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## SOCIOLINGUISTIC FEATURES OF CLICKBAIT IN ENGLISH AND ARMENIAN WEBSITES

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In this highly developed technological world, newspapers and news shows have mostly been replaced by online news. The world-renowned news agencies, as well as social media platforms, report their news online, providing information to the public. However, readers are sometimes disappointed to find a misleading headline with quite different web content. This deceiving technique called clickbait uses ambiguity to provoke the user into clicking a link.

The present article explores the sociolinguistic strategies employed in Armenian and English clickbait headlines by bloggers, vloggers, and news reporters. The study aims at revealing how language is manipulated to engage and persuade users in online media. The exploration conducted from a sociolinguistic perspective unveils the intricate interplay between language, culture, and societal norms in English and Armenian clickbait headlines.

The findings contribute to the understanding of how linguistic styles, word choices, and persuasive techniques vary across different languages and cultures. It also emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between clickbait and regular headlines, as well as the potential impact of clickbait on trust and reader engagement in the digital media landscape.

**Keywords:** *clickbait, social motives, sensational language, persuasion, sociolinguistic features.*

### Introduction

Newspaper headline, as a subgenre of mass media, possesses significant power and can serve various purposes. The language employed in journalism, particularly in headlines, is widely acknowledged to possess distinctive characteristics that set it apart from ordinary English. Headlines, as suggested by T. van Dijk (1988, p. 53) and D. Crystal (2004, p. 382), are titles that appear above news articles and summarize the main topic of the text. According to C. Cotter (2010), they are designed to be concise and informative. However, Ifantidou (2009, p. 97) claims

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that the primary purpose of newspaper headlines is to capture attention rather than provide accurate information. This implies that headlines are more persuasive than informative, as they may not accurately represent the content of the articles they introduce. This function of persuasion is sometimes implemented by a technique called “clickbait”.

Scholars in journalism and media studies have engaged with the topic of clickbait in discussions related to online media, sensationalism, or the changing landscape of journalism.

Known for the works on digital media and journalism, P. Boczkowski (2021) and his colleagues (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2021; Boczkowski & Matassi, 2023) have explored various aspects of online news consumption, including the impact of sensationalism and attention-grabbing strategies. W. Phillips and R. M. Milner (2018) focus on internet culture, online misinformation, and how sensationalism and provocative content operate in a digital environment.

From a communication and marketing standpoint, clickbait is seen as a strategy to increase engagement and views by arousing curiosity or sensationalism to draw users’ attention. I. Elawadi’s work (2016) focuses on various facets of digital marketing strategies, as well as the impact of such strategies on user behavior.

Some scholars have explored the psychological factors that influence human behavior, attention-grabbing tactics, and the impact on decision-making. In his book “Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion” (2009), R.B. Cialdini highlights people’s ability to process vast amounts of information to make good decisions, attributing our dominance on the planet to this advantage. However, different approaches to this problem bring to the acknowledgment that despite our superior cognitive abilities, we still have limitations. In situations where we lack time, energy, or focus, we tend to rely on simpler, more automatic decision-making processes that focus on single pieces of information rather than a comprehensive analysis.

Truly, though the scholars mentioned above may not have provided strict definitions of clickbait in isolation, their works have contributed to a nuanced understanding of clickbait, emphasizing its manipulative nature and its reliance on psychological triggers.

The present paper explores clickbait from a sociolinguistic perspective. By focusing on sociolinguistic aspects, this study aims to uncover the intricate interplay between language, culture, and societal norms in the realm of clickbait.

The study explores the sociolinguistic dimensions of clickbait in both Armenian and English, with a particular focus on how linguistic techniques align with sociolinguistic norms.

The objectives include:

- investigating how sensational language, emotional triggers, and sociolinguistic strategies are employed in clickbait headlines to engage and persuade users across diverse cultures;
- studying how clickbait manifests in diverse sociolinguistic contexts;
- employing comparative and contrastive approaches identifying commonalities that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, as well as distinctions that underscore the unique sociolinguistic nuances present in each language.

### Clickbait or regular headline?

While there might not be specific definitions from scholars, various experts and sources have provided perspectives on clickbait.

Online media outlets, in a bid to expand their reach and subsequently increase revenue through ad monetization, have begun adopting clickbait techniques to lure readers to click on articles. However, the article fails to fulfill the promise made by the headline (Kumar et al, 2018).

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines clickbait as “something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest” (“clickbait”, n.d.).

According to A. Bazaco, clickbait is a strategy of viral journalism that seeks to lure users into clicking on a link to a page through tactics such as sensationalist stories and eye-catching headlines that work as bait (Bazaco et al, 2019). Clickbait is also defined as an umbrella term with a pejorative connotation, characterized by being deceptive, derivative and of poor quality (Mormol, 2019).

Unlike traditional news platforms such as newspapers and news shows, social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Youtube, etc.) allow people without professional journalistic backgrounds to create news and cover events that news agencies might not cover. Hence to attract readers’ attention clickbait headlines are used by bloggers and news reporters. They use various linguistic techniques such as sensational language, hyperbole, incomplete information, curiosity-driven language and emotional triggers to manipulate people and to lure readers into clicking on the content. These techniques are designed to create intrigue and curiosity that often falls short of the initial expectations.

Kate Scott from Kingston University carried out an investigation of clickbait headlines focusing on two main categories: (i) definite referring expressions and (ii) superlatives and intensifiers. The results and analysis of her research revealed that these words and expressions contribute to an *information gap* by encouraging readers to construct new conceptual files based on the terms used in the headline, while providing little or no content for those files. This then drives the reader to

click on the associated link with the expectation that the article will contain relevant information with which he can enhance his conceptual files, and that this, in turn, will reward him with cognitive effects (Scott, 2021, pp. 53-66). General manipulative strategies are often employed by news reporters, bloggers and vloggers to arouse readers' curiosity. The empirical material reveals that influence is a powerful persuasive technique. According to R. B. Cialdini, "there is a group of people who know very well where the weapons of automatic influence lie and who employ them regularly and expertly to get what they want. They go from social encounter to social encounter requesting others to comply with their wishes; their frequency of success is dazzling. The secret of their effectiveness lies in the way they structure their requests, the way they arm themselves with one or another of the weapons of influence that exist within the social environment. To do this may take no more than one correctly chosen word that engages a strong psychological principle and sets an automatic behavior tape rolling within us" (Cialdini, 2009, p. 7).

Thus, clickbait relies on misleading, manipulative or sensational tactics to achieve its goals. While clickbait headlines share some similarities with ordinary headlines in terms of language and structure, they also employ specific linguistic strategies that set them apart. Let us explore the similarities and differences between them.

Hence, the primary goal of clickbait is to attract as many clicks as possible without providing substantial or accurate content. On the other hand, a headline's main purpose is to provide a concise and accurate summary of the content it represents. It should give readers a clear idea of what to expect if they click on the link. While headlines can be attention-grabbing, their main focus is on communicating the content's key point or offering value to the reader. As to clickbait headlines, they often promise something exciting, shocking, or intriguing without necessarily providing readers with valuable and relevant content. This may result in reduced trust in the source and reluctance to engage with future content.

Let us consider some English clickbait headlines (Hennessey, 2020) and see how they can be transformed into more honest and informative titles:

"*The One Simple Trick That Will Change Your Life Forever*" can be introduced as an honest headline: "Effective Strategies for Improving Your Life" or "Practical Strategies for Personal Growth and Improvement". The clickbait title implies that a single "trick" can have a life-altering impact, which is often exaggerated. In contrast, the honest title focuses on "strategies" for personal growth, setting a more realistic and responsible tone.

The clickbait headline "*You Won't Believe What This Dog Can Do – Watch Now!*" can be changed into "Impressive Skills and Abilities of a Talented Dog". The clickbait title creates suspense by suggesting that the reader will not believe

what the dog can do and encourages immediate viewing. The honest title, on the other hand, invites readers to “discover” the dog’s abilities, focusing on providing information rather than sensationalism. It respects the reader’s intelligence and curiosity without resorting to a clickbait approach.

To sum up, it is of great importance to differentiate between clickbait headlines and ordinary ones having the aim to attract the attention of the reader. Very often the difference between clickbait and regular headline is difficult to find if you do not refer to the content of the article following the title. As already mentioned, clickbait headlines often rely on sensationalism, exaggeration, or even misleading information to grab attention. They may promise shocking revelations, secrets, or miraculous outcomes without delivering substantial content, whereas regular headlines provide a concise and truthful summary of what readers can expect to find within the article. Regular headlines build trust with readers over time by consistently delivering reliable and informative content, while clickbaits are designed to generate curiosity and encourage immediate action (clicking).

This title, for example, looks like a clickbait headline: *“We only lacked this. An Infection has Spread in Armenia, which Can be Fatal for Children. Dear Parents, Be Informed Urgently”* (Hraparaknews.am).

The alarming statement “An infection has spread in Armenia, which can be fatal for children”, creates sense of urgency and concern. The use of words like “fatal” and “urgent” aims to grab the reader’s attention. The headline does not specify the infection in question, leaving readers curious and prompting them to click on the article to find out the details. The phrase “Dear parents” directly addresses the target audience, appealing to their emotions and parental instincts. This personalization is intended to engage parents and make them feel concerned about the health of their children.

However, this headline is not a clickbait as the content of the article provides information about a confirmed case of measles in Armenia. The article urges people who do not have at least two doses of measles vaccination to get vaccinated to prevent the further spread of the virus. It goes on to claim that measures are being taken to identify the source of the patient’s infection to prevent further spread.

Thus, considering the content of the article, the headline cannot be called “a clickbait”. Though sensational language and personalization is used in the title to generate curiosity and encourage parents to click on the article for information about the infection, the article itself contains relevant and important health information about the measles outbreak and preventive measures, which is crucial for the public to be informed about. In this case, the article’s content does provide valuable health information.

Clickbait often sensationalizes information. Sensationalism is designed to invoke an emotional reaction in readers. Headlines using this tactic often involve highly emotional words and exaggerated claims that arouse fear or other strong reactions. Let us consider this clickbait taken from “Mother Jones” magazine: *The Scary New Science That Shows Milk is Bad for You* (Miller-Wilson).

The headline is clickbait as the article introduces how adults do not need as much calcium as previously suggested instead of directly saying that milk is bad for you. Those who drink milk will be afraid to read this headline. The clickbait headline employs several sociolinguistic strategies to capture attention and generate interest: the use of words like “Scary” and “Bad” adds an emotional and sensational tone to the headline, instilling a sense of fear or concern. This sensational language is designed to grab the reader's attention and arouse their curiosity. The phrase “Milk is Bad for You” creates curiosity and generates discussion. The structure of the title follows a common clickbait pattern by presenting a problem (“Milk is Bad for You”) and suggesting that there is a solution or explanation (“The Scary New Science”). This format encourages readers to click on the link to get more information. The sensational nature of the headline makes it shareable. Readers who find the claim intriguing or alarming may be more likely to share the information with their social circles, contributing to the clickbait’s potential virality. It is obvious that this clickbait title manipulates language to create curiosity. The goal is to attract clicks rather than to provide a scientific and balanced view of the topic.

Another example of a sensationalized headline is “1 ժամ է ինչ որչ ազգը սա է դիտում. տազնապ պոստերից.../The Whole Nation has been Watching this for 1 Hour. Alarming News from Borderline” (Blogger.am).

The headline is followed by an informative article discussing political and diplomatic matters related to the situation in Nagorno Karabakh and the activities of the Russian peacekeeping force. Clickbait sensationalizes the information, the headline plays on readers’ desire to be informed about important events, especially those that involve their country which is on the verge of another war. The phrase “for 1 hour” implies a recent and ongoing event. This adds a sense of urgency and immediacy to the news, encouraging readers to stay updated. The term “alarming news” triggers an emotional response, indicating that the information being presented is of great concern or has potentially serious implications. The phrase “the whole nation has been watching” implies that everyone else is already aware of this event, and the reader might be missing out if they do not click to find out more. These linguistic elements attempt to create a sense of unity among readers by implying that everyone is involved or should be interested.

Furthermore, the headline mentions “borderline” without specifying what is happening. This vagueness prompts readers to click in order to find out more

details about the situation, as the lack of details triggers curiosity. The mention of “borderline” also suggests a potential security-related issue. Such terms often attract attention due to their association with matters of national security and safety. Nonetheless, the content following this clickbait headline is quite different from the content of the headline.

Such sensationalized headlines are predominantly prevalent in Armenian social media. It is important to highlight that the tense relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the threat of a new war give bloggers and journalists an “opportunity” to shape the audience’s mindset and manipulate their emotions. For that reason, using clickbait is often equated with betraying the ideals of high-grade journalism. Such headlines reflect the socio-political environment, indicating how linguistic choices cater to the emotional and cultural sensitivities of the Armenian audience.

Overall, this clickbait headline uses inclusive language, temporal markers (the phrase “for 1 hour”), emotional tones, community involvement, national identity and national security concerns to create a sense of urgency, emotional engagement, and communal interest. The headline plays on readers’ desire to be informed about important events, especially those that involve Armenia and Armenians. Thus, the choice of topics and references in clickbait is influenced by cultural contexts, and sometimes political and other social factors.

The research shows that many clickbait headlines are personal, i.e. they include a personal story that induces the reader to sympathize with that person (usually well-known).

This clickbait: “*Vanetsyan’s Health is Going Worse. Great Stress, Find out What Happened to Him*” refers to the Armenian political figure’s health (araratlur.am).

The headline introduces ambiguity by stating that Vanetsyan’s health is worsening due to “Great Stress” without immediately revealing the specific details. This encourages readers to click on the content to find out more about the events leading to this stressful situation.

The headline uses the phrase “health is going worse” to create a sense of urgency and concern about Vanetsyan’s well-being. This sensational language aims to grab the reader’s attention by hinting at a potential health crisis. The headline leaves out specific details about Vanetsyan’s health condition and the cause of his “Great Stress”, where “Great” is written in capital letters. This incomplete information creates information gap, prompting readers to click on the article to find out what exactly happened to him. Words like “worse” and “great stress” evoke emotional responses since health and stress are emotionally charged topics. The phrase “find out what happened to him” serves as a call-to-action, encouraging readers to click and discover the full story behind Vanetsyan’s health and the stress

he is experiencing. However, the content of the article has nothing to do with Vanetsyan's health or stress, it merely gives some details about his education and career.

Overall, the sociolinguistic strategies employed in this headline aim to engage the audience through personalization, curiosity, sensationalism, urgency, and emotional appeal. The specific identification of an individual, coupled with the promise of revealing a significant event, is likely to attract readers who are interested in the personal lives of public figures or those intrigued by dramatic developments.

Another personal clickbait deals with Armenian well-known actor: "*SAD NEWS. What Happened to Popular Actor, Reporter Rafael Yeranossyan?*" (infozone.am)

This headline has some characteristics that can be associated with clickbait. Let us consider them:

- The headline starts with "SAD NEWS," which is a common clickbait tactic to grab the reader's attention by using emotional language.
- The headline creates a sense of mystery by asking a question ("What happened to...?"), which is a clickbait technique to encourage readers to click and find out more.
- The headline does not provide any specific details about the actor's situation, leaving readers curious and potentially clicking on the article to learn more.

It is essential to note that the determination of clickbait can be subjective, and the full context of the article matters. As mentioned above, if the article provides relevant and factual information about the actor's situation, it may not be a clickbait in its basic sense. To make a final judgment, it is best to read the entire article and evaluate the content for accuracy and relevance.

Based on the content of the article, the headline "*SAD NEWS. What Happened to Popular Actor, Reporter Rafael Yeranossyan?*" appears to be a clickbait. The headline suggests that there might be a significant or tragic event related to the actor, which would be considered "sad news". Nonetheless, the article discusses some routine aspects of the actor's life, like his participation in a movie, personal life, and a public appearance with his partner. One significant sociolinguistic aspect of this article is the absence of any substantial news or "sad news," despite the suggestive headline. This phenomenon is indicative of a trend in digital media where the focus is on drawing in users through enticing headlines rather than providing valuable or substantial content.

It is common knowledge that YouTube is full of drama. Any time a celebrity makes a mistake, YouTubers will come up with content to respond or even criticize



them. The following clickbait headline is from YouTube: “*Is Kim Kardashian AVOIDING Kanye West at home?*” (youtube.com, 2020).

The use of well-known celebrity names Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, who are recognized all over the world, immediately attracts attention. As people are naturally inclined to seek answers, the headline is structured as a question. This strategy induces readers to click for more information. The headline hints at a potential issue within the celebrity couple’s relationship, suggesting avoidance, which is written in capital letters to grab people’s attention. The choice of words like “avoiding” and “at home” are designed to evoke curiosity, concern, or intrigue in the audience. The headline has the power to initiate a specific emotional or psychological response which is a key goal in clickbait strategies to encourage individuals to click on the article or video for more information.

Spankie Valentine, best known for being an American YouTuber, also a filmmaker and recording artist, has a video entitled: “*I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS HAPPENED.... OMG!*” (youtube.com). This headline is a classic example of clickbait as the content of the video is quite different from the headline. It turns out in the video that the vlogger merely shares a link to her new free album. In this case, the headline intentionally misleads the reader by creating an expectation of a shocking or unexpected event. The discrepancy between the headline and the actual content of the video is a deliberate tactic to generate clicks based on false expectations.

The use of capital letters and an exclamation mark conveys a sense of excitement, urgency, and heightened emotion. This is a common technique used to formulate clickbaits both in Armenian and English to grab attention and create a sense of immediacy. This strategy aims to trigger curiosity and intrigue in the reader or viewer, prompting them to explore the content to find out what could elicit such a strong reaction. The use of the first-person pronoun “I” suggests a direct connection between the author and the viewer, creating a sense of intimacy or shared experience. The use of informal language in this clickbait, including the widely recognized acronym “OMG” (Oh My God), adds a colloquial and conversational tone. The ellipsis (“...”) at the end of “I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS HAPPENED” creates a pause, building suspense and leaving people curious about the content that follows. This expression in the headline also implies a significant or unexpected event, heightening the drama and exaggerating the impact. This exaggeration “I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS HAPPENED” is a common clickbait strategy to attract attention. Besides, it creates a curiosity gap, encouraging viewers to click for more information. The concise nature of the headline is effective in the online context, where it delivers a quick message that encourages immediate engagement.

Hence, the sociolinguistic strategies in this clickbait headline focus on emotional language, suspense, personal engagement, internet slang, exaggeration, and the deliberate use of misleading information. These tactics are designed to entice readers to click on the content, even though the actual video content may not align with the dramatic expectations set by the headline.

To summarize, the analyses of Armenian and English clickbait headlines revealed the cultural sensitivities of the target audience. By emphasizing the social and linguistic implications of each headline, we tried to shed light on the nuanced ways in which language is manipulated to influence user behavior in every cultural context.

The analyzed clickbait headlines in both languages rely on emotional triggers, the use of sensational language, and the deliberate omission of specific details to captivate readers and prompt them to click on the articles. This strategy plays on people's curiosity and concern for others' well-being, fostering a desire to get more information. The majority of headlines explored in this study employ techniques such as capitalization, exclamation marks, personal pronouns, informal language, suspense-building ellipses, and an emotional tone. These elements collectively aim to create a sense of urgency and persuade viewers to click and explore the intricacies presented in the video or article. However, it is important to approach such headlines with caution, as clickbait may not always deliver accurate or reliable information.

## **Conclusion**

Examining clickbait from a sociolinguistic lens resulted in the following findings: While both clickbait and regular headlines aim to attract attention, regular headlines do so by offering informative and respectful previews of the content. In contrast, clickbaits employ deception, prompting people to click without delivering accurate information. Consequently, the reporters, bloggers and vloggers frequently rely on sensationalism and manipulation to generate clicks, often at the expense of reader trust and satisfaction.

The study revealed how cultural and societal factors influence the choice of clickbait topics in each cultural context; how the linguistic strategies are adapted to suit the sociolinguistic norms of each language community, impacting the effectiveness of clickbait.

Unlike clickbait headlines in British and American media, which often focus on celebrities, health-related topics (particularly diets), or fashion trends, Armenian clickbaits predominantly center around issues related to the borders with Azerbaijan, or unfortunate news involving celebrities and political figures. Apart from the potential dissemination of misinformation, these clickbait headlines

induce fear and anxiety in society, compelling the individuals to click to discover the breaking news. These clickbaits represent a significant danger as they manipulate the emotions of Armenian citizens. By spreading false or deceptive information with the aim of boosting page views, they inflict harm on ordinary people who are genuinely concerned about the well-being and security of their nation and admired public figures.

Thus, the analysis of clickbait headlines employs a sociolinguistic lens to unravel the intricate interconnections between language, culture, and societal norms.

According to our research, the Armenian clickbait headlines exhibit a greater formality, while the English clickbait headlines typically lean towards a conversational and colloquial style. Nonetheless, the analysis of specific clickbait headlines in both languages unveil common linguistic strategies used to create curiosity, evoke emotional responses, and encourage immediate action. Whether in English or Armenian, clickbait headlines often employ personalization, sensationalism, and a sense of urgency to entice readers or viewers into clicking.

In sum, this article seeks to deepen our understanding of the sociolinguistic dimensions of clickbait, shedding light on the ways language is manipulated to influence user behavior. Through the analysis of linguistic styles, word choices, and persuasive techniques, the research contributes insights into the cross-cultural dynamics of clickbait, ultimately informing discussions on media literacy and responsible communication.

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**ՄԵՂՄԱԽԱՅԾԻ (CLICKBAIT) ՀԱՆՐԱԼԵԶՎԱԲԱՆԱԿԱՆ  
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ԿԱՅՔԵՐՈՒՄ**

**Անահիտ Գալստյան**

Այս գերգարգացած տեխնոլոգիական աշխարհում թերթերն ու լրատվական հաղորդումները հիմնականում փոխարինվել են առցանց լուրերով: Ներկայումս շատ աշխարհահռչակ լրատվական գործակալություններ իրենց նորություններն առցանց են հաղորդում: Սակայն, քիչ չեն նաև տարբեր սոցիալական հարթակներում ներկայացվող տեղեկատվությունները, որոնք հանրությանն են հրամցվում ինչպես լրագրողների, այնպես էլ բլոգերների և վլոգերների կողմից: Հաճախ ապակողմնորոշյալ վերնագրի տակ տեղադրված է լինում միանգամայն այլ բովանդակության նյութ: Նման երկիմաստ, խաբուսիկ վերնագրերը, որոնց նպատակն է դրդել օգտատերերին, որ սեղմեն հղումը և կարդան տվյալ հոդվածը, կոչվում է սեղմախայծ (clickbait)։

Սույն հոդվածը ուսումնասիրում է բլոգերների, վլոգերների և լուրերի թղթակիցների կողմից հայերեն և անգլերեն սեղմախայծ վերնագրերում կիրառվող հանրալեզվաբանական ռազմավարությունները:

Հետազոտությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ երկու լեզուներում էլ սեղմախայծ վերնագրերում մարդու հոգեբանության վրա ազդող հանրալեզվական միջոցներ են կիրառվում՝ նպատակ ունենալով հնարավորինս շատ օգտատերերի համոզելու, որ դիտեն կամ կարդան նյութը: Հետազոտության ընթացքում վեր են հանվել որոշ ոճական տարրերի, բառերի ընտրության առանձնահատկություններ լեզվական և մշակութային տարբերություններով պայմանավորված:

**Բանալի բառեր՝ սեղմախայծ, սոցիալական դրդապատճառներ, սենսացիոն լեզու, համոզում, հանրալեզվաբանական առանձնահատկություններ:**