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ЯЗЫКИ НАРОДОВ ЗАРУБЕЖНЫХ СТРАН (С УКАЗАНИЕМ КОНКРЕТНОГО ЯЗЫКА ИЛИ ГРУППЫ ЯЗЫКОВ)/LANGUAGES OF PEOPLES OF FOREIGN COUNTRIES (INDICATING A SPECIFIC LANGUAGE OR GROUP OF LANGUAGES)

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LINGUISTIC MARKERS OF MANIPULATION IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNET HEADLINES: CLICKBAIT AS A PRAGMATIC AND DISCURSIVE PHENOMENON

Research article

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Abstract

The present study examines clickbait as a form of linguistic and pragmatic manipulation and identifies the principal linguistic markers through which contemporary Internet headlines construct curiosity, emotional involvement, perceived relevance, and informational incompleteness. The study is based on a synthesis of findings from corpus-based, experimental, pragmatic, and computational research on clickbait and online headline effectiveness. The analysis demonstrates that clickbait manipulation is not reducible to sensational vocabulary. The findings also indicate that negative emotional vocabulary, personal reference, and longer headline structures are systematically associated with headline success in experimental data. The article argues that clickbait should therefore be conceptualized as a multimodal pragmatic strategy in which linguistic form is used to influence the reader's cognitive and behavioral response.

Keywords: clickbait, Internet headlines, linguistic manipulation, media discourse, pragmatics, curiosity gap, persuasion, digital communication, linguistic markers, online journalism.

ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЕ МАРКЕРЫ МАНИПУЛЯЦИИ В ЗАГОЛОВКАХ СОВРЕМЕННЫХ ИНТЕРНЕТ-ИЗДАНИЙ: КЛИКБЕЙТ КАК ПРАГМАТИЧЕСКИЙ И ДИСКУРСИВНЫЙ ФЕНОМЕН

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В данном исследовании рассматривается кликбейт как форма лингвистической и прагматической манипуляции, а также определяются основные лингвистические маркеры, с помощью которых современные интернет-заголовки формируют любопытство, эмоциональную вовлеченность, воспринимаемую значимость и информационную неполноту. Исследование основано на синтезе результатов корпусных, экспериментальных, прагматических и вычислительных исследований эффективности кликбейта и онлайн-заголовков. Анализ показывает, что манипуляция с помощью кликбейта не сводится к сенсационной лексике. Результаты также указывают на то, что негативная эмоциональная лексика, личные отсылки и более длинные структуры заголовков систематически связаны с успешностью заголовков согласно экспериментальным данным. В статье утверждается, что кликбейт следует рассматривать как мультимодальную прагматическую стратегию, в которой лингвистическая форма используется для воздействия на когнитивную и поведенческую реакцию читателя.

Ключевые слова: кликбейт, интернет-заголовки, лингвистическое манипулирование, медиадискурс, прагматика, информационный дефицит, убеждение, цифровая коммуникация, лингвистические маркеры, онлайн-журналистика.

Introduction

The relevance of the present study is determined by the growing prevalence of clickbait practices in contemporary digital media and by the need to understand the linguistic mechanisms through which headlines can influence readers’ interpretation and behaviour.

The aim of the study is to identify and systematize the principal linguistic markers of manipulation used in contemporary Internet headlines and to examine the pragmatic functions they perform in clickbait communication. To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following objectives: to clarify the linguistic and pragmatic characteristics of clickbait; to identify the recurrent lexical, grammatical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse-level markers of manipulation; to examine the relationship between information withholding and the creation of a curiosity gap; and to determine how individual linguistic devices interact in constructing persuasive and attention-oriented headlines.

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The novelty of the study lies in an integrated analysis of clickbait as a multidimensional linguistic and pragmatic phenomenon, with particular attention to the interaction of information gaps, referential ambiguity, emotional and evaluative vocabulary, interrogative structures, intensification, and personalization.

The theoretical significance of the research consists in contributing to the study of digital media discourse, linguistic manipulation, and pragmatic strategies of persuasion by demonstrating that clickbait effectiveness is achieved not only through sensational vocabulary but also through the strategic organization and partial withholding of information. The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of applying the identified linguistic markers to the development of media-literacy programmes, guidelines for responsible digital journalism, and automated approaches to clickbait detection.

The transition from print journalism to digital media has fundamentally changed the communicative function of the headline. Articles are now encountered individually through search engines, social media feeds, recommendation systems, and notifications rather than as components of a complete newspaper issue. Consequently, the headline becomes an independent persuasive unit whose success can be measured in terms of clicks, engagement, shares, and reading time. Gasanov analyzes the transformation of headline structures within the context of the digital attention economy and describes how clickbait strategies reshape the cognitive processing of media messages in Russian- and English-language discourse [6, P. 121]. Prokofeva and Akulovich consider [12, P. 157] clickbait functions as a communicative act that promises continued communication, using verbal and non-verbal markers of humor to lure readers into hypertext by offering funny content they can laugh at or engage with [13]. Clickbait headlines function as manipulative communicative acts that prioritize arousing curiosity and provoking clicks over accurately previewing content, with cross-cultural research showing that a quarter of Western and nearly half of Russian headlines distort their underlying articles through expressive language, information substitution, and logical fallacies [14, P. 348].

This transformation has contributed to the emergence and rapid diffusion of clickbait. Although definitions vary, clickbait can generally be described as a form of online content whose headline or teaser is constructed to encourage the recipient to click on a link, frequently by creating curiosity, withholding information, exaggerating significance, or appealing to emotional responses. "Clickbait" refers to “content whose main purpose is to attract attention and encourage visitors to click on a link to a particular web page” and has been implicated in the rapid spread of rumor and misinformation online [15, P. 15]. However, Esakova and Koltsova [5, P. 342] argue that modern linguistics has no unambiguous answer to the questions of how this phenomenon should be approached and whether the use of clickbait headlines is legitimate, given that they create not merely intrigue but also contain deliberately false information. Dekhtyarev [4, P. 70] also agrees that clickbait can be regarded as an extreme form of a linguistic strategy aimed at maximizing traffic, but one that undermines trust in the media. The author emphasizes the need for news consumers to develop linguistic awareness in order to recognize and resist manipulative strategies. Moreover, Carcioppolo N. et al. [3, P. 33] consider that clickbait can negatively affect media learning even when readers subsequently read the full article.

The phenomenon has attracted attention from linguistics, media studies, communication research, psychology, and natural language processing. For example, Mormol [8, P. 2] examines how the transition to online journalism has changed the linguistic features of news headlines, showing that characteristics such as greater length and negativity have become increasingly prevalent across online news outlets over the past two decades.

Early computational research approached clickbait primarily as a classification problem. Potthast et al. [10, P. 813], for example, developed one of the first clickbait detection systems and introduced a corpus containing 2,992 Twitter posts from major news publishers, of which 767 were classified as clickbait by the majority of human annotators. Their model employed 215 features, demonstrating that clickbait could be distinguished from non-clickbait through a combination of linguistic and structural characteristics.

Subsequent linguistic research demonstrated that the phenomenon is more complex than the presence of sensational vocabulary. Blom and Hansen's analysis [2, P. 89] of 100,000 headlines from ten Danish news websites showed that forward reference, including discourse deixis and cataphora, constitutes an important mechanism of online clickbait. Such headlines refer to an entity or event without fully identifying it, thereby encouraging the reader to continue reading.

From a pragmatic perspective, Scott [11, P. 54] argues that clickbait creates an information gap by suggesting that the linked content contains information that is relevant and cognitively rewarding while simultaneously withholding the information necessary to satisfy the reader's curiosity.

Particularly significant for the study of manipulation is research by Apresjan and Orlov [1, P. 94] on Russian Internet media. Their analysis of 1,327 clickbait headlines from 19 Russian online media outlets demonstrated that clickbait frequently exploits generalized conversational implicatures. Headlines can thus encourage an interpretation that is misleading or incomplete while remaining technically compatible with the article's actual content. The authors further demonstrated experimentally, with 2,010 participants, that clickbait effectiveness is conditional rather than universal: headlines must create curiosity without appearing obviously false. Clickbait operates by deliberately creating an information gap — withholding or incompletely presenting content — which exploits the audience's curiosity drive (an aversive cognitive state that demands resolution) and compels them to click in order to close that gap [16], [17].

Recent research indicates that clickbait-related linguistic tendencies are not confined to explicitly sensational websites. Nickl, Moussaïd and Lorenz-Spreen [9] analyzed approximately 40 million headlines from several large corpora and identified a long-term increase in linguistic characteristics associated with click-oriented communication, including greater headline length, increased use of verbs, pronouns and wh-words, a shift from noun-phrase headlines toward full sentences, and increasing negativity.

Therefore, it can be assumed that clickbait manipulation is primarily achieved through controlled informational imbalance: the headline establishes relevance and emotional salience while strategically limiting access to the information required for complete interpretation.

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Research methods and principles

The study employs an integrative qualitative synthesis of existing empirical research on the linguistic and pragmatic characteristics of clickbait headlines. The analysis brings together findings from corpus-based linguistic research, controlled experiments, computational clickbait detection, and large-scale longitudinal analyses of online headlines.

The principal analytical unit is the Internet headline or headline-like teaser whose linguistic construction is intended to increase the probability of user engagement. The synthesis focuses on peer-reviewed studies that investigate clickbait or linguistic predictors of online headline success.

The inclusion of studies from different languages and media environments makes it possible to distinguish potentially universal mechanisms from language- or platform-specific realizations.

The linguistic markers identified in the literature were grouped into six principal categories presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - Linguistic markers and their functions

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Category	Linguistic markers	Manipulative function
Referential	demonstratives, personal pronouns, cataphora, vague reference	Withholding identification
Informational	ellipsis, incomplete propositions, unspecified entities	Creating an information gap
Interrogative	questions, question-like constructions	Stimulating cognitive completion
Evaluative	superlatives, intensifiers, exaggeration	Increasing perceived importance
Emotional	negative/positive affective vocabulary, dramatic verbs	Activating emotional responses
Syntactic/discursive	full sentences, increased length, narrative structures	Increasing engagement and perceived relevance

The analytical distinction between linguistic marker and manipulative function is essential. A pronoun such as *this* is not inherently manipulative. It becomes a marker of clickbait when its referent is deliberately unavailable in the headline and must be retrieved by accessing the article.

Main results

The synthesis indicates that the most fundamental characteristic of clickbait is not sensational vocabulary but strategic information withholding.

Traditional headlines generally attempt to answer some combination of the questions *who?*, *what?*, *where?*, *when?*, and *why?*. Clickbait headlines frequently disrupt this informational structure. They provide a topic or evaluative frame while omitting the specific information necessary to identify the central event. Example: “Scientists discovered THIS unexpected treatment — and the results are astonishing”.

The headline contains additional evaluative and emotional material but less propositional information. The reader knows that something significant has happened but does not know precisely what the treatment is. This mechanism corresponds closely to the curiosity gap described in pragmatic research. Scott [11, P. 59] argues that clickbait creates an information gap while simultaneously suggesting that filling this gap will provide a cognitive reward. Thus, informational incompleteness should be regarded as one of the primary linguistic mechanisms of clickbait.

Another example is «Как тебе такое, Илон Маск?» (How do you like that, Elon Musk?). This phrase appears in the titles of clips and community posts more than 80 times. This meme phrase, widely circulated on VKontakte, uses the demonstrative «такое» (such a thing) to point to a preceding post, image, or situation. The referent is established by context — whatever absurd or impressive content the user has just shared.

One of the most clearly documented linguistic mechanisms is forward reference. Blom and Hansen distinguish between discourse deixis and cataphoric reference in online headlines. A headline may contain expressions such as:

This is what happened next...

You won't believe what they found.

This decision has shocked everyone.

The demonstrative *this*, the pronoun *what*, or another referring expression establishes an unresolved reference. The reader is implicitly instructed to search for the missing referent in the subsequent text. The large Danish corpus examined by Blom and Hansen [2, P. 94] contained 100,000 headlines from ten news websites, and the authors found that forward reference was recurrently used as a lure in online journalism. They relate its increasing presence to commercialization and tabloidization.

Forward reference, therefore, performs two functions simultaneously: it points toward information not yet available and creates a reason for continued attention. This makes deixis and cataphora particularly important markers in the linguistic analysis of clickbait.

Demonstratives such as *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those* are particularly effective in clickbait because they establish a referential expectation without necessarily satisfying it.

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For example:

This simple mistake could cost you thousands

The reader immediately asks: *Which mistake?*

The demonstrative *this* normally presupposes an identifiable referent. In clickbait, however, the referent may be deliberately unavailable in the immediate linguistic context.

The same mechanism occurs with personal pronouns:

They don't want you to know this

What happened to her shocked everyone

He opened the door — and immediately regretted it

Here, the pronoun establishes a human-centered narrative while suppressing information about the relevant person or event.

As for vague reference, it works by leaving the referent unspecified, so the audience must fill in the meaning themselves. This allows the speaker to avoid direct commitment while steering the audience toward a predetermined conclusion. Because the referent is never named, anyone who tries to challenge the statement must first "decode" what is being referred to — putting them in a defensive position.

A Chinese example is 这跟月薪 3000 的我有什么关系? which means "What does this have to do with me, earning 3,000 yuan a month?"

The phrase became a subject of official criticism. The Zhejiang Propaganda (浙江宣传) WeChat account published a piece in November 2025 specifically criticizing this phrase as a “absurd cognition” (荒唐认知). Another account, “Chaoyang Shaoxia” (朝阳少侠), published an article titled “中美关系、中日关系，跟我月薪 3000 有什么关系？”

The word 「这」("this") is a highly vague demonstrative. It can refer to a space mission, a new AI model, a high-speed rail network — anything presented as a national achievement. By never specifying what "this" is, the speaker avoids taking a clear position while simultaneously guiding the audience into an indifferent, cynical frame. The manipulative power lies in the fact that any discussion of national progress can be dissolved by this single vague reference. Anyone who wants to argue must first figure out what the speaker is even talking about, which puts them at a disadvantage. It creates a ready-made dismissal template that requires no actual engagement with facts. The vagueness is not accidental — it is the mechanism.

Experimental evidence from the Upworthy headline archive supports the broader relevance of pronouns to headline success. Gligorić et al. [7] found significant positive associations for first-person singular and third-person pronouns, while first-person plural pronouns showed a negative association. The manipulation does not therefore reside in pronouns themselves but in the combination of pronoun + informational omission.

Another productive engagement strategy is cataphora in Vkontakte headlines with constructions like «Случилось то» (Something happened) appearing repeatedly as a forward-pointing device over 20 times. The demonstrative «то» delays referential resolution, forcing the reader to continue reading to decode what actually happened. This creates anticipatory tension and functions as a clickbait mechanism in the attention economy. The verb «случиться» carries a strong negative evaluative bias priming readers for dramatic content before specifics are revealed. Thus, «Случилось то» exemplifies how cataphora manipulates cognitive processing by withholding identification until the post body resolves the gap.

Another recurrent marker is the use of emotionally charged vocabulary. Clickbait headlines frequently contain words expressing: surprise, fear, outrage, admiration, disgust, urgency, danger, exclusivity. Common semantic patterns include verbs such as *reveals*, *destroys*, *shocks*, *warns*, *exposes*, *discovers*, and *admits*, as well as intensifiers such as *completely*, *absolutely*, *unbelievable*, *shocking*, and *incredible*.

However, experimental evidence suggests that the relationship between emotion and headline effectiveness is asymmetric. Gligorić et al. [7] found no statistically significant negative effect of positive-emotion words, whereas negative-emotion vocabulary was significantly associated with headline success ($\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$). This result is consistent with the broader concept of negativity bias in news communication: negative information may receive greater cognitive attention because it signals potential threats, problems, or socially relevant changes.

Consequently, emotional manipulation in clickbait is not simply a matter of making a headline "emotional." Negative affect appears to have particular communicative value. Traditional journalistic headlines often favor brevity and nominal structures. Digital headlines, by contrast, have increasingly moved toward longer, sentence-like constructions. The longitudinal study by Nickl, Moussaïd and Lorenz-Spreen [9] examined approximately 40 million headlines and found a long-term increase in headline length, verbs, pronouns and wh-words, together with a decline in noun-phrase headlines and an increase in full-sentence structures. Experimental research also found a positive association between headline length and headline success in the Upworthy dataset ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). The significance of this finding is conceptual. Longer headlines allow publishers to combine several attention-generating mechanisms within one linguistic unit: event + emotion + personalization + evaluation + information gap.

For example:

A woman ordered the cheapest meal on the menu - what happened when she received the bill surprised everyone

contains:

a) a narrative protagonist;

b) a concrete action;

c) a contrast;

d) an implicit question;

e) emotional evaluation;

f) an unresolved consequence.

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Thus, length itself is not necessarily manipulative; rather, it creates greater structural space for manipulative markers to co-occur.

Discussion

The synthesis demonstrates that clickbait should be understood as a pragmatic-discursive form of manipulation, rather than simply as sensational journalism. The central mechanism of clickbait is the controlled distribution of information between headline and article. Traditional journalistic practice tends to maximize informational value within the limited space of the headline. Clickbait frequently follows the opposite principle: provide sufficient information to establish relevance, but insufficient information to satisfy curiosity. This creates what may be termed an asymmetrical information structure. The headline answers enough questions to convince the reader that the article concerns something relevant but leaves the central informational variable unresolved.

This finding corresponds with the pragmatic account of clickbait proposed by Scott and with the corpus-based analysis of Apresjan and Orlov. So, clickbait manipulation operates at several linguistic levels. The evidence allows the principal markers to be organized according to linguistic level in Table 2.

Table 2 - Linguistic levels of clickbait markers and their manipulative effects

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Linguistic level	Principal markers	Manipulative effect
Lexical	intensifiers, superlatives, emotional vocabulary	Increases perceived significance
Morphological	pronouns, demonstratives	Personalizes and withholds reference
Syntactic	questions, ellipsis, full sentences	Creates unresolved propositions
Semantic	ambiguity, generalization, exaggeration	Encourages non-obvious interpretation
Pragmatic	implicature, presupposition, relevance	Produces curiosity
Discourse	narrative sequencing, forward reference	Creates anticipation
Multimodal	image + incomplete headline	Transfers missing information to the visual component

Consequently, automatic detection systems based exclusively on individual keywords are theoretically limited. Potthast et al.'s [10, P. 811] early computational work already demonstrated the value of combining numerous linguistic features, while later research has increasingly moved toward more sophisticated linguistic and semantic representations.

Conclusion

The synthesis of existing corpus-based, experimental and computational research demonstrates that clickbait is characterized not by a single linguistic feature but by the systematic interaction of several mechanisms. The central finding is that the markers perform a common communicative function: they create an information imbalance between what the reader knows and what the reader believes can be discovered by clicking. The manipulation is therefore primarily pragmatic. A clickbait headline does not necessarily need to contain an explicit falsehood. It may instead exploit presupposition, implicature, ambiguity and incomplete reference to encourage a more sensational interpretation than the article itself ultimately supports.

From a practical perspective, identifying linguistic markers of clickbait may contribute to media literacy, automated clickbait detection and the development of ethical guidelines for digital journalism and professional communication.

Future empirical research should move beyond English-language datasets and examine the interaction of clickbait markers across languages. Particularly promising areas include comparative research on Russian, English and Chinese online media, since grammatical differences in deixis, pronoun use, information structure and implicit meaning may produce language-specific manifestations of the same pragmatic strategy.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.

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