"ALL TRUTH IS RELATIVE" OR HOW TO NOT BE FOOLED IN THE POST-TRUTH AGE?
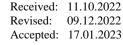
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The term "fake news" is not a new phenomenon. Before the advent of the Internet, people read news from reliable sources which were required to adhere to strict standards of professional ethics. However, due to the ease of access to the Internet and social media there have emerged new ways of publishing, sharing and consuming news and information, in the meanwhile, the control over the quality and editorial norms have declined significantly. This has changed the way fake news is created and distributed. People now prefer to read the information on social media and other online sources. However, it is not always easy to determine which content is true and which is not. The paper argues that fake news employs specific language and graphic patterns which are meant to generate an emotional response. Knowing the language features of fake news may help readers become less susceptible to fake content. The study is built on the hypothesis that a critical analysis of how the information is represented activates a process of reasoning that helps spot fake content.

Keywords*: post-truth; fake news; language and graphic patters; critical approach, emotion; cognitive aspect.*

Introduction

Pluralism and relativism in dealing with such fundamental concepts as truth and knowledge have resulted in the emergence of competing perspectives on reality and entailed paradigmatic changes, particularly in the media culture. Misinformation, malinformation, disinformation and fake news have become usual terms describing the qualitative changes in the current media landscape. In recent years, among the mentioned terms "fake news" has become most popular designating not only false and misleading information, disseminated as news. It has become a highly emotional term that questions the news objectivity

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and aims at exerting pressure over people's attitudes and beliefs. Fake news is directly related to the information war, the purpose of which is to distort facts for political propaganda and manipulation of mass consciousness, as well as to create the image of the enemy. The spread of false information has become rampant and popular in the Post-truth age, when, according to the definition given in the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, "the emotional perception of information and personal beliefs are much more important in shaping public opinion than objective facts" ("Post truth", n.d.). In this case, we can even speak of the synonymic relations between "fake news" and "post-truth" as they both designate falsehood and disinformation or truth which has become irrelevant.

As far as the English terminology is concerned, we note that the word "fake" in the combination "fake news" is not the first and only word to mean false information. The word "hoax" (a widely publicized falsehood, as defined by the Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential, n.d.) has also been in circulation long before it was overtaken by the word "fake". One of the earliest evidences of this is *The Great Moon Hoax of 1836*, a series of six articles published in 1835 in the SUN, a New York Newspaper, about the supposed discovery of life and even civilization on the Moon ("The Great Moon Hoax", 2020).[1]

Misinformation in the media is not new. History abounds in examples of falsification and twisting of the truth for material gain[2]. The phenomenon has been around since the development of the earliest writing systems (Marcus, 1993). A classic example of widespread misinformation dates back to 1938, when the broadcast of a radio adaptation of H.G. Well's drama *The War of the Worlds* frightened over one million people (Cantril, 2005). Radio drama director Orson Welles adopted an innovative radio news format and engaged actors playing the roles of reporters, residents, experts, and government officials to narrate the story of Martian invasion. While his intention was to entertain listeners, the radio drama was performed in the form of a live news report, in a period when radio was the main source of information in the United States. While the radio adaptation was meant for entertainment listeners interpreted it as factual news (Cantril, 2005). Now that online platforms, particularly social media, are becoming the main sources of news for a growing number of individuals, misinformation seems to have found new channels (Molina, Sundar, Le & Lee, 2021).

The linguistic nature of truth

Assuming that news is an operational information message about events that have occurred recently or are taking place in the current period, representing a political, economic or public interest for the audience, then "fake" is not just a false fact, it is a strategy for creating false content. Fake news can be regarded as a specially created manipulative construction, which is implemented in the form of text, audio fake, video, a photo.

It is common knowledge that when publishing any news, a journalist considers the rule of multiple (at least three) sources and the so-called fact-checking. The news is considered reliable if it has been verified in three publications; editorial review is a necessary condition for the existence of a quality content. Researchers attribute different meanings to fact-checking. A widely acknowledged view is that fact-checking is a procedure for verifying the reliability of the facts received in the media. As a rule, this involves searching for the necessary information on the Web, the ability to work with primary and secondary sources of information, a deep analysis of the level of literacy of writing a text, and so on. More specifically, specialists now put more emphasis on a "wider consideration of human nature, interaction, and our inter-relatedness", which turns fact-checking into a form of critical, investigative inquiry. It includes a wide range of approaches and practices (Leonard, Meban, & Young, 2020).

Communication without truth is simply impossible, therefore truth is a problem of linguistic nature. The desire to attract readers leads journalists and content creators to manipulate information, which facilitates the emergence of the so-called fake news. If some time ago it was considered that low quality newspapers, or social websites alone are proliferating on faking news, nowadays the picture has changed dramatically. More and more mainstream papers are getting involved in spreading unverified information and this happens very often. It takes a couple of hours or even days when the fake content is deleted and newspapers extend apologies for the unverified pieces of information. But the fake has already been spread, and it has served its purpose to monger panic, concerns or to simply fool people. On the other hand, politicians and public figures do spread fake news via their private accounts to win popularity or whatever the purpose might be.

Fake news is disguised as reliable information and requires careful language analysis. Social media ensures that fake news is spread faster than ever and has a continually increasing impact on mass consciousness.

First of all, the text format of such phenomena deserves special attention. To fake content we attribute online text messages published on websites that do not carry reliable information, as well as blogs with unknown authors or fake authors. Also, fake news exists in the form of video and audio messages, distributed via instant messengers WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, Facebook etc., hence we can speak of multimodal features employed to make the content as truthful as possible (Singh, Ghosh & Sonagara, 2019). The characteristic features of fake news can be studied based on their sources, titles, the body text, the volume, the visual content, and the social engagement of the authors. From linguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives, words and syntax, style and graphic means are most prominent.

Words in the media and in political discourse have significant power in shaping people's opinions and beliefs. Often their veracity is compromised in order to maximize the impact on the reader. The discovery of fake news becomes an important task for professionals working with news content, and for an average reader, too. Due to this, it seems important to find objective linguistic markers that indicate the unreliability of information and analyze their features.

Psychologists and neurolinguists mention that the cognitive aspect of news consumption and interpretation deserves attention. Martel, C., Pennycook, G. & Rand, D. (2020) suggest that people "who engage in more reasoning are less likely to fall for fake news, while reliance on emotions promotes belief in fake news". There emerges the following question: what is there so special in the fake news in terms of its affective properties? By "affect" here we mean psychological/emotional "impact" which refers to a special kind of influence linked to our body. Cognitivists largely agree on that all our cognition is embodied, emotionally and experientially grounded. Thus, affects are believed to influence the cognitive scope and this is backed up by considerable empirical data. Initially, it was thought that positive affects broaden, whereas negative affects narrow cognitive scope (Fox, 2008), however, this idea has later been challenged.

Having in mind the abovementioned considerations, the present study employs the hypothesis that special language and graphic patterns used in fake content evoke emotions which increase susceptibility to fake news. The paper argues that a critical approach to news stories and the knowledge of the frequently repeated language and graphic patterns can activate the process of reasoning and help spot fake news.

Spotting fake news with the help of language and graphic means

This Chapter deals with the linguistic and graphic peculiarities of fake news. One hundred online headlines and tweets have been studied covering topics on the US elections in 2020 and COVID-19 headlines (2020-2021), as well as examples covering random topics. The material was taken from social media and various websites known for being involved in disseminating fake news. Whenever possible, the content has been checked on Reuters Factcheck or other resources.

Speaking about the linguistic features of fake news, researchers note the widespread use of emotionally charged words, labeling, use of words and expressions inappropriate with the style of the verified news. As a demonstration of this, it is appropriate to mention the word "miracle" (and its derivatives) circulating in fake headlines promising cure from the Covid pandemic ("US has developed "miracle" drug Remedesivir against COVID-19", "Madagascar president announced that WHO tried to bribe him to poison his "miracelous" (sic) treatment for COVID 19", "Chlorine dioxide, or Miracle Mineral Solution (MMS) can cure COVID-19", etc.), a word hardly ever referred to in mainstream sources.

Hereunder we will consider some examples of fake news as an illustration of the above stated features.

A large amount of fake news is associated with the US President Donald Trump (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Many researchers believe that the explanation for its popularity is his speech. His tweets make it possible to understand that his statements are quite emotional. According to The Washington Post, as of November 2017, the President has made 1,628 false or misleading statements since taking office, this on average makes more than five false claims per day (Kessler, Kelly & Lewis, 2017).

He, like a real speaker, resorts to various communicative strategies; his speech patterns are variable, the discourse is emotional and dynamic, which is largely achieved through the use of rhetorical techniques.

During the analysis of the material, it was revealed that the popularity of Donald Trump increased due to fake news created and distributed in order to achieve political advantages by discrediting his political opponent (including during the election campaign for the US presidential election in 2020). Let us consider the following headline which went viral across media during the presidential campaign of 2020:

> *Joe Biden's son Hunter was dishonorably discharged from the Navy for cocaine use.*

In the example we note the repetition of *dis-*, a prefix with negative connotative value, which instantly catches readers' attention. Later Reuters' Fact check published the following title:

> *Hunter Biden's military discharge was administrative, not dishonorable.* (Reuters Staff, 2020)

Based on this, we note that the information is presented selectively, i.e. it is true, but only partially. The fake content is exaggerated as Hunter received an administrative penalty but was not ignominiously expelled from the Navy. The exaggeration is created due to the repetition of the prefix *dis-* with a negative value in units *dishonorably* (shameful, shameful), *discharged* (excluded, fired), which instantly attracts the reader's attention and generates emotional response (shock, resentment) leaving no time to question the truth of the statement. Was the person really discharged? or Was it really a dishonorable act?

As far as exaggeration as a strategy to create misleading information is concerned, one of the most frequently used language units to create exaggeration and spread panic is the pronoun *everyone:*

> *The Democrats are pushing for an implanted microchip in humans, and everyone to be vaccinated.* ("The Democrats are pushing", 2020)

> *Bill Gates personally will profit from a COVID-19 vaccine and he owns a company that plans to implant microchips in everyone.* ("Bill Gates personally will profit", 2020)

> *The coronavirus is a "virus weapon" as lethal as Ebola. Everyone who is infected dies.* ("The coronavirus is a "virus weapon", 2020)

The statements illustrated above cover the period of the upsurge of the Covid-19 pandemic when very little was known about the virus and the methods of its treatment. This gave way to many conspiracy theories. The

statements presented above can easily bring forth negative expectations and mislead people to negative expectations. This effect is due to the use of the pronoun *everyone*, which, from the point of psychological impact, creates participation effect. The reader feels himself/herself immediately engaged in the story or more precisely a part of it and what is more dangerous an immediate recipient of the consequences that the new vaccine or the virus will entail. The psychological impact of these statements involving *everyone* is greater than compared with examples when a definite number of people or regions are mentioned. Hence the probability that readers will take this news as true is high.

Direct quotations deserve special attention in the study of fake news. Usually, to increase the authenticity of their message, the authors of fake content take the words out of the real context and use it in another context. This was a widely used strategy during the upsurge of the pandemic. The cases when the authors of fake content refer to words of competent authorities or refer to such authorities by introducing totally false content are numerous. This is the case in the following statement, which was published on 15 June 2020, on www.hotnews.ge, under the title "Shocking Admission of WHO's Epidemiologist – Epidemic Does not Exist!"

> *According to a statement appearing to be coming from WHO "There is no pandemic. The epidemic does not exist. No vaccine is needed. Healthy people do not need gloves, face masks and other protective equipment. There was no need for a lockdown and a curfew as well as the so-called contact tracing. The virus cannot survive on surfaces – such an isolation was only the demand of governments. Each and every organisation, fitness clubs, theatres, restaurants, cafes and bars can work at full capacity."*

According to FactCheck ("WHO's Fabricated Statement", 2020), though the article was removed later, it was nonetheless widely circulated throughout Facebook and amassed over 5,000 interactions (over 2,000 reacts, over 2,000 comments and 1,360 shares).

The strategy of removing the words out of a real context was widely used during the presidential campaign in the USA. It was one of the effective ways

of discrediting the opponent and shaping public opinion. Let us consider the following example:

> *In a September 2018 speech, Joe Biden called Donald Trump's supporters "the dregs of society"*

The news is unreliable, as Biden's words were taken out of context and misrepresented. In his speech, Biden referring to an unnamed subset of individuals, called them as the "dregs of society". According to Reuters Fact check, the remark came in a speech that Biden gave on 15 September 2018 at an annual dinner for the Human Rights Campaign (Caldera, 2020*)*.

Thus, the combination *the dregs of society*, which certainly has the power of generating negative emotional response, was taken from another context and was not aimed at Trump supporters. However, the headline served its purpose to discredit the political opponent by showing his "attitude" toward the part of American people who supported Republicans. This undoubtedly led more and more Americans to support the Republican candidate, though initially they had not been favoring Trump's campaign.

The topic of the US fight against coronavirus has been widely used to create false content. Here are some examples of fake statements:

> *U.S. President Donald Trump touted the "antibody cocktail" as a COVID-19 "cure" that he intended to make available to the American public.* (Smith, 2020)

> *President Donald Trump to treat COVID-19, involved the use of human fetal tissues and embryonic stem cells.* (Fauzia, 2020)

What connects these two statements is the absence of the indication of time and place, i.e. the statements lack specific configurations of time and space. The first statement is presented in the Past indefinite tense, the second statement involves an infinitive construction denoting a future action, but the two statements lack any specific time or place configurations. There are empirical studies suggesting that the absence of specific time and place disorient people, generate anxiety and uncertainty, that is to say when news consumers are aware of when and where the event has taken place, they feel more comfortable as this is a safe way to distance themselves from the

unpleasant events. In the two headlines presented above, there is no time indication which augments people's worries about being forced into vaccine trials. On the other hand, the units *touted, available, cure, treat* point to Donald Trump's successful fight against the virus, thereby increasing his rating in the election campaign.

Depending on the ratio of reliable and false information fake news may represent a lie from the start to end. Below we present a sensational headline built on a complete lie:

My blood IS the vaccine. (Binkowski, 2020)

Units *blood* (blood), *vaccine* (vaccine), capital letters *IS* act as triggers, provoking readers' interest in the content. This eccentric headline appeared in the period of the upsurge of the pandemic and had an adverse psychological impact. This news was posted on a fake Twitter account and went viral immediately. It is known that news pieces incorporating visual components capturing the attention of viewers are mainly published on social platforms.

As far as visual components are concerned, capitalization and the use of other graphic means deserve special attention. These are the most frequent means used in fake content. A statement written in capital letters or other graphic elements should be treated carefully. Both techniques trigger visual consumption of the news. This happens immediately, as the visual units arouse emotional response before the reader embarks on factual analysis.

BOOM! Wikileaks Confirms Hillary Sold Weapons To ISIS? (@Reca, 2016)
CHANGES IN PHARMACIES! DON'T EXPECT THE PRESCRIPTION>>> HERE'S WHAT YOU'LL GET!

In the first headline, the capitalized word *BOOM* with the interjection mark attracts attention as it hints that something sensation will follow. Boom is associated with the effect of an exploding bomb, which appeals to senses, engaging more emotions. In the second example, we see capitalization and combination of several graphic signs (exclamation mark, three arrows), the necessity of which is not supported by the context. They are meaningless, but they produce click-catching and eye-catching effect.

Misspelling is another technique of drawing people's attention to the fake content and increasing the readership. On 31 May, 2017, the US President Donald Trump posted the following extraordinary tweet which was later removed:

> *Despite the constant negative press covfefe.*

The word, *covfefe* is not registered in English dictionaries. As evident from the context, D. Trump intended to write *coverage*, referring to the reports publishing defaming reports about his presidency. Whether this was a typo or a strategy, the tweet went viral and became one of the most discussed tweets. The extravagant tweet was discussed even one year after its first appearance and continued to intrigue the minds of readers as to what it could have meant (Estepa, 2018).

In fake news, grammatical and spelling mistakes may occur because the websites and private accounts do not have proofreaders or editors (which is a usual practice for quality news sites) responsible for technical issues.

The following tweet on the return of Woolworths to high street went viral in October 2020:

> *Our trial stores will open in 2021. Very own the online Woolsworths, so we will be retail only. Before we launch, we have a few legal contracts to sign, but we're super excited!*
> *This will be your Woolsworths ♡* (@UKWoolworths)

According to the Guardian (Waterson, 2020), dozens of mainstream news sites (including the Daily Mirror and Mail Online) "ran prominent articles" on the reopening of a once popular brand, but the news was based on "nothing more than a typo-strewn Twitter account with fewer than 1000 followers". As it turned out, the author of the fake content was only a six grader (which explains the spelling errors (*Woolsworths* instead of *Woolworths*) and the poor text) and as he confessed later, he did it to practice his marketing skills and was far from the intention to dupe people.

Mistakes may as well be made deliberately to trick the reader into opening and reading the content. In this case we are not dealing with occasional errors, but rather with deliberate ones. For instance, during our search we noted that the word *scam* (a deceptive scheme or trick used to cheat someone out of

something, especially money), a word with obvious negative connotation, in several fake headlines was misspelled as *Ccam*. By misspelling it, the authors deliberately neutralize the initial negative content and the expected negative impact on readers, in this way arousing interest and tricking them into clicking on the headline.

Conclusion

The results of the analysis enable us to draw at several conclusions. First, we can state that the study of fake news, as a product of the post-truth age, is important for understanding the mechanisms of the formation of current media content. Fake news, particularly those in English, become rampant especially in the periods of political or social instabilities and uncertainties of both local and global character. The strategy of bending of the truth has become a tool of waging information war for the purpose of influencing public opinion and producing desired emotions. The study of the fake news is of interest from linguistic perspective, due to the linguistic nature of communication. We may conclude that in fake news visual component and the form of expression are more important than the content itself. Among specific features widely used in fake content we may underline the following means: lexical markers, the use of stylistically marked vocabulary, generalization, quotation, deliberate omission of time and space configurations, capitalization, graphic signs, deliberating misspelling. This, however, is not an exhaustive list. The mentioned features trigger emotional response and increase the susceptibility of readers to fake content. A critical approach to the content may be of help to readers to be more cautious of what they consume as news.

Notes

1. Yet another synonym for the "fake news', is the noun "bombshell' which, according to Oxford Learners' dictionaries, is defined as "an event or a piece of news which is unexpected and usually unpleasant" (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.).
2. Nicola Watts in his article entitled "5 Types of 'Fake News' and Why They Matter" (2018) draws comparisons between the US elections held in 2017 and the use of fake news by Octavian against Marc Anthony which started the final war of the Roman Republic (32 BC to 30 BC). Instead of Twitter, Octavian used coins on one side of which was him, on the other Marc Anthony backed

by Cleopatra! There were short slogans written on coins that denigrated Anthony for being a puppet of Egypt, disloyal to Rome, a philanderer and a drunk. The vicious propaganda concluded with Anthony being declared a traitor (https://www.ogilvy.com/ideas/5-types-fake-news-why-they-matter).

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«ՃՇՄԱՐՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՀԱՐԱԲԵՐԱԿԱՆ Է» ԿԱՄ ԻՆՉՊԵՍ ՉԽԱԲՎԵԼ ՊՈՍՏՃՇՄԱՐՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԴԱՐԱՇՐՋԱՆՈՒՄ

Մարիանա Սարգսյան

«Ֆեյք լուր» երևույթը նոր երևույթ չէ: Մինչ համացանցի հայտնվելը, լուրեր ստանալու միակ միջոցը վստահելի աղբյուրներն էին, որոնք պարտավորված էին պահպանել մասնագիտական էթիկայի խիստ չափանիշներ: Սակայն, համացանցի և սոցիալական հարթակների հասանելիությունն հանգեցրեց նորություններ և տեղեկատվություն հրապարակելու, տարածելու և սպառելու նոր եղանակների ի հայտ գալուն, որն ուղեկցվեց դրանց բովանդակության և իմբագրական նորմերի նկատմամբ վերահսկողության զգալի նվազմամբ: Վերջինս էլ առաջ բերեց ֆեյքերի ստեղծման և տարածման նոր ձևեր: Ներկայում մարդիկ նախընտրում են նորությունները ստանալ սոցիալական ցանցերից և տեղեկատվական կայքերից: Տեղեկատվական հոսքի և կայքերի բազմազանության պարագայում անհրաժեշտություն է ծագել բացահայտելու որոշ օրինաչափություններ, որոնք թույլ կտան զանազանել ճշգրիտ տեղեկատվությունը ֆեյքից: Սույն հոդվածը միտված է քննելու ֆեյք լուրերի յուրահատուկ լեզվական ու գրաֆիկական օրինաչափություններ, որոնք միտված են առաջ բերելու հուզական վիճակներ, ինչը մեծացնում է ֆեյքերի նկատմամբ զգայունությունը: Վերլուծությունը հիմնված է այն վարկածի վրա, որ սպառվող նյութի նկատմամբ քննադատական մոտեցումը և օրինաչափությունների իմացությունն ակտիվացնում է տրամաբանական գործընթացը՝ օգնելով հայտնաբերել կեղծ բովանդակությունը:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *պոստճշմարտություն, ֆեյք լուր, լեզվական և գրա- ֆիկական կաղապարներ, հույզեր, ճանաչողություն, քննադատական մոտեցում:*