

The Semantic Analysis of *National Geographic* Headlines: The Case Study of English and Polish

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The paper discusses different kinds of newspaper headlines and *National Geographic* headlines in English and in Polish, categorizing the latter into regional and relational ones on the basis of the semantic criteria proposed by Schneider (2000). In this classification, regional headlines consist of proper or common nouns. The category of relational headlines is further subdivided into relational nouns, relational adjectives, relational prepositions, and relational verbs, depending on whether the headlines include deverbal nouns, deverbal and evaluative adjectives, prepositions, and finite or non-finite verbs (which may often be omitted). The analysis clearly shows that relational adjectives and relational nouns seem to be in the majority of *National Geographic* headlines in the American edition, while regional nouns make up more than half of the Polish headlines analyzed. The two tendencies are connected with a descriptive character of the English headlines and a referential or informative character of the Polish ones. The research conducted is relevant for linguists, headline writers, and those who are interested in journalism and mass media.

Keywords: types of headlines, nominal/verbal headlines, regional and relational headlines (relational nouns, adjectives, prepositions, and verbs)

Introduction

Headline writing is a craft which makes news articles, newspapers, and magazines either successful among the audience or not. Headline writers, however, are very often not the ones who write the articles (Marcinkevičiene, 2008, p. 176). The popularity and readability of the article often depend on the headline which is its most representative part and can, therefore, be considered as the most important part of the journalistic style (Rich, 2010, p. 259). It is possible to say that headlines are the “medium” which communicates and interacts between the author and the reader (Bitiniene, 2007, p. 62). They also have a very specific thematic function since they usually express the most important topic of the article (Dijk, 1985, p. 69). Headlines represent the main ideas of the articles in a condensed form; thus, very often a forcible and informative element is included, so that the headline could intrigue the reader (Bitiniene, 2007, p. 65) and capture his/her attention (Rich, 2010, p. 259). Hence, two types of headlines could be identified (Marcinkevičiene, 2008, p. 176): subject headlines (which define the subject of the article) and thesis headlines (which include the main thesis of an article and, therefore, allow the writer to present a subjective opinion).

There are also other types of headlines (Saxena, 2004, p. 45), e.g., commentative headlines (comments are embedded in the headline of the article), label headlines (the subject dominates and the predicate is omitted), descriptive headlines (the main information is presented with a comment), etc.. It is noteworthy that most of *National Geographic* headlines seem to be subject and label headlines; they do not include subjective comments (only descriptive comments are present) and they often consist of noun phrases which are often modified or premodified by other nouns or adjectives. The headlines analyzed in the paper do not present the writer's subjective opinions and only in exceptional cases one can identify verbs in these headlines ("Failure is an Option" or "It Began in Chaos").

Headline writers and translators should not forget the rules regarding how to make headlines eye-catching and intriguing. First of all, headlines have to be neither too long nor too short, as they are usually characterized by the maximum of information and the minimum of space, and they should also include some specific keywords. According to Saxena (2006, p. 48), headlines are characterized by the five "Ws" (who, what, where, when, and why) and "H" (how) principle. As headlines have to be space saving, they need to reveal the most essential issues. A noun and a verb are quite important, while other parts of speech seem to make the headline more attractive to the reader. Therefore, as headline writers make efforts to write attractive headlines, translators have to do the same when adapting both the information and the headline to the expectations of the target reader.

Finally, it needs to be stated that the choice of *National Geographic* headlines is motivated by the fact that this magazine, published in many language versions, is well known all around the world. The material analyzed consists of the headlines of 88 articles published in the English version of *National Geographic* (January 2013-December 2013) and 88 headlines of the articles published in the Polish version of this magazine—*National Geographic Polska* (January 2013-December 2013). The headlines of all the articles published in the two language versions (88 in each one of them) in the time period specified have been identified and analyzed.

Nominal vs Verbal Headlines—The Traditional View

Apart from the number of words, the kind of words used in headlines is also worth studying. Most studies have classified headlines in terms of nominal and verbal headlines (Maurer, 1972; Simon-Vandenberg, 1981). Their main focus was on the absence or presence of a verb. Verbal headlines are also recommended by journalistic handbooks. Garst and Bernstein (1982), for instance, argue that the main difference between a rather dull caption or a label and an interesting headline is "the presence or absence of a verb" (p. 93). Evans (1979) claims that "headlines must live" and that "most headlines without a verb are only half alive. They tell the reader nothing and produce the effect of dullness and monotony" (p. 26). Similarly, Wimer and Brix (1983) point out that "the verb more than any other factor is the key to a successful headline" (p. 13).

This rather strict structural distinction between nominal and verbal headlines, however, poses some problems since different scholars have expressed different views as to what is nominal and what should be regarded as a verbal structure. A headline consisting only of a noun is nominal; a headline with a finite verb in the main clause is verbal. Nevertheless, drawing an exact borderline between nominal and verbal structures may be problematic. A headline of the Subject-Complement or Omission-of-Copula type, for instance, has been interpreted as a verbal structure by Maurer (1972) (his example: *Plane too slow*) and Mardh (1980) (her example: *Bus export a success*). Simon-Vandenberg (1981), however, counts such headlines as nominal structures (her

examples: *Emperor a war criminal, Unionist opposition uncertain*).

Yet apart from these borderline cases, the classification poses another problem. Historical studies based on the traditional distinction have pointed out that up to the middle of the 20th century, the majority of headlines were nominal. But they did not explain why headlines had remained verbless for such a long time. Supposing that the function of a headline is to summarize a news story and considering the fact that news stories are usually full of action, should not the headline reflect action, too? Did verbless headlines fail to express this action? Can only verbs express action? (Schneider, 2000, p. 56)

It is clear that the classification into nominal and verbal structures seems to overlook the semantic aspect of a headline. Therefore, according to Schneider (2000), a different categorization of headlines, helping to overcome the problematic task of finding the exact borderline between nominal/verbal structures and explaining why not all verbless structures are “dull”, should be introduced.

Methods Section: Regional vs Relational Headlines—The New Classification

In order to explain the possible need of a new classification, Schneider (2000, p. 57) gives the following example: BARBAROUS MURDER OF A WIFE BY HER HUSBAND.

This headline was found in a popular 19th century newspaper called *Bell's Life in London* in 1830. Traditionally, it would have been interpreted as a nominal structure. It can be argued, however, that despite the absence of a verb, a number of actions are expressed in this headline: A wife was killed, her husband killed her, and he did it in a barbarous way. This example and many more of the early headlines show that there seems to have always been an urge to express actions in headlines, and that headline writers found various ways to express these actions long before they started using verbs in headlines. (Schneider, 2000, p. 57)

This example shows that action can be expressed with the help of adjectives and prepositions: The murder was *barbarous*, it was the murder *of* a wife, and it was done *by* her husband. The impression that adjectives and prepositions have verbal qualities can be supported by a number of studies. One of the most interesting theories in this context was developed by Langacker (1995) who argues that besides verbs, also prepositions and adjectives are able to express what he calls “relations”. This terminology, distinguishing between regional qualities (expressed by nouns) and relational qualities (expressed by verbs, adjectives, and prepositions), is also used by Schneider (2000, p. 58).

Using the categories regional and relational, one does not need circumlocutions such as “omission of copula or full verb” (used by Maurer, 1972). Relations can be expressed without verbs, by using prepositions and adjectives (compare *Jackie in Italy* and *Hot line soon*). According to Schneider (2000), some types of nouns have relational qualities.

Structurally, *circle* and *explosion* are both regarded as nouns. Semantically, however, there is a distinction between them: *Circle* refers to a region; *explosion*, in contrast, expresses a kind of action or relation (which is not surprising since *explosion* is a deverbal noun). (Schneider, 2000, p. 59)¹

Relational nouns² seem to be particularly frequent in headlines.

¹ See Marchand (1972) and Quirk (1990).

² Langacker (1995, p. 218), in contrast, calls nouns such as *uncle* relational nouns because they express a kind of kinship relation. In the classification proposed by Schneider (2000), however, only nouns that express an action have been counted as relational nouns.

To sum up, according to Schneider (2000), the proposed new classification of headlines concentrates on the distinction between regional qualities expressed by proper and common nouns and relational qualities expressed by relational nouns, relational adjectives, relational prepositions and verbs, depending on whether the headlines include deverbal nouns, deverbal and evaluative adjectives, prepositions, and finite or non-finite verbs (which may often be ellipted).

Regional structures consist of proper nouns (*Tom Paine*), common nouns (*The Weather*), common nouns premodified by denominal adjectives (*A Scotch Ghost*), and common nouns in connection with the preposition *of* and/or the genitive (*Countess of York's Rout*). These examples are seen as profiling a region, but do not indicate any relation in the sense of action. All the headlines consisting of proper nouns have been counted as regional structures (*New, Old Libya*); the only exception are proper nouns premodified by deverbal adjectives (*Crowded Everest*) since they have been classified as relational adjectives.³ Moreover, all common nouns premodified by deverbal or evaluative adjectives have been classified as relational adjectives (*Painted Elephants* or *New Species*).

Relational nominal structures, in contrast, consist of deverbal nouns (*Challenge, Robbery*), deverbal nouns that modify common nouns or are modified by common nouns (*Risk Takers* or *Class Reunion*); the most relational type of them being gerunds or verbal nouns in *-ing* (*Flogging* or *Chasing Longevity*). As has already been mentioned, relational adjectives include deverbal adjectives (*Destructive Fires*) or evaluative adjectives (*Narrow Escape*). Relational prepositions are all prepositions other than *of*, the most relational type probably being local prepositions such as *in*. Relational verbs include finite verb forms (*Deserted Girl Takes Poison*), infinitives (*Soldier's Mum to Fly Free*), participles (*Skaters Drowned*), and relational subject-complement structures (*Bevan More Comfortable*).

Regional and Relational Headlines in *National Geographic* (January 2013-December 2013)

In accordance with the basic distinction provided by Schneider (2000) between regional and relational headlines, each headline was tagged as either regional or relational. Relational headlines were further subdivided into headlines with relational nouns, relational adjectives, relational prepositions and verbs.⁴ Table 1 gives an overview of all types, including the numbers and examples.

As illustrated in Table 1, regional structures consist of proper nouns (*North Korea*), common nouns (*Citizen Scientists*), common nouns premodified by denominal adjectives (*Manatee Mania*), and common nouns in connection with the preposition *of* and/or the genitive (*Prince of Precious, Zimbabwe's Voice*). All these examples are seen as profiling a region, but they do not indicate any relation in the sense of action.

Relational nominal structures, in contrast, consist of deverbal nouns (sometimes in combination with proper nouns, i.e., *Antarctic Climb*), the most relational type of them being gerunds or verbal nouns (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1990) ending with *-ing* or *-er* (*Chasing Longevity, Risk Takers*). Relational adjectives include deverbal adjectives (*A Healing Bite*) or evaluative adjectives (*Restless Genes*). Relational prepositions are all

³ Depending on the criterion applied, one may argue that they may be classified as regional structures as well.

⁴ Although this classification claims to be a predominantly semantic one, it needs to work with structures in order to categorize the headlines. However, the fact that some nouns, adjectives, and prepositions have been counted as regional and others as relational structures proves that the semantic classification clearly dominates the structural one. For example, the headline "Crowded Everest" has been classified as relational adjective because the proper noun *Everest* has been premodified in the headline by a deverbal adjective *crowded*. All other proper nouns, the ones not premodified by deverbal adjectives, have been classified as regional headlines.

prepositions other than *of*, the most relational type probably being local prepositions (*Out of Eden*). Relational verbs include finite verb forms (*Risk Takers Tell All*), infinitives, participles, and relational subject-complement structures (*Excavation Impossible*). In a number of cases, more than one type occurred. In those cases, the most advanced, i.e., the most relational, element of the headline was tagged.

Table 1

*Regional and Relational Headlines in National Geographic Articles (January 2013-December 2013)*⁵

Regional headlines (27 headlines)	Relational headlines (61 headlines)			
Regional nouns (+ modifiers)	Relational nouns (24 headlines)	Relational adjectives (21 headlines)	Relational prepositions (8 headlines)	Relational verbs (8 headlines)
Space Archaeology; Crisis Mapper; Roof of the World; Sultans of Streams; America's New Oil; Midnight Gardens; Bonobo's Wild Side; Citizen Scientists; Historic Delaware; Europe's Wild Men; Manatee Mania; Wrangel Island; Zimbabwe's Voice; Turkey's Birdman; Grand Canal; First Australians; Last of the Whalers; The Life of Lions; Secrets of the Maya; Space Mountains; Prince of Prints; Prince of Precious; North Korea; A New America; Costal Norway; Ghost Cats; New, Old Libya.	Class Reunion; Rain Forest Sale; Risk Takers; Ice Water Diver; Tusk Hunters; DIY Soccer; Chasing Longevity; Fertilizer Curse; Element Hunters; Making New Materials; Whale Catch; Comeback Croc; Sugar Love; Caving In; Space Walker; Photo Power; Child Saver; Meltdown; Building the Ark; World of Explorers; Mystery of Risk; Rebirth of a Park; Antarctic Climb; Pulse of the Congo.	Crowded Everest; Restless Genes; Crazy Far; Ultimate Trek; Small, Small World; Painted Elephants; A Healing Bite; New Species; Crusading Pilot; Last Song; Missing Ancestor; Rising Seas; Big Bird; The Last Storm; First Skiers; Tumbling Intruder; Virtually Immortal; The Unlikely Warlus; Changing Faces; Grounded Art; Visual Village.	Back to Life; Rush for Red Gold; All the Way Down; Close-up on Mars; The War for Nigeria; Out of Eden; English by the Book; Living with Lions.	Drones Take Off; Risk Takers Tell All; It Began in Chaos; Paradise Revisited; Failure is an Option; Viki Jensen: Virus Catcher; ⁶ Hay Beautiful; Excavation Impossible.

Finally, in *National Geographic* (January 2013-December 2013), one can identify 88 headlines altogether; 27 of them are regional ones and 61 are relational ones. Within the relational ones one can identify 24 headlines that include relational nouns, 21 including relational adjectives, eight including relational prepositions and eight including relational verbs. These numerical values (the overwhelming majority of relational headlines—61 out of 88 of all the headlines) lead to the conclusion that the descriptive, rather than purely referential or informative function, is emphasized in the case of the American version of *National Geographic* headlines.

Regional and Relational Headlines in *National Geographic Polska* (January 2013-December 2013)

In accordance with the distinction between regional and relational headlines discussed in Section 4, each

⁵ See Appendix.

⁶ In these examples, the verb "is" has been omitted (*Viki Jensen is Virus Catcher*, *Hay is Beautiful*, *Excavation is Impossible*).

headline was tagged as either regional or relational. Relational headlines were further subdivided into headlines with relational nouns, relational adjectives, relational prepositions and verbs. Table 2 gives an overview of all types, including the numbers and examples.

Table 2

*Regional and Relational Headlines in National Geographic Polska Articles (January 2013-December 2013)*⁷

Regional headlines (55 headlines)	Relational headlines (33 headlines)			
Regional nouns (+ modifiers)	Relational nouns (7 headlines)	Relational adjectives (17 headlines)	Relational prepositions (7 headlines)	Relational verbs (2 headlines)
Wywiad, Grzyby, Portfolio, Biskupin, Mikroby, Król lew, Yasuni, Lwy i ludzie, Fotoreportaż, Nigeria, Pigmeje, Cenoty Majów, Libia, Piękno ciała, Jad, Romskie pałace, Sekwoje, Rzeka Klamath, Czas dronów, Kinsza, Puszczyk uralski, Cukier, Włosy, Kazuary, Chiny, Antarktyda, Cywilizacje, Tongariro, Piramidy, Puszcze złota, Mamuty, Twarze Ameryki, Machoń, Korea Północna, Manaty, Parki inaczej, Narkotyki, Królowe Egiptu, Chiński kanał, Medycyna, Długowieczność, Puma, Wywiad, Bielizna, Everest, Kaniony Australii, Wielorybnicy, Mars, Gorongosa, Hazard, Macierzyństwo, Aborygeni, Tunele Gazy, Dieta paelo, Afganistan.	Sekrety wzrostu, Savoir-vivre, Władcy umysłów, Przenawożenie, Wyścig natury, Pierwiastkowanie, Wiwat porażka.	Niespokojne geny, Obłędnie daleko, Dziki korytarz, Wściekła pogoda, Teatr boży, Nocne ogrody, Czarna despotia, Mamut jak nowy, Rajskie ptaki, Kosmiczne dno, Wielki potop, Wielki konkurs fotograficzny, Cyfrowa wioska, Fotograficzne zoo, Ostatnia pogon, Zabytek cyfrowy, Zielona inwazja.	Przez Amerykę, W nieznane, Ropa z łupków, Piłka z odpadków, Ból na życzenie, Chaos w układzie, Narciarze z Ałtaju.	Jedź z głową, Obejść świat.

As illustrated in Table 2, regional structures consist of proper nouns (*Afganistan*), common nouns (*Sekwoje*), and common nouns in the genitive case (*Kaniony Australii*, *Królowe Egiptu*). All these examples are seen as profiling a region, but they do not indicate any relation in the sense of action.

Relational nominal structures, in contrast, consist of deverbal nouns (*Sekrety wzrostu*, *Wyścig natury*), the most relational type of them being gerunds (Quirk et al., 1990) (*Pierwiastkowanie*, *Przenawożenie*). Relational adjectives include deverbal adjectives (*Wściekła pogoda*), evaluative, or other kinds of adjectives (*Obłędnie daleko*, *Niespokojne geny*). Relational prepositions are all kinds of prepositions, the most relational type probably being local prepositions (*Chaos w układzie*). Relational verbs include finite verb forms (*Jedź z głową*) and infinitives (*Obejść świat*).

Finally, in *National Geographic Polska* (January 2013-December 2013), one can identify 88 headlines altogether; 55 of them are regional ones and 33 are relational ones. Within the relational ones one can identify

⁷ See Appendix.

seven headlines that include relational nouns, 17 ones including relational adjectives, seven including relational prepositions and two including relational verbs. These numerical values (the majority of regional headlines—55 out of 88 of all the headlines) lead to the conclusion that the referential or informative function is emphasized in the case of Polish *National Geographic* headlines.

Regional and Relational Headlines in *National Geographic* and *National Geographic Polska*—Discussion of Results

Tables 3-4 show the results of the analysis of the headlines of all the articles published from January 2013 to December 2013 in the two language versions; 88 headlines have been identified in each language version.

Table 3

Regional and Relational Headlines in National Geographic Articles (January 2013-December 2013)

Regional headlines (27 headlines) 30%	Relational headlines (62 headlines) 70%			
Regional nouns (+ modifiers)	Relational nouns (24 headlines) 27%	Relational adjectives (21 headlines) 25%	Relational prepositions (8 headlines) 9%	Relational verbs (8 headlines) 9%

Table 4

Regional and Relational Headlines in National Geographic Polska Articles (January 2013-December 2013)

Regional headlines (55 headlines) 63%	Relational headlines (33 headlines) 37.5%			
Regional nouns (+ modifiers)	Relational nouns (7 headlines) 8%	Relational adjectives (17 headlines) 19%	Relational prepositions (7 headlines) 8%	Relational verbs (2 headlines) 2%

Table 3 shows that even though regional headlines seem to be in the minority as far as the American version of *National Geographic* is concerned (out of 88 headlines of the articles published in 2013 (from January to December) 27 (30%) are regional headlines, which is one third of all the headlines analyzed), they are definitely not infrequent. This should be attributed to the fact that this popular science journal discusses different geographical regions, tribes, wildlife or more specifically different species of animals and plants, as well as some scientific discoveries. These are the areas of life in which the use of proper nouns is very frequent.

With regard to relational headlines of the American version in turn, 24 relational nouns (27%), 21 relational adjectives (25%), eight relational prepositions (9%), and eight relational verbs (9%) have been identified in the material analyzed. This clearly shows that relational adjectives and relational nouns seem to be in the majority of *National Geographic* headlines. This tendency is connected with both a descriptive and a referential character of the headlines published in this magazine.

Table 4 in turn shows that the referential or informative function of Polish headlines should be emphasized in the case of *National Geographic Polska* since as many as 55 instances of regional headlines (63%) have been identified in the Polish material analyzed. As far as relational headlines are concerned, seven relational nouns (8%), 17 relational adjectives (19%), seven relational prepositions (8%), and two relational verbs (2%) have been identified. The analysis shows that relational adjectives are in the majority, which may be attributed to the descriptive character of Polish headlines.

To sum up, there is a noticeable difference between English and Polish headlines in this magazine. The majority of the former ones are relational, while the latter ones are mostly regional, which determines their slightly

different function in the two cultures. English headlines are usually longer and more descriptive in character, while Polish ones are shorter (consisting of a word or two) and, in the majority of cases, they have a referential and informative or clarifying function. This tendency seems to be connected with the stylistic differences between Polish and Anglo-Saxon traditions of popular-science journalism; the former one seems to be more science-oriented, while the latter one seems to be more informal in register and more popular in character (Pikor-Niedzialek, 2009).

Conclusion

Headline writers must put in a nutshell the main point of the news story they relate to and at the same time capture the reader's attention (Verdonk, 2002, p. 4). That is why the headlines are usually in a larger and bolder typeface than the articles they introduce. Due to the restricted space available in the layout of the page, *ellipsis* (which means that some words have been missed out) is a characteristic feature of the language of headlines, which results in a succinct, pungent style that has a powerful effect on the reader.

In order to study the internal structure of headlines the traditional two-fold distinction between nominal and verbal headlines has to be replaced by the semantic classification in terms of regional and relational headlines, as proposed by Schneider (2000). There is a noticeable difference between English and Polish headlines in this magazine; the majority of the former ones are relational while the latter ones are mostly regional ones. English headlines are usually longer and more descriptive in character while Polish ones are shorter (consisting of a word or two), more clarifying in nature and, in the majority of cases, they have a referential and informative function. This phenomenon may be connected with the stylistic differences between Polish and Anglo-Saxon traditions of popular-science journalism. The former one seems to be more science-oriented, while the latter one seems to be more informal in register and more popular in character (Pikor-Niedzialek, 2009).

In addition, *National Geographic* headlines seem to be subject, label, and descriptive headlines; they do not include subjective comments and often consist of noun phrases, modified or not. Finally, it will be interesting to investigate the internal structure of headlines of some other journals or analyze and compare the semantic structure of *National Geographic* headlines in other languages and cultures, as well as their relation with subheadlines.

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Appendix: Materials Used

National Geographic, January/styczeń 2013; *National Geographic*, February/luty 2013; *National Geographic*, March/marzec 2013; *National Geographic*, April/kwiecień 2013; *National Geographic*, May/maj 2013; *National Geographic*, June/czerwiec 2013; *National Geographic*, July/lipiec 2013; *National Geographic*, August/sierpień 2013; *National Geographic*, September/wrzesień 2013; *National Geographic*, October/październik 2013; *National Geographic*, November/listopad 2013; *National Geographic*, December/grudzień 2013.