Deceptive clickbaits in the relevance-theoretic lens

What makes them similar to punchlines

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This paper explores the nature of clickbaiting as a form of viral journalism from a relevance-theoretic perspective (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2012). The focus is on deceptive clickbaits, i.e., manipulative internet headlines whose interpretation, based on the way they are worded, leads to opening an information gap, thus luring the reader into clicking on the link provided with a view to increasing the website traffic. It is highlighted that such headlines exploit linguistic underdeterminacy, and unlike felicitous headlines, which provide an accurate representation of the article content and therefore play the role of relevance optimizers (Dor 2003), deceptive clickbaits induce recipients to generate interpretations which arouse their intense curiosity but are ultimately incompatible with the article's content. The paper shows how relevance theory can explain the interpretation bias that the reader of deceptive clickbaits falls prey to and advances the idea that there is affinity in this respect between deceptive clickbaits and jokes.

Keywords: clickbait headlines, underdeterminacy thesis, relevance theory, jokes, punchline effect.

1. Introduction

Verbal communication, as is widely acknowledged (e.g., Sperber and Wilson 1995, 2002, 2008; Carston 2002; Bach 2007; Wilson and Sperber 2012; Belleri 2014), involves a certain amount of underspecificity. This is directly related to the fact that utterances abound in contextual variables (such as, e.g., indexical expressions or demonstrative pronouns), vague and conceptually incomplete expressions, ellipsis, structural ambiguities, etc., which must be adequately worked out by the comprehender to get the intended contextual meaning. All this means that what is expressed by utterances is either "too variable or too skimpy to comprise what people mean in uttering them" (Bach 2007, 29–30). This idea has been formalized by Carston (2002) as the linguistic underdeterminacy thesis, which amounts to stating that there is always a gap between what the utterance standing meaning is and what it is used to

Received: 12 Oct 2023, Accepted: 28 Oct 2023, Published online: 05 Nov 2023
Pragmatics 34:3 (2023), pp. 502–516.
ISSN 1018-2101 | E-ISSN 2406-4238

communicate (see also Belleri 2014 and the references therein). All verbal comprehension, then, is taken to involve bridging gaps of various kinds to arrive at the contextually intended meaning. This, as will be argued below, is deliberately exploited in deceptive clickbait headlines. The major of goal of the paper is to examine how headlines of this type work and to show that relevance theory can explain the mechanism at play. It also aims to show that there exists affinity between processing deceptive clickbaits and processing jokes, which is an original contribution of this paper: while there has been research on clickbait headlines before, and comparisons between advertising slogans and headlines have been drawn, the similarity of clickbaits with the punchline effect has not been explored, as far as I know. The paper is structured as follows. First, the nature of headlines is briefly discussed, and then clickbait headlines and deceptive clickbait headlines are described, with some examples provided to expose their characteristic features. A relevance-theoretic analysis of how deceptive clickbaits function follows. Finally, the idea that there exists affinity between processing deceptive clickbaits and joke processing is discussed. The paper ends with some concluding remarks.

2. Major Functions Of Headlines

Newspaper headlines as we know them today – to be distinguished from headings (serving the purpose of grouping similar news reports) and crossheads (appearing in the body of the text to mark its different sections) – are a relatively recent invention. They were introduced in the role of telegraphic summaries of the news story (Dor 2003) when news material began to be arranged thematically in newspapers, which occurred only in the 18th century (Schneider 2000).

Newspaper headlines are markedly different from titles of books, films, paintings, etc. They have been explored from various theoretical and empirical angles, mainly by journalists and linguists (Schneider 2000). Linguistic investigations, with the first extensive monograph on headlines by Straumann (1935) published almost a century ago, have focused primarily on the questions of how and what headlines communicate (see Dor 2003). Exploring the former question has led to the identification of a number of syntactic, semantic, stylistic and typographic features, typical of headlinese. In effect, the headline is nowadays recognized as a text type in its own right (Ifantidou 2009; Jaki 2014).

Seeking answers to the question of what it is that headlines communicate has resulted in identifying their various functions. Stereotypically approached as telegraphic summaries of the text content (van Dijk 1988; for a detailed discussion, see Dor 2003), headlines are texts about texts, so they are metatexts par excellence (Iarovici and Amel 1989). Revealing what the text is about through "the semantic transtextualization of the article" (which has to do with bringing to prominence the core semantic essence of the text), they give the text

identity, which suggests that they may be taken to function as its name (Iarovici and Amel 1989, 443). Technically, this contributes to making newspaper page organization easier (Jaki 2014).

This kind of informative role that headlines are supposed play is directly related to some other functions. Headlines permit a quick assessment of whether to expect a factual news article or an opinion piece (see Graney 1990). Headlines are also assumed to help readers choose what they want (or do not want) to read (Jaki 2014, 37), and since they are brief and take little time to process, they enable readers to browse through a large number of items and quickly choose those worth their while (Ecker et al. 2014). Furthermore, they provide general context in which to process the text, which facilitates its comprehension and constrains interpretation of content, based on the activation of relevant background knowledge (Bransford and Johnson 1972; Krug et al. 1989; Geer and Kahn 1993; Wiley and Rayner 2000; Miller et al. 2006; Ifantidou 2009). As Jaki (2014, 37) emphasizes, they may additionally be a thought-provoking instrument.

The last feature listed is directly connected with another function that headlines play: they are designed to catch attention and arouse interest of potential readers (e.g., Dor 2003; Ifantidou 2009; Ecker et al. 2014). As is pointed out by some researchers (i.a., Schneider 2000; Ifantidou 2009; Jaki 2014), there are just two principal functions of headlines that appear superordinate and subsume the other minor ones mentioned above, namely, to inform and to awaken curiosity. Iarovici and Amel (1989) refer to the first one as the semantic function, as it is related to what the text is about, and they call the other one the pragmatic function, as it is related to the reader. These two are coexistent, "with the semantic function being included in and justified by the pragmatic function" (Iarovici and Amel 1989, 442).

Research findings indicate that many readers spend more time scanning headlines (and looking for photos and dropped quotes) than reading articles, because this strategy maximizes their informational gain relative to invested cognitive effort (Dor 2003). This indicates that headlines often fail to induce the desire to read the article, not accomplishing one of the chief purposes they are intended to achieve. This might be a pressing problem in the case of internet headlines, whose effectiveness is measured in terms of click-through rates (see Kuiken et al. 2017), therefore the major concern of their authors is to ensure that readers are prompted to click on the provided link.

3. Clickbait headlines: Characteristic features

Research on headlines, which started many years ago as research into newspaper headlines (see Schneider 2000), has recently expanded to cover headlines used on the internet, as this has become a growing market for news consumers. It is widely acknowledged that many more people worldwide are

reading articles available online than paper copies (Kuiken et al. 2017; Bazaco et al. 2019): in the busy life that everyone leads, it requires less time to pay brief visits to websites with news articles than to buy and read physical newspapers.

As indicated above, since opening the online article increases the click-through rates, which quantify the success of digital marketers and increase their revenue, enticing readers to access content and not just browse through headlines has become a primary concern of internet headline authors. As a result of the fierce competition for digital users' attention, the phenomenon of clickbait headlines has become ubiquitous. This means that the pragmatic function appears to have acquired prominence these days and has become of greater importance than the semantic function of headlines, with the clickbait features of headlines recognized as the key element determining news readers' choices on the internet (Kuiken et al. 2017).

There are various definitions of clickbaits (for a comprehensive survey, see Bazaco et al. 2019). For the purposes of this paper, clickbait headlines will be defined as headlines on the web designed to attract attention in order to entice readers to follow the link provided and access the online text with a view to increasing the website traffic. Their ultimate goal, which has to do with triggering viral dissemination, is purely commercial. As Chen et al. (2015, 15) crudely put it, "the current state of online news is one that heavily incentivizes the speed and spectacle over restraint and verification in the pursuit of ad dollars".

All this means that unlike good headlines, which are "not supposed to make the ordinary reader go on reading the story, but to ensure that the reader has indeed received the best 'deal' in reading the headline itself" (Dor 2003, 718), clickbaits are devised to make the reader click on the story. Ifantidou's (2009, 700) argument that "[i]f headlines lack in informative value with respect to the article introduced, their function to attract attention may be more promising as a goal to fulfil" (emphasis added) is thus corroborated. Without exploring the issue of whether it is desirable for headlines to expose the most crucial information and, in effect, absolve the reader of consulting the text, which goes beyond the scope of the present paper, it needs to be underscored that the shift of their function in the digital environment to curiosity-raisers has become their most prominent characteristic (Kuiken et al. 2017).

The most conspicuous textual qualities of clickbaits include: sensationalism (reinforced by affective expressions and buzzwords), negativity and forward referencing (Blom and Hansen 2015; Kuiken et al. 2017). In their extensive quantitative study of clickbait headlines, Kuiken et al. (2017) have found that in comparison with traditional headlines, clickbaits tend to include more signal words, sentimental expressions, citations and interrogatives. Typically marrying information with entertainment, clickbaits are classified as the so-called "infotainment" (Livingstone and Lunt 1994). The information and

type of content that headlines of this kind link to is quite diverse, as the examples below show:

(1) 5 Incredible Roofing Tips You Need to Know

(2) You Won't Believe the Secret Ingredient in Our Special Sauce

(3) 13 Marketing Statistics You Won't Believe

(4) Why You've Never Heard of This Top Travel Destination

(5) What You Don't Know About Custom Designing a Home

Therefore, as Scott (2021) rightly points out, it is not the nature of heralded content per se that is their distinctive characteristic, since spicy topics such as scandal, sex, the supernatural, etc. appear no longer enough to improve website traffic statistics. Their major distinguishing feature is that they induce readers to think that there is useful information to be learnt, thus creating what is referred to as an information gap (Loewenstein 1994). Such expressions as "you need to know", "you won't believe" or "you've never heard of" explicitly communicate that the reader is deprived of some information that the text will provide. By indicating that "incredible tips" or "the secret ingredient", etc. will be revealed, it is indicated that the knowledge to be gained is not commonly shared, that it is special and worth having and that by accessing it, the individual enters the privileged circle of those who are in the know.

There is unanimous agreement among researchers studying clickbait headlines (e.g., Blom and Hansen 2015; Potthast et al. 2016; Bazaco et al. 2019; Scott 2021) that the decoy that they use is achieved through the information gap that they create. This means that their constitutive function, as hinted at above, is that of being curiosity-triggers. In particular, the mechanism employed has to do with promising readers that they will find out something that they need to or should know by clicking through, so they feed on the intrinsic Freudian ego-based need to know.

The tendency to close knowledge gaps and seek information is deeply rooted in human nature and is hypothesized to have developed as an adaptation to deal with uncertainty, so it has a firm evolutionary basis and biological underpinnings (Shin and Kim 2019). The drive to seek information which helps to overcome knowledge deficiency is directly related to the general cognitive adaptation mechanism that aims at minimizing uncertainty and maximizing accuracy in representing the world around, crucial for survival (ibid.).

Information-seeking behaviours are thus built into human functioning, and clickbait headlines take advantage of that: the intrinsic purpose of clickbaits is to switch them on. Following Day's (1982) construal of curiosity, it can be contended that clickbaits let the audience into the "zone of curiosity", at the same time providing an easy way out of this zone by pretending to make the potentially desirable information available to them at a click. In other words, the audience is led to believe that the dissonance between what they know and

what, allegedly, they necessarily need to know can be resolved by getting acquainted with the content of the article provided. It is apparent then that curiosity resolution can be achieved at a low cost (see Sweeny et al. 2010), so a favourable cost-benefit balance is supposedly guaranteed (Loewenstein 1994; Shin and Kim 2019). But the promise that by reading the content found at the landing site readers will satiate their curiosity is not delivered: what is signalled in the headline as "surprising" proves ordinary and familiar, what is proclaimed to be "incredible" turns out to be rather obvious and unspectacular, and what is denoted as "secret" appears common knowledge or trivial. So those lured into reading the text are bound for disappointment (Chen et al. 2015; Scott 2021).

4. Deceptive clickbaits: A relevance-theoretic analysis

A decoded logical form as returned by the language parser, involves inferential adjustment and fleshing out of this semantic template, resulting in the full-fledged contextual meaning. Thus, verbal comprehension is by definition assumed to be inferential in this model (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2012). Since, as other human cognitive behaviours, comprehension is assumed to be relevance-driven (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2012), in the process of utterance understanding the major goal of the hearer is to generate communicator-intended cognitive effects, which can roughly be understood as improvements in the information state of the individual (Jaszczolt 2012, 2346). A fast and frugal comprehension heuristic is postulated to be tacitly followed by comprehenders. In accordance with this heuristic, the interpreter is assumed to "[f]ollow a path of least effort in constructing an interpretation of the utterance (and in particular in resolving ambiguities and referential indeterminacies, in going beyond linguistic meaning, in supplying contextual assumptions, computing implicatures, etc.)" and to stop as soon as their expectations of relevance are satisfied (Sperber and Wilson 2005, 360). It is argued that this kind of procedure secures an optimally relevant interpretation, "i.e. one providing the maximum of cognitive gains at a justifiable processing cost" (Piskorska 2020, 2). In this model then, rapid and relevance-constrained inferencing is taken to be responsible for generating the intended meaning. Let us see how it works in the context of understanding clickbaits and first consider Example (6) below:[1]

(6) 5-Year-Old Boy Dies During Funeral (https://fijisun.com.fj/2020/10/30/5-year-old-boy-dies-during-funeral/, last accessed October, 2020)

When reading this headline, the reader is likely to think that something

[1] The examples discussed here come from a private corpus collected by the present author and two other people, Agnieszka Piskorska and Alicja Feitzinger, who had been asked to send me links to web materials in which they detected an obvious mismatch between the headline meaning and the content of the linked text. Over a period of 4 months in 2020, 22 deceptive clickbaits were gathered. It must be added that the data were collected sporadically and randomly, as none of us is a regular news website browser. I would like to thank both friends for their help with collecting the clickbaits.

terrible happened during a funeral, because of which the boy referred to died. This interpretation surfaces, since while recovering the explicitly communicated meaning, or explicature of (6), schematically represented as (6a),[2] the reader (following the path of least effort) fine-tunes the meaning of the phrase "during funeral" into "at a certain point in the course of the funeral". This interpretation of the phrase is most accessible to the reader and yields a satisfying range of cognitive effects in context, hence it is optimally relevant, and it is automatically identified as the intended one.

(6) a. [5-YEAR-OLD BOY]$_X$ DIES DURING* FUNERAL*

As indicated above, the meaning communicated by the headline conveys that something extraordinary must have happened at the funeral in consequence of which the boy died, as generating the explicature gives rise to the recovery of additional implicit import. This is directly related to the satisfying range of cognitive effects that the interpretation process is taken to bring about. The idea that verbal comprehension has to do with obtaining satisfying cognitive effects needs to be glossed at this point. It is assumed in relevance theory that the cognitive effects that utterance interpretation yields usually include constructing hypotheses about both explicitly and implicitly communicated import: more often than not speakers convey meanings pertaining to these two layers of content, and the pragmatic module in the hearer's mind is responsible for generating explicatures as well as implicatures (Wilson and Sperber 2012). Implicatures calculated through inferencing alone, unlike explicatures that necessarily entail decoding and inferring (Sperber and Wilson 1995), are an important part of the interpretation process and have to do with fulfilling the specific expectations of relevance in a given communicative situation (for a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Sperber and Wilson 1995; Carston 2002; Wilson and Sperber 2012). These expectations in the context of the headline under inspection are likely to prompt implicatures, possibly conceptually similar to those in (6b) and (6c):

(6) b. Something terrible must have happened at the funeral.

c. There must have been an accident that killed the boy.

The implicatures like those above give rise to the questions about what exactly happened at the funeral (what was the accident at the funeral that killed the boy? how did he die?), so the information gap opens up and the reader is provoked into clicking on the link. In fact, the text reveals that the boy drowned while his parents were attending a funeral. A felicitous headline providing a true summary of the tragic event, for instance, the one in (6d) would not create the

[2] It is a convention in relevance-theoretic analyses to capitalize explicatures as formulas that show mentalese representations. The bracketed material stands for the intended referent, which at this stage of comprehension remains not fully resolved but is sufficient to secure the recovery of intended cognitive effects. The asterisks used indicate that occasion-specific senses, referred to in the relevance-theoretic framework as ad hoc concepts resulting from pragmatic modulation, are involved. For an in-depth discussion on how relevance theory approaches ad hoc concept construction, see, i.a., Carston (2002, 2010), Sperber and Wilson (2008) and Wilson and Sperber (2012).

desired curiosity gap and might not improve clickability rates: fatal accidents concerning the young ones are more likely to cause sadness and distress than arouse widespread public interest.

(6) d. Unsupervised 5-Year-Old Drowns While Parents Attend Funeral

In Example (7), the interpretation of the headline and its clickbaiting quality relies on the way the phrase "the Polish national team" is identified.

(7) The Polish national team coach dies

(original version: Nie żyje trener polskiej reprezentacji)(https://www.popularne.pl/nie-zyje-trener-reprezentacji-polski; last accessed October 2020)

The relevance-theoretic model predicts that the reader interprets the title to refer to the current Polish football team's coach, as schematically shown in (7a): as can be anticipated in a football-loving nation, this is the most accessible interpretation of the key phrase that is likely to occur to a Polish reader, since "the Polish national team" is commonly taken to stand precisely for the Polish national football team. Potentially rich in cognitive effects, this interpretation is derived by the comprehender following a path of least effort and surfaces as the intended one.

(7) a. [THE POLISH NATIONAL FOOTBALL TEAM]

J COACH DIES

Obviously the news about the death of the Polish football team's coach would be hot news, so again the kind of information gap that clickbaits are designed to fuel is created. The explicature in (7a) is likely to unleash a range of implicatures, possibly not unlike those in (7b)–(7d):

(7) b. The Polish national football team coach may have been seriously ill.

c. Many Polish football fans will be in mourning.

d. There will be a new coach appointed soon.

In fact, the text is about an ex-coach of Polish national junior volleyball team, who passed away, so there is manifest incompatibility between the interpretation generated by the audience and the content of the news article.

The headline in (8) below signals that Tom Hanks has suffered extreme distress and sorrow in his life, suggesting that some catastrophic events from his biography are likely to be disclosed.

(8) The Tragic Real-Life Story of Tom Hanks

(https://www.nickiswift.com/218080/the-tragic-real-life-story-of-tom-hanks/; last accessed January 2021)

The word "tragic" is contextually interpreted to convey this. The expression "real-life" likewise suggests that the idealized picture of Tom Hanks will probably disappear after the reader learns about the facts that the story

reports. As relevance theory predicts, the text of the headline will be optimally relevant yielding a satisfying range of cognitive effects on such an interpretation, which, in effect, will create an information gap and arouse curiosity in the audience, eventually making many of them click on the link.

However, the story is mainly about how Hanks faced bitter disappointments when his projects were not fully successful. It also underscores that his dad "worked long hours, often leaving the children to their own devices at home". It is also reported that in 2013 Hanks was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. The text exposes Hanks' unfulfilled hopes and expectations, but all this can be hardly thought of as "tragic" in the sense that the reader expects: there are no truly horrible aspects of Hanks' life to be found in the article.

As the examples above demonstrate, the relevance-theoretic model of utterance interpretation predicts which interpretation the reader will generate and how he or she is led to enter the "curiosity zone". It explains how deceptive clickbait headlines bias the reader towards a specific meaning, which results in fostering the reader's spirit of inquiry, tempting him or her into reading the text. However, when the news story is being read, the original interpretation of the clickbait is found incongruent with the content of the article. This is due to the fact that there is blatant incompatibility between what the reader is curious about and what the text is about, so his/her appetite for specific information is not satiated. In effect, the reader will feel disinformed by the headline. It may also occur to some readers that their first interpretation of what the headline meant was misguided, as they realize that the wording is compatible with another – less accessible but feasible and consistent with the news article – interpretation. This indicates that deceptive headlines are not strictly speaking lies (cf. Dynel 2018), and the mechanism they employ is similar to that of joke punchlines.

5. Deceptive clickbaits and jokes

As Iarovici and Amel (1989) point out, the strategies of headlines resemble those of advertising. Both headlines and ads need to be attractive to the audience, create a desire in the recipient, and provoke and facilitate further action, which should be more or less immediate. As hinted at above, I would like to argue that there is affinity between deceptive headlines and jokes, which has to do with the way inferential interpretive processes are planned and exploited in the case of both of these text types.

As Yus (2016) contends, in order to spark the humorous reaction in the audience, joke-tellers deliberately lead them along a certain interpretation path. Dynel (2018, ix) calls this a special "communicative design", which in the case of canned jokes takes the form of garden-path interpretations (Dynel 2009). It means that joke tellers predict and manipulate the way listeners/readers make sense of what they hear or read: the meaning the audience is led to recover

while processing the joke's set-up is invalidated when the punchline comes, and the resulting incongruity, which becomes finally resolved as appreciation of two contrasting meanings (ibid.), underlies intellectual satisfaction and humorous reaction in joke recipients.

Let us look at an example in order to illustrate how the manipulation whose goal is to create the humorous punchline effect operates.

(9) Father to son, on coronation Day: "Jimmy, where's Mummy?" Jimmy: "She's upstairs waving her hair."

Father: "Goodness me, can't we afford a flag?" (Lew 1996, 129)

The sense assigned to "waving her hair" in (9) will be that of "styling the hair so that it curls", since this is the most salient and accessible interpretation: tacitly following the relevance comprehension heuristic, the reader is bound to understand it in this way. However, when the punchline comes, there is another sense of this expression that becomes manifest, namely – a rather absurd – meaning that has to do with using the hair as a flag and swinging it the way you wave a flag during public festivities. It is the incongruity that results from the two meanings which, as is postulated in Yus' (2013, 2016) Intersecting Circles Model of humorous communication, will trigger a humorous reaction.

The same mechanism is in operation in (10) and (11) below. In (10) the phrase "go to bed" takes on a totally different meaning when the punchline comes from the one originally assigned to it in the opening question, and in (11) the unexpected meaning of the priest's question (blatantly incongruous with the most salient one) becomes manifest when the little girl answers the question the way she does.

(10) "Why does a good girl go to bed at 8 p.m.?"

Because she must be home by 10 p.m.

(11) Little Mary is leading a cow through the village.

The priest sees her and says, "Hey, little Mary, where are you going with the cow?"

"Oh," little Mary says, "I am taking her to the bull."

"Oh," says, the priest, "can't your daddy do that?"

"No," says little Mary, "it really has to be a bull."

As these examples demonstrate, there are clear parallels between how jokes achieve the desired effect and how deceptive clickbaits do. Both jokes and deceptive clickbaits are special kinds of texts that exploit interpretation bias: recipients of both jokes and clickbaits are supposed to follow a preconceived inferential path, with the inferential steps that the audience will take, predicted and consciously manipulated by their authors. The text of the joke is cleverly crafted to create an incongruity configuration that is the cornerstone of humour (Yus 2016). Analogously, the deceptive clickbait is designed in such a way that readers are biased towards the interpretation that opens the information gap,

which by arousing their curiosity, makes them click on the linked text. While the audience of a joke is guided to the initial interpretation by the set-up of the joke, which creates conditions for the punchline effect (with a view to making the audience laugh), the deceptive clickbait manipulates the audience to recover the curiosity-arousing interpretation (with a view to alluring them to click), by making it the most salient and accessible one to the reader; this intended interpretation proves incompatible with the article the clickbait links to. The predictability of how a given joke and a deceptive clickbait will be processed has to do with resolving the underdeterminacies involved for both genres to achieve the strategic goal. Joke recipients become aware of two competing interpretations when the punchline comes, while those who have fallen prey to a deceptive clickbait discover incongruity between their interpretation of the clickbait headline and the text in the course of reading the accessed article.

There is a major difference between jokes and deceptive clickbaits though: while the former aim to amuse and bring forth satisfaction, the latter are meant to increase digital traffic (and ultimately bring economic rewards to platform owners) and the reaction of the fooled reader is usually disappointment and the feeling of being tricked. The intellectual pleasure that humorous texts culminate in contrasts with displeasure that deceptive clickbaits may create in the reader. This means that whereas jokes lead to a humorous climax, which can be explained in terms of an inferential overload effect (Jodłowiec 2015; Piskorska and Jodłowiec 2018), deceptive clickbaits bring about an anti-climax, when the hopes of satisfying the aroused curiosity are dashed, and readers find out that they rose to the bait. The punchline effect and the clickbait effect, while relying on the same interpretation mechanisms, are strikingly different. The punchline effect, as argued at greater length elsewhere (Piskorska and Jodłowiec 2018), has to do with an inferential overload effect: a wide range of weakly communicated assumptions suddenly becoming accessible in the recipient's mind, leading up to a sudden reorganization in the background assumptions available. This can be easily traced as the cognitive effect that comes about when the punchline is processed in the examples presented above. For instance, in (11) there is a host of assumptions that become manifest to the joke recipient when the punchline comes, which concern naiveté and straightforwardness of little girls, promiscuity of male villagers, inquisitiveness of priests, and so on. All this takes place at the subpersonal level (which explains why we usually find it very difficult to explain what makes the punchline funny) and there will of course be differences in what becomes manifest to different individuals exposed to the joke.

No inferential overload occurs when the reader discovers that the text that he or she has just accessed is incompatible with their interpretation of the headline, which has proved to be deceptive. The implicatures generated by the original reading of the headline simply get cancelled, and there is no rich impact

of the weakly communicated assumptions that would suddenly become manifest to the reader. The individuals tricked into clicking on the link simply realize they will not find what they have expected, which will result in disappointment. The point is that incongruity that functions as the inferential overload trigger in the case of jokes, becomes the cognitive impact killer in the case of clickbaits.

It may be expected that after a number of rather frustrating experiences with deceptive clickbaits, some readers will become cautious and their vigilance mechanisms, in particular those that Padilla Cruz (2015, 2016) refers to as hermeneutical vigilance may be activated. As Padilla Cruz (2016) suggests, hermeneutical vigilance is responsible for checking plausibility and acceptability of interpretive hypotheses and makes hearers sensitive to misinterpretation. In the context of deceptive clickbaits there is a chance that readers frequently lured into deceptive traps by internet headlines will become attentive in this respect, and may develop vigilance against baits of this kind and (at least sometimes) refrain from clicking. However, it should be taken into account that it may not be very easy to distinguish good headlines from teaser ones. The authors of the latter are more and more careful to produce titles that would not signal sensationalization, so they are trying hard to camouflage deception. Exploring the issue of whether internet readers develop strategies to guard against rising to the bait seems an interesting line of further investigation.

6. Conclusion

There have been numerous studies on the language of newspaper headlines, but clickbaits have not received much attention from linguists so far (Scott 2021), with most research on clickbaiting conducted within the Artificial Intelligence paradigm. By focusing on the pragmatic analysis of deceptive clickbaits, the present paper attempted to fill at least a part of this gap in linguistic studies.

Out of several functions originally associated with headlines, one has become particularly conspicuous and significant in the digital age, namely, to attract attention. This is precisely the function that clickbait headlines are intended to serve: their major goal is to ensure high rates of clickability, and in order to achieve this, such headlines promise much more than they actually deliver. Deceptive clickbait headlines misguide readers as there is incongruity between the interpretation of the headline that the recipient is intended to recover and the content that the clickbait links to. Strictly speaking though, the headline does not provide false information: the way it is formulated makes it open to competing interpretations and the responsibility for recovering a certain meaning, though cleverly “engineered” by the website editor, rests with the reader.

My aim was to show how the relevance-theoretic model of utterance interpretation can be used to explain the mechanism underlying deceptive

clickbaits: it provides useful insights into the nature of the bait and elucidates how the reader is enticed to click. In particular, predicting how the interpretation of the clickbait will proceed, the relevance comprehension heuristic explains the way the information gap is created. As has been argued above, there are some interesting parallels between the manipulative strategy employed in deceptive clickbaits and in jokes, though the outcomes of processing the two types of texts are very different: the intellectual satisfaction associated with getting the punchline sharply contrasts with the disappointment of the clickbait victim. The different outcomes of jokes and clickbaits are likely to have significant social consequences, suggesting a path of future research on clickbait headlines.

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