

## **Exploring Linguistic Strategies in Romanian Clickbait Headlines: Communication Tactics in Online Media**

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the communication tactics embedded in clickbait headlines found in Romanian online media, by linguistically analysing a corpus of 80 headlines sourced from the *Libertatea* newspaper. It identifies key strategies such as the use of questions, numbers and dramatic language, all crafted to provoke curiosity and evoke emotional reactions from readers. By examining these linguistic techniques, the paper sheds light on the manipulative structures that drive digital engagement through clickbait in Romania. Furthermore, the findings provide a foundation for developing more advanced algorithms for clickbait detection and emphasise the critical need to understand how these strategies affect the credibility and quality of online journalism.

**Keywords:** clickbait, news headlines, linguistic analysis, sensationalism, online media, communication tactics

### **1. Introduction**

With 86% of American adults frequently or occasionally reading news on a digital device (“News Platform Fact Sheet” 2023) and 63% of internet users in the European Union accessing news online (“EU-27: People Reading News Online 2022,” n.d.), it is clear that digital news consumption has become a daily habit, driven by the widespread availability of wireless internet and mobile technology (Yadamsuren and Erdelez 2011). However, alongside the benefits of instant access and the global reach

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of digital news, this new habit also has its drawbacks, such as the prevalence of inaccurate or biased information and a tendency towards sensationalism to attract clicks and boost advertising revenue, as online journalism largely depends on digital advertising (Greive 2022). This is often achieved through the use of clickbait, i.e. headlines designed to appeal to readers' emotions and curiosity, enticing them to click on the link to read the full story.

Although Romania ranks among the lowest countries regarding digital news consumption, with only 59% of its population reading news online (“Eurostat: România, cea mai scăzută pondere a utilizatorilor de internet care citesc știri online / CECCAR Business Magazine,” n.d.), clickbait headlines are still prevalent in Romanian online journalism. Research on clickbait in Romania has primarily been carried out from a computational approach, such as using algorithms to develop models for detecting clickbait (Broscoteanu and Ionescu 2023; Păcurar and Oprișă 2023), or from a communicative and psychological perspective (Enache 2022). To the authors' knowledge, no studies in Romania have specifically explored the linguistic features of clickbait headlines, which could be invaluable in developing more effective algorithms for clickbait detection.

This study aims to address this gap and contribute to existing research by analysing a corpus of over 80 Romanian headlines to identify the linguistic techniques journalists employ in the pursuit of sensationalism.

## **2. Literature review**

### ***Clickbait features***

Starting from the definition in the dictionary as “something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest” (“Definition of Clickbait” 2024), clickbait has received various other definitions both regarding its form and its function. As for its form, it has been categorised as web content (Chen, Conroy, and Rubin 2015; Lockwood 2016; Potthast et al. 2016), as a headline of a journal article (Blom and Hansen 2015; Chakraborty et al. 2016) or as a hyperlink (Singh Sisodia 2019; Wiegmann et al. 2018).

From a functional point of view, some researchers (Chen, Conroy, and Rubin 2015; Zannettou et al. 2019) see clickbait as content that conveys sensationalism and hyperbole in order to draw readers in with enticing headlines, but frequently failing to meet the expectations set by the headline. Other researchers (Blom and Hansen 2015; Chakraborty et al. 2016) focus on the curiosity gap produced by such headlines, which serves as an attraction point for readers. The deceptive and misleading nature of clickbaits with the purpose of driving traffic through false content is discussed by Zannettou et al. (Zannettou et al. 2019) and Rony et al. (Rony, Hassan, and Yousuf 2017). Therefore, it is a general agreement among researchers that, while effective at driving traffic, clickbait is often criticised for being deceptive, manipulative and contributing to the spread of misinformation and low-quality content.

As a matter of fact, it seems that clickbait is not a completely new concept as its roots can be traced back to the sensational headlines used in “yellow journalism” (Mormol 2019). The term “yellow journalism” was coined in 1897 by the New York Press to denote newspaper publishers William Randolph Hearst’s and Joseph Pulitzer’s sensationalist and populist news style (Spencer 2007).

The way clickbait headlines are created and the linguistic, pragmatic and psychological strategies that are used for this purpose have been studied intensively by various scholars, who have identified several characteristics that make such content particularly effective. For instance, the use of hyperbolic language exaggerates the importance or the emotional impact of the content and heightens the reader’s curiosity. The use of numbers and listicles (e.g. “7 ways to lose weight”) are highly effective in headline writing as they provide a clear structure and promise easily digestible information (Vijgen 2014; Venneti and Alam 2017). Interrogative forms in clickbait headlines and their effect on people (i.e. to directly engage the reader and create a sense of urgency or curiosity) have been studied by Lai and Farbrot (Lai and Farbrot 2014), who posit that headlines in the form of a question receive more clicks than declarative sentences.

Chakraborty et al. (Chakraborty et al. 2016) have conducted an analysis on a corpus at the word, text, phonetic, syntactic and semantic level and have presented the linguistic characteristics of clickbait headlines compared to non-clickbait headlines. Their analysis has shown that, at the word and sentence level, words in clickbait headlines are shorter than the ones in non-clickbait headlines, but that clickbait headlines are usually longer than the non-clickbait headlines. As regards the punctuation, they have observed some informal punctuation patterns, such as *!?*, *...*, *!!!* or *\*\*\**, that are present only in clickbait headlines. The authors have also noted the frequent use of conditional, superlatives and passive structures in clickbait headlines.

Another feature that is characteristic of clickbait headlines and that has been found by Biyani et al. (Biyani, Tsioutsoulouklis, and Blackmer 2016) to be a strong indicator of clickbait is informality, i.e. the conversational tone used in such headlines in order to create a feeling of engagement and lower the reader’s guard, making him/her click on the headline.

In terms of discourse markers, clickbait headlines often use forward-reference devices, such as pronouns (“This is why...”) or partial information (“You won’t believe what happened next...”), to create anticipation and lure readers into clicking. In their study, Blom and Hansen (Blom and Hansen 2015) discuss two types of forward-references, i.e. deixis and cataphora. Other studies (Biyani, Tsioutsoulouklis, and Blackmer 2016; Cao, Le, and Zhang 2017; Wei and Wan 2017) have focused on the similarity between clickbait headlines and their content and have found out there is a low similarity for clickbait headlines as what is promised in the headline is not necessarily provided in the content of the article.

These linguistic strategies are generally employed by journalists to maximise engagement by appealing to readers’ emotions, curiosity (Chakraborty et al. 2016; Loewenstein 1994), and cognitive biases (Potthast et al. 2016). The effectiveness of

clickbait is rooted in its ability to manipulate these psychological triggers through language (Naradauskas 2024).

### ***Clickbait detection***

Recent research in clickbait detection has concentrated on identifying and mitigating the spread of misleading or sensational content online, particularly in news media and social media platforms. Several approaches have been proposed, each leveraging different linguistic, stylistic, and machine learning techniques to distinguish clickbait from non-clickbait content.

Using a dataset of clickbait and non-clickbait headlines from various sources, Chakraborty et al. (Chakraborty et al. 2016) were the first to have introduced a supervised machine learning system for detecting clickbait by analysing various linguistic and stylistic features such as sentiment, word count and punctuation. Their system achieved high accuracy, highlighting the effectiveness of using a combination of features to identify deceptive headlines and to even block them by using a Chrome extension.

Potthast et al. (Potthast et al. 2016) have conducted a comprehensive study on Twitter tweets that combined text analysis, user engagement metrics and image features to detect clickbait. They have provided the first clickbait detection model based on 215 features. In the same line of research, Zhou (Zhou 2017) has proposed a deep learning approach using a self-attentive network to detect clickbait in social media posts, particularly on Twitter. His model was named Zingel Clickbait Detector and highlighted important parts of the text, outperforming traditional methods and showing the potential of deep learning in this area.

As already mentioned in the Introduction, Romanian research in this field has mainly prioritised developing and testing machine learning models for detecting clickbait. The most important research on detecting Romanian clickbait headlines has been performed by Broscoteanu and Ionescu (Broscoteanu and Ionescu 2023), who have compiled the first Romanian clickbait corpus (RoCliCo), made up of 8,313 news samples, and who have created a new clickbait detection model encompassing both news headlines and their content.

### **3. Methodology**

Seeing that Romanian research has primarily addressed the problem of finding detection models, this study intends to provide a qualitative analysis of the aforementioned Romanian corpus, RoCliCo, from a linguistic point of view. RoCliCo is a corpus of 8,313 samples comprising news from six of the leading Romanian news websites, i.e. *Cancan*, *Digi24*, *Libertatea*, *ProTV*, *WowBiz* and *Viva*, and has both clickbait and non-clickbait headlines, which were labelled as such by annotators based on some linguistic features set by the authors. The corpus was collected by the authors during October and November 2023.

For the purposes of this analysis, only the clickbait samples were collected from the *Libertatea* newspaper website, amounting to 80 clickbait headlines.

*Libertatea (Freedom)* was chosen as it is one of the tabloid newspapers in Romania and has been known to provide all kinds of news (“*Libertatea*,” n.d.). The clickbait headlines were first grouped into specific categories related to the type of news they convey and the impact it has on readers. Then, they were analysed from a linguistic and stylistic point of view and the prevalent linguistic features were extracted and exemplified.

Therefore, this study’s research questions were the following:

1. What is the type of news that the clickbait headlines in *Libertatea* discuss?
2. What are the linguistic and stylistic features of the Romanian clickbait headlines found in *Libertatea*?

#### **4. Results**

The corpus has provided 80 clickbait headlines taken from the *Libertatea* newspaper, all of them presenting mainly political and social governance news. The headlines were initially analysed to categorise the different types of news. Subsequently, the primary linguistic and stylistic strategies employed by journalists were identified and examined to determine if a consistent pattern exists in the creation of such clickable news.

Analysing the headlines for clickbait characteristics can be done by identifying recurring categories and by evaluating the elements that contribute to appeal to readers and that have the potential to attract clicks. For the analysed headlines in *Libertatea*, several categories were identified, based on the observed patterns.

##### **4.1. Headline categories**

- ***Political conflict and tension***
  - ✓ Headlines involving high-profile political figures or events creating expectations of conflict or controversy:  
E.g.:  
„Prima reacție de la Casa Albă la vestea arestării lui Donald Trump” [“First reaction from the White House on the news of Donald Trump’s arrest”]  
„Klaus Iohannis, Maia Sandu și Olaf Scholz, întrevedere la București. Ce au discutat cei trei lideri” [“Klaus Iohannis, Maia Sandu and Olaf Scholz meet in Bucharest. What have the three leaders discussed”]
- ***Official announcements having a major impact***
  - ✓ Headlines informing about government decisions or legislative changes, emphasising the impact:  
E.g.:  
„Legile educației au fost adoptate de Guvern și merg în Parlament. Ce noutăți sunt la salarizarea profesorilor și mandatele rectorilor” [“The education laws have been adopted by the Government and are sent to the Parliament. What’s new about teachers’ salaries and rectors’ mandates”]

„SURSE: Coaliția a decis tăierea cheltuielilor bugetare cu 20 de miliarde de lei” [“SOURCES: The coalition has decided to cut budget expenditures by 20 billion lei”]

- ***Disclosures and investigations***

- ✓ Headlines suggesting the discovery of hidden information or investigations, stimulating the reader’s curiosity:

E.g.:

„Percheziții ale Parchetului European în Biroul Vamal Siret. Ce au găsit anchetatorii” [“Searches of the European Public Prosecutor's Office in the Siret Customs Office. What have the investigators found”]

„Foști șefi de la CFR Marfă, trimiși în judecată după ce au vândut la preț de fier vechi peste 2.400 de vagoane” [“Former heads from Romanian Railways – Cargo Division sent to court after selling more than 2,400 wagons at the price of scrap metal”]

- ***Shocking statistics and numbers***

- ✓ Headlines using statistics or high numbers to shock the reader and make them want to know more:

E.g.:

„Peste jumătate dintre copiii români de gimnaziu și liceu vor să plece în străinătate” [“More than half of the Romanian middle school and high school children want to emigrate”]

„46 de percheziții în București, la o rețea de falsificatori de certificate de încadrare în grad de handicap” [“46 searches in Bucharest, at a network of forgers of disability certificates”]

- ***Notable/Shocking Events***

- ✓ Headlines featuring unusual, shocking or sensational events with the purpose of grabbing attention quickly:

E.g.:

„Un bărbat a păstrat cadavrul mumificat al mamei sale în casă, pe canapea” [“A man kept his mother's mummified body at home, on the sofa”]

„Accesul auto în Pasajul Unirii, sensul spre Universitate, oprit două nopți” [“The car access in Pasajul Unirii, towards the University, closed for two nights”]

These headlines are well structured to stimulate the readers’ interest and curiosity, using various clickbait techniques. The dominant category is that involving political tension and conflict, followed by revelations and shocking statistics. A significant portion of the headlines appeal to the need to uncover unknown details or understand the implications of important events.

Extending the analysis from a linguistic point of view involves examining the use of language, grammatical structures, rhetoric and stylistic techniques used in clickbait headlines. In what follows, the way in which language is used to capture attention, arouse curiosity and generate emotional reactions will be analysed.

#### 4.2. Linguistic analysis

- **Grammatical level**

- ✓ **Use of Adjectives:** Superlatives are frequently used to amplify the importance of the subject. They are key elements in clickbait because they suggest the uniqueness or gravity of the information.

E.g.:

„Cine e Daria Trepova, cel mai căutat om din Rusia, după ce a livrat bomba care l-a ucis pe bloggerul pro Kremlin Vladen Tatarski” [“Who is Daria Trepova, Russia’s most wanted person, after delivering the bomb that killed pro-Kremlin blogger Vladen Tatarski”]

„Cine e în spatele AirConnect, cea mai nouă companie aeriană românească: un fost director Blue Air, un proprietar de aeroport și investitori din aviație, turism și imobiliare” [“Who is behind AirConnect, the newest Romanian airline: a former Blue Air executive, an airport owner and investors from aviation, tourism and real estate fields”]

- ✓ **Use of numbers:** The numbers are used as they stand out visually and cognitively, drawing readers’ eyes and encouraging them to click.

E.g.:

“Peste 2.000 de femei cer CEDO să stabilească dacă este o legătură între drepturile omului și schimbările climatice, o premieră pentru instanță” [“More than 2,000 women ask the ECHR to determine whether there is a link between human rights and climate change, a first for the court”]

„14 restaurante din Centrul Vechi al Capitalei au fost închise temporar de ANPC. Ce nereguli au fost găsite” [“14 restaurants in Bucharest’s Old Center have been temporarily closed by the National Authority for Consumer Protection (ANPC). What problems have they found”]

- ✓ **Use of questions:** These headlines are formulated as incomplete questions, designed to pique curiosity and leave the reader in a state of suspense. It is important to note that the question mark is generally missing.

E.g.:

„Trei britanici sunt deținuți de talibani în Afganistan. Ce se știe despre ei” [“Three Brits are being held hostage by the Taliban in Afghanistan. What is known about them”]

„Italia interzice chatbot-ul ChatGPT. Ce nereguli au găsit autoritățile” [“Italy bans ChatGPT chatbot. What problems have the authorities found”]

- ✓ **Short and direct sentences:** Headlines tend to be concise, using short, direct sentences that get the point across quickly. This style is effective for clickbait because it provides the minimum amount of information necessary to attract the reader:

E.g.:

„Se reiau lucrările de consolidare la Podul Grant din București. Cât vor dura”  
[“Consolidation works are being resumed at the Grant Bridge in Bucharest. When will they be finished”]

„Tramvaiele 41, blocate pe șine în zona Lujerului, azi-dimineață. Ce s-a întâmplat” [“Trams 41, stuck on the tracks in the Lujer area, this morning. What has happened”]

- ✓ **Use of quotes:** Quotes are used in these clickbait headlines to create intrigue, evoke emotion, or add a sense of authority and credibility making the headline more personal, thereby increasing the chances of capturing the reader’s attention and prompting a click.

E.g.:

„Salt nebunesc într-un canal din Veneția, de pe o clădire înaltă din lagună. Primar: „I-ar trebui un certificat de prostie”” [“Crazy jump into a canal in Venice, from a tall building in the lagoon. Mayor: “He should get a certificate of stupidity””]

„„Nu m-ar fi crezut nimeni”. Cum au reușit două fetițe de 10 și 11 ani să demaște un pedofil care le agresa sexual” [““No one would have believed me”. How two 10- and 11-year-old girls managed to expose a pedophile who has sexually assaulted them”]

- **Rhetorical and stylistic level**

- ✓ **Use of the singular 2nd person pronoun ("you"):** The singular 2nd person pronoun is used here to create a personal connection to the reader, making them feel involved, thus increasing the likelihood of engagement and clicks.

E.g.:

„Ce este platforma Reddit și cum să o folosești” [“What is the Reddit platform and how should you use it”]

„Ce ai fi în stare să faci pentru bani?” Cum au motivat judecătorii achitarea fostului angajat McDonald’s acuzat că racola minore pentru prostituție [“What would you do for money?” How have the judges explained the acquittal of the former McDonald's employee accused of recruiting minors for prostitution”]

- ✓ **Use of tension and drama:** Dramatic language is employed to heighten the gravity of a situation or to suggest impending conflict:

E.g.:

„Masacrarea Parcului IOR. Cum luptă o comunitate să salveze 12 hectare de spațiu verde pierdute de primărie: „N-avem destule betoane?”” [“The IOR Park massacre. How a community fights to save 12 hectares of green space lost by the city hall: “Don't we have enough concrete buildings?””]

„Putin a reînființat școala de „spionaj sexual” din perioada Războiului Rece. Cum sunt alese fetele care devin experte în seducție” [“Putin has reopened the school of “sexual espionage” active during the Cold War. How are the girls who become seduction experts chosen”]

- ✓ **Use of subtle contrasts:** Subtle contrasts (antithesis) are sometimes employed by journalists in some cases where there are implicit contrasts that emphasise the differences between expectations and reality, with the purpose of drawing attention.

E.g.:

„Plafonare la un preț mai mare. Ce înseamnă înghețarea prețurilor RCA la nivelul lunii februarie 2023. Transportatori: „O țeapă dată de ASF” [“Cash limits at a higher price. What does it mean to freeze car liability insurances (RCA) prices at the level of February 2023. Carriers: “A sham from ASF”]

„Cine este Apo Whang-Od, cea mai în vârstă persoană care a apărut pe coperta revistei Vogue” [“Who is Apo Whang-Od, the oldest person to appear on the cover of Vogue magazine”]

- ✓ **Emotional Appeals:** The emotional state is created through fear and anxiety and through curiosity and mystery.

**Fear and anxiety:** Certain headlines are created to evoke fear or anxiety, aspects that are highly effective at generating clicks.

E.g.:

„Aproape toată țara, sub avertizare de vreme rea: ploi, vânt puternic și chiar ninsori la munte. Cum va fi în București” [“Almost the whole country, under bad weather warning: rain, strong wind and even snow in the mountains. What is the weather going to be like in Bucharest”]

„Pirații au capturat o navă daneză în Golful Guineei. Ce s-a întâmplat cu membrii echipajului” [“Pirates have captured a Danish ship in the Gulf of Guinea. What has happened to the crew members”]

**Curiosity and mystery:** Headlines often use words that induce a sense of mystery or surprise, which increases the likelihood of a click. At the same time, all the headlines containing a question lead to curiosity and mystery.

E.g.:

„Cum a scăpat de înrolarea în armata sovietică unul dintre cei mai importanți scriitori basarabeni de azi” [“How did one of today's most important Bessarabian writers escape conscription in the Soviet Army”]

„Cine este Stormy Daniels, vedeta de filme porno din dosarul în care Donald Trump a fost pus sub acuzare penală” [“Who is Stormy Daniels, the porn star in the Donald Trump indictment case”]

## 5. Conclusions

In the digital era, journalism has experienced significant changes as most of the content has shifted to online platforms. In this new landscape, clickbait headlines have become an essential strategy for capturing readers' attention and generating traffic and views. In an era dominated by algorithms and intense competition for audience attention, news websites and journalists depend on the traffic generated by clicks (Lewis and Marwick 2017).

Most of the clickbait headlines that have been analysed are related to political conflicts and tensions, official announcements with major impact, revelations and investigations, shocking statistics and figures, and notable or shocking events. This indicates that Romanian online media use clickbait especially for news having the potential to attract attention and generate strong emotional reactions.

The analysis has revealed that 82% of all the clickbait headlines comprise a question, leading to curiosity and mystery for the reader (Loewenstein 1994) and making it an important feature for the Romanian political news clickbait headlines.

The use of quotes in the analysed corpus has amounted to 20% of all the clickbait headlines showing that they could be a powerful means to create intrigue, generate curiosity, or lend credibility to the content. While quotes can boost user engagement by increasing the likelihood of shares, comments, and clicks, their overuse or deceptive nature can erode trust. Research indicates that while users may initially respond to these headlines, they quickly become skeptical if the content fails to deliver on the headline's promise, reducing future engagement and damaging the credibility of the publisher (Kaushal and Vemuri 2021).

The linguistic analysis has also presented other strategies used in clickbait headlines, such as the use of superlatives (8.75%) and numbers (12.5%). Rhetorical and stylistic elements such as appeals to emotions, tension and drama, use of second person singular pronouns (“you”) and subtle contrasts have also been observed.

Clickbait is a form of communication that uses linguistic strategies to achieve specific outcomes, such as driving traffic to a website or increasing engagement by understanding the audience and using appropriate linguistic strategies to convey messages clearly and persuasively.

The study highlights the need to understand the linguistic characteristics of clickbait headlines in order to create more effective algorithms to detect them. The research adds value by showcasing the ways in which language can be manipulated to capture readers' attention, thus providing a basis for future research in this area.

## Limitations

This pioneering study comes with its own limitations. It focuses exclusively on clickbait headlines from a single newspaper (*Libertatea*) over a brief period of time

(October-November 2023) and examines only one major category of news, namely political and social governance news. Future research could explore different news categories, such as entertainment or economic news, which are also known for generating clickbait headlines, in order to identify potential differences in linguistic features across these categories. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate how various other online newspapers or news websites handle clickbait linguistically and whether the features identified in this study are applicable to other publications as well.

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