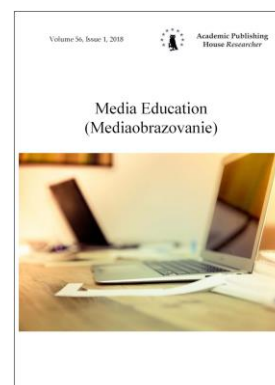




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## Linguistic Manipulation in Print Tabloid Editions: Some Methodological Implications for Media Classes

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### Abstract

The manipulative potential of the media is one of the broadly discussed topics nowadays. Print editions, in particular tabloids, often employ manipulative linguistic devices, whose aim is to attract the readers' attention and to create sensational news. The use of materials in media classes, whose aim is to present to the students the manipulation in these editions, is a way of preventing the spread of the stipulated devices. The discrepancy between the headline of the article and the main text is one of the most often observed ways of manipulation, which is used in the tabloid press. Since many of the readers read only the headlines of the articles, the analyzed device is highly productive and it can often be found only after the reading of the whole text.

The paper deals with the discrepancy between the headline and the main text in the articles about famous people in the British tabloids *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*, as one of the main ways of achieving linguistic manipulation. The discrepancy is associated with the manipulative use of possessive constructions and wordplay. The use of word play is based on a well-known song or a metaphor. The sought effect is the creation of a "pseudo-event" and artificial closeness with the reader. The analysed articles can be used in media classes in order to develop students' critical thinking abilities.

**Keywords:** manipulative devices, possessive constructions, word play, metaphor.

### 1. Introduction

The manipulative potential of the media is one of the broadly discussed topics nowadays. Print editions, in particular tabloids, often employ manipulative linguistic devices, whose aim is to attract the readers' attention and to create sensational news. The use of materials in media classes, whose aim is to present to the students the manipulation in these editions, is a way of preventing the spread of the stipulated devices.

The discrepancy between the headline of the article and the main text is one of the most often observed ways of manipulation, which is used in the tabloid press. Since many of the readers read only the headlines of the articles, the analyzed device is highly productive and it can often be found only after the reading of the whole text.

### 2. Materials and methods

The main method of analysis, which is obtained in the paper, is discourse analysis, based on Teun van Dijk's theory for the structuring of news. Teun van Dijk in *Discourse and*

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*Communication: New Approaches to the Analysis of Mass Media Discourse and Communication* (Dijk, 1985: 84–88) presents categories that are typical of news discourse. Summary and news story are the first main categories. The summary consists of the headline and the lead.

One of the ways of forming the headline is through the presenting of a summary of the main event. The headline, which is a mini-version of the whole text, should give precise information about the content of the text. In some headlines of the British tabloids, however, the headline–summary does not correspond to the content of the main text. The linguistic devices through which a discrepancy between the headline and the main text is achieved, are the use of possessive constructions and word play in the headlines of the articles.

Articles from the tabloid editions *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror* can be distributed for analysis in media classes. The proposed articles were published in the period October – November 2012. The texts are about celebrities, since the information about celebrities is one of the criteria for newsworthiness.

### 3. Discussion

In recent years, research in the field of media studies concerns topics, related to news values. Authors who have done research on conflict and negativity focus on discourse in journalism textbooks with regard to “bad news” (Parks, 2018), media representations of domestic violence (Cullen et al, 2019), digital diplomacies during conflict (Manor, Crilley, 2018). A number of publications refer to the development of regional press and local newspapers (Matthews, 2017), (Clark, 2017; Longden, 2017). Media psychology topics are also within the realm of investigation of researchers (Grizzard et al, 2017). In the case of linguistic manipulation in print tabloid editions, the topic of investigation is the parasocial relation between the addresser and the addressee.

While making a review of the recent tendencies in media education studies, it is of utmost importance to focus on research, directed to media criticism and the development of analytical thinking (Fedorov, Levitskaya, 2017). The development of analytical thinking helps the audience in gaining knowledge and understanding media communication.

Of particular interest are the studies related to language use in media context. Since language is never neutral, a careful observation of certain linguistic patterns is necessary for the critical understanding of hidden meanings. Media discourse analysis includes exploration of the language of the French quality daily, *Le Monde* (Le, 2017), online abuse of journalists through comments in Twitter (Binns, 2017) and social media discourse (Duffy, Wissinger, 2017). The present paper proposes a media studies frame, based on identifying the manipulative potential of British tabloid dailies, which can be successfully implemented in writing media classes of advanced level.

In the very beginning, a distinction between manipulation and persuasion should be made:

Manipulation is not exactly coercion, not precisely persuasion, and not merely deception. Nevertheless, in order for any motivating action to be effective it must, at least to some extent, be persuasive, compelling, or both. A basic understanding of manipulation is that it involves a combination of persuasion and coercion made possible by trickery. In other words, manipulation dissected looks like a weird mixture of persuasion, coercion, and deception. Therefore, trying to distinguish between the different motivating actions might help us understand the very essence of manipulation and give us a better vision of its territory (Handelman, 2009: 21).

A distinction between text and discourse should also be made:

'Discourse' is sometimes used in contrast with 'text,' where 'text' refers to actual written or spoken data, and 'discourse' refers to the whole act of communication involving production and comprehension, not necessarily entirely verbal. ... The study of discourse, then, can involve matters like context, background information or knowledge shared between a speaker and hearer (Bloor, Bloor, 2013: 7).

After having been introduced to the peculiarities of media discourse in general, students may proceed to the characteristics of linguistic manipulation.

The use of possessive constructions in the headlines of the articles about celebrities is one of the most often used ways of manipulating the readers. The use of the constructions is based on insufficient information, presented in the headline, most often in texts about famous singers.

The headline “Jessie’s devotion to Ocean” (*The Daily Mirror*, 02.11.12) presupposes a text in which the reader will learn interesting information about a famous person, who likes the ocean. According to D. Boorstin, a successful reporter is the one, who can find an interesting story. If he/she cannot find such a story, they have to invent it (Boorstin, 1992: 8). In the concrete

example, the tabloid employs the above-mentioned strategy. What students read in the main text is not a story about the hobby of a famous singer but information about the professional success and aspirations of a famous person – a topic, which is not as provocative as the headline itself. In the story, the singer Jessie Ware speaks about the success of her debut album and confesses to the reporter that she is eager to work with the famous American singer Frank Ocean. At the end of the text, there is a commentary that after the success of her album *Devotion*, there is a great chance that the singer will agree to work with her. By using only the first name of Jessie Ware and the discrepancy between the headline and the text, the edition aims to create sensational news.

Headlines with possessive constructions, especially in texts about famous sports people are difficult to be interpreted because in some sports, there is specific lexis that can hardly be understood outside the context. Thus the headline loses its informative value and turns into an attractive graphic wordplay.

“Man U’s Ryan on drive rap”, a headline from *The Sun* (14.10.12) presupposes a text about a man, named Ryan. After the reading of the main text, the students recover the meaning relations, which are not present in the headline. The text is about *Manchester United* footballer – Ryan Tunnicliffe, who has been arrested after driving drunk and causing a car accident. In this case, there is surprising information, based on incongruity – a loved person makes something bad: “loved negative /–/ Is it possible?” (Kapferer, 1992: 116).

According to Kapferer, the information has one positive and one negative element. These elements have surprising information, which is interesting for the reader. Since the readers prefer balanced claims, this kind of information leads to derogation of the image of the person in question, and it becomes negative (Kapferer, 1992: 117).

Discrepancy between headline and main text is also achieved through word play. The word play is based on the use of a famous song or a metaphor.

An example of word play is to be found in the headline “Adele rolls in the sleep” (*The Daily Mirror*, 05.10.12). The headline presupposes a text about sleeplessness problems of the singer. After reading the text, it becomes clear that Adele is the singer, who most people like to listen to, before going to sleep. The discrepancy between the headline and the main text is used with the aim of creating sensational news – information about a famous person, which would attract readers’ attention. According to Ch. Rojek, sensationalism is the way through which the massmedia respond to the monotony and predictability of the everyday life (Rojek, 2001: 18). The use of the analysed device is also aimed at the creation of a “pseudo-event” in which celebrities take part. Thus, one of the criteria for the turning of an event into news, namely the presence of a celebrity, is being realized.

By creating articles in which the meaning of the headline and the main text do not correspond, the editions adhere to the main postulate that the reader has to decide himself/herself which part is true and real and which not. The interpretation of the text is made difficult, since “untrue or distorted content is being presented in media space like truthful information in order to manipulate the public” (Hristova, 2018: 32).

Examples of “planned sensationalism” (Rojek, 2001: 23) are found in headlines based on metaphors. Since “the metaphor is considered as a universal means for verbal communication” (Genova, 1997: 138), its use, related to the creation of sensation in headlines, has a high manipulative potential.

“The metaphor is both truth and untruth, truth in one respect and untruth in another... and the very fact that the metaphor has in itself this play of the truth with the untruth, is one more source of its attractiveness” (Passi, 2001: 43). Students may analyse the article entitled “Steve runs fight club” (*The Sun*, 10.11.12), whose headline presupposes that the manager Steve Clarke owns a fight club. After reading the text, it becomes clear that the players of Steve Clarke may now have a rest, after having won a victory over Southampton.

Learners may be further given the task to analyse the following headline with wordplay, based on polysemy “Rylan ready for chop” (*The Daily Mirror*, 24.11.12). The discrepancy is due to the use of the word *chop* and its meanings – *cut* and *dismiss*.

#### 4. Results

After the analysis of the headlines in the tabloid editions, it becomes clear that the lexical way of achieving manipulation prevails over the grammatical one. Apart from the headlines that were

given as examples for linguistic manipulation, the following set of tasks may also be implemented in media classes.

A good way of acquiring the skill of finding the manipulation will be an exercise in which learners will try to write themselves ambiguous sentences and the other students will have to tell what the story will be about. Comparing headlines with and without manipulative devices, concerning one and the same event, can also foster critical thinking abilities. Context-related tasks may include finding the word that does not belong to the same category or choosing the best words among words with similar meaning.

Students may also be given a text with jumbled sentences and they have to decide which sentence does not belong to the original article. A modified type of the same exercise may include a text with jumbled sentences or paragraphs and students will have to unscramble them or sentences have been removed from paragraphs and learners have to put them in the correct order. Distinguishing between fact and opinion sentences, taken from newspaper articles can foster students' critical ability skills. Since there is an intense public interest in sports and articles about sport events often use linguistic manipulative techniques, a selection of that kind of articles may be a good choice for analyzing metaphor use and ambiguity, for example. In tabloids most often, sport is presented as a symbol of national identity, as a world of stars and personalities and as a war, through uses of war metaphor. In sports immediacy, action and drama are built into the event (Kellner, 2003: 67) and this makes the stories about sports people news worthy.

The images of sport in the media are often about moments of emotional climax, about success, about implicit domination of an 'other', of the achievement of cultural status. They are of course also about competitiveness, about winning – and about others losing. They are, to a fair extent, about individualism within ideology – even team sports frequently report on the goal scorers, the victorious strikers, the man of the match. These images are about moments of victory, of celebration, of humiliation (Burton, 2005: 313).

In the analysis of the articles from the tabloid editions, students may answer questions, regarding the way the doers of the action are named and the way the attitude towards the doers of the action is expressed. Learners may also find examples of word play in the headlines, the leads or the main texts of the articles, emotional argumentation or adverb intensifiers creating ambiguity. Exercises, based on rewriting parts of sentences, using collocations or correcting collocations are also useful for fostering critical ability skills.

Tasks, related to cohesion and coherence in writing can also be implemented in media classes. Achieving these features is a prerequisite for the correct interpretation of a text. The emphasis may be on exercises about the natural flow of language.

Students should be aware that the manipulative potential of tabloid editions is possible because of the existence of "parasocial interaction" with the readers. "Parasocial interaction (PSI) occurs when we respond to a media figure as though he/she/it were a real person" (Giles, 2003: 188). The topics, related to the lives of the famous people arise the interest of the readers, who are curious to learn as many things as possible about their favourite celebrities.

Learners also become aware that manipulation is possible because of the process of tabloidization. "Tabloidization results in a greater number of infotainment and 'soft news' stories found in the serious press" (Mooney, 2008: 9). This is a process, which is gaining speed and is influencing the production of news.

The existence of "limiting manipulation" (Handelman, 2009: 45–46), can also explain the manipulative potential of tabloid editions. "These manipulations are intended to limit a target by maneuvering the target toward one specific option or reducing the number of options that he considers while making a decision" (Handelman, 2009: 45–46). In tabloid editions, one and the same story is often repeated in successive editions. Even if the information is based on a rumour, the rumour itself can be perceived by the audience as truth. Kapferer (Kapferer, 1992: 77) claims that when in different editions we read wrong information about a given person, then this information leads to unanimity, and the unanimity weakens even the deepest inner convictions. The addressee is given only one point of view – that of the tabloid edition and since the verification cannot be done at the moment of reading the text, the manipulative effect is very strong.

The manipulative effect is also possible because of the flouting of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. "The central claim of relevance theory is that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise and predictable enough to guide the hearer toward the speaker's meaning" (Sperber, Wilson, 2006: 607). When headlines, for example, are positioned outside of



the context, they can be interpreted in the way the author wants them to be interpreted. Thus the presented picture of the world is more colourful compared to reality (Zambova, 2000: 38). But this colourfulness namely, is what the reader is looking for – satisfying the need for escape from reality, relieving of the tension and emotional recovery (Petev, 2004).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, texts in which the headline does not correspond to the main text are often found in tabloid editions. The events about the lives of celebrities are introduced through headlines, based on insufficient or untrue information, which makes difficult the interpretation of the headlines and the sought effect is the creation of an artificial closeness with the reader. When students are aware of the existence of the stipulated devices, they will be able to find them and critically evaluate the presented information.

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