

The Power of Polysemy: Unpacking the strategic Use of Semantic Ambiguity in Contemporary News Headlines

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Abstract: Background: News headlines often use linguistic ambiguity to attract readers and to shape narratives in media discourse in today's world. **Gap:** Although there has been a vast amount of research on ambiguity, very little has been focused on the distribution of semantic ambiguity in modern online news headlines in particular. **Aim:** The objective of this study is to examine how common and distributed semantic and syntactic ambiguities are in digital news content. **Method:** The method used is a qualitative descriptive methodology based on Kreidler's (1998) semantic model, which consists of a corpus of 28 headlines taken from the online editions of BBC and CNN. **Results:** The results show that there was a significant use of lexical ambiguity, as 24 out of 28 sampled headlines had this feature. Polysemy was the most important linguistic strategy (n = 20) in that category, followed by homonymy (n = 4). Moreover, syntactic ambiguity (surface structure ambiguity) was identified in the rest of the four headlines. **Conclusion:** The results indicate that ambiguity in communication of media is not an unwanted by-product of brief writing, but rather is a strategic tool that affects how the text is read and that contributes to the construction of meaning. **Recommendation:** The authors' conclusion is that this study contributes to the theoretical knowledge of media-related linguistic patterns, and to the empirical knowledge of the fields of discourse analysis, pragmatics and media studies. **Keywords:** Semantic ambiguity, Lexical ambiguity, Polysemy, Media discourse, News headlines.

قوة تعدد المعاني: كشف النقاب عن الاستخدام الاستراتيجي للغموض الدلالي في عناوين الأخبار المعاصرة

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الملخص: الخلفية: في الخطاب الإعلامي المعاصر، كثيرًا ما تستفيد عناوين الأخبار من الغموض اللغوي لجذب انتباه القراء وتأطير السرد. فجوة البحث: على الرغم من الأبحاث المكثفة حول الغموض، لم يُولَّ اهتمام كبير نسبيًا لتوزيع الغموض الدلالي في عناوين الأخبار المعاصرة عبر الإنترنت. الهدف: تبحث هذه الدراسة في مدى انتشار الغموض الدلالي والنحوي، والتوزيع النمطي له في محتوى الأخبار الرقمية. المنهجية: باستخدام منهجية وصفية نوعية، مرتكزة على الإطار الدلالي لكريدلر (1998)، تحلل الدراسة مجموعة مكونة من 28 عنوانًا رئيسيًا، جُمعت من الإصدارات الإلكترونية لهيئة الإذاعة البريطانية (BBC) وشبكة سي إن إن (CNN). النتائج: تكشف النتائج عن اعتماد واضح على الغموض المعجمي، إذ تم تحديده في 24 عنوانًا من أصل 28 عنوانًا في العينة. وفي هذه الفئة، برز تعدد المعاني بصفته الاستراتيجية اللغوية السائدة (n = 20)، يليه التجانس (n = 4). كما لوحظ الغموض النحوي وخاصة غموض البنية السطحية في العناوين الأربعة المتبقية. الاستنتاج: في نهاية المطاف، تُشير النتائج إلى أن الغموض في التواصل الإعلامي نادرًا ما يكون نتاجًا عرضيًا للكتابة المختصرة؛ بل يعمل كأداة استراتيجية متعددة تُشكّل تفسير القارئ وتؤثر في بناء المعنى. التوصية: يُثري هذا البحث الفهم النظري للأنماط اللغوية المرتبطة بالإعلام، ويقدم رؤى تجريبية قيمة للمجالات المتقاطعة لتحليل الخطاب، والبراغماتية، والدراسات الإعلامية. الكلمات المفتاحية: الغموض الدلالي، الغموض المعجمي، تعدد المعاني، الخطاب الإعلامي، العناوين الإخبارية.

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Background

Language is central to human communication and social interaction. However, communication may become problematic when linguistic expressions allow multiple interpretations, leading to misunderstanding and divergent readings of the intended message (Al-Jarf, 2021; and Hadidi et al., 2022). Such ambiguity is particularly significant in media discourse, where audiences often rely on limited textual cues to interpret information (Abalkheel & Sourani, 2023; Al Bataineh, 2019; Ammari et al., 2024; Banikalef et al., 2023; Huwari, 2021).

News headlines play a crucial role in summarizing information, attracting readers' attention, and framing the interpretation of news events (Almahameed et al., 2022; Huwari, 2021; Karazoun & Abdelmajid, 2016; Shi, 2014). Owing to their brevity and communicative impact, headlines frequently employ linguistic strategies that allow multiple meanings and interpretations. While ambiguity in media discourse has been examined from lexical and syntactic perspectives (Saleem & Rahaman, 2019; and Sherazi et al., 2025), comparatively little attention has been paid to semantic ambiguity in the headlines of major international news organizations.

BBC and CNN are among the most influential global news outlets, yet few studies have systematically compared how semantic ambiguity is employed in their headlines. Given their different editorial practices and communication styles, examining semantic ambiguity in these outlets can provide valuable insights into contemporary media discourse. Therefore, this study investigates the types and distribution of semantic ambiguity in BBC and CNN news headlines and identifies the most frequently occurring ambiguity types.

This study is mainly located in the field of linguistics but it is still relevant to society. The

study explores how semantic ambiguity operates in the most important international news headlines and adds new insights into the impact of language in public perception of information. The contribution of the study is therefore indirectly to Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) which aims to promote access to quality, reliable, widely available and acceptable information and communication in media, in particular.

Research Objectives

To identify the types of semantic ambiguity used in BBC and CNN news headlines.

To determine the dominant type of semantic ambiguity occurring in BBC and CNN News headlines.

Literature Review

Headlines in Media Discourse

Headlines are a central component of news discourse because they summarize events, attract readers' attention, and shape the interpretation of news stories (Bell, 1991; Conboy, 2013). In contemporary digital environments, headlines serve not only an informative function but also a persuasive one, influencing how readers engage with news content (Alhasan, Alkhaldi, et al., 2024; Alhasan, Huwari, et al., 2024; Huwari, 2024). Because headlines must communicate complex information in a limited space, they often rely on linguistic choices that allow multiple interpretations.

Research has demonstrated that semantic and pragmatic features significantly influence readers' understanding of media messages. Editorial decisions regarding lexical selection, framing, and contextual presentation affect how news events are interpreted (Alhamshary, 2021; Alkhawaja et al., 2023). Similarly, Abd El Latif et al. (2025) showed that lexical choices contribute substantially to the construction of meaning in newspaper

discourse. These findings highlight the importance of semantic analysis in understanding how media texts communicate information and shape public interpretation.

Semantics and Ambiguity

In general, Semantics refers to the meaning in the language which is the study of linguistics (Crystal, 2008; Saeed, 2009; Riemer, 2010). News headlines express meaning, which can sometimes be influenced by the structure and context of the language used, hence the importance of semantic analysis.

Ambiguity can be defined as a linguistic expression that has more than one meaning (Crystal, 2008; Hurford et al., 2007; Ovu, 2011). Ambiguity can be present in spoken or written communication, but is more often found in the headlines due to their concise and condensed nature. Fuzzy headlines might attract more readers, but also can leave them wondering what you are trying to tell them.

Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity is the situation of having more than one meaning for a lexical item (Lyons, 1995). When this happens, the meaning to be interpreted is inferred from the context. Lexical ambiguity is a known type of ambiguity in media discourse and is arguably one of the most prevalent in news headlines that tug on readers' interest (Ahmed et al., 2026).

Syntactical ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity arises where a sentence or phrase has more than one interpretation in terms of its syntactic structure (Ovu, 2011; Charina, 2017). Syntactic ambiguity is when the structure of the expression gives rise to ambiguity, as it is lexical ambiguity when the individual words of the expression give rise to ambiguity. Syntactic ambiguity is common in journalistic discourse, due to the tendency to using compressed grammatical structures in the headlines.

Prior Work

The pragmatic, lexical, syntactic and reader response approaches to news discourse ambiguity have been investigated before. As cited by Al-Hindawi & Ali (2018) and Abid (2023), news headlines are able to provide more meaning than what can be clearly understood from the literal meaning of the words in the news text. In a similar way, Raihana and Arif (2023) identified lexical and structural ambiguity in the newspaper headlines, and Khalifa (2018) revealed that ambiguity affects the comprehension and attention of the readers.

Lexical ambiguity has been consistently found as a common characteristic of media discourse and a successful method in order to stimulate the readers' interest in reading the media (Fitri, 2019; Taufiqoh, 2017). In spite of these contributions, however, the literature that is available has tended to focus on the local newspaper, speech acts or the perceptions of the readers rather than on semantic ambiguity per se. Furthermore, comparative studies of the semantic ambiguity in international news organisations like BBC and CNN are still limited.

Therefore, there is a notable lack of information on the distribution and prevalent kinds of semantic ambiguity in the top news media outlets worldwide. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring and comparing semantic ambiguity of news headlines in BBC and CNN.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used descriptive qualitative research design to study the incidence and categories of semantic ambiguity found in the news headlines of BBC and CNN English news. Since the study aimed to investigate how ambiguity can be expressed in linguistic means and the extent to which it can be interpreted in more than one ways in given context, a

qualitative approach was deemed appropriate. This analysis was directed towards the identification and classification of cases of semantic ambiguity according to Kreidler's (1998) semantic framework.

Document analysis was used as the main technique of the study. The news headlines printed on the official website of BBC and CNN were used as textual data and they were respectively analyzed in terms of ambiguous lexical and syntactic constructions. The study examined the role of ambiguity in news texts and the possibility of multiple interpretation of the same expression, using the method of textual analysis.

Along with qualitative interpretation, the occurrence of various types of ambiguities in the data was identified by using frequency counts. Accurate classification was achieved by consulting the dictionary and analyzing the context of ambiguous words and expressions.

The headlines published between January 2018 and June 2022 were randomly picked for study: 28 headlines were selected. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, it was not intended to produce statistical representativeness but to get a manageable corpus to be analyzed in detail linguistically. The chosen headlines offered enough information to be able to look for patterns of semantic ambiguity and analyse their distribution between the two news sources.

Data Collection

A systematic approach was used to gather data in a consistent, transparent, and accurate manner throughout the study. The process was divided in three steps: source selection, headline selection and identification of ambiguous expressions.

Source Selection

The sources of the primary data were the Official Websites of BBC and CNN. The news organizations were chosen due to their world

presence, large circulation and wide reporting of foreign and local news. This explains why they are appropriate to identify in the current media and to explore semantic ambiguity in news headlines.

Headline Selection

Twenty-eight headlines have been taken from the official websites of the BBC and CNN between January 2018 to 2022. The headlines were chosen in a random sampling to ensure diversity of topics and minimize selection bias. The headlines came from a range of news domains (politics, health, international affairs, entertainment), and thus provided a wide sample of current news discourse.

Identification of Ambiguous Expressions

These were closely scrutinized for words, phrases and sentence structures which could be read in more than one way. Lexical ambiguities such as polysemy and homonymy, and the syntactic ambiguities, were pointed out and noted for subsequent analysis.

Documentation method was used as the major data collection technique. All ambiguous elements were carefully recorded and sorted by their ambiguity type. Twenty-four of twenty-eight headlines were analyzed for the presence of semantic ambiguity and detailed analysis was carried out on these.

Data Analysis

The data collected were statistically analyzed and the types and incidence of semantic ambiguity in news headlines of BBC and CNN were identified. This analysis was based on the semantic framework proposed by Kreidler (1998) and concentrated on the two most important types of ambiguity: lexical ambiguity and syntactic ambiguity.

Lexical ambiguity is ambiguities due to the meaning of the lexical items such as Polysemy and Homonymy.

Syntactic ambiguity is ambiguity as a result of sentence structure or word order, where a phrase or sentence can be understood in more than one way. The following steps were followed in the data analysis process:

1. Identification of Ambiguous Expressions: All the headlines collected were analyzed to find words, phrases and structures that could have more than one interpretation. Special consideration was given to polysemy, homonymy and syntactic ambiguity.
2. Classification and Coding: Ambiguous items were classified by their ambiguity type, as were all other ambiguous items. Lexical ambiguity was classified as polysemy or homonymy and syntactic ambiguity was classified by its syntactic properties.
3. Dictionary and Structural Analysis: The lexically ambiguous words were considered with the help of their dictionary definitions to fix their possible meanings. For syntactic ambiguity, bracketed structural representations were used to determine alternative interpretations.
4. Frequency Analysis: For each of the types of ambiguity, the frequency of each was calculated to find the most common types of semantic ambiguity in the data.
5. Interpretation of Findings: Based on the results, the article was interpreted in order to understand how semantic ambiguity works in BBC and CNN news headlines and to answer the research questions of the study.

Evaluation of Data (Based on Khotari, 2004): The data analyzed were then checked for consistency in classification and interpretation following Kothari (2004). Ambiguous items were looked up in the dictionary and confirmed by the context, and structural analysis was used to confirm syntactic ambiguities. A second pass of

frequency counts was then made to get the reported results right.

Reliability and Validity: An inter-rater reliability procedure was run to ensure reliability of the analysis. A sub-sample of the headlines was analyzed and assigned to the ambiguity categories employed in the study by an independent researcher. The degree of agreement between the two raters was determined by Cohen's Kappa coefficient and was 0.85, which is considered a high extent of agreement and consistency in coding. It can be concluded from these findings that the types of ambiguity were reliably classified.

In order to increase the validity of the research, the dictionary definition and the context analysis were used to determine the possible meanings of the expressions which are found to be ambiguous and support their classification. Along with this, syntactic ambiguity was analyzed structurally and bracketed representations were used to detect other interpretations of the ambiguity. These procedures helped to increase the trustworthiness and validity of the results.

Findings

This part determines and discusses the different forms of lexical ambiguity in CNN and BBC news headlines. This encompasses cases of polysemy and homonymy, as well as syntactic ambiguity, all of which help make news headlines interpretable.

Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity is a phenomenon in which a word can be used in several ways and the way it is understood by the speaker depends on the context in which it is applied. This ambiguity in many cases results in several possible interpretations of a headline. Our discussion reveals that homonyms, polysemy and antonyms prevail in the headlines of CNN and BBC that we analyzed.

Homonyms: Homonyms are words whose form is similar (in phonology and in writing) but the meaning of which is different and unrelated. These terms are ambiguous depending on how they are used. The examples of homonyms in the chosen headlines are as follows:

“The bank was forced to close after the floodwaters rose.” Source: BBC, February 13, 2019: The word bank is an example of homonymy because it has two distinct and unrelated meanings: a financial institution and the side of a river. Although the context of the headline ultimately suggests the financial-institution interpretation, the lexical item itself permits more than one interpretation. This makes bank a homonymous expression whose meaning can only be determined through contextual information.

“The company aims to hire more employees to keep up with demand.” Source: CNN, August 22, 2020: The word *hire* is used as a homonymous expression because it can convey two distinct meanings: to employ a person for work or to obtain the temporary use of a service, vehicle, or equipment in exchange for payment. The intended meaning of this headline is obvious and is clearly related to the recruitment of employees. Note, however, that the lexical form *hire* also has the alternate sense of renting, which can lead to lexical ambiguity until the sense is explicit in the context in which the word is used.

“The cold front could bring heavy rain to the coast.”: Source: CNN, November 3, 2021: The word front is used as a homonymous expression, since it has more than one meaning. In meteorology, a front is the boundary between two air masses; in military terms a front is the line or space through which opposing forces fight. Here the connotation is the meteorological one, because the term cold

front is used to describe a type of weather. However, the lexical item front also has another meaning that is linked to what is actually war, which may cause lexical ambiguity if the surrounding context does not specify the meaning of front.

“They need to lead the team to victory.”

Source: BBC, April 12, 2022: The term lead is homonymous, having two different meanings. The word lead has two meanings: When it is used as a verb, it means to guide or direct others toward a goal, and if it is used as a noun, it means a heavy metallic element. The meaning that the headline is trying to convey is the verbal equivalent of taking a team to a victory. However, in the lexical form there is another meaning, and this may lead to ambiguity in the context unless the other meaning is made clear by the surrounding context. Thus, the word ‘lead’ is an example of homonymous ambiguity.

Polysemy

Polysemy: words with more than one, but related meaning. The meanings are usually connected by some shared sense, but the meaning can vary depending on the context. The selected headlines show polysemy in the following ways:

“I have learned how to survive with a bow and arrow.” The BBC headline from March 24, 2021, illustrates the polysomic behavior that it demonstrates with its statement. The term survive is polysemous since it has several similar meanings. It can be used to describe staying alive following a threatening event or adapting to difficult situations. The bow and arrow in this headline could be interpreted as a literal survival situation or as an ability to persevere in difficulty without relying on others, adapting to circumstances. Because these related meanings coexist within the same lexical item, survive represents an instance of polysemy.

“The titles are Frankfurt Motor Show: Love, Hate, and Electric Cars.”: The BBC September 13th 2019 headline features the word love is classified as a polysemous expression because it carries multiple related meanings. It may refer to deep emotional affection toward a person, or more generally to a strong feeling of liking, enthusiasm, or approval toward an object, activity, or idea. In this headline, love most likely refers to positive attitudes toward electric cars. However, the word also evokes its broader emotional sense, creating a range of related interpretations. Since these meanings are connected through the concept of positive emotional evaluation, the word represents an instance of polysemy rather than homonymy.

“Record numbers of women are running, but how many can win?”: Published by CNN on June 11, 2018, the word running is classified as a polysemous expression because it conveys multiple related meanings. In its literal sense, running refers to moving quickly on foot. In a political context, however, running refers to participating as a candidate in an election or competing for public office. These meanings are semantically related because the political sense is derived metaphorically from the notion of movement toward a goal. In this headline, the intended interpretation is political candidacy. Nevertheless, the lexical item retains its literal meaning, making it an example of polysemy in which one word carries multiple related senses.

“It is time to revisit Donald Trump’s battery theory of life force.”: CNN’s headline from February 8, 2019, the word battery is classified as a polysemous expression because it carries several related meanings associated with the concept of stored energy. In its primary sense, battery refers to a device that stores and supplies electrical power. The term may also be used metaphorically to describe a source of physical or mental energy in human beings. In

this headline, battery is used within the expression battery theory of life force, which conceptualizes human energy as a finite resource similar to the charge stored in a battery. The word battery is an example of polysemy due to its semantic similarity and its origins from the larger concept of energy storing and destroying.

“Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen’s words of inflation will not end America’s price hikes.” CNN’s headline from June 1, 2019, The word hikes is a polysemous expression, as it has several meanings that are related to one another. In the common expression, hike can mean a rise in prices, taxes, or other expenses; in the literal sense, it means a long walk or trek. The meaning in this headline is that prices will rise due to inflation. The lexical item, however, by itself also has its literal meaning: a long walk, a fact illustrating the multiple related meanings that a single word can have. Thus, "hikes" is an example of polysemy.

“Mr. Marks will help reinvigorate a pastime that had been in sharp decline.” BBC’s headline from March 25, 2021, The term reinvigorate is considered as a polysemous expression because it has more than one meaning related to it. Reinvigorate literally means to restore physical vigor, strength or health. It can also be used to mean to renew or restore an activity, institution, idea or social practice. This headline is meant to resurrect an activity that may be in decline. But the same sense of restoring life and energy still remains. Both meanings are semantically connected by the idea of renewal/revitalisation so reinvigorate is an instance of polysemy.

“But by tailoring the microorganism carefully and choosing the right feedstocks, it is possible to create a different end product—anything from honey, to egg whites, to milk.” Tailoring is a polysemous

expression since it has a number of related meanings. Tailoring in its original meaning is the process of cutting and sewing garments to a specific need. More generally, it describes making modifications, changes or customizations of a thing to meet a specific need or purpose. In this headline, the desired goal is to modify microorganisms to generate desired end products. But the word still carries its original meaning related to changing clothes. Both senses of the word tailoring have the idea of adapting something to specific requirements, so tailoring is an example of polysemy.

“Henan Province says the rollout has been fuelled by the coronavirus pandemic.” CNN’s headline from January 24, 2021, the word fuelled is classified as a polysemous expression because it possesses multiple related meanings. In its literal sense, fuelled refers to supplying fuel or energy to power a machine, vehicle, or system. In a figurative sense, it refers to stimulating, driving, or accelerating a process or development. In this headline, the intended meaning is metaphorical, indicating that the coronavirus pandemic contributed to or accelerated the rollout. However, this figurative sense originates from the literal concept of supplying energy, making fuelled an example of polysemy in which related meanings coexist within a single lexical item.

“Why our fight in Ukraine is yours, too.” CNN’s headline from March 24, 2021, the word fight is classified as a polysemous expression because it possesses multiple related meanings. In its literal sense, fight refers to physical combat or direct confrontation. In a broader figurative sense, it refers to a struggle against a political, social, ideological, or military challenge. In this headline, the intended interpretation relates to the conflict in Ukraine and the broader struggle associated with it. However, the word also evokes its

literal sense of physical combat. Because these meanings are semantically related through the concept of opposition and struggle, fight represents an example of polysemy.

“Washington University in St. Louis basketball star passes away from stomach cancer aged 22.” BBC’s headline from June 21, 2022, A polysemous expression is one that has several related meanings, such as the word star. Literally, star is a glowing object in space. In figurative terms, it means a highly accomplished, accomplished, or famous person in a specific area. In this headline, the purpose of the word is to identify a basketball player who is distinguished in sporting activities. This figurative use, however, is historically and conceptually a reflection of the literal use of a celestial star as a symbol of prominence and visibility. Hence, star is an example of polysemy, where star's meanings are connected by a common semantic link.

“George Russell is on a level playing field with Lewis Hamilton at Mercedes.” BBC’s headline from March 24, 2022, the word field is classified as a polysemous expression because it possesses multiple related meanings. In its literal sense, field refers to an area of open land. In a broader figurative sense, it refers to a sphere of activity, competition, or specialization. In this headline, the expression level playing field refers to equal competitive conditions between George Russell and Lewis Hamilton. However, the phrase retains its connection to the literal meaning of a physical playing field used in sports. Because these meanings are semantically related through the concept of a space in which activity occurs, field represents an instance of polysemy.

“Jeremy Corbyn urges more robust ties with all EU nations.” BBC’s headline from January 18, 2018, the word ties is classified as a polysemous expression because it possesses multiple related meanings. In its literal sense,

ties refer to physical objects such as ropes, cords, or fasteners used to connect or secure things. In a figurative sense, it refers to relationships, associations, or bonds between individuals, groups, or nations. In this headline, the intended meaning concerns diplomatic and political relations between the United Kingdom and European Union countries. However, this figurative meaning is semantically derived from the literal notion of connection. Therefore, ties represent an instance of polysemy because its meanings are related through the concept of linking entities together.

“A growing number of Americans are now learning to hunt.” BBC’s headline from March 21, 2020, The term growing is a polysemous one since it has several related meanings. Grow in the basic meaning is about "the process of becoming bigger, increasing, or developing (as in growth, development, or expansion)." As a general term, it means an increase in amount, size or size. In this headline, the intended meaning is that the numbers of Americans learning to hunt is growing. However, this meaning originates from the more general concept of growth and development. These meanings are semantically related by the concept of expansion or increase, and growing is an example of polysemy.

“Then coronavirus hit at the start of last year.”: In the BBC's June 19, 2021 headline, the term hit is polysemous, meaning that it has several meanings that are related to one another. The word hit, in its literal meaning, means to hit something or someone with force. More generally, it means to impact, influence or cause damage to a person or a thing. In the headline, it isn't about a strike, but rather the effect of the coronavirus. But this figurative understanding comes from the literal meaning of "strong touching. Both definitions have the general idea of exerting an impact on some target, and hit is an example of polysemy.

“This idea holds strong appeal for Steph Naylor.” CNN’s headline from March 22, 2021, The word strong has many related meanings, making it a polysemous expression. Strong, as a word, means powerful or force. In a more extended figurative way, it can mean something influential, compelling, persuasive, or highly effective. The idea of the statement in this headline is persuasive, but not as strong as what it suggests. But the figurative meaning is based on the literal concept of strength and power. The meanings are semantically connected via the concept of force/influence, so that strong is a case of polysemy.

“The Chinese phone giant that beat Apple to Africa.” CNN’s headline from October 11, 2019, The term giant is a polysemous expression with more than one related meaning. Literally, giant is a very large human sized organism, usually used in the context of myth and legend. It also denotes a company, institution, or a person with outstanding size, influence or market power, in a figurative sense. The intended meaning of this headline should not be confused with a physically large being, but instead, a highly influential Chinese smartphone company. But this figurative sense comes from the literal meaning of "extraordinary size" and "prominence. Both the meanings are related to each other by the notions of magnitude and dominance, so giant is an example of polysemy.

“The two Americas are on a collision course today.” In the November 7, 2018 headline of CNN, the expression "The word/collision course" is a polysemous expression, as it has several related meanings. It is literal in its meaning to describe the path that two objects in motion are supposed to follow if they are to be physically collided. It is used figuratively to describe people, groups, or opponents who are heading for inevitable confrontation, competition, or conflict. As it relates to this headline, the intended meaning is

two Americans who are slated to compete in a major sporting event, not a collision. But the figurative interpretation is based upon the literal idea of the head-on collision of objects. Both meanings are related by presupposing a threat to confrontation, so collision course is an example of polysemy.

“Getting your child vaccinated is a gift to others.” CNN’s headline from January 1, 2019, gift is a polysemous word with several related meanings. As a noun, gift means a present or something given voluntarily to someone. More generally, it can mean a gift, a good turn or a good thing that enhances the lives of others. The meaning of this headline is not a physical present, but the social benefit that comes from vaccination. This figurative meaning, however, is based on the literal meaning of giving something valuable to another person. The word gift is an example of polysemy, as both of the meanings share the idea of giving a benefit.

“Covid pushed me to do that sooner, and it gave me the time to go out and start hunting.” The content of the story, as it appeared in the BBC news headlines on March 25, 2021, is considered a polysemous expression since it has several related meanings. Push literally means to use physical force to push a person or object. In the figurative sense, it means to motivate, encourage or influence someone to do something. The word Covid-19 is used in this headline to imply that the pandemic prompted this speaker to go hunting earlier than usual, not that it compelled him or her to do so. The figurative meaning, however, comes from the literal meaning of "to exert force to cause movement or change. Both push and pushed have the idea of action or movement, so pushed is a case of polysemy.

“Democrats are feeling down. Now they have to decide which way is up.” The term up and down is considered polysemous expression

since it has multiple meanings, which can be literal and/or figurative, as illustrated in CNN’s headline on 08/07/2018. In fact, they are opposites in space. As a verb, down can mean "disappointment," "decline," "political failures," and up can mean "improvement," "recovery," or "political direction. The meanings of this headline are political, since the Democrats are described as being disappointed, but still thinking about what they will do going forward. The figurative usage of the words is derived from the literal one, which has to do with space, hence the words are examples of polysemy.

Syntactic Ambiguity

Syntactic ambiguity arises when a sentence is ambiguous because of the structure or arrangement of the words in the sentence. Surface structure ambiguity occurs when words and phrases can be grouped in alternate ways, leading to multiple interpretations (Kreidler, 2002). Such ambiguity is particularly common in coordinated structures containing conjunctions such as *and*. The following headlines illustrate instances of surface-structure ambiguity.

Surface Structure Ambiguity: The Grouping of Terms: *In this usage, stop and search is a compound noun that refers to a particular aspect of the police practice. The headline suggests that the police issued a stop and search order after the stabbings incident.*

“Stop and search order issued after stabbing” The ambiguity in this headline arises from the grouping of the phrase stop and search.

Interpretation 1: [[Stop and search] order]

Within this interpretation, ‘stop’ and ‘search’ are considered as distinct actions or instructions. A stop order may, therefore, be issued, and the incident may result in a separate search.

Interpretation 2: [[Stop order] and [search]]

The ambiguity is not due to the meaning of the words, but rather to the multiple structures in which the words are grouped, thus making it a case of surface structure ambiguity.

“Drinking two or more diet beverages daily is linked to a high risk of stroke and heart attacks.” The indefiniteness of the headline is because of the addition of the quantifier phrase *two or more*.

Interpretation 1: [Drinking [two or more] diet beverages daily]

This interpretation leads to the assumption that having two or more diet drinks a day is linked to higher risk of stroke and heart attacks.

Interpretation 2: [[Drinking two] or [more diet beverages daily]]

The meaning of this interpretation may cause the reader to doubt whether two beverages have been consumed or a greater amount. Although the intended meaning is the first interpretation, the sentence permits alternative structural readings and therefore constitutes an example of surface structure ambiguity.

“After panic buying caused severe ammunition shortages across the country, I then went a step further, learning to track and hunt game with a bow and arrow and process meat in the field.” The ambiguity arises from the coordination of multiple actions through the conjunction *and*.

Interpretation 1: [[track and hunt game with a bow and arrow] and [process meat in the field]]

This interpretation suggests two separate activities: tracking and hunting game with a bow and arrow, followed by processing the meat.

Interpretation 2: [track] and [[hunt game with a bow and arrow and process meat] in the field]

In this interpretation, the phrase *in the field* may modify both the hunting and meat-processing activities, creating a different structural relationship among the actions.

Because the ambiguity results from alternative groupings of coordinated elements, the headline constitutes an example of surface structure ambiguity.

“There are problems of protection and liability.” The ambiguity arises from the coordination of the nouns *protection* and *liability*.

Interpretation 1: [[problems of protection] and [liability]]

This interpretation suggests that protection and liability constitute two separate categories of problems.

Interpretation 2: [problems of [protection and liability]]

This interpretation treats protection and liability as elements of a single broader category of problems.

Because the competing meanings depend on structural grouping rather than lexical meaning, the headline represents an instance of syntactic ambiguity, specifically surface structure ambiguity.

B.2 Frequency of Lexical and Syntactic Ambiguity in News Headlines

Frequency analysis of both lexical and syntactic ambiguities within headlines from CNN and BBC demonstrates specific patterns regarding their appearance throughout different language categories. Table 1 shows the number of lexical and syntactic ambiguities of various types.

Table (1): Distribution and Frequencies of Lexical and Syntactic Ambiguity Types in the Analyzed Headlines.

No.	Types of Ambiguity	Types of Lexical and Syntactical Ambiguity	Frequencies
1	Lexical Ambiguity	Polysemy	20
		Homonymy	4
	Total of Lexical Ambiguity		24
2	Syntactic Ambiguity	Surface Structure Ambiguity	4
	Total of Syntactic Ambiguity		4
	Total Ambiguous Headlines		28

The results show that lexical ambiguity is more common by far than syntactic ambiguity for BBC and CNN news headlines. The set consists of 28 ambiguous headlines, with 24 of them being lexical ambiguities and 4 as syntactic ambiguities. This implies that journalists adopt ambiguous lexical structures more than they do structurally ambiguous sentence structures.

Polysemy was the most common lexical ambiguity type (20 headlines). The words star, gift, fight show how a single word may have several related meanings in a given context. The high frequency of polysemy suggests news writers often take advantage of semantic flexibility to draw readers to their text and to create multiple meanings in their text. Four headlines had homonymy. Bank and lead are examples of two meanings for a given word form. Multiple meanings will make news discourse more ambiguous, although context will generally assist the reader to interpret the meaning intended.

Four cases of surface structure ambiguity have also been found. The ambiguities were caused by the arrangement of words and phrases, rather than the meaning of the lexical elements themselves. Headlines with coordinated structures were more likely to be

multi-interpretive due to different structures, with and being the most common conjunctions. In summary, the findings show that most headlines in BBC and CNN are subjected to the lexical ambiguity. The polysemy of the words and the prevalence of multiple related senses suggest that journalists have a great tendency to use words with multiple related senses to make their headlines informative and concise, while syntactic ambiguity is less common, and is mainly caused by the variation of phrase structures.

Discussion

The results are presented in the preceding chapter, and this section discusses the findings in the context of previous research and answers the research questions. The results showed that there were 28 headlines with identifiable ambiguities. These included 24 lexical and 4 syntactic ambiguities. The findings suggest there is much more lexical ambiguity than syntactic ambiguity in the news headlines of BBC and CNN.

Discussion of the Findings in Light of Previous Studies

The current study has also found similarities with the previous research.

Similarities with Previous Research

The most remarkable similarity between the present study and previous studies is that lexical ambiguity is the most important similarity. The results corroborate those of Khalifa (2018) that stated that one of the most frequently found type of lexical ambiguity in the language of the media is polysemy. In the same way, the present study has identified polysemy as the most common type of ambiguity which appeared in 20 headlines. This outcome indicates that journalists often use words that have several similar meanings to draw readers' attention and invite them to draw conclusions about the meaning of the words.

The results also corroborate Kreidler's (1998) explanation for syntactic ambiguity, especially the surface structure ambiguity that occurs through different ways of grouping phrases. A few headlines were ambiguous in their structure, with and conjunctions showing different structural relationships, such as and with, and, to, creating different interpretations. Similarly, Fitri (2019) noted that the coordinated constructions often cause ambiguity in written discourse. The present study substantiates that this kind of structures is still responsible for creating ambiguity in present day news headlines.

Differences from Previous Research

One of the strengths of this study as compared to many previous studies is that it investigated lexical and syntactic ambiguity in the same data set. Previous research has tended to study only one category of ambiguity and the comparisons were between the number of ambiguities in each category. The results indicate that lexical ambiguity, especially polysemy, is the predominant type of ambiguity in today's news headlines and syntactic ambiguity is less common but still plays a role in providing alternative interpretations.

Moreover, they found four instances of surface structure ambiguity, all of which arose from different coordinations of the elements. This finding underscores the important role that structural ambiguity plays in media discourse and shows that sentence organization can have an impact on sentential meaning even without changing the lexical choice.

Discussion of the Research Questions

What are the types of ambiguity? This study adopted Kreidler's (1998) framework in which the ambiguities found were grouped into two main categories: Lexical Ambiguity and Syntactic Ambiguity.

- **Lexical ambiguity** consisted of:
 - Polysemy

- Homonymy
- **Syntactic ambiguity** consisted of:
 - Surface structure ambiguity
- The results showed that lexical ambiguity was more common than syntactic ambiguity on the news headlines of BBC and CNN.

What are the dominant types of ambiguity used in CNN and BBC news headlines? The results prove lexical ambiguity is the most prevalent type of ambiguity in BBC and CNN news headlines. The 24 occurrences of lexical ambiguity found in the data yielded the following subcategories: polysemy (20); homonymy (4). The results indicate that journalists often use words that have multiple meanings to create a concise, catchy and ambiguous headline.

Lexical Ambiguity

The most frequent kind of ambiguity found in the data set was lexical ambiguity. Common words like 'star' have several related meanings depending on the context, such as 'fuelled' and 'gift', and also 'fight'. Likewise, the word bank can be used to refer to the bank of a river, as well as to a bank of coins or banknotes. Confusion arises that leaves the reader to infer the meaning based on the context.

Syntactic Ambiguity

The occurrence of syntactic ambiguity was less frequent and was represented by surface structure ambiguity. This ambiguity was mainly due to the presence of conjunctions (and, or, but) connecting coordinated structures that could be organized in the following different ways: This ambiguity is due chiefly to the presence of conjunctions (and, or, but) that connect coordinated structures and can be organized in the following different ways: The news of Stop and search order issued after stabbing illustrates how structural relationships in a sentence can lead to several different readings. The syntactic ambiguity occurrence

was also low but still led to interpretive complexity in the analyzed headlines.

In general, the results show that the news headlines have a high ambiguity level. The most common ambiguity subtype was polysemy, indicating that journalists commonly use ambiguous words with multiple close meanings to capture readers' attention and to draw the attention to the news content. Syntactic ambiguity, although not widely used, was found to be present too, and would serve to create alternative interpretations by using structural grouping.

Conclusion

In this research, the BBC and CNN's 28 news headlines were analyzed to determine whether ambiguity is found in the news discourse. Of these, 24 were lexical ambiguity and 4 were syntactic ambiguities. The most common type of lexical ambiguity was polysemy (20 headlines) and homonymy (4 headlines). Four examples of surface structure ambiguity were also identified, all of which were due to multiple structural groupings in headlines.

The results show that the most predominant type of ambiguity in BBC and CNN news headlines is lexical ambiguity and polysemy is the most frequent sub-type of lexical ambiguity. Journalists often use words that have several meanings that will prompt readers to infer and interpret the news content and make the headlines interesting and concise. Syntactic ambiguities on the other hand were less common and mostly related to coordinated constructions with conjunctions like and.

In summary, the study shows that ambiguity is a characteristic linguistic element of the news headlines in the modern period. Lexical and syntactic ambiguity are involved in the complexity of meaning in media discourse and help to influence the readers' perception in reading news events. The result of the research

indicates that ambiguity is not just a coincidence but a communicative strategy that draws attention, stimulates curiosity and invites audience's engagement.

Recommendations

This study has yielded a number of suggestions for further investigation of the phenomenon of news-headline ambiguity. The following recommendations are suggested:

28 headlines were analyzed in the present study from the BBC and CNN. Subsequent research studies might be conducted by using a larger corpus with more data sources that span a longer period of time and more news topics to gain a more comprehensive view of ambiguity in media discourse.

Further research could explore specific types of news (Political, Economics, Health, Entertainment) to examine if there are specific types of ambiguity more likely to be used in particular areas of news.

Comparative analysis of regional, national and international news organizations could yield more insights into the extent and nature of ambiguity in different contexts, expectations and editorial practices.

Future studies could examine audience interpretations of ambiguous headlines and the impact of such factors as education, media literacy, age, and career experience on interpretation.

Academic studies can be conducted on the methods used by journalists to keep their readers engaged in the content they produce while avoiding potentially misleading "ambiguities" and making headlines more transparent.

The results can help to develop a better understanding of media communication, helping to raise awareness of the impact of semantic ambiguity on the public interpretation of news discourse which in turn can contribute

to achieving SDG 16, access to information and institutional transparency.

Future research could examine the effects of photographs, graphics and other visual elements on readers' interpretations of ambiguous headlines.

Study of multilingual and multicultural media environments can offer insights into the nature and function of ambiguity in various language and cultural settings.

Implications

The results of this study indicate the important amount of ambiguity in news headlines in the current media landscape, especially in the case of major international media outlets like BBC and CNN. Lexical ambiguity is evident in the data, particularly polysemy, which shows how journalists often use words with more than one meaning to create catchy headlines that are tight and captivating to readers. These linguistic decisions can serve to enhance the interpretation of the text, but can also cause confusion for readers.

The study recommends that news organizations continue to be mindful of the impact of ambiguity on the audience's interpretation of the news. Ambiguity can help create reader interest, but too much ambiguity can result in misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Thus, editors and journalists could benefit from a balance of being creative and clear in headline construction.

The findings also enrich the understanding of media discourse, which is achieved by showing that ambiguity exists both in the lexical and structural levels. Lexical ambiguity was more common than syntactic ambiguity, suggesting that word choice is a critical factor to influencing interpretation of headlines.

Lastly, the study offers a basis for further studies on ambiguity in the news media. The aim for future research is to deepen the

understanding of the relationship between language, media, and public perception, as future research will investigate how different audiences will perceive ambiguous headlines, as well as how the ambiguity differs across people and across media organizations and cultural contexts.

Disclosure statement

- **Ethical Approval:** Ethical approval was not required for this study because it relied exclusively on publicly available news headlines collected from the official websites of BBC and CNN and did not involve human participants, personal data, or animal subjects.
- **Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.
- Data and Materials Availability
- The data analyzed in this study consist of publicly available news headlines obtained from BBC and CNN. The source and publication date of each headline are provided in the manuscript to ensure transparency and facilitate verification of the analyzed data.
- **Authors' Contributions:**
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