

The Hidden Power of the Language in Web-news Headlines

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Abstract: This paper attempts to explore the hidden power of the language in the Web-news headlines, in terms of power in discourse and behind discourse. Discourse refers to the whole process of social interaction of which the text is a part. With its unique function of providing infotainment, a headline displays many distinctive formal features (e.g. its key words, grammatical choices, graphic elements) in discourse, and meanwhile, power behind discourse, embodied in the integration of orders of discourse, demonstrates the power-holders' ideology, the social roles and power relationships. Through the discourse analysis of data collected from Yahoo, the author is to represent and delineate the power endowed in the different Web-news headlines in terms of their ways to influence, impress and intrigue the readers and impose the ideological power in and behind discourse on them.

Key words: Web-news headlines; hidden power; CDA; power in discourse; power behind discourse orders of discourse

1. Introduction

Technically speaking, a headline is a line or part of line providing more or less detailed information about the content of a news story, mostly by providing a short summary or introduction of the happening. A typical headline describes the essence of a complicated news story in a few words. It informs quickly and accurately and/or arouses the reader's curiosity and attention (Ungerer, 2000). To create novel and glamorous headlines, headline producers use many devices like lexical choice, word play, loaded language, omission of grammatical words, nominalized phrases, etc. in the text. And meanwhile, the writer's ideology or world view and belief system are embodied in and behind discourse in the headlines.

As the major eye-catcher on the webpage, a Web-news headline needs more than other kinds of headlines, e.g. those in the newspapers, to attract the surfers online. The headlines have to cater for a wide range of readers with a wide range of needs. Some people may read the webpage thoroughly, taking in every aspect; others, probably the majority, just skip certain sections and read others in more detail. Even some may read only one section. And of course, each reader may change his or her mode of reading depending on the demands of the day. Therefore, Web-news headlines have the persuasive function as they are designed to attract the attention of the reader and interest him/her in reading the story when surfing on the net.

However, it should be noted that language creates power and "language is the place where actual and possible forms social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed" (Weedon, 1997: 21). Language in the media text, as the means of both information-supplier and propaganda, is more of power-holders in the sense that it not only conveys the information but by so doing influences the perception of the readers as well. "The

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headline is a unique type of text.” (Tunstall, 1996: 13) It is more likely to be seen as very much a conceptual and ideational business, a matter of statements, claims, beliefs, positions—rather than personal feelings, individual circumstances, qualities of social and interpersonal relationships, and so forth.

And language power in question here is not the one exercised through coercion of various sorts, including physical violence; it is the one exercised through the manufacture of consent to or at least acquiescence towards it (Fairclough, 1989). Web-news headlines possess the largest-scale audience, and probably the most educated recipients of information, in view of its technical requirements in computers. These headlines line up on the webpage under the dispatch of their writers to inform, to entertain, to impress and to intrigue the hasty potential readers browsing the webpage.

But at the same time, news headlines as part of the organ of the politics and social communication, they exercise their influence and power on the readers through language in a much less conspicuous manner. And even with the asserted slogan of being factual and objective, news is exercising the power on the readers by influencing their perception and interpretations of people and events in the way that active choices of words or structure are made for various purposes of spreading the information. The news writer’s perception and ideas (sometimes representative of the medium he or she is working for) about the news are consciously or unconsciously transfused into the news headlines and their stories. Just as Fairclough (1989) pointed out, “the exercise of power, in modern society, is increasingly achieved through ideology, and more particularly through the ideological workings of language.” So in the case of Web-news headlines it is a perfect embodiment of the exercise of power through language with its tremendous influence domain and great numbers of readers, which motivated me to begin this preliminary probe into the power of the language of Web-news headlines.

And this paper is to analyze and manifest the power in discourse and behind discourse of the language of the Web-news headlines which we believe can reflect in a typical manner the hidden power of language. In terms of hidden power in discourse it will analyze the lexical choice, grammatical form and even graphic elements of the Web-news headlines. In terms of hidden power behind discourse the paper will target the social orders of discourse and reveal the unseen power embodied in the conventions and common sense that have been brought into being and generally accepted for various reasons.

2. Data Collection

The data were collected from Yahoo because it is believed that Yahoo’s “news. yahoo.com” has the “largest news audience on the Web” and it is “a portal to material from other news organization, including Reuters, AP, AFP, and The New York Times on the Web”; “The largest news audience on the Web still gravitates to Yahoo”(Barringer, 2001). So we gathered in the recent months the headlines uploaded on the Yahoo website in the section of world news from AP, AFP, and Reuters as the samples. All the news agencies here we refer to are world-known and powerful news releasing sources on the net, hence used as the reliable and important data providers for our research, to whom we owe much appreciation and credit.

3. Theoretical Framework

The approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is adopted here in analyzing the data on the basis of the Fairclough’s discourse view of language as a form of social practice in the sense that it is a part of the society and socially conditioned (Fairclough, 2001).

Critical discourse analysis focuses particularly on the relationship between power and discourse, studying the way in which “social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2001: 352).

The critical approach to discourse aims to challenge social orders and practices that we accept as “natural”, but which are, in fact, “naturalized”; in other words, when one way of seeing and interpreting the world becomes so common (and so frequently constructed in discourses), and so taken-for-granted, that it is accepted as the only way. In casting light on this process, critical discourse analysts seek to make visible the “common-sense” social and ideologies (or cultural assumptions) which, below the level of conscious awareness, are embedded in all forms of language that people use (Fairclough, 2001).

The word “critical” is being used in a specific sense here, indicating a focus on power as it relates to issues of international conventions and making its hidden workings visible. Discourse analysis focuses on the language of social life and analyzes the issues of social concern. The discourse here refers to “the whole process of social interaction of which the text is just a part” (Fairclough, 1989). They make powerful contributions to our understanding of the international events and the bilateral or multilateral relationships among the countries all over the world. The representation of discourse in news media can be seen as an ideological process of considerable social importance. The discursal practices in the Web-news headlines are more likely to be ideologically invested in so far as they contribute to sustaining power relations. Relations of power may in principle be affected by discursal practices in any type of discourse (Fairclough, 1995: 83).

4. The Hidden Power in and behind Discourse

The power of language consists in the fact that it will help shape people’s thoughts and ideologies gradually and stealthily. Language power in the media text is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneous undergoing and exercising this power. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application (Foucault, 1980: 98). Language power in the news text can manifest itself by the fact that the text may mystify the nature of the event being reported or who was responsible for actions associated with the event. And Fairclough, in uncovering the power of media text, distinguishes the language power in terms of power in discourse and power behind discourse (Fairclough, 1989).

According to Fairclough (1989), power in discourse involves the discourse as a place where relations of power are actually exercised and enacted and as a site where power struggles. Whereas power behind the discourse shifts the focus to how orders of discourse, namely, the distinctive ways in which specific groups (hereby referring to the media and their readership) communicate with each other, as dimensions of the social orders of social institutions or societies, are themselves shaped and constituted by relations of power.

4.1 The hidden power in discourse

Power in discourse of Web-news headline is a hidden power in that “the nature of the power relations enacted in it is often not clear” (ibid). The readers of Web-news headlines aim to get the infotainment produced on the Internet. So it can be seen that, for one thing, the interaction between the headline producers and the consumers or readers is just one-sided, namely, in most cases the readers can be just the empty vessels waiting for the news writer to fill in as they have no access to confirming the truthfulness of the news, even no intention of examining the truthfulness of the information. Whereas the news writer can employ those expressions that can best serve

their own purposes to spread the news.

For another, Web-news headlines are designed for distinctively diverse audience, including those high-brows, low-brows, even “no-brows”. In this case the discourse producers find no way to orient the potential participants in the interaction. So they “must produce with some interpreters in mind, what media producers do is addressing an ideal subject” (ibid), in some sense like T. S. Eliot’s ideal reader.

The hidden power in discourse is unidirectional and predetermined. It is exercised onto the readers in the way that it is the headline producers that “have sole producing rights and can therefore determine what is included and excluded, who evens are represented” (ibid), including the way how the headlines are produced.

Thus the headlines firstly demonstrate different formal features in terms of word choice, grammatical form and even graphic elements at the will of the producers. Let’s look at some headlines from the different sources about the same news story.

News 1

Blair says Iran may be linked to Iraq bombs Thu Oct 6, 4:30 PM ET

LONDON (Reuters)—British Prime Minister Tony Blair said on Thursday that evidence pointed to Iran or its Lebanese Hezbollah allies as the source of sophisticated explosives used in roadside bombs in Iraq, although Britain did not have proof.

News 2

Blair warns Iran not to interfere with Iraq Thu Oct 6, 5:19 PM ET

LONDON (AFP)—British Prime Minister Tony Blair warned Iran against interfering in Iraq, saying London suspected explosives used to kill British troops there may have come from the Islamic republic

News 3

Blair Warns Iran Not to Meddle in Iraq Thu Oct 6, 5:24 PM ET

LONDON (AP)—British Prime Minister Tony Blair warned Iran not to meddle in Iraq after declaring that the explosive devices that have killed U.S.—led troops were similar to those used by Italian-linked militant group Hezbollah.

Table 1 Analysis of the key verbs in the data

Web-news Headlines	Agency	Key Verbs Used
Headlines 1	<i>Blair</i>	<i>say, may be linked</i>
Headlines 2	<i>Blair</i>	<i>warn, not to interfere</i>
Headlines 3	<i>Blair</i>	<i>warn, not to meddle</i>

These news headlines are all about Blair’s comment on the same incident of bombing in Iraq, but with different expressions. From the simple table we can see that the three headlines share the same agency, i.e. Blair, but they use different verbs (say vs. warn) to describe the agency’s act in the same event. Obviously the Reuters headline sounds more objective in wording and tone. It employs the more neutral word “link” as well as the passive voice and modal verb “may” to refer to the incidence. Whereas the AP and AFP headlines respectively use the word “interfere” and “meddle” which make them appear quite assertive and straight-out in tone and belief. The word “meddle”, in particular, reflects the flinty attitude of Blair toward Iran. Concerning the same event the different producers provide quite different versions of reporting, which reflected the respective views and ideologies of different producers on Iran as the party involved in the incident.

Meanwhile in any case, the meaning of these headlines may be basically interpreted as the statement that Iran must or at least might have had something to do with the bomb in Iraq, because it is often taken for granted that “where there is smoke, there is fire” and nobody should intervene others, let alone get linked to the infamous bombing. And with their take-for-granted assumptions, the power holders impose their own ideology onto the

readers and the readers in this case are rendered to interpret the message under this influence from the verbal communication. And here ideology works, as Althusser reminds us, by disguising its ideological nature. It becomes naturalized, automatized—“common sense” in Gramsci’s terms (Fairclough, 1995).

Besides, in terms of graphic layout, the precise time about the news also contributes to the hidden power in discourse by rendering the news to appear very true to reality and hence become unquestionably convincing to the readers. Hereby the graphic layout boosts the hidden power of the influence on the readers’ interpretation of the information, which makes a unique and salient feature of Web-news headlines.

4.2 The hidden power behind discourse

Power behind discourse, according to Fairclough (1989), is also a hidden power. It involves the whole social orders of discourse being put together and held together as the hidden effect of power. It is closely linked to ideologies of the social groups in the interaction “because the nature of the ideological assumptions embedded in particular conventions, and so the nature of those conventions themselves, depends on the power relations which underlie the conventions; because there is a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which take these relations and power differences for granted” (Fairclough, 1989).

The less visible and unrecognized the ideological assumption is the more effective and powerful effect that the ideology has exerted on the public. Some headlines about the issue of North Korean Nuclear can be a good case in point.

AP: North Korea Demands Nuke Reactor from U.S.

2 hours, 3 minutes ago, 0920-13:20

SEOUL, South Korea—North Korea said Tuesday it would not dismantle its nuclear weapons program until the United States first provides an atomic energy reactor, casting doubt on its commitment to a breakthrough agreement reached at international arms talks.

AP: U.S. to Wait and See on N. Korea Nuke Deal

2 hours, 24 minutes ago, 0920-13:20

The Bush administration hailed North Korea’s agreement to shut down its nuclear weapons program Monday but warned that the pledge must be followed by action. “Now we’ve got to verify whether that happens”, President Bush said.

AP: N. Korea Agrees to Dismantle Nuke Programs

Mon Sep 19, 6:44 PM ET 0920-13:20

BEIJING—North Korea agreed Monday to dismantle nuclear weapons and its atomic facilities in exchange for energy aid, economic cooperation and security assurances, a breakthrough that marked a first step toward disarmament after two years of six-nation talks.

AFP: US says North Korea nuclear pledge only a “positive” first step

Mon Sep 19, 7:07 PM ET 0920-13:40

WASHINGTON (AFP)—The United States called North Korea’s pledge to give up nuclear weapons a “positive step,” but President George W. Bush demanded firm verification measures to make sure the Stalinist state keeps its word.

AFP: N. Korea pledges to give up nuclear weapons

Mon Sep 19, 1:02 PM ET 0920-13:

BEIJING (AFP) —North Korea promised to give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for pledges of aid and security, the first major breakthrough in more than two years of deadlock over the high-stakes crisis.

Reuters: North Korea urged to keep atomic arms pledge

Wed Sep 21, 9:42 AM ET

VIENNA (Reuters) —The United States and other members of the U.N. nuclear watchdog offered cautious praise on

Wednesday to North Korea for pledging to abandon nuclear weapons but said Pyongyang must stick to its word.

The headlines above are all about the controversial issue of North Korean nuke programs, in which six nations including America are involved. Before analyzing the text of the headlines, let's first look back on the origin of the issue. It started in the early 1990s when America suspected, in light of its satellite pictures, that North Korea possessed the facilities of producing nuclear weapons. It declared to inspect the nuclear devices while North Korea repeatedly reiterated that there was no nuclear at all. Concerning this issue the U.S. and North Korea along with the neighboring countries began to negotiate. With the further development of the six-nation talk, the global media reported a lot about this issue.

Obviously in the interaction of the two parties involved, America, referred to as the "world cop" with its tremendous economic and military advantages over any other country, is so often categorized into a fixed role and image among the world that the intervention has almost become a convention that may be applied in many international matters. It tends to color the perception of both the mass media and the readers.

North Korea would just utter weak responses to the powerful rivals headed by America. It finally "agreed" to dismantle nuke program whereas American just "waited" and "saw" on its pledge and with a weak smile commented on the pledge as "a positive first step" in the eye of the western journalists. The approval from them is indicative of their views on the issue that the compromise made by North Korea under the pressure of the U.S. is a matter of course. And the views have become deep-rooted in their minds. At the same time, the unequal relationships of power between the two countries can be easily detected.

But as we all know, America is the nation which possesses the largest amount of the most sophisticated nuclear weapons in the world, while North Korea cannot even have its own nuclear devices and has to be checked by America (But beware that this is not to say that North Korea should develop its own nuclear weapons anyway). This illegitimate convention assigns a legitimate role to the US government's intervention. In other words, unequal power relations have been established in the mind of the power-holders, including the readership and the headline producers. It has been generally taken-for-granted or "naturalized". The discourse apparently encodes thoughts and attitudes that are expected to be shared by the readership.

The hidden power behind discourse can also contain the ideology and belief of the writer representative of the sides and stand of their patrons. We can see this point from the syntactic structure of these news headlines. In all the headlines North Korea is chosen to act as the subject or agency and hence the focus of the whole event. It seems to follow that the whole problem will be solved satisfactorily once North Korea makes the compromise. But it should be noted that North Korea was just involved in the complicated nuclear event involuntarily. Whereas the power of America is well-hidden behind the satisfactory result in the case of America and other countries. In this case, the selected agency renders the textual mystification to take place. In brief, we can learn how active choices made in the way news headlines are couched can "have a very powerful ideological effect on readers' perception and interpretation of people and event" (Talbot, Arkinson & Arkinson, 2003: 41).

5. Conclusions

Conclusively, power of the headlines is exercised through language in ways which are not always obvious, just as much power in the modern world is unseen and even unnoticed in the sense that it becomes "naturalized". More often than not, it is not through direct coercion but through the development and creation of common sense, by a process of hegemony (ibid: 5).

The hidden power in and behind discourse embodied in the Web-news headlines is basically ideological. It is “the power to project one’s practices as universal and ‘common sense’, which powerfully boosts and serves the economic and political power” (Fairclough, 1989: 33). And the latter, in turns, contributes much to the enforcement of the former. It quietly and unconsciously influences the readers by providing them with the infotainment in discourse. Being a reader is not unlike a citizen. In both spheres you can lose your identity or assert it. One way of asserting it, for example, is to identify the role a text assigns to you, or the attitude it expects, and to decide whether or not you accept that role or share that attitude (Butler, M. & Keith, G., 1999).

Furthermore, as being noticed in the data, Web-news headlines are updated very soon, with the precise updating time, e.g. 12 minutes ago. That definitely leaves readers an impression that the news is latest and sticks to the current situation, and hence more believable and powerful in disguise.

The ideological power, meanwhile, reflects the social and interaction strata of the participants including both the power-holders and the consumers. And it will also be shaped by the social changes and distinctive cultures. To learn well about this can help us understand both the workings of language and the world we live in.

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