” follows a formulaic pattern, making it recognizable and familiar to audiences. The “Why” introduces the concept of causation or explanation, preparing the reader for a list of supportive points. Similar to the “X Things You...” expression, “X Reasons Why...” may also include the second person pronoun “You” to personalize the content and create a direct connection with the reader. For example, “Five reasons why you shouldn’t buy a house right now”, “6 reasons why conditions on I-95 deteriorated during the Jan. 3 snowstorm”, “Experts offer four reasons why kids need to own their college essays – and one way parents can help” (The Washington Post).

The declarative statement “This Is What” is a common linguistic construct in English, often used in

titles or headlines to introduce a specific idea, concept, event, or situation, meaning it presents a statement of fact or opinion rather than asking a question or giving a command. For example, “This is what ‘aging well’ is all about”, “Alexei Navalny: This is what a post-Putin Russia should look like”, “Hundreds of kids witness parents shot to death. This is what it does to them”, “This is what happens when the party in charge cares about governing”, “This is what it looks like when women become second-class citizens”, “The freedom of Juneteenth was fleeting. This is what came next”, “This is what supporting life looks like. The rest is just politics”, “This is what the beginning of the end of the Roe era feels like”, “Distinguished pols of the week: This is what moral outrage sounds like”, “This is what ‘living with covid’ might look like”, “This is what it feels like to attend a film festival in the metaverse”, etc. (The Washington Post). “This Is What” is a powerful linguistic tool for introducing and emphasizing information in a clear and straightforward manner. It serves as a strong headline or lead-in that piques the reader’s curiosity and encourages them to continue reading to learn more about the specified subject.

The declarative statement “You can now” is a linguistic construct commonly used in various contexts to announce or inform about something that has become possible or available at the present moment. The phrase carries a positive and optimistic tone, as it highlights something favorable or advantageous for the recipient, while also creating a sense of immediacy and personal relevance for the audience. For example, “You can now track your ballot online in half of states”, “You can now buy hearing aids without a prescription”, “Thanks to technology, you can now own the rights to an iconic Biggie rap”, “You can now see how many Uber drivers liked (or hated) you” (The Washington Post).

The most dominant type that is commonly used in clickbait headlines is the conditional sentence. We found 35 headlines that contain conditional clauses and immediately engage the reader’s curiosity and imagination. These clauses indicate a cause-and-effect relationship, adding depth to the hypothetical scenarios: “What happens if there’s no House speaker? These things can’t get done” and “What if environmental damage is a form of capitalist sabotage?”, “What if gun owners had to pass a test? Czech Republic offers an answer”, “Ask Amy: My neighbors crashed my party. What if they show up again?”, “In crises, officials tweet crucial info. What if Twitter dies?” etc. Some headings function as rhetorical questions, like “What if Yale finds out?” and “What if Lil Yachty’s ‘Poland’ contains the meaning

of life?”, “What If the Rental Market Is the First to Break?”, “What if the United States loses the AI race against China?”, “What if Trump hadn’t spent the week directing fury at the FBI?”, “What if Trump’s pile of papers is nothing more than a prop?” These questions are not necessarily meant to be answered but serve to emphasize a point or convey a particular tone or mood. All the headings are phrased as interrogative sentences, marked by a question structure. This form immediately engages the readers by posing thought-provoking questions, inviting them to ponder possible scenarios, encourages them to continue reading to find out more and consider different perspectives. In some cases, “What...if” can be used as a form of indirect persuasion. By prompting the reader to consider a hypothetical situation, the author may lead the reader to reflect on potential consequences or benefits without directly stating them. “Oz has promoted false health claims. What if he pushed vaccinations?”, “What if the midterm elections aren’t about Biden after all?”, “What if every man in your life had to go to war?”, “With North Korea talks stalled, some wonder: What if we tried something different?” (The Washington Post).

These examples highlight the use of clickbait strategies and linguistic elements in The Washington Post’s headlines to captivate readers and drive audience engagement.

Conclusions. Clickbait headline is a type of online content that is designed to get attention and entice users to click on a link to a website or social media page. The quality of the headline depends on the level of mastery of the native language and the writer’s understanding of the target audience. Additionally, a well-crafted headline requires a keen sense of storytelling and an ability to capture the essence of the article in a concise and attention-grabbing manner. The writer must strategically choose words and phrases that evoke curiosity, emotion, or intrigue, compelling the reader to delve further into the con-

tent. Moreover, an effective headline should align with the overall tone and purpose of the article, guiding the reader seamlessly into the heart of the narrative or information being conveyed. Mastering these skills empowers writers to create headlines that not only attract clicks but also genuinely inform and engage their audience.

The study revealed that clickbait headlines typically include several semantic components that are designed to pique readers’ curiosity and generate interest. While the specific components may vary, depending on the context and topic, most clickbait headlines include some common semantic elements found in clickbait headlines. The research detected the presence of clickbait headlines in the business newspaper The Washington Post (75 headlines of articles published in 2022), as well as the prevalence of techniques such as mind-blowing promises, hyperbolic statements, sensationalized language, exaggerated opinions, overly simplified descriptions, omitted details, strong emotional trigger words, newsjacking, false dichotomies, contradiction of facts, and unclear or likely strive information. Authors use powerful and effective linguistic expressions and patterns to create engaging content that captivates the audience and encourages them to read further. The most common linguistic structures used in headlines by authors for The Washington Post include: “You won’t believe it”, “This is how”, “X Things You...”, “X Reasons Why...”, “This Is What”, “You can now”, and “What... if”.

By conducting linguistic and structural-syntactic analyses of clickbait headlines, researchers and media professionals can gain insights into the persuasive techniques employed, the psychological mechanisms at play, and the potential impact on readers’ decision-making. This understanding can be valuable for developing media literacy programs, improving headline writing practices, and fostering critical thinking skills among audiences when consuming online content.

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