

## THE MANIPULATIVE NATURE OF MEDIA-POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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At the present moment, media saturation provides us with a reasonably objective criterion available for examination. In a loose sense, the Internet has become a parallel reality where people live to pursue constantly updated news at the repeated click of a button, which maintains the reader's immediate interest in every sense of the word. In perusing news articles, placing a particular emphasis on their manipulative nature, we can plunge deeply into such language layers as that of the lexical, grammatical, stylistic, etc. In this paper we place our central interest on the lexical aspect of language manipulation because words are the foundation of meaning in speech. A functional-communicative view of the lexical material of the discourse of news articles reveals the effect of a journalist's choice and arrangement of words on the reported news and how the manipulative potential of language unfolds.

**Keywords:** *manipulation, media discourse, political discourse, lexical level of the language, news, information bias.*

### Introduction

The study of media communication in all of its forms is undeniably vital: television, newspapers, and social media all play an important role in mediating society itself. Newspaper articles are a typical form of written communication. Newspapers are one of the most commonly read sorts of printed texts, their advantage existent in their public character of availability to a vast number of individuals. The broad application of newspapers is defined by the fact that many individuals read newspapers as part of their daily routine. On the basis of

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this, we must confirm that newspaper articles can combat the tendency to be considered their own discourse. It should be mentioned, at the outset, that online newspapers are another extremely important form of newspapers; it is essential to emphasize that online newspapers and printed newspapers are two forms of newspapers that retain significantly distinct characteristics.

With the use of several allusions to media and its power, we can state on the largest scale that this decades-new digital technology, for many powerful reasons, is a tool that holds a vast potential to regulate society, even before the period of coronavirus pandemics and global lockdowns. It is an understatement to say that social media platforms and their networks will continue to restructure the world not only with the goal of linking people to a global and borderless social environment but also as another fresh means of controlling people in modes of communication. However difficult it may be to accept, with the majority of the world's population stranded at home, there has been an increased use and manipulation of social networks – the active access to and disclosure of information, deception, false news, fake stories, etc. – that have become an indivisible part of how most people define their lives. It is unfortunate that technological, social, and political triads achieve this confluence heretofore unseen, prompting an unheralded generation of individual interests, with social networks employing new technologies to dictate social will and public policy. It may be obvious to admit that because of its widespread necessity during the lockdowns, social media magnified its role as a critical platform for political activism. In the midst of the uncertainties and public unhappinesses inherent to problematic current realities, we face challenges which can be manipulated. It leaves no doubt that more and more individuals largely employ social media not only as their primary mode of communication, but also as a source of political information. It is evident, from the simplest of local campaigns to the most complex of global organizations, that the use of social media to communicate and generate political will for all forms of movement and referendum is manifest. As manipulation is no stranger to politics, the unparalleled technical potential for propaganda and manipulation via social networks cannot be underestimated.

### **Lexical means of manipulation in English media discourse**

The analysis of manipulation is a complex phenomenon. It must be admitted that language and politics are inextricably linked, therefore we cannot rule out the possibility of linguistic manipulation in this context, particularly in media

illustrations. It should be noted that the flow of information has reached unparalleled levels, a fact that strongly suggests that lies, concept substitution, intimidation, emotional appeal, plagiarism, inconsistency between the main text and the accompanying photos and videos, lack of source references, quotes taken out of context, sophisticated tricks, crude generalizations, unsupported conclusions, lack of an alternative point of view, and baseless insults, all can lead to manipulative language in use. Manipulation can be carried out in different layers of the language; however, in this paper, our object of investigation is the lexical aspect, since we strongly believe that the readability of a news article is largely conditioned by the choice of its lexical components.

In media a special significance is attached to how the news is structured. Consideration of van Dijk's methodology of examining the structure of news articles makes it essential to single out the rule-based news schema comprised of hierarchically ordered sets of categories and according to the author different schematic categories can be used to classify the basic pieces of a news item that are listed in order of importance (van Dijk, 1988a, p. 55; Pajunen, 2008, p.3).

Subjecting it to analysis, let us consider the first example taken from the third presidential debate in the United States in 2016. It is interesting to follow the structure of the inverted pyramid<sup>1</sup>, attaching special significance to the headline of the video which is "*Presidential debate: Hilary Clinton calls Donald Trump 'a puppet' for Vladimir Putin.*"(Global news, 2016).

From the first glance, the word "*puppet*" attracts everybody's attention since it contains an incredibly offensive and ironic instance of verbal aggression. Familiarizing ourselves with the description of the video, which is, "*U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton called Republican candidate Donald Trump a 'puppet' for Russian President Vladimir Putin during the third presidential debate Wednesday night*", we can see how the choice and arrangement of the words brings to the fore the information bias and manipulative overtones of the piece reported by the Global News. Placing emphasis on the headline, which is a direct quote, captures the eye right away with the help of the subject of the clause "*Hillary Clinton...*" and so the reader reflexively concentrates on her. Next we are drawn to the object of the sentence "*Donald Trump....*", until finally the choice of the word "*puppet*" intensifies the aggressive behavior of Hillary Clinton, placing all the *guilt-baiting* on her, leaving Donald Trump in the state of *victimhood* from which we can allude a sign of psychological manipulation. Here we can see an evident example of media manipulation and information bias in favor of Donald

Trump, for the video shows that Donald Trump was the first one to offend Hillary Clinton, saying that she was “*playing chicken*” and that he (Donald Trump) had “*no respect for this person*”.

Reconsidering the description and the reported video we draw an analogy between the words and phrases “*Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton*”, “*Republican candidate Donald Trump*” and “*Russian President Vladimir Putin*” to notice that the description corresponds to the fundamentals of impact, conflict, provoking interest, prominence, etc. The conflict here is that two famous candidates from two famous opposing political parties are in a clash, intensified by the integration of “*Russian President Vladimir Putin*”, indirectly referencing American-Russian relations. Turning back to the word “*puppet*” it seems essential to know that the word not only has the meaning of a “*toy*” but, according to Oxford Learners Dictionary, also “*a person or group whose actions are controlled by another*” thus perhaps it is most reasonable to conclude that polysemantic words can lead to a manipulative language in use since it is hardly recognizable but presumable whether Hillary Clinton meant “*toy*” or “*a person*” likely to be controlled by Vladimir Putin. (“Puppet”, n.d.-a). Added to this, “*puppet*” is a standard colloquial word which from the first glance has no offensive meaning in general; however, depending on the micro and macro settings, as well as the addresser and the addressee, the term can acquire negative and hostile implications.

It is abundantly clear from this example that there is an obvious case of incompatibility between the main text and the title, realized by the linguistic trick to use a *direct quote*, *reported speech* and the journalistic trick to manipulate through *guilt-baiting*, *victimizing someone*, *comparison*, etc. These kinds of tricks have many purposes such as to shape public opinion, humiliate someone in favor of another and obviously, to engage more people to click on the link and watch the video (Global news, 2016).

Of special interest is the following example: *Donald Trump Speech Transcript: Kabul Bombing “would not have happened if I were your president”* (Trump, 2021).

It is considered essential to single out the headline again, which is a direct quote that catches attention instantly following the bottom-up pyramid tactic. A more profound examination of the materials shows that for another essential component, the article should involve either sex or violence or both to awaken interest. The word “*bombing*” in the headline serves as a trigger for violence. During his speech, Trump regularly used “*pathos*” – a lyrical tactic to refer to

the readers'/listeners' emotions. Comprising basically 80% of his speech, the other 20% is "*ethos*" – he is referring to an ethical code and trying to highlight the "*immoral and violent*" actions of Afghanistan. The speech itself is manipulative with flowery language to overwhelm and intentionally exaggerate in order to gain compassion and favor. It is too dramatic and theatrical for the masses, especially the vocabulary he used "*brilliant, barbaric, savages*", etc. If we look closely at the speech structure it is very predictable, however the majority will not notice it at first sight and maybe even from a second glance, due to its emotional state; nevertheless, the speech has too many adjectives to make us "*understand*" how "*evil*" Afghanistan is and how "*brave and heroic*" the US military is. Even though the speech is about a real event, we witness the lack of evidence regarding Trump's "*Would Not Have Happened If I Were Your President*" claim, the lack of "*logos*" – logic and facts that would prove his statement to be valid. The article follows the "*vertical*" structure – a person who holds power says something, and the direct quote reaches the masses. There are analytical, personal, subjective additional sentences added to the article by the journalist, however it still manages to make Trump's words seem ridiculous and that they serve only as a propaganda tool.

Nowadays, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is at the center of almost all media illustrations. Despite the fact that the conflict has a historic background, in media illustrations it is very difficult to understand which side should bear the responsibility. Turning to a more detailed examination of the cases of media manipulation on this specific topic, we find it essential to mention that the topic itself is very intriguing: full of verbal and physical abuse and actions, though what we are mainly concerned with is the analysis of the examples purely from the point of view of linguistics, where the central emphasis is put on the use of the language.

The articles referring to the conflict are primarily targeting the Russian president, accusing and blaming him for the present situation. To make several allusions about the manipulative nature of the conflict, let us consider the following example, published in "The Sun" on 15 February 2022, authored by Tom Tugendhat.

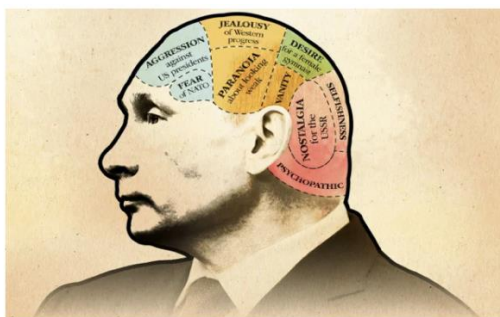
Here, following again the structure of the inverted pyramid, we can consider the headline as our primary focus: "*BAD VLAD Inside the Paranoid Mind of Vladimir Putin, the Trigger-happy KGB Bully Who Acts Like an 'Aging Gangster from Sopranos'*" (Tugendhat, 2022)

In political discourse, it is acceptable to refer to a politician by his/her full name; however, we may come across such examples where the opponent or the journalist purposefully refers to the politician by his/her first name in order to convey disrespect, feign ignorance, exhibit a negative attitude and humiliation in front of the public or as a sign of a close relationship. This kind of observation can be seen in the following example, where the name of the Russian President Vladimir Putin has been degraded to the level of the headline as “*BAD VLAD*”, which leaves the contempt of the journalist towards the President beyond doubt. It is valid to note that the name “*Vladimir*” has been trimmed to “*Vlad*”, referencing colloquial language to refer to people in a totally different level in society, often an implicitly inferior one. Considering the position the Russian President holds, combined with the aggressive attempt of the journalist to refer to the politician by the first name, modified by the adjective “*bad*”, this shows the dishonest and disrespectful behavior of the journalist. Comparing the choice of the words in the headline such as “*paranoid*”, “*trigger-happy*”, “*bully*”, “*aging gangster*”, we can see that the negative humor designed to humiliate and create a shared public viewpoint against the Russian president, unfolds the manipulative intention of the author. “*BAD VLAD*” can lead to different connotations – humiliation, contempt, sarcasm, irony – and also infer some reference to expressions such as “*bad boy*”, “*rule breaker*” “*a person of unconventional and slightly strange views or behavior*”.

One of the offensive words that has been used is “*paranoid*” which literally means “*suffering from a mental illness in which you believe that other people are trying to harm you*” according to Cambridge dictionary (“*Paranoid*”, n.d.). The choice of the word itself is very unseemly, since it connotes an attempt to consistently judge and criticize the subject to make the public feel inadequately and wary about him, claiming that he suffers from some mental illness. Another vulgar and verbally aggressive choice of phrase is “*aging gangster*” which is being used because the President has been ruling over Russia for many years. The word “*gangster*” can refer to criminals or hooligans; at the same time it means dishonest. As a case of polysemy, if we consider which of the meanings was the journalist’s intention, we can come to the conclusion that polysemantic words have the potential to cause confusion and mislead the audience. Also, in analyzing the phrase “*trigger-happy*”, we can see from Meriam Webster Dictionary that it means “*irresponsible in the use of firearms*” or “*inclined to be irresponsible in matters that might precipitate*”.

war” (“Trigger-happy”, n.d.). The journalist obviously intends to create a negative concept and opinion in the audience, to prompt criticism of the Russian president for triggering wars against countries. At the same time, the journalist compares the President with the American drama series “*The Sopranos*” which is about a fictitious mafia.

All these negative connotations can lead the public to feel sourly towards Vladimir Putin and contempt towards Russia. Such manipulation is carried out to mislead the audience into believing whatever the writer desires them to believe or act upon and in what manner they want the idea to be transferred to the audience. The manipulative intention of the author is comprehensively realized through the ironic picture accompanying the news article:



COMMENT

News > Opinion

**BAD VLAD** Inside the paranoid mind of Vladimir Putin, the trigger-happy KGB bully who acts like an ‘ageing gangster from *Sopranos*’

Observing other examples in regard to the same topic, we can see another case of manipulation found in the following article: “*HIGH ALERT Russia set to invade Ukraine at any time with massive missile blitz and 200,000 troops, US intelligence claims*” (Parker & Starkey, 2022).

As there is political unrest in the process between Russia and Ukraine, highlighted in almost every media platform every day, people are anxiously waiting for the latest news updates regarding the topic. Here, the expression “*high alert*” is an attention-grabbing phrase employed by the journalist to garner more public attention. The conflict's level of intensity is such that, besides Russia and Ukraine, other influential countries are also reported by media to be involved such as the USA, the UK, etc. This direct quote attempts to make the headline much more reliable by including the following phrase:

“US intelligence claims”. Being a quote, the headline is smartly chosen for the following reasons:

- The conflict is between Russia and Ukraine; however, the USA is a powerful ally of the latter. The journalists, on behalf of US Intelligence, give information about a Russian invasion, providing exact facts of the numbers of the troops, automatically involving the country in the conflict. Regardless of how verifiable the information might be, originating from one of the most influential countries in the world, it influences the transmitted information to sound valid and correct for the public, specifically for those who are unaware of the situation.
- The authors try to keep their biased opinion as neutral as possible by putting the responsibility for the given information on US Intelligence, which is rather relative.

It is generally acknowledged that articles containing violence have more potential to receive more attention and click-baits unlike those that illustrate casual life events. In this case, violence is realized through the use of such a military term as “*missile blitz*”, which is usually applied during wars. Additionally, the journalist used the verb “*invade*” to describe the action of Russia, fostering an impression among the public that Russia is set to start a war against Ukraine. The choice of the adjective “*massive*” is not accidental, as it is used to describe events that are very fierce, violent, or of utmost importance in comparison. The importance of the headline cannot be overemphasized, as a reader chooses which article to read based on its eye-catching dynamics. The second step will be to read the article in search of the conviction that the headline and the article are related. Generally, the article highlights the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, where the whole guilt-baiting and responsibility is upon Russia. Reading it, we can see the absurdity of the chosen title, since the authors mention, “*US intelligence sources suspected a Russian attack came and went without incident*”, which proves that the headline has been edited, but the quote presupposes to be mirrored in the article verbatim. This proves the manipulative intention of the authors, since they emphasized the word “*claim*” in the headline. However, in the article, it is mentioned that the US Intelligence only “*suspects*”. This is vital, because such words can lead to dangerous conclusions, firstly that the Ukrainians are in danger of an attack; these kinds of illustrations are a psychological abuse, as they can keep people in stress and tension. The authors’ manipulative intentions are also realized by involving another powerful and influential country – the UK: “*It comes as*



*Britain warned a Russian invasion of Ukraine is highly likely, could be imminent and could become the biggest threat to security in Europe since World War II*” (Parker&Starkey, 2022). Here, they referenced a link (<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/putin-russia-invade-ukraine-without-warning/>), where they supposedly got the information from, however, such a link does not exist.

Given this possibility that the authors do not maintain neutrality, we can also criticize contextually the words and word-combinations such as: “*attack*”, “*threat*”, “*invasion*”, “*escalating tensions*”, “*baseless hysteria*”, “*unspecified military technical actions*”, the purpose of which is to spread negativity and chaos, as there is much information regarding the conflict and people have been rendered unable to differentiate the fake from the truth.

In some media articles we can meet cases of doublespeak, which according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary means “*language used to deceive usually through concealment or misrepresentation of truth*”, through purposefully disguising, distorting, or reversing the meanings of words. (“Double speak”, n.d.). Doublespeak can be realized through euphemisms, mitigation, etc. Let us consider the following example taken from Turkish Hürriyet daily news regarding the Armenian Genocide: “*Armenian ethnic cleansing as ‘de-Islamization’*”, where the author speaks about the Armenian Genocide in falsifying disregard for history and facts (Akyol, 2012).

First of all, paying attention to the headline, we can notice that the historic tragedy and massacre has been reduced to “*ethnic cleansing*” instead of “*Genocide*”, which, from the point of view of the language, is a euphemism, aimed at describing an event in a softer manner than it is in reality.

Secondly, we should consider the fact that Genocide itself is of a criminal nature, an admission of which would lead Turkey to facing criminal prosecution and judicial execution, whereas, by contrast, ethnic cleansing is not considered to be as serious and horrible an action as Genocide, since it is not carried out only through massive killings. We should mention that in the core nature of Genocide, the main aim is not cleansing the race, but to destroy and exterminate the entire nation.

Thirdly, the word “*de-Islamization*” exonerates those who were responsible for the Genocide, by justifying the horrible historic event, by attempting to relate it only to religion.

Finally, let us consider the following paragraph taken from the article:

*Yesterday was the 97th anniversary of what Armenians call the “Great Catastrophe,” or the ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Armenians from Anatolia, their historical homeland, in 1915. Those who commemorated the tragedy included some Turks, such as the group that gathered in Istanbul’s Taksim Square.*

It seems essential to underscore that Armenia has never claimed the historic tragedy as the “*Great Catastrophe*”, since the word “*catastrophe*” presupposes a sudden event whereas the Genocide was planned in advance, with great caution and clear intent. This means that the given central information is falsified and misleads the audience, making them believe that even for Armenians the Genocide was considered a “*Great Catastrophe*”. Genocide is an undeniable fact, because Armenia lost not only its people but also its territories.

Another linguistic strategy and trick can be found in the use of oxymoron in a headline, with the intent to overwhelm and create a more serious environment through flowery language, unnecessary words, thus misrepresenting the information. In the article “*Theresa May’s passive-aggressive parting gift for Trump*” (Cooper, 2019) we can see an example of oxymoron in the phrase “*passive-aggressive*” where the word “*aggression*” is used to create provocation and inflict damage, whereas the word “*passive*” is used to soften the action. Passive-aggressive behavior is a way of expressing negative feelings indirectly without violence. This headline includes manipulation since the journalist keeps it as simple and comprehensible as possible, while at the same time using a provocative phrase and figurative language to grab more attention.

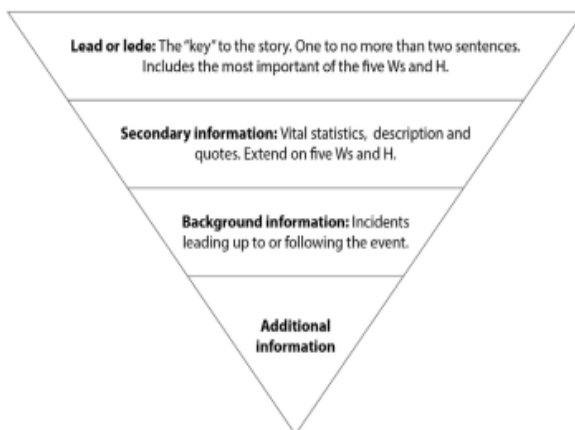
Another example of oxymoron is in the headline “*Being Deeply Superficial: Warhol, Charlie Brown, And The Balkanization of Politics And Economy*” (Miller, 2016), where “*deeply superficial*” is the oxymoron. The words in this headline are total antonyms used together to convey a meaning. At the same time the headline is very complicated and this complexity lends itself to misunderstanding. If one does not have enough knowledge and background information about the following terms and words such as: “*Warhol*”, “*Charlie Brown*”, “*the Balkanization of Politics and Economy*” as used by the author, they may not be able to understand the essence of the article.

## Conclusion

If people are sometimes suspicious of the manipulation of images as a multimodal means of communication, the manipulation of words is more intentional and occasionally unintentional. Indeed, when reading a news article, our immediate reaction is never to analyze the terms, the conjugation, or the form of the sentences used by the journalist. Such elements can strongly influence and even manipulate our understanding and thinking. The power of words can consciously be chosen as instruments of manipulation and influence, depending on the intended target audience (marketing materials, political propaganda), whereas in other circumstances this usage can at least partially be involuntary. The semantic meaning of the lexical components of the language can easily be manipulated when journalists purposefully choose words and arrangements that can sound more severe and impactful in a specific context, e.g. over very magnetic and controversial topics, in order to reach their goal of persuasion. This semantic confusion can be noticed in the use of polysemantic words, oxymorons, doublespeak, etc., as the examples contained within this article display.

## Notes

1. For news writing, the inverted pyramid is the most widely utilized structure. On the first level of the pyramid there is the lead, which is followed by the secondary information, background information and additional information.



The lead, or the first paragraph, of a news item is very important. Media illustrates everything with so much information and sources that it practically becomes impossible to read the whole story so readers often go past the first paragraph or even the first line of the story unless it provokes their interest. In a well arranged lead journalists are guided by the following tips: the less vital details are not presupposed whereas the answers of the five possible W- and H-questions (what, when, where, why, who, how) should be covered; conflicts are essential in good leads; specific information in leads should be as precisely and briefly summarized as possible; brevity and simplicity is a crucial characteristic feature for a journalist (from 2 to 5 sentences are supposed to be enough to communicate the major information); a lead can be more vibrant and interesting when the use of the Active voice is preferred, as Passive constructions are potentially meant to leave out some information; consideration of the audience and the context is also important in today's media society which is in a constant search for breaking news; the credibility of one's news writing is conditioned by the honesty of the information (How to write a lead, 2021).

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Մեղա Գասպարյան  
Ռաֆայել Հարությունյան

Զանգվածային լրատվամիջոցների համատարած շրջանառությունը ժամանակակից աշխարհում դրդում է օբյեկտիվ չափանիշներ գտնելու դրանցում ներկայացված տարաբնույթ լրատվությունը ուսումնասիրելու և արժևորելու համար: Լայն իմաստով՝ համացանցը վեր է ածվել մի այլ իրականության, որտեղ մարդիկ ապրում են մշտապես թարմացվող տեղեկատվություն ստանալու իրենց հագուրդը հագեցնելու համար, և այդ ամենը կոճակի մի հպումով, որը ընթերցողի հետաքրքրությունը կարողանում է անմիջապես բավարարել: Լրատվական հոդված-

ներում մասնավորապես հետաքրքրված լինելով մտաշահարկման խնդիրների քննությամբ՝ նկատում ենք, որ այդ ռազմավարությունն իրականացնելիս հեղինակները դիմում են ամենատարաբնույթ լեզվական տարրերի օգնությանը՝ բառապաշար, ձևաբանական ու շարահյուսական միավորներ, ոճավորման միջոցներ և այլն: Սույն հոդվածում առաջնային ենք համարել լեզվի բառային միավորների մտաշահարկման քննությունը՝ նկատի ունենալով այն կարևոր հանգամանքը, որ հենց դրանցով է խոսքում իմաստ ձևավորվում: Տեղեկատվական հոդվածներում կիրառվող բառապաշարի քննությունը գործառական-հաղորդակցական լույսի ներքո հնարավորություն է տալիս բացահայտելու նախ լեզվական միավորների մտաշահարկային կարողականությունը լայն իմաստով և ապա՝ բառամիավորների հեղինակային նախընտրության ու կապակցման ազդեցությունը փոխանցվող տեղեկատվության վրա:

***Բանալի բառեր՝** մտաշահարկում, զանգվածային լրատվության դիսկուրս, քաղաքական դիսկուրս, լեզվի բառային մակարդակ, լուրեր, տեղեկատվական կողմնակալություն:*