

Differences Between Headlines and Their Effect on Our Perception

Anastasia-Aylin Răducănescu

BA student, West University of Timișoara, Romania

Senior Lecturer Valentina MURESAN, PhD (coord.)

DOI: 10.61215/GAMC.2025.4.18

Abstract

This paper reflects on how differently newspapers choose to write their headlines and how this significantly affects the perception of the occurrence. Headlines are the titles of newspaper articles. They are not referred to as titles because they differ a lot from usual titles and are known to have special characteristics, which will be described in this paper. The main characteristic is why they carry the nickname “attention catchers” or “attention grabbers”: they are so interesting that they convince the reader to buy the newspaper just to read that one article. This is sometimes taken to the extreme, leading to bias or misrepresentations of various types, which affect our perception.

Keywords: language, media, newspapers, headlines, perception, bias, misrepresentation

Introduction

Most of the time, headlines differ immensely from one another. While some shine a positive light on the story through their headline, others seem to portray it rather negatively. When this happens regarding topics such as celebrities in Hollywood or the newest fashion fad, it does not affect society as much as it does when it presents stories involving a country’s political affairs. Sometimes, the media tends to misrepresent certain countries through the language used in the headlines of their articles. As a consequence, some newspapers can improve the reputation of some countries in the eyes of their readers through their headlines, while others can damage it. Headlines carry more importance than one might imagine, because living in this chaotic world means we must shorten some tasks to finish others. Hence, people often read only the headline of an article, maybe take a glimpse at its photo, and then talk to their relatives about the article they have not even completely read. Striding on the streets of London, I came across an abandoned newspaper from CITY AM. This British newspaper published an article with the following headline: “Royal Mail takeover hit by political woes in Romania” (CITY AM 2025). This caught my eye since “Romania” collocated with “political woes”. The picture did not help much in understanding what had actually happened and was explained in that

article. It was a picture of Royal Mail vehicles and one of its workers, which only aroused my curiosity further and led me to this case study. This research paper will demonstrate that reading different headlines affects our perception of the presented event, thus giving us, as readers, different impressions on sensitive topics depending on which headline we choose to read.

Research methodology

At the beginning of the research, I started looking up headlines from Romania as well as from the UK, which reported on the same topic, being published around the same period of time, and restricted from a geographical point of view. Therefore, all the news reports collected contain “Royal Mail” in the headlines and originate from the period between 02.03.2025 and 06.03.2025. Additionally, the headlines have been chosen because they are written in English (two of them) and Romanian (also two headlines) to ensure a clear and unbiased analysis between the languages. Also, the chosen headlines are confined to European territory, thus being published in Romania and England.

Unfortunately, it was pretty challenging to find articles about this particular event because they mostly describe other parts of the takeover process, which will be explained in the analysis of this case study. Well-known Romanian broadsheets such as “Adevarul” or “Libertatea” did not publish anything regarding this story, nor did English ones such as “The Guardian”.

As this is a qualitative case study, four headlines from different newspapers reporting the same story are compared and analyzed using newspaper theory data retrieved from the book “The Language of Newspapers” by Danuta Reah. Thus, they will first be presented and then analyzed according to the stylistic devices of headlines, which include reorganizing language, graphological features, and persuasive function. These are considered the hyponyms of the hypernym “attention grabbers” or “attention catchers,” both referring to the same idea. Additionally, as has become crystal clear by now, headlines are the primary focus of this article; however, the meaning of a headline can sometimes be inseparable from the article's photo. (Reah, 24).

Furthermore, after conducting detailed research, I concluded that Romania played only a minor role in this storyline. More interestingly, I discovered that Romanian media did not present this story as the international media did, namely, by emphasizing Romania's political issues.

1. Headlines as Chinese Whispers

Collins dictionary defines the noun “Chinese Whispers” as follows: “a game in which a message is passed on, in a whisper, by each of several people, so

that the final version of the message is often radically changed from the original and would not be taken literally” (Collins 2025). Therefore, in this context, it should not be taken literally, as it refers to a game where information is passed from one person to another, and by the time it reaches the end, the original message becomes distorted or even lost in the process. Similarly, headlines often do the same: they focus on one event and, when writing an article about it, exaggerate what has occurred by using various stylistic devices. This is reflected in some of the headlines presented in this case study.

1.1. The Event

Firstly, the content and the endeavor of story presented by the headlines analyzed in this paper are the following: first and foremost, the actual event that was shortly presented in media started in May 2024 when the Czech billionaire Daniel Kretinsky offered a large amount of money for IDS (Royal Mail’s parent company), and promised to keep its name, UK jobs and services. In December 2024, Kretinsky got government approval on condition that he keep his promises from earlier that year. The next step was to be approved by the countries where EP Group (Kretinsky’s company) operates. Romania’s authorities needed to check if the takeover followed their Foreign Direct Investment regulations after the annulled presidential elections, thus slightly delaying the transactions.

1.2. The Headlines

As previously stated, four different headlines are going to be analyzed in this case study. One of these four is, of course, the inspiration that led me to this case study: an English article by CITY AM, which is unfortunately only available in a physical format. The other is from “The Telegraph” and can be found in a digital format. The other two headlines used are also available in digital format. They are both from Romanian newspapers, one from “Profit”, which is a serious economic newspaper, and the other from “News.ro”.

All this considered, the article from CITY AM presents its headline as such: “Royal Mail takeover hit by political woes in Romania” along with a picture of Royal Mail vehicles (CITY AM 2025).

Now, the Romanian article from Profit, can be found under the following headline: “ULTIMA ORĂ PHOTO Tranzacția gigant prin care miliardarul Daniel Kretinsky, „Sfinxul Ceh”, vrea să preia Royal Mail - întârziată chiar de România. Este invocată “teama de amestecul Rusiei” în alegerile prezidențiale”. Profit publishes this article with a picture of a Royal Mail vehicle and two of its workers (Profit 2025).

Next in line is the other Romanian article from News.ro presenting this headline: “Preluarea Royal Mail de către EP Group, companie a miliardarului ceh Daniel Kretinsky, întârziată din cauza problemelor de reglementare în România” with a photo depicting multiple Royal Mail vehicles (News.ro 2025).

Finally, the last headline is in English. It is divided into two parts, a bigger and a smaller one: “Royal Mail takeover delayed by fears of Russian meddling in Romania. Approval for sale of company which operates across Europe, stalls amid political gridlock.” alongside a picture of Putin (The Telegraph 2025).

2. Headlines as Attention Grabbers

According to some specialists, the writer of the headline can use a range of linguistic devices in order to make it more interesting to the reader (Reah, 2002: 16). Of course, this is the lexical as well as the grammatical dimension. However, the keyword here is the so-called “noun phrase, “ which is the base that headlines are built upon. A noun phrase always contains a headword, which is the main noun in a noun phrase and is almost always accompanied by a determiner, meaning either a pronoun or an article. A modifier can also be added to the noun phrase, between the headword and the determiner, so that more information is being presented to the reader. (Reah, 2002: 21) So let us look at the following headline as an example and use it to explain further the theoretical aspect of headlines: “A red motorcycle has crashed into a garden on Sunday morning”. If the event that the noun phrase is “a red motorcycle”, the headword here is “motorcycle”, the determiner is the undetermined article “a”, and the adjective placed between the headword and the determiner, “red”, is its modifier.

The writer of an article can shorten it by omitting specific words, most often auxiliary verbs, to save space on paper, which simultaneously leads to increased ambiguity, such as: “Red motorcycle crashed into a garden on Sunday”. S/he can play with the graphics of the article by choosing a picture that is either neutral or conveying a connotative meaning, sometimes positive, but mostly negative. Namely, the picture chosen here depends on what the writer wants to accentuate; here can be chosen either a photo of the accident itself to illustrate the (non)severity of the accident, of a brand new red car to show that brand new, fast cars are in fact hazardous to the safety of drivers, or of a beautiful garden alluding to the danger fast cars provoke to the people living in places the cars are driven around. Not to mention, the language used to make headlines more interesting to the reader is usually persuasive through its choice of words. The author can replace a neutral word with one that carries positive or negative connotation. All of these techniques play an important role

in catching the reader's attention and ensuring they are impressed and persuaded by the idea presented. In this case, our headline can sound something like: "Red motorcycle destroyed garden on Sunday". Forthwith, we will examine in detail these three stylistic devices newspapers use to change the importance of the event.

2.1. Graphics – Looks can be deceiving

Graphological features are the visual function of the headline that is often overlooked because most people consider them just the design of the newspaper. Just like in our previous example with the accident and the car, a persuasive photo, however neutral the headline itself might be, will undoubtedly affect the readers' perception. "Headlines work in conjunction with the other visual aspects of the newspaper text, in particular the pictures" (Reah, 2002: p.24). That is to say, they do play a grand role in the perception of the article as described earlier, and sometimes, when the headline is ambiguous, the image helps in deciphering it. Indeed, just as important is the size of the headline; here applies the old but gold rule, namely, the bigger, the better. The article may be written in a neutral tone and in a formal register; however, whenever a reader picks up the newspaper, s/he directly looks at the headline due to its size.

That being said, although CITY AM chose a provocative headline, the choice of the picture was neutral and informative, rather than persuasive, as it was one of Royal Mail's vehicles – similarly, both Romanian newspapers, Profit and News, did the same. Someone published a neutral photo of something directly related to Royal Mail. Lastly, The Telegraph published a persuasive photo as well as a headline with negative connotation. Therefore, the effect of persuasion is much greater, for there are two pillars sustaining a perception to be formed on the reader's side.

Consequently, photos are an important part of the headline, one that should not and sometimes cannot be ignored. Together with the size, they form the visual function that gives the reader the first impulse to read the headline and the first impression of what it is going to be about.

2.2. Reorganizing Language

Newspapers shorten articles and headlines in order to create more space, so that more articles can fit on one page. Therefore, headline writers need to be imaginative in making changes, or as D. Rhea calls it, "to use space economically" (Rhea, 2002: p.16). A clever way to do so is by omitting verbs; however, this can also lead to an ambiguous understanding regarding the tabled headline. As an illustration, the headline from CITY AM, "Royal Mail

takeover hit by political woes in Romania,” is missing the auxiliary verb “was” because it is a passive voice construction. The grammatically correct version would have been “Political woes hit Royal Mail takeover in Romania”. This is important because the passive voice construction gives us the impression that “Royal Mail”, in this case, is a victim of Romania’s political situation.

Similarly, the conscious placement of “Royal Mail” in the article’s text from Profit and the one from The Telegraph differ entirely. The Telegraph tries to neutralize the shocking effect of Putin’s photo by placing “Royal Mail” right at the beginning of its article. Profit, on the other hand, places Royal Mail in the middle of its article, just before the picture of Royal Mail’s vehicles and after “ULTIMA ORĂ FOTO”. In doing this, they assure the reader that the headline is about a postal company, and not the politics of Romania. Other than that, the Romanian headline from Profit does not omit any verbs; it instead provides the reader with a blow-by-blow headline. Neither does the other Romanian headline from News.ro. Whereas The Telegraph does omit the verb “was” and the definite article “the” in the first and bigger part of the headline. The grammatically correct headline would have been: “Fears of Russian meddling in Romania delayed the Royal Mail takeover”. By doing this, they shortened the article, making it more attractive to the reader.

Consequently, all these factors together unconsciously affect the readers’ perception regarding what is being reported.

2.3. Persuasive Language – The Semantics of Headlines

Headlines are attention catchers, which is obviously important to attract more readers and encourage them to buy the newspaper. (Reah, 2002: p.28). In doing so, they can exaggerate and use words with a negative connotation that may strongly influence the readers’ perception of a particular group of people, or in this case, of a country.

While News.ro uses “probleme de reglementare în România” in its headline (News.ro 2025). CITY AM chooses to resort to an expression that carries negative connotation, “political woes in Romania” (CITY AM 2025). The difference between those two is immense. To have a problem is one thing, but a woe is entirely another, because it is destined for the loss of a loved one. Therefore, suggesting the reader that Romania should be deplored, or maybe even be grieved for. This obviously takes the attention off Royal Mail and immediately shines a bright light on Romania and its – at that time – vulnerable political position.

When comparing the headlines from Profit and The Telegraph, two fascinating differences are waiting to be analyzed. The first one being “întârziată chiar de România” (Profit 2025) versus “delayed by Russian meddling” (The Telegraph 2025). The reason for the delay of the takeover

provided by these newspapers could not be more contradictory. Additionally, Profit mentions Russia; however, it is quoting a source and uses the noun “amestec” (Profit 2025). The Telegraph uses again a word with negative connotation: “meddling”. According to the Collins Dictionary, “meddling” is an adjective of British English origin that describes an annoying or unofficial interference (Collins 2025).

This being said, it can be clearly observed how headlines can differ significantly in meaning just by altering a few words. The Romanian headline points to the truth, whereas the English one speculates about a political investigation ongoing in Romania to capture the readers' attention. This is, of course, the goal of any newspaper company; however, the article clearly shows that not every one of them resorts to such desperate measures. Of course, another motive might be that the Romanian articles were publishing an article about their own country, therefore being biased.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that headlines can definitely alter our perception of an event that has occurred, aided by various tools. Oftentimes, attention catchers such as a tiny word in the headline written as big as the body of the article itself, or a not-so-informative picture, can lead to misrepresentation and bias among their readers and reflect a negative light on specific groups of people, or, as in this case, on a whole country. Because Romania played an important role in the event, Romanian newspapers tried and succeeded in being as neutral as possible by omitting words with negative connotations and provocative pictures. The international newspapers, on the other hand, did not have this in mind because, to them, Romania was just another country they were not very concerned about. As a result, they used every tool to gain attention from their readers, misrepresenting Romania in the process. To put it all in a nutshell, if two people were to read different headlines about the same subject from different newspapers, they would not have an identical perception of the occurrence. Hence, their perception is affected by different headlines.

Works Cited

- CITY AM Reporter (2025) ‘Royal Mail takeover hit by political woes in Romania’. Cityam.com 6 March, 4
- Collins Dictionary (2025) *Chinese Whispers* [online] available from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/chinese-whispers> [23 June 2025]
- News.ro (2025) *Preluare Royal Mail întârziată de România* [online] available from <https://www.news.ro/economic/preluarea-royal-mail-de-catre-ep-group->

- companie-a-miliardarului-ceh-daniel-kretinsky-intarziata-din-cauza-unor-probleme-de-reglementare-in-romania-1922403405222025032121955842 [20 June 2025]
- Profit (2025) *Tranzacția Royal Mail întârziată* [online] available from <<https://www.profit.ro/perspective/ultima-ora-foto-tranzactia-gigant-miliardarul-daniel-kretinsky-sfinxul-ceh-vrea-preia-royal-mail-intarziata-romania-invocata-teama-amestecul-rusiei-alegerile-prezidentiale-21951850>> [20 June 2025]
- Reah, D. (2002) *The Language of Newspapers*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge
- The Telegraph (2025) *Royal Mail Takeover Delayed* [online] available from <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2025/03/02/royal-mail-czech-takeover-delayed-fears-russian-meddling/>> [20 June 2025]