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Critical reading of online news commentary headlines: Stylistic and pragmatic aspects

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Abstract

In doing a critical reading of news commentary headlines drawn from a corpus, this study uses critical stylistics as an initial tool for delineating the headlines' textual, ideational and interpersonal features and also for categorizing them according to the main type of triggering located in their respective textual-conceptual functions. Presuppositions are found to be a key device in constructing the headlines' ideational "text-worlds", which can strategically activate readers' "belief systems knowledge" and rapidly validate or shape their attitudes regarding social reality, even when a headline is being scanned and read autonomously on a mobile device platform. To better understand the contextual and representational role of these news commentary headlines in contemporary journalistic knowledge production and reception, this research examines their stylistic and syntactic design, identifying accompanying characteristics such as embedded ideological perspectives and propositional interpretive frameworks, while noting the headlines' specialized positioning as cohesive interpolating texts in the digital news ecosystem.

Key words

critical stylistics, pragmatics, headlines, news commentary, digital journalism

1. Introduction

The founding types of approaches to headline stylistic analysis view a news headline as functioning informatively to summarize content as well as functioning persuasively in an eye-catching way to attract attention (Bell, 1991; Fowler, 1991). Most previous linguistic headline research also examines headlines as separate units of text, which are generally viewed as a correlated, yet distinguishable, intermediary to another text. This autonomous sub-genre of "headlines" has a definable set of linguistic features and is a specific type of language (Bednarek and Caple, 2012, pp. 100-104). Overall, headlines are considered to simultaneously have both a semantic and a pragmatic function, evidenced in the structure of the headline as well as in the various stylistic devices deployed, which are strategies for creating a type of expressiveness in relation to potential news readers (Iarovici and Amel, 1989; Miššiková, 2007). When stylistic devices in headlines are pragmatically evaluated in terms of their effectiveness, this is often discussed in terms of accessibility markers (Kronrod and Engel, 2001; Isani, 2011), relevance optimization (Dor, 2003; Ifantidou,

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2009), and forward-reference (Blom and Hansen, 2015), which should lead to selection of the news article by the headline's reader. Most recently, analysis of headlines in digital contexts tends to focus on how well stylistic features can prompt the goal of "getting clicked" by the reader as evidence of effectiveness, and studies look at how headline writers are deploying textual "clickbait features" (Kuiken, et al., 2017). Indeed, in this study, we can note that these types of stylistic features and pragmatic phenomena are also woven into the fabric of, and are germane to, the types of headlines under discussion here.

While these approaches focus on the attracting features of the headline text and tend to ultimately measure pragmatic "success" by a reader's somewhat quantifiable response of reading the article's full text, indicated by clicking (or tapping) engagement, this paper will pause in a space in-between the textual and the interpersonal aspects of the reading interaction to examine the ideational "moment" linking the two. This is where, from the critical stylistic perspective, ideational triggering occurs and a textual world, embedded with ideology, is generated (Jeffries, 2016, p. 163). It is here that the communicator's choices in rhetorical style and selectively deployed linguistic options are specific strategies for textualizing a particular version of social reality (Molek-Kozakowska, 2016, pp. 279-280). This is an important space to explore, since the news commentary headlines under consideration here are distinctly more explicitly ideological than "objective reporting" hard-news headlines. While they are constructed with stylistic economy much like other types of headline, news commentary headlines also strategically represent and package the news material in perspective, evaluation and opinion, which manifests initially at the ideational level.

Between the textual style of the headline and the pragmatic goal of reader selection, one aspect of headlines that should be included in an analysis is the role of presuppositions. How news discourse is experienced in context is highly dependent on presuppositions, which are built into its structure and production (van Dijk, 1988). Usually, this is discussed in terms of the presupposed contextual knowledge that a reader draws on to read the news. Various types of knowledge are activated when a reader processes news discourse. This activation begins with the headline interface, as the "proposition expressed by the headline is also a strong strategic suggestion to the readers to construct this as the top macro proposition of their mental model of the event to be represented – or to add or modify an opinion already formed in an earlier model when readers heard about this case" (van Dijk, 2003, p. 99). This paper is particularly interested in the type of knowledge Lindemann (1989, p. 56) refers to as readers' "belief systems" knowledge, and van Dijk (2003, pp. 89-90) defines as one part of social cognition: the ideologically based *attitudes* contained within readers' (group) social knowledge. My contention is that this key type of reader-knowledge is activated when presuppositions attend the textual-conceptual triggering at the ideational level of interaction with a news commentary headline text.

This research paper contextually incorporates, acknowledges and pays particular attention to current trends in digital mobile online technology, and the current affordances and constraints that are impacting news headline design and news reading habits (Jones and Salter, 2012). Today, news headlines are most commonly viewed on mobile device applications (Fedeli and Matsa, 2018), including social media platforms (Shearer and Matsa, 2018), and that movement is distinctly shaping emerging journalism as digital mobile technology impacts the crafting of news content for various platforms (Westlund, 2013; Ekström and Westlund, 2019b). In addition, headlines are frequently distributed and shared in social networks as a kind of "cultural currency" (Hermida, et al., 2012; Hermida, 2016; 2018) where they often make "impressions" in getting noticed and read, but are much less likely to be clicked/tapped in order to read the full article (Gabiello, et al., 2016). In everyday contexts, many readers develop a "checking cycle" habit of reading a stream of headlines in order to "derive sufficient information" about news events (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink, 2015, p. 673). Since this habit is not dependent on clicking through, the reasons for *not* clicking on a headline are worth attention. In a daily browsing process, headlines can be essential criteria for deciding whether to read full news articles or not, but a headline also can be left unclicked and still of interest as important reading material on its own. This is because headlines perceived as being "informationally complete" can be used as sufficient reading material for staying updated about what is going on in the world (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2017, p. 9). Overall, current digital journalism research and observations journalists are making about their field indicate that today's digital news headlines are very important content, even being "like articles in and of themselves" (DeMers, 2016).

This has changed the way headlines, as one part of the contemporary digital news media ecosystem, are now being viewed and how they may be studied.¹

2. Framework of analysis

One model for critical reading, suggested by Jeffries (2010; 2016), is the critical stylistics model of analysis. In this paper, the critical stylistic approach to texts is also important to the initial critical reading and linguistic analysis of online news commentary headlines. In other words, taking a critical reading perspective and testing the critical stylistics model in this context is how we can begin to unpack what is going on in the selected language samples. The selected sample headlines, taken from a larger corpus that I collected are from the genre of online political news commentary. I believe that this research presents a novel application of the critical stylistics model, being used as a critical lens for viewing these types of texts in context, and for subsequently gaining a better understanding of an understudied genre in contemporary journalism.

Stylistic analysis of interpersonal rhetoric involves examination of expressive language choices, which are contextual discourse strategies for facilitating cooperative interactions and understandings (Miššíková, 2012). The headlines in this research are examined in terms of their stylistic and interactive ability to effectively trigger reader attention and interest, and the focus is on further dimensions in this interface. This paper focuses on particular textual and discourse-level linguistic devices used to effect ideational triggering. These are devices such as language manipulations and other pragmatic devices, for example presuppositions and implicatures, which support the triggering effects. Beyond how these discourse structures in headlines trigger attention and interest, I look at how they also autonomously trigger construction of an independent commentary “text-world” or “narrative version of the social world” at the ideational level, which interfaces with readers’ personal narratives of their lived social worlds.

In agreement with Jeffries’s recommendations for applying the critical stylistics model of analysis (2015), the sample texts are analyzed with attention to the links between their three metafunctional aspects, based on Halliday’s functional-systemic approach to language and the concept of three metafunctional levels in language with textual, ideational, and interpersonal meanings. In particular, the present analysis utilizes Jeffries’ contextual and co-textual interpretation of ideational meaning activation (2014, p. 409-412), and takes a critical stylistic perspective in identifying textual trigger features and their ideational textual-conceptual functions in the text-reader interface. In turn, this aids us in observing how the ideational metafunction relates to the other two metafunctions in the stylistic presentation of ideas in texts, and through this we can identify some prototypical formulations in the language samples.

For the headlines being analysed, I first focus on the textual metafunction and identify the semantic and stylistic features of the language sample, examine the grammar and syntactic structure, and also observe elements such as parallelism and foregrounding, in order to describe the construction of the sample’s textual elements. Next, when focusing on the ideational metafunction, I focus on “what the text is doing in creating an ideational world” (Jeffries, 2015), and note which textual-conceptual functions are present and prominent in triggering an ideational world. This is identifying the “ideational scenario” or the kind of ideation being produced. Finally, when focusing on the interpersonal metafunction, I focus on what the language sample is doing in the social world at the discourse level as a text functioning among the various discourses of contemporary journalism. Here, I address questions about the digital journalism context, the commentator’s role in knowledge production, the text’s utility for readers, and the possibility of ideologies

¹ In pragmatics, this concept is raised by Dor, who acknowledges that an important news reading pattern to consider is “scanning the headlines” and only occasionally stopping to read the whole story, because a reader might “receive the best deal” in reading just the headline itself (Dor, 2003, pp.696-697, p.718, p.720). Isani makes a related observation that, functioning on a pragmatic level, a headline could be considered a communicative act that engages a newsreader’s interpretive process on its own (Isani, 2011, p.6, p.8). These observations become even more important to develop and explore in the current age of digital mobile devices and applications, which are specifically designed for rapid scrolling and scanning of news headlines.

being naturalized or societal power structures being reified in the news-reading process. Certainly, links between all the three metafunctions are also noted in the overall analysis.

3. Language material description

In this study, I isolate political news commentary articles' headlines as the language material under consideration. If we are to view the articles' headlines as condensed summaries that also act as lures for attention, then we must keep in mind that they do so for articles that offer knowledge in the form of interpretations and perspectives on political events and people, in contrast to providing the more "objective" factual information in reported news articles. In today's digital and mobile society, examining these types of headlines is important to our general contextual understanding of how political news is represented and interpreted in a journalistic discourse ecosystem.

The corpus for this project consists of 204 commentary headlines retrieved from five news websites. The collection of this headline corpus is limited by time period and topic. All of the collected samples are from January-February 2017. The topic is Trump's inauguration as US president, and so the collection is limited to headlines about Trump from the weeks preceding Trump's presidential inauguration (January 20) and from the weeks directly after the inauguration. In the weeks surrounding an inauguration, there is most often a large amount of writing of this type done around the new president and the new presidential administration.

Headlines from two newspaper websites are used in this paper: the Washington Post (WP) and the Guardian (TG). On these websites, the opinion section is clearly labelled, and all headlines gathered were marked as opinion articles. However, it is important to note that when viewed on some mobile device applications, these labels did not appear along with the headline, unless it was clicked for the full article. Another note is that because editorials are considered to be a separate news genre, unique and distinct from other forms of opinion journalism (Firmstone, 2019), they are excluded from this corpus. Both of these news outlets have well-developed opinion pages, with regular columnists as well as guests writing about a wide variety of public affairs news topics, including specific political topics. In particularizing this collection, the intention is to discover, identify and elaborate on stylistic and pragmatic features contained in headlines solely from the genre of political news commentary.

4. Analysis and discussion

In this section of the paper some patterns are identified in the collected headlines. They are organized into groups and labelled according to what I found to be the textual-conceptual functions creating the main structural "cog/gear" with projections that also drive other complementary textual-conceptual functions to generate a dynamic, coherent textual world. Around this central functional structure are other contributing stylistic features (foregrounding) and pragmatic devices (presuppositions) contributing to the combined ideological-ideational world and its interpersonal effects. The groupings are first introduced by detailed analysis of representative examples focusing on their textual, ideational and interpersonal levels, and then three additional similar examples are discussed in a more condensed way, highlighting the key textual-conceptual function, and also noting other related patterns typically expressed in that type of headline. The following three main categories of commentary headlines outlined in this research are based on Jeffries's set of 10 tools (2010), and are labelled according to the types of textual-conceptual functions that they reflect most prominently: naming and describing, exemplifying and enumerating, and (deictically) representing time, space and society.

4.1 Naming/describing

This textual-conceptual function is generally found in news headlines, where noun choice and modification are key in constructing a headline, and nominalization can be used as a framing device, sometimes coercively (Molek-Kozakowska, 2015). Yet, a remarkable difference from the language of news reporting headlines is indicated in how the structured use of presuppositions in triggering conveys a news commentary headline's more transparent ideological nature. Also, these naming/describing type of

commentary headlines are usually paired with other textual-conceptual functions, in particular the equating/contrasting function and the prioritizing function, which amplifies the main triggering effect as illustrated by the following four examples.

(1) *The Trump era is a leap in the dark (WP)*

The headline in example (1) is a textually succinct sentence where a definite article nominalizes the phrase “The Trump era”, which is linked via a stative/copular verb with a metaphor for upcoming uncertainty. So, the headline politically names a time period, using a proper noun while at the same time associating the time period with unknown future risks. The metaphor for a period of uncertainty is prefaced with an indefinite article. Lexical foregrounding is done through use of this metaphor, and the metaphor is also syntactically foregrounded within the sentence structure.

Several structurally combined textual-conceptual functions are key to the formation of a cohesive ideational metafunction in the text. The first noun phrase, being nominalized, is an example of the naming/describing textual-conceptual function as well as the second noun phrase, where use of a metaphor triggers this same function. Other textual-conceptual functions are at work as well. The textual world generated here deictically represents current time/space/society as an era named and described after an elected official. Yet another layer is added to the era label when this so-called “Trump era” is equated with “a leap in the dark”, and the prioritized metaphor encapsulates it. This strategic use of “imaging” metaphor creates a conceptual frame (Molek-Kozakowska, 2014, pp. 158-159) for the initial temporal frame.

So overall, the headline effectively generates a present-tense textual world that expresses the commentator’s stance, while proximally synchronizing and epistemologically aligning it with potential readers. The text world generated here is one named and defined by Trump as political leader; it is also a world filled with unknowns and anxieties about the future.

As political commentary, this headline interpersonally situates the reader and author in a time and place, and it presupposes the reader’s knowledge of the political context, in this case the election results and Trump’s inauguration. We can expect the full article to elaborate on why the commentator has decided to name and describe the situation in this way. This assumes deictic agreement and implicit understandings about the “The Trump era” naming, even though the parameters and characteristics of this politically labelled time period are unspecified. In presupposing “The Trump era” existing, the headline leaves the task of further delineating what that means to the commentator. So, the headline’s structure draws attention to a description of a yet-undefined “leap in the dark”, which is the prospective “knowledge gap” that will become the focus of the commentary article. Here, we see how a commentary headline can “offer substantial ideological opportunities” when nominalization conveys an element of “mystification” or “reification” (Fowler, 1991, p. 80). This construction formulates concepts and topics around which an “expert” journalist can then potentially provide opinion, analysis and clarification. In other words, the job of the author is carved out in the text of the headline. The headline is well structured for the commentator’s enterprise of defining and recurrently redefining events in the general political news environment.

(2) *Trump’s lies are delusional. But the dangers they pose are now very real. (TG)*

As in the previous example, this headline textually uses nominalization, this time a possessive proper noun and definite article, to trigger the naming-describing function. Additionally complementing the nominalization is syntactic foregrounding with a two-part or two-sentence structure to indicate contrast, which is a device common in the corpus it is drawn from. The use of ‘but’ generates conventional implicature, conveying additional meanings and setting up a key ideational part of this headline: presuppositions that trigger by hinging on all of the adjectives in the headline. The progression that follows is that Trump is a liar, his lies are delusional, and his lies have become dangerous, to the point of being “not delusional but real”, and “very real now”. In this movement from one definition to the next, cohesion is maintained as new definitions are added and prioritized.

Another stylistic device found frequently supplementing the main triggering in these types of headlines at the ideational level involves the deictic/representing textual-conceptual function, and in this case the ‘now’ proximally points to the world as it is with Trump recently inaugurated as president. Additionally, at the interpersonal level, presuppositions are harnessed to trigger either an automatic agreement/confirmation of the reader’s own interpretation of the current situation if this is read as a declaration, or to trigger a desire to know exactly how the lies have moved in relation to the reader; the lies now being “very real and dangerous”. So, the parameters of the textual world created by the headline solicit explanations and definitions, and the author is positioned to be an expert interpreter with insights into the situation to impart in the full text.

(3) *Trump’s anemic imagination **undermines** the American Dream (TG)*

As we have seen in this category of headlines, the naming/describing process, using proper nouns, possessive proper nouns and definite articles, is one of the key ways that the textual level bridges into the ideational aspects of the headline. This one-sentence headline also has two parts, and the lexical choice of verb here puts two nominalized entities into opposition, while the predicate is structurally prioritized. When combined with attending presuppositions, this opposition of two named entities triggers the ideational world of the headline. Assumptions about the source and meaning of Trump’s utterances and what the meaning of the American Dream is are implicit, and their presupposition is necessary in understanding and accepting the contrastive relationship expressed in the headline. As an overall coherent interpretive declaration, the headline alone can confirm or shape readers’ perceptions. Yet, the conceptualization of opposition also directs and positions the reader for seeking enumeration or finer definitions, when it generates questions like “why/how/how much/in what way” is “the American Dream” undermined by “Trump’s anemic imagination”? As we have seen in other examples, the headline creates a conceptual space for a knowledgeable explainer to fill this type of “knowledge gap”.

(4) *Donald Trump isn’t mad – he’s the **arrogant boss** we’ve all seen before. (TG)*

The structure of this headline is textually quite similar to example (2) and (3), and reflects a feature often used in this category of headlines, where the overall syntactic system is structured for setting up opposition of two nominalized entities, which are often contrasting definitions or interpretations of one entity. The headline is also structured for foregrounding and prioritizing the author’s presentation of a particularly favoured definition. The second sentence is linked to the first with a dash, which is a diacritic, and graphic, visually expressive means of syntactically foregrounding the two phrases in the second sentence, seen also in example (7). Here, in three parts, the headline moves a definition along, nominalizing the second and third parts with a definite article for the predicate, and ending in a nominalizing relative clause that is marked deictically. So, when the headline triggers at the ideational level, the naming/describing function is intensified by also equating/contrasting, and by bringing the reader deictically into proximity with the new definition via presuppositions about “arrogant bosses”. The shifting of definitions, cancelling ‘mad’ and replacing it with a familiar image of an ‘arrogant boss’ coincides with the shift in deictic positioning.

There is another strong presupposing element in this and in other headlines in this corpus, which is that the whole process the author and reader are engaged in is dependent on presuppositions about an ongoing debate or public discussion around how to define Trump’s utterances and actions. The headline states a proposition, interpersonally, and while it implies that this opinionated statement will be explained or proven in the article’s text, it also invites the reader into the definitional “game” being played out more widely in political news commentary discourse. One final note is that this headline, like others in the corpus, can also be read and understood on its own, and does not require further reading to effectively make a coherent point. In other words, the headline itself already generates enough text-world for a rich interface with a reader’s social world.

In this first grouping, the headlines introduce propositions or proposed redefinitions. The headlines themselves ideationally generate these subjective perspectives and viewpoints, which are opinion-based

observations of current political events and responses to ongoing political discussions and debates. The headlines package definitions in a way that strongly expresses their validity, and their propositions can be immediately accepted as true, might also induce curiosity for further supportive text, or could be rejected outright.

4.2 Exemplifying/enumerating (& explaining)

Whether implied or explicit, the questions generated by the Wh-clauses in these news headlines are clearly in the commentary genre. Exploring the often highly subjective presuppositions in them makes this more apparent. It is worth noting that this category should make us consider the assuming/implicating textual-conceptual function playing a role, as it does in any commentary headline. However, the main trigger in the texts is one of “explaining”. In these samples of commentary, this is not typically done in an explicit numerical or basic three-part list, but more indirectly as “reasons” supporting a proposition. I argue that when the headline introduces an implied proposition and its accompanying argument/explanation, it generates expectation for an indefinite amount of appropriate supporting reasons/causes. Thus, my perspective on this category of headlines expands on Jeffries’s definition of the exemplifying/enumerating textual-conceptual function (Jeffries, 2010, p. 76).

(5) *What’s the method in Trump’s madness? (WP)*

The headline text is a stylistically conversational forward-referencing interrogative. In the predicate a definite article nominalizes ‘method’, followed by a prepositional phrase. Syntactically, the entire predicate is nominalized, and the link between ‘method’ and ‘madness’ is structurally embedded. The headline also uses a modified idiomatic phrase (a method to one’s madness), which stylistically foregrounds the predicate.

The ideational aspects of the conversational question being posed here are found in its layers of nominalization. To start, ‘Trump’s’, a possessive proper noun functioning as an adjective triggers the naming/describing textual-conceptual function, much like in examples (2), (3), and (7), and also in (12) with a non-possessive. Most noticeable in this type of headline is how a Wh-clause interrogative formulation packages the headline. The prioritizing effect in the construction ‘What is...’ as opposed to the construction ‘Is there...?’ effectively cancels the interrogative force of the question, replacing it with the implied proposition ‘There is...’. This is possible because nominalizing the predicate assumes and normalizes the presupposition that Trump’s demonstrated madness exists, and also conceptually implies that the method in it is discoverable.

The headline text assumes reader familiarity with, and some knowledge of Trump’s behaviour being previously defined and discussed as ‘madness’. The embedded concept “the method in Trump’s madness” is a difficult notion to cancel, once expressed. So, the entire headline resists being debated or questioned, while still appearing as a question. By posing explicit and implied questions the headline triggers with the exemplifying and enumerating textual-conceptual function, which creates a “knowledge gap” to be filled. The gap creates space for proceeding with some explanation of the declared existing “method”.

Contextually, readers are interpersonally primed for explaining language by reading a headline implying that an answer to a vexing question will be provided by the author, who is a news commentary professional with a purported degree of expert watchfulness and authority. The news commentator is in a position to sort out or clarify any debate about the confusing “madness” behaviour that has already been noted and defined, and to subsequently provide the answer to the entailed “What the method in it is”. The Wh-clause conversationally frames that discussion, provides a supporting layer of nominalizations and presuppositions that must initially be accepted, and signals an upcoming explanation by the author. In forming expectations about the full text of the article, anticipation and a “knowledge gap” are created. The headline itself may contain some confirmation of a reader’s pre-existing viewpoint, but it is implied that the added insights from the journalist will bring even clearer or better understandings.

(6) *Why Trump loves to hate the media. (WP)*

Textually similar to the previous example, this headline uses a Wh-clause construction to formulate a relative nominal clause for an overall nominalizing effect. Also, it includes an idiomatic and oxymoronic element in the “loves to hate” phrase, which is deployed to foreground the headline. The ‘Why’ can, as in example (5) and (7), also be seen as cataphoric. Beyond these textual elements, the implying and assuming function, activated by using factive verbs here, can be an example of how the textual bridges over into ideational territory by triggering a logical presupposition for the main clause. This presupposition passes the negation test of “Trump doesn’t love to hate the media”.

On another layer of the headline, since the predicate noun phrase is nominalized, and therefore packaged, this presupposes the act of “hating the media” as a known entity, in the prior knowledge of the author and reader. So, interpersonally, the commentator assumes readers’ familiarity with Trump’s behaviour toward the media and implies that there are some unanswered questions about it. If, textually and ideationally, it is an accepted fact that Trump enjoys his hateful rants against journalists, then the question, worthy of exemplification or enumeration, would be “why?” This is implied to be part of an “unexplainable” situation that readers may be puzzled by. As in the other examples in this category of headlines, through the textual-conceptual functions, room is made for filling in a “knowledge gap”.

(7) ***How** Trump’s obsession with the media endangers **his** presidency – and all of **us**. (WP)*

This headline also nominalizes with a relative nominal Wh-clause construction, and ‘How’ suggests cataphoric reference to additional explanatory text. Textually it has two direct objects: ‘his presidency’ and then ‘all of us’, which is syntactically foregrounded, in being visually separated by ‘- and’, with its attending conventional implicature for additional messages. The headline construction conveys implied but indeterminate meanings regarding sequential as well as consequential political considerations, given the context and timing close to the presidential inauguration. The implied proposition that “endangerment exists” resists being debated or questioned, while the headline also triggers an enumerative/explanatory ideational conceptual space for generating questions, much like the previous examples in this category. So, several textual-conceptual functions are working in tandem to create the coherent ideational whole. Within this nominalized Wh-package, an additional interior layer of nominalization in ‘Trump’s obsession’ is triggering the naming/describing textual-conceptual function. The naming and describing is then linked to the prioritized personal pronoun ‘us’, and this deictic device is an example of the representing time/space/society textual-conceptual function.

Back to the textual level, the ‘all of us’ phrase appears to use ‘all’ as an iterative word to make certain that ‘us’ implies wide audience inclusiveness. But, interpersonally, as in previous examples, coherent assimilation of the entire headline is still contingent upon presuppositions embedded structurally into the main subject of the sentence: the phrase ‘Trump’s obsession with the media’. The credence and salience of this conception is assumed. Subsequently, it can be revealed to be “endangering” and moving proximally closer, but with a degree of uncertainty about exactly “how” and “why”. Thus, based on conceptual text-world acceptance, the headline entails these types of questions and prompts proceeding to additional descriptions, postulations and possible answers in the full text of the commentary.

(8) ***14 ways** to Trump-proof your life (TG)*

Within this category of headlines, this particular example of numerically listing ideas triggers the exemplifying/enumerating textual-conceptual function directly by textually prioritizing ‘14 ways’, and then syntactically packaging the rest of the headline into a prepositional phrase, which nominalizes it. The term ‘Trump-proof’ is a creative way to imply vulnerability and foreground the concept of protecting against presupposed dangers and potential harms that could come from a Trump presidency. In addition, the general noun ‘ways’ has a cataphoric function, in pointing to the proceeding text, if the ideational world presented is accepted and also spurs the desire to read more.

In the ideational world being generated, Trump has the ability to impact the reader negatively, and one ideational element working with the exemplifying/enumerating function is the open-endedness and non-

specificity of the term ‘your life’ in the headline. Based on presuppositions about the need for security or shielding, the direct address ‘your’ creates deictic proximity with readers. Thus, there is also room for the commentator to fill a “knowledge gap”, as the headline implies that the author possesses an action plan for protecting readers’ lives in various “ways”. So, interpersonally, the headline is packaged as a label for commentary with instructions, or an explanatory “how to” guide, formulated and proffered by the author. Readers are positioned to see themselves as seeking or potentially needing these ideas, which are implied to be useful to life in the new and future political context.

In the second grouping of sample headlines, questions are ideationally raised by the texts, generated in the mind of the reader as entailments of the main textual-conceptual function. Notably, these headlines contain no textual modality. The modality is generated only ideationally, in co-creation of the text-world, as *possibly existing questions*. These ideational questions are actually “closed questions” because the headline text already contains an implied proposition that an existing answer is available. For instance, in example (5) the headline “*What’s the method in Trump’s madness?*” ideationally generates *both* the more interrogative, modal questions: “Is there any method/ could there be a method in Trump’s madness?” as well as the statement “There is a method in Trump’s madness”. In raising the original question, and because of the presuppositions attending the headline, the commentator’s “pre-set” or “fixed” answer is already implied. (Is there? + Yes, there is.) Further explanation and elaboration of this answer is presumed to be in the full text of the commentary article and the headline may be regarded as containing a question worth pursuing in the co-text. However, the ideationally generated question may also be deemed as already sufficiently addressed in the ideationally generated answer.

4.3 Deictic/representing

The following type of involvement phenomena in headline language reflects a strategy of simulating closeness by “mixing oral and written modes” through “synthetic personalization” in news discourse, and in particular personal pronouns referring to discourse participants are more likely to be found in commentaries and opinion sections, where such a “change of voice” is to be expected within the genre (Chovanec, 2003, p. 61). The style is conversational in engaging the reader. Because of this, the headlines in this grouping have very direct ideational and interpersonal force. Especially important to note is how the deictic-representing textual-conceptual function works in conjunction with other functions such as naming/describing and equating/contrasting, and that brings in the attending presuppositions necessary to construct a deictic centre.

(9) *Admit it: Trump is unfit to serve (WP)*

The first part of the headline text is an imperative clause, with a colon pointing to what must be admitted. The use of a colon is syntactic foregrounding, graphically using a diacritic for visually expressive means (Miššíková, 2003, p. 90), in order to highlight the subordinated clause. The pronoun ‘it’, is a placeholder for the proposition in the second sentence. The proper noun ‘Trump’ is the subject of the sentence, joined with a stative/copular verb to a noun phrase expressing a state of being. The lexical word choice of ‘serve’ as opposed to ‘lead’ or ‘govern’ or ‘be president’ is also a possible cue for readers.

An imperative start to the headline creates a close, immediate deictic distance with the reader, and is ideationally triggering with the representing time/space/society function. The second sentence is triggering with the naming/describing function. Being placed after the colon, it is also prioritized in this headline, as the new information given. The clause ‘Admit it’ presupposes “not admitting that Trump is unfit to serve” as a possibly existing frame of mind, and implies an opposing argument. In addition, the term ‘unfit’ signals the concept of ‘fit to serve’ using a conventional trigger for the function of equating/contrasting.

The lexical word choice of ‘serve’ implicitly connotes how the reader should picture the duties of president. The term particularly emphasizes a perspective with democratic concepts about elected officials “serving” the citizenry. This particular presupposed definition of the role a president should take while in public office is useful in being exact about “what must be admitted”. Taken together, the elements in the headline cohesively signal that it precedes a persuasive argument, so the headline may have an enumerating

textual-conceptual function as well, if arguments are imagined as often being expressed as reasons assembled to support a main proposition. In all, the potential argument is made more “personal” since the ideational world is created via deictic triggering.

The headline is concise, interpersonally conversational and easy to assimilate. Readers who are already ideologically aligned with the commentator and accept the proposition in the headline might approach the persuasive co-text as an exercise in confirmation of their own beliefs, or search it for new arguments and knowledge they might discover and use. The headline text could also serve as a “stand-in” text for a reader’s own unwritten or unexpressed opinions. As a “surrogate text” it could be publically distributed to others in digital social media, using the author’s arguments as pre-formulated substitutes for writing an original argument with the same basic proposition. This headline may be seen as a good example of news commentary “sharebait” precisely in how easily it might be shared on social media platforms in order to express sentiments and confirm consensus with others. Additionally, this headline can be sent to other readers in a person’s social network who have “not admitted it” yet, in order to convince them to change their minds.

*(10) Donald Trump wants **you** to be afraid. (WP)*

In this headline, the deictic/representing textual-conceptual function is highlighted by the structure of the headline, placing the reader at the deictic center, in time and space, and in relation to the utterances of Donald Trump. Also on the textual level, the infinitive form of ‘to be’ expresses a possibility, indicates that something is due to happen, and hypothesizes about something that might happen. Therefore, the adjective ‘afraid’ has the *potential* for modifying ‘you’. On the ideational level, behind the use of the proper noun name ‘Donald Trump’ are a set of assumptions and presuppositions regarding the reader’s knowledge and interpretation of “utterances Trump has made”, for example, in this context we can note some specific language in his inauguration speech. Deictic triggers position the reader, who may yet decide if the ‘you’ is inclusive of them, but the effect of ‘you’ still automatically temporarily brings the reader into that point of view in order to make a choice about adopting that positioning. Indirectly, but embedded in the structure of the headline, Donald Trump’s statements are named and described, implicitly, as “fearmongering”, and thus Trump as a “fearmonger”. The headline implies that “what Donald Trump wants you to feel” is knowable, and discoverable in his utterances. Public figures and their public speeches often invite interpretative exercises like this by news media pundits, who decipher motivations and analyse politicians’ justifications for particular positions and policies. In this regard, the meanings generated in this headline also touch on the textual-conceptual function of presenting other people’s speech and thoughts in the process of triggering.

So, the formulation of an interpersonal proposition encourages the reader/you to seek further elaboration beyond the headline for some reasoned hypothesis about, or gloss on, “what Trump said and what he wants”, putting this conception in relation to themselves as citizens. Another corresponding conception is that this does not have to be seen as destined to occur. Indication of this is in the verb choice ‘wants’, which leaves open the possibility that Trump will not get what he wants, if the reader/you do not fall prey to the effects of his attempts at emotional manipulation. In any case, the deictic force in this headline is clearly a main trigger for a text-world to interface with the social world of the audience.

*(11) Trump’s **here**. **We** have four years to write a better story (TG)*

Like other examples in this collection, this headline structurally has two parts, and here it is two sentences. Both sentences are triggering deictically. Regarding the proper noun ‘Trump’, omitting the word ‘President’ can be seen as a condensed language strategy and also as an elliptical way to foreground time periods, but more importantly, the ‘here’ is clearly being used to express time, as the present moment, the here and now, where Trump has become a president. The second subject, ‘we’ and the direct object ‘years’, plus the adjective ‘four’ modifying it, combine to create a second deictic centre. Much of the ideational triggering in this headline has to do with the deictic markers, ‘here’, ‘we’, ‘years’, which indicate the

textual-conceptual function of representing time/space/society. The conversational declaration ‘Trump’s here’ presupposes knowledge and opinion about a recent event: the inauguration of Trump as president. The phrase ‘four years to write a better story’ deictically places the reader in the mode of “from now until four years from now”, as the nominalized metaphor “a better story” minimally implies that the story about to be written under a Trump presidency will not be “a good story”. Assumptions embedded in this metaphor also signal that a story is being/will be formulated, and that the inclusive ‘We’ in this headline can participate in constructing such a story. Interpersonally, this implies a politically and ideologically directive “call to action” regarding Trump’s upcoming four-year presidency. Like many other examples, this headline is coherently summarizing on its own, yet it leaves room for the commentator to put forward ideas for how to go about achieving the “better story”, and it differs from the others since the very direct deictic triggering also potentially invites the reader into that process.

(12) *Chill, America. Not every Trump outrage is outrageous (WP)*

This example has several overlapping layers of triggering devices and lexical and syntactic features. First, the foregrounding appears in the use of informal, conversational slang as well as a deictic imperative in the first sentence. The “fronting” in the second sentence highlights and emphasizes the negation effects by syntactically shifting ‘Not’ to the first word of the sentence (Miššíková, 2003, p. 69), while lexical foregrounding comes through word play that juxtaposes word-family derivatives, and which intentionally groups the semantically clashing words. This is using “paronomasia” for effect (Miššíková, 2003, p. 64). The combined effects of all this textual foregrounding connect cohesively with ideational triggers, as we get a proximal deictic address ‘America’, and embedded, nominalized naming/describing triggering in ‘Trump outrage’ as well as equating/contrasting triggering in ‘not every’. These are, naturally, dependent on presuppositions about America’s reactions (or overreactions) to Trump, and about how his actions have been interpreted and defined in other previous or adjacent commentary discourse. Thus, this headline implies familiarity with an ongoing debate about definitions, as many headlines in this corpus do. The directive and interpersonal qualities of the headline create space for additional parsing of definitions, while also maintaining an informal, approachable and even playfully conversational tone. Based on what previous knowledge, reading and personal opinions they bring to the interface, readers are positioned for responding in agreement or disagreement to the ‘Chill’ imperative. The conversation begun in this part of the headline can produce a “knowledge gap” and an inclination for discovering some fuller reasoning and explanation about the brief proposition in the second sentence.

Generally, headlines in this third grouping create gaps by providing the potential for an ideational “shift” in the positioning of the reader-self. This can be a shift in a reader’s perspective or way of thinking in relation to the political context. A direction for such deictic positioning, or re-positioning, is offered by the proposition contained in the headline. Engagement is proximally invited, in the inclusive possibility of fully sharing or adopting a deictic orientation and thus aligning in calibration with the commentator, with the news event in mind. The commentator implicitly offers instruction regarding making that potential mental, emotional or behavioral shift. The reasoning and logic behind this proposed shifting is expected to be available in the commentary’s full text.

4.4 Summary of analysis

Semantically and pragmatically, there are two underlying elements playing key roles in support of the textual-conceptual functions and the textual triggering of ideational text-worlds: foregrounding and presuppositions. These help to signal and fortify that the text is commentary and also invigorate the most relevant textual-conceptual functions in the headline.

Stylistic foregrounding, both lexical and syntactic, is notably accompanying and contributing to the overall triggering effects in these samples. In conjunction with the featured textual-conceptual functions, the pragmatic function of lexical foregrounding in these headlines demonstrates how lexical choices and various types of deviations create prominence to gain attention (Gregoriou, 2014). Also frequently found in these sample headlines is syntactic foregrounding that structures the headlines into subordinating levels.

This noticeable pattern works in tandem with the prioritizing textual-conceptual function, as “the ideological point to make here is that the lower the level of subordination, the less amenable the structure is to scrutiny and/or objection or disagreement by the reader/hearer” (Jeffries, 2010, p. 78). So, the foregrounding can contribute lexically to triggering attention and syntactically to create a bridge for establishing ideological agreement.

Also, pragmatic presuppositions are notable as fundamentally contributing factors, which are often essential in attending the triggering process of textual-conceptual functions. Indeed, news reading context models inherently require knowledge-based presuppositions, especially when, in a news discourse structure, a journalist activates what “readers know or should know on the issue, and which knowledge thus can be presupposed or left implicit” (Van Dijk, 2003, pp. 97-98). This leads us to consider how, in the background, the “hidden” dynamics of presuppositions in news writing are linked to power relations and journalism’s institutional role in society, since structuring news reporting discourse with “unfair presuppositions” may often be due to ideological reasons (Bekalu, 2006). In news discourse, obscuring certain issues in this way can potentially have dubious impacts on how news readers access and interpret information, as well as how they view their social reality (Molek-Kozakowska, 2015). However, these commentary headline examples, which are essentially labels for personally/professionally opinioned writing, are presumed as being more overtly ideologically subjective. So, in this type of journalism discourse, we may look at the underlying presuppositions from another, related angle.

As essential elements in ideational triggering in the headlines of political news commentary, it is clear that presuppositions highlight and express ideology rather than hide it. The presuppositions are key elements in nominalizing conceptions of information, and key for creating the kind of “common ground” that facilitates new knowledge production and transfer in a discourse system that is shaping perspectives on social reality. In the case of news commentary, interpretive knowledge of political events is produced by an “expert” journalist, and in a digital, mobile ecosystem of news consumption, commentary genre articles, which interpolate and “supplement” the news can easily become “replacements” for the “objective-information” type of hard news that they constantly comment on. As a result, reading this type of commentary can naturalize a reader’s system of news interpretation, as viewpoints come largely via the commentariat’s packaged constructions of social reality. In its societal role, journalism is generally seen to have epistemic norms and an institutionalized claim to knowledge production, and as representatives of that system, the commentators, as interpreters and “knowledge producers”, can act as namers, explainers and positioners, especially because of the way these texts are disseminated and utilized within the digital news discourse ecosystem.

Based on the three main types of headlines grouped in this research, there are three main types of “knowledge gap” that are created in news commentary, where knowledge can be added to the question under discussion. The naming/describing type implies a new definition or a redefinition, the exemplifying/enumeration type implies a new explanation, and the deictic/representing type implies a new positioning or a new action to participate in. In any of these cases, the text is indicating to readers that it has the potential to be “knowledge-adding” or “knowledge-confirming” depending on how novel and pressing the commentator’s ideas truly are proposed to be, from the reader’s perspective.

Even as we see some interesting technology-based reconfiguration of the public sphere and of the roles of audiences in relation to media practitioners (Johansson, 2014; Cotter 2015), these types of commentary text reflect naturalization of a relationship to constructed truths about social reality. The discourse structures in the texts are set up to influence the mental models of recipients, potentially manipulating their beliefs (van Dijk, 2015, pp. 473-475). While it may textually disclose its ideological biases, commentary discourse is structured in ways that are similar to other types of news discourse, in that it also ideologically delineates and reproduces power relations, maintaining an elite group’s control and perceived institutional “epistemic authority” (Ekström and Westlund, 2019a, pp.11-12, pp.19-20) in a publically shared discourse space. Unequal interpersonal and societal relationships are still being expressed, and it is the journalistic commentators who remain arbiters of truth, framing and leading the conversations, wielding the authority to know, and setting parameters for new social knowledge.

At a societal level, reception of the interpretations in the headlines may depend on the epistemic community and social knowledge of a reader approaching the text. The epistemic aspect of presuppositions in the triggering process is notable here, and worthy of “critical epistemic discourse analysis” (van Dijk, 2003, 2011), which, in part, this study of headlines generally attempts to do in examining how a textual world is prompted, and in imagining how readers from differing epistemic communities, with differing perspectives, might experience these texts. Acceptance of the presuppositions, for example, can make acceptance of the proposition in the headline quite smooth, and can have the effect of making the headline a complete package of meaning. At the other end of the spectrum, the presuppositions are strong indicators of epistemic positioning, so if they are found by a reader to be unacceptable, or unprocessable in an epistemic way, they could also cause the text’s meaning to be summarily rejected.

While the sample headlines in this study can be seen as strongly opinionated, and as using a type of logic that is directly appealing to partisan attitudes, this is to be expected within the news commentary genre, and the examples considered here are within the standard range of political discussion. While polarization, tribalization and even hyperpartisanism are factors in the American political environment, and are very relevant to the 2016 election and its aftermath, this particular type of commentary comes from the part of the media ecosystem that adheres to professional journalistic norms, and it is not to be equated with other types of journalism that were and still are markedly propagandistic (Benkler, et al., 2018). Rather, in the context of readers trying to make sense of a confusing and troubling political situation, these types of articles can be viewed as potentially useful tools for coping with an unexpected election outcome and for sorting out the political and societal consequences of the election. They are, then, identifiable as one naturally occurring part of the mix of genres within journalism discourse.

Overall, it seems clear that exposing presuppositions is a key way to discern between commentary and reporting language. Yet, the contemporary context of headline reading and scanning habits raises additional questions. Commentary discourse appears obviously ideological, but when placed alongside other news headlines in a mobile digital environment, that distinction can become less clear. A related question worth pursuing beyond this paper is whether textual stylistic cues in news headlines always signal their genre explicitly enough to give readers clear indication of what is “reported opinion” and what is “objective reporting”. This concern especially arises because the usual newspaper genre signposts might be absent when a headline is dislocated from its original source of publication onto a non-proprietary mobile application, social network platform or personalized newsfeed. Related to how headlines move around in digital environments, and also beyond the scope of this paper, is an exploration of how headline writers and news commentators go about creating their headlines, fully knowing, and counting on the fact that they will become dislocated in this way (Westlund, 2013; Ekström and Westlund, 2019b). Perhaps headlines could be discussed as a type of artifice. In such a view, the commercial economy of measurable audience analytics and the impact of “algorithmic judgment” (Carlson, 2018) in headline construction and manipulation could also be explored in order to know more about these types of texts. To answer questions about how some of the headline language options being deployed today are based on reader data, linguistic researchers would need access to the accumulating data on click-rates and share-rates that is mostly limited to the exclusive view of news producers and social media platforms.

5. Conclusions

These commentary headlines condense information and opinion into a package of knowledge expressed in an ideational text-world that is triggered by textual-conceptual functions formed in conjunction with the concomitant stylistic and pragmatic mechanisms in the text, namely syntactic foregrounding and presuppositions. This textual design reflects a context where a reader’s act of scanning news headlines can become less concerned with information-seeking and more focused on accumulating confirming views on social reality and maintaining a narrative that a reader finds to be in alignment with their own perceptions. Taken as a whole, these language formulations construct ideational text-worlds, make commentary headlines ideologically congenial, and also establish and maintain a type of epistemic orientation. This is a shift where the commentator, and even a briefly summarized proposition of their ideas, is positioned in the

role of producing a type of knowledge that contributes to social cognition, thereby structuring thought and mediating experience for readers and their social groups.

So, a commentary headline and its unique combination of ideational elements becomes a coherent proposition and it can be easily consumed during rapid scanning of digital headlines. At the same time that the headline resists challenges and debate, it still potentially acts as a lure for a reader's clicking action by creating some underlying "knowledge gaps" for prompting further reading of the article. These features suit a digital mobile environment, where a commentary headline interpolates digital news discourse consisting of a constant flow of headlines from varied sources and platforms. In this packaged design, the proposition in the commentary headline contains all the stylistic and pragmatic support that it needs to be taken as true and knowledgeable, appearing to not need additional supporting evidence, except if a reader might afford the time and effort of reading on by clicking/tapping to test or explore the proposition being advanced. It could be said that the headlines are so pragmatically tightly formed and so well designed as to accomplish the job of being an interpretive tool as mini-articles. Paradoxically, the headlines might not accomplish the "other" pragmatic effect of getting a reader to click for additional reading material. Consequently, in a digital mobile context the question of whether the full commentary article actually contains proper support for a proposition in the form of a well-formulated argument or a logical explanation is easily left aside.

In this critical reading of commentary headlines, attention to the interstitial ideational moment of text-world generation, between the textual and interpersonal aspects, helps us to observe how the ideational text-world is infused with ideology and see that the type of knowledge it independently produces has potential appeal for readers because of the common ground being created. Even the headline alone is formulated to be subjectively, adequately narrating the world of events as it is processed, allowing the commentator to be in the position of evaluating events for the reader. Because the headline text is immediately expressive of opinion and a fixed interpretation, it is activating, prioritizing and exploiting belief systems/ideology-based types of attitudinal social knowledge, while also deemphasizing and subsuming activation of analytically and empirically universal types of knowledge, which remain the domain of the professional commentator.

This paper has looked at how a news commentary headline's linguistic mechanisms interface with readers' news uses in digital mobile contexts and how ideology can impact news reading habits. It has raised questions about how a reader, encountering and scanning stylistically mixed types of journalism discourse might make discerning reading choices. The examples in the study particularly indicate how the specialized language construction in news commentary headlines validates and reifies the role of a news commentator as a knowledge producer in journalistic discourse spaces. In isolating the news commentary genre, this research contributes to discussions about which types of knowledge a reader may be activating in order to process and evaluate differing types of journalistic texts.

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