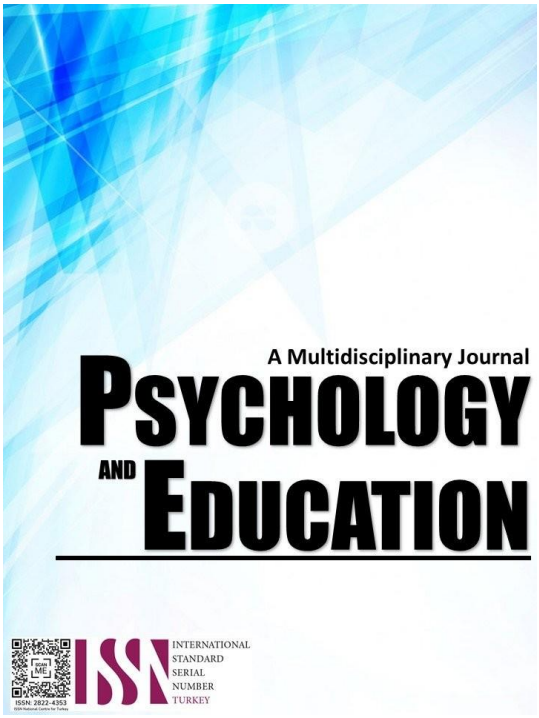
PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC AND READER REACTIONS TO LOCAL NEWSPAPER HEADLINES IN DAVAO DEL NORTE



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Research Article

Pragmatic Analysis of Linguistic and Reader Reactions to Local Newspaper Headlines in Davao del Norte

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Abstract

This study conducted a pragmatic analysis of local newspaper banner headlines in Davao del Norte, focusing on linguistic form and intended meaning. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 14 avid local newspaper readers, the study explored participants' experiences and insights. Key findings revealed participants' challenges with unfamiliar expressions, sight reading, and news content dissatisfaction. Their preference for shorter headlines and the positive impact of local newspapers on knowledge acquisition and critical thinking underscore the need for more accessible and engaging headlines. To enhance practical application, local newspapers should simplify language, prioritize headline length and clarity, and tailor content to readers' interests. By addressing these issues, local newspapers can significantly improve headline quality and foster a more engaged readership.

Keywords: *linguistic form, grammatical form, pragmatic analysis*

Introduction

Newspaper headlines, as concise discourse units, often present challenges for readers due to their reliance on linguistic devices and potential for misinterpretation (Krasina & Souadkia, 2020; Nwala & Umukoro, 2017). Previous studies have highlighted the prevalence of idioms, neologisms, and other rhetorical expressions in newspaper headlines across various contexts, such as Iran (Monsefi & Mahadi, 2017) and India (Gajendra & Alquhali, 2021). In Metro Manila, research has shown that sensationalized headlines can contribute to negative public perceptions of the government (Diaz, 2021; Mendoza & Panao, 2021).

Newspaper headlines employ various linguistic devices to capture readers' attention and convey information concisely. Studies have found that phraseological units, including idioms and other figurative expressions, are frequently used in headlines to create interest and enhance meaning (Jaki, 2014; Kinashchuk & Sunko, 2021). Headlines also feature neologisms, reflecting the rapid growth of the English language and serving as a medium for introducing new vocabulary (Mohamed, 2020). However, these linguistic devices can also lead to ambiguity and potential misinterpretation (Nwala & Umukoro, 2017).

Research indicates that sensationalized headlines can contribute to negative public perceptions of government. A study of Philippine online news portals found that media practitioners use various discursive devices in headlines to attract attention, potentially leading to biased or misleading content (Montejo & Adriano, 2018). Analysis of banner headlines from major Philippine broadsheets revealed a tendency towards negative tone, which may impact readership and public perception (Diaz, 2021). Another study demonstrated that low presidential approval ratings correlate with increased negative press coverage, suggesting a relationship between public opinion and media portrayal of political events (Mendoza & Panao, 2021). While not specific to the Philippines, research on U.S. newspaper coverage of government contracting found that sensationalized media coverage reinforces negative perceptions of government, potentially impacting public trust and policymaking (Alibašić & Atkinson, 2022).

Existing studies highlight the challenges posed by linguistic devices in newspaper headlines, such as idioms, neologisms, and sensationalized content. These elements can lead to misinterpretation and influence public perceptions of government. This research aims to investigate the specific challenges faced by readers in comprehending local newspaper headlines, focusing on linguistic forms, functions, and potential for misinterpretation. By examining these aspects, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of reader-headline interactions and the factors influencing their interpretation.

Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the study was seeking to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the linguistic features illustrated in the local newspaper headlines?
2. What are the experiences of the participants on reading the newspaper?
3. What are the insights of the participants on reading the newspapers?

Literature Review

Pragmatics and its Principles

Pragmatics involves principles that help in understanding language use in context, as outlined by Levinson (2000). These include deixis, speech acts, presupposition, implicature, and entailment. Deixis focuses on how language encodes contextual information, relying on expressions like "this," "that," "here," and "there" that refer to aspects of the communication situation. It can be gestural, needing physical cues, or symbolic, depending on the spatial and temporal context of the speech event. The term "deixis" comes from

the Greek word for "to show" or "to indicate," highlighting how language points directly to its situational context (Gjergji, 2015).

Moreso, Deixis is crucial for understanding the meaning of certain words and phrases in utterances, requiring contextual information and it encompasses person, spatial, temporal, discourse, and social deixis (Pangaribuan et al., 2015). Deixis plays a significant role in various disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive psychology (Dylgjeri & Kazazi, 2013). It is often described as "verbal pointing" and involves deictic expressions or markers. The study of deixis is essential in pragmatics as it directly concerns the relationship between language structure and context of use (Dylgjeri & Kazazi, 2013; Sodiqova, 2020).

Speech Act and its Levels

Speech acts in linguistics refer to intentional communicative behaviors and consist of three levels: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act involves producing a sentence with a specific meaning (Nishth, 2013). An illocutionary act is about the intention behind the speech, such as making a statement, promise, or offer, and carries conventional force (Hariku, 2015). Perlocutionary acts focus on the effect the utterance has on the listener (Sholihah, 2009). Illocutionary acts can be direct or indirect, and literal or non-literal, with indirect-literal illocutionary acts often seen as more polite, while direct-literal acts are straightforward and commonly used (Sholihah, 2009). Speech acts explain how language is used to perform actions in specific contexts.

Challenges in Understanding and Engaging with News Content

Reading comprehension challenges have evolved in the digital age, with readers facing difficulties in understanding unfamiliar expressions, processing complex information, and navigating new text formats (Alexander, 2020; Appelman, 2019, Coiro, 2003). Struggling readers often encounter obstacles when comprehending informational texts, requiring additional support and strategies (White, 2011, Rapp et al., 2007). Rereading has been identified as an effective technique to enhance comprehension, particularly for informational texts that present unique challenges (Hedin & Conderman, 2010). The Internet introduces new literacy demands, necessitating expanded definitions of reading comprehension to encompass digital literacies (Coiro, 2003). To address these challenges, researchers and educators must collaborate to develop interventions that target higher-order comprehension processes and adapt to the changing nature of literacy (Alexander, 2020; Rapp et al., 2007). As technology continues to shape the reading landscape, proficiency in new literacies becomes essential for students' future success (Coiro, 2003).

Preferences and Satisfaction in News Consumption

Recent research highlights the importance of simplicity and readability in news content for enhancing user experience. Studies show that readers prefer simpler headlines with common words and more readable writing, leading to increased attention and deeper processing (Shulman et al., 2024, Rieis et al., 2021). This preference for simplicity extends to news leads, where readability is crucial for engaging readers (Wu, 2024). Interestingly, when given the opportunity, users can suggest alternative headlines that are often preferred over those crafted by professional editors (Jahanbakhsh et al., 2022). However, finding the right balance in content presentation is essential, as both overly long and excessively short summaries and links can be problematic in digital news stories (Vargo et al., 2000, Scacco & Muddiman (2019). These findings underscore the need for news outlets to prioritize simplicity and readability in their content to compete effectively in the online attention economy and make news more accessible to readers.

The Role of Newspapers in Enhancing Knowledge and Critical Thinking

Reading newspapers plays a significant role in enhancing learning and refining perspectives on societal issues. Street (2002) and Schrank (2020) emphasizes that newspapers serve as "living textbooks," helping students develop critical thinking, reading, and problem-solving skills. Du and Wong (2013) found that increased newspaper reading correlates with stronger agreement on public issues within social groups, highlighting the medium's role in shaping collective perspectives. Mittal (2014) and Ramnarain & Moleki (2017) discusses the benefits of newspapers in English language learning, suggesting that they can facilitate interactive learning experiences and address students' shortcomings. Furthermore, Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση et al. (2020) and Segall & Schmidt (2006) argue that newspapers are valuable resources for informal learning, influencing public ideology and educational perceptions. Together, these studies underscore the multifaceted benefits of newspaper reading in education and societal engagement.

The Societal Impact and Importance of Keeping Updated

Newspapers play a crucial role in disseminating information, shaping public opinion, and influencing society (Khalid & Ahmed, 2014, Domínguez, 2013). They serve as agenda-setters, providing in-depth coverage on various social issues and contributing to national development (Khalid & Ahmed, 2014). Sociolinguistic factors also influence newspaper language, reflecting political goals and reader characteristics (Israil, 2024, Vecsei, 2024). The media's growing influence has led to a symbiotic relationship with terrorism, as terrorist groups seek publicity while media outlets aim to meet consumer demands for dramatic and emotionally resonant stories (Camphuijsen & Vissers, 2012 and Meyer, 2004). This relationship has implications for society and raises questions about the media's proper role (Camphuijsen & Vissers, 2012). Overall, newspapers continue to be vital in keeping the public informed and shaping societal behavior.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using pragmatic and phenomenological approaches. It involved in-depth interviews

with 14 informants and analyzed 30 local newspaper banner headlines from five publications in Davao del Norte, covering 2015-2018. The research focused on linguistic phenomena in headlines, examining how they engage readers through various interpretations and the relational dynamics involved. The analysis was both content- and reader-centered, addressing ideational and interpersonal functions (Isani, 2011). To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation was employed, combining data from interviews and headline analysis. Intercoder reliability was established through a coding agreement process, ensuring consistency in data analysis.

Additionally, member checking was conducted to validate findings with informants, ensuring the accuracy of interpretations. To address potential researcher influence, reflexivity was incorporated into the research process. Researchers were aware of their own biases and perspectives, and these were considered during data analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, the use of multiple researchers with diverse backgrounds helped to mitigate potential biases and ensure a more comprehensive analysis. Phenomenological methods observed informants in their natural settings to understand their experiences with headlines (Sidky, 2004), while pragmatic analysis explored the communicative acts of headlines. Researchers acted as collectors, interviewers, transcribers, translators, analysts, and encoders (Dornyie, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Davis, 2011). Purposive sampling was used to select informants who were avid readers of local newspapers (Tashakkori, 2003).

Results and Discussion

Experiences of the Participants

During the interview, I used sub-questions to guide informants toward the main question and explore their concepts on challenges faced by local newspaper readers. In the in-depth and focus group discussions, key findings emerged: unfamiliar expressions, figurative language and contextual understanding. The major themes for Research Question 2 are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of Local Newspaper Readers*

Emerging Themes	*Core Ideas*
Unfamiliar Expressions	• I find it difficult what I have read; I cannot understand what I am reading." (IDI02) • "I am in doubt because I don't understand it." (IDI03 • "I am curious about because (new words/expression) …it just exists nowadays." (FGD02) • "I am confused if what does it means." (FGD03) • "I am confused also because I don't also understand." (FGD06) • "Likewise, I am confused, I cannot understand." (FGD07) • "Of course you need to have a tool. If you have sight problems, you need to have reading glasses." (IDI05) • "Challenges? Sometimes I cannot see clearly because I am already old." (IDI07) • "I find it difficult to read newspaper. The I can feel headache. I cannot see clearly because I am aging." (FGD03) • "I feel sad – my head is aching and as what they've said I cannot see some words clearly." (FGD06) • "My head and eyes gets hurt because of the tiny letters, then I'll get my reading glasses." (FGD07)
Figurative Language	• "Of course, it affects because readers will be not satisfied with that." (IDI05) • "I will really react, the tv's report is like that then the newspapers report is like this. What is really the truth? What is this? So just like that." (IDI01) • "It is discouraging because they are not aligned." (IDI03) • "I can say that what happened to this news there is wrong. It is different from what I've heard, but I will also ask from others." (IDI07) • "I will get mad . . . because others have different story and then the other one also has different story." (FGD07)
Contextual Understanding	• "You really need to read the whole (news report) because it is difficult if you only read the 1st and 2nd paragraph only." (IDI01) • 'What makes me contented? are the news that I really wanted to know like for example about Duterte just like that, I really wanted to clarify if it is really the truth or not. I will be relieved if I will know that, that is it." (IDI02) • "I, we read newspaper because we want information. If the information that we want is that we get from the newspaper that means, we are contented of course." (IDI05) • "You will know what is happening in your locality and in our community today if you will read newspapers. Somehow you will be updated. (FGD01)

Unfamiliar expressions. The use of unfamiliar words or phrases can hinder comprehension, particularly for readers with limited vocabulary or knowledge of specific domains (Joshi, 2005; Stebick & Nichols, 2014).

Figurative language. Newspapers often employ figurative language, such as metaphors and similes, to create vivid and engaging headlines (Gajendra & Alquhali, 2021; White & Herrera, 2009). However, if not understood correctly, these devices can lead to misinterpretation (Chakrabarty et al., 2022; and Colston, & Gibbs, 2021).

Contextual understanding. Comprehending newspaper headlines requires understanding the broader context, including the news story, the publication's stance, and the target audience (Gamboa & Cayabyab, 2023; Mikadze, 2023; and Nwala & Umukoro, 2017b).

Insights of the Participants

I aim to uncover the insights of local newspaper readers in Davao del Norte, based on their observations and personal experiences. The summary reflects their uncoerced opinions, as gathered through in-depth and focus group discussions. From their responses, the major themes identified are preferences and satisfaction in news consumption, the role of newspapers in enhancing knowledge and critical thinking, and societal impact.

Table 2. *Themes and Core Ideas on the Insights of Local Newspaper Readers*

Emerging Themes	*Core Ideas*
Preferences and Satisfaction in News Consumption	● "It would depend (if the headline) is written positively or negatively…If the headline has lengthy words, I can feel laziness (in reading) because I prefer to read brief only. Just like in a class, I am attentive if it is short. There are lengthy words, yet it contains little thought." (IDI01) ● "If it is brief and concise it is easy to be understood." (IDI03) ● "If the headline is short, you will easily understand it and you will not be confused." (FGD03) ● "It is easy to understand if it is short, if it is long, you will really linger to understand it." (FGD06) ● "(I am) affected because it is only short, and then excited because I really want to read its content." (FGD07)
The Role of Newspapers in Enhancing Knowledge and Critical Thinking	● "I can really say what happened to this news. There's something wrong. It is different from what I've heard, but I will also ask from others." (IDI07) ● "You will be enlightened, that was really it. Likewise, with the headline of course on your readings, you could really identify what is right from wrong. You can extract out from it. The headline is correct yet if it is wrong you will feel bad about it" (IDI02) ● You will know that the news in the TV and in the newspaper is as one. (FGD06) ● "I am not affected. Why? Just like us we don't have television, I will really believe what is stated in the news (newspaper) because that's what I've read." (FGD05) ● "If I heard gossips it should be that I have read in the newspaper that the truth is. That is really the truth." (FGD07) ● "Of course if I have already read that, I will share the truth but I will only add the information that I know because others might say that, is this it? That is not right, something is lacking." (IDI01) ● "You will learn a lot when you read, you will learn a lot. What are those crafty manner of speaking? You will not be fooled by anyone because you are always reading." (IDI02) ● "I can answer if ever I will be asked." (IDI03) ● "Opinion? Of course newspaper is informative but not always telling the truth. But the more you read the newspaper the wiser you will be." (IDI05) ● It helps us. It adds more knowledge." (IDI07) ● "(It gives) more knowledge so that if someone would ask (me) who does not have any idea, I can answer them." (FGD02)
Societal Impact	● "It is really important so that you will know what will happen in our community." (IDI02) ● "It is important so that I can share it to others and I will become more updated on the happenings." (IDI03) ● "Actually reading newspapers mainly plays a vital role in the social awareness. As a school head, it gives me an idea on the latest trends and issues and probably this can be a tool for me umm, or a helping tool that I can use inside the, ahh as a leader I can share it to my students and to the teacher and to the faculty as a whole." (IDI04) ● "You will know what will be happenings in our town and in our time if you always read newspapers." (FGD01) ● "Like for example there is an incoming typhoon, you will immediately know, you will be prepared if what will you do." (FGD02) ● "You can really inform them about the events that happened." (FGD03) ● "One-on-one heart talk but one at a time." (IDI03) ● "Son, you should really read newspapers because in the newspaper you will immediately understand because there is bisaya and tagalog except English. Like me that is not good in English I will really read bisaya newspapers. I will encourage him." (FGD01) ● "I will encourage them to read newspapers for them to learn. Because they are using mother tongue now, for them to understand the words with deep meaning" (FGD02) ● "I will tell them that we can learn more you will not be left behind about the happenings and upcoming events in our surroundings" (FGD03) ● "I will tell them that they should read newspaper because not all news can be found on the tv." (FGD06) "For me, I will let my child to read. Like for example, rape case. He/she will know what to do." (FGD07)

Preferences and Satisfaction in News Consumption. The study also explored readers' preferences and satisfaction with news content. Participants expressed a preference for shorter, more concise headlines that are easy to understand and capture the essence of the news story (Maria, et al., 2023; and Viana et al., 2020.) They also emphasized the importance of relevant and timely news content that is presented in a clear and engaging manner (Castells-Fos et al., 2023; Tully, 2021; and O'Brien, 2011).

The Role of Newspapers in Enhancing Knowledge and Critical Thinking. Newspapers play a crucial role in informing the public and promoting critical thinking (Sibanda, 2021; and Claes & Quintelier, 2009). By providing access to diverse perspectives and fostering informed discussions, newspapers can contribute to a more informed and engaged citizenry (Hayes & Lawless, 2015; Khalid & Ahmed, 2014b; and Carpenter, 2010).

Societal Impact. The ability to understand and interpret newspaper headlines is essential for effective civic participation and engagement (Ashley, 2017; and Vraga & Tully (2016). By addressing the challenges faced by readers, newspapers can enhance their accessibility and relevance, fostering a more informed and engaged public (Bogart 2022; Hansen & Hansen, 2011); and Nielsen, 2015)

Conclusions

This study investigated the linguistic features and challenges faced by readers of local newspaper headlines in Davao del Norte. Findings revealed that while headlines predominantly adhere to the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) grammatical structure for comprehension, their intended meaning can be complex and require nuanced interpretation. The headline "Sara Duterte gibaharan si Alvarez" serves as an example, reflecting the seriousness of the situation and the mayor's strong stance.

Furthermore, readers encounter difficulties with unfamiliar expressions, figurative language, and contextual understanding. These challenges can hinder comprehension and lead to misinterpretation. To ensure effective communication, newspapers should prioritize clear and accessible language in their headlines.

The study also highlighted the importance of concise, relevant, and engaging headlines in fostering knowledge and critical thinking among readers. Understanding and interpreting newspaper headlines is crucial for active civic participation. By addressing the challenges faced by readers, newspapers can enhance their accessibility and relevance, promoting a more informed and engaged public.

The findings of this study have significant implications for journalism practice, education, and public communication. Newspapers can benefit from these insights by adopting clearer and more concise language in their headlines, avoiding unfamiliar expressions and figurative language when possible, and providing context to aid comprehension. Additionally, journalism programs can incorporate training on headline writing and interpretation to equip future journalists with the necessary skills.

Future research could delve deeper into the specific linguistic devices used in newspaper headlines and their impact on reader comprehension. Additionally, exploring the regional variations in headline styles and their implications for readership could provide valuable insights. Furthermore, investigating the relationship between headline readability and reader engagement would contribute to a better understanding of how headlines influence audience behavior.

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