

What Makes a Headline go Viral on youtube.com?

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Abstract—The article presents a descriptive linguistic investigation of communicative features and communication foci, as well as ‘theme and rheme progression’ analysis of rhetoric structures of video headlines on youtube.com video hosting, distinguished with over 15,000 and more ‘likes’ or viewings. Youtube.com videos are viewed as creolized media-messages – semiotic entities, based on verbal headline and the movie content dialectic unity. The research makes an attempt to elicit typical rhetoric tools and strategies, used in video headlines in order to promote viewings, likes, sharing and popularity. One of the most prominent functional components of a ‘headline as utterance’ rhetoric is that of ‘attention-grabber’, focusing on new, relevant, and triggering emotions message for the viewer. The article pays close attention to two-focus rhematic structure of the youtube.com video headlines. As a result, two degrees of topic expression in the videos headlines are distinguished. The article introduces classification of video headlines based on lingua-rhetoric analysis, which includes headlines-messages, headlines-assertions, headlines-citings, and finally – headlines in the form of either a reflexive question or a rhetorical question. Most popular on youtube.com headlines cover the following functional semantic micro-genres: ‘List Posts’(36 per cent), ‘How-to posts’(23 per cent), ‘Resource Posts’ (17 per cent), ‘Heart-to-heart’ posts (10 per cent), ‘Question posts’ (14 per cent).

Keywords—*headline semantic and pragmatic complex, attention focus, theme and rheme, media discourse analysis*

I. INTRODUCTION

Economic and financial instruments, such as taxes, fees, We are living in a digital media age. It can be characterized as the age of tough competition in oceans of the Internet space, now and then affected by viral waves of explosion of attention to some certain media-content against the myriads of neglected other, presented by their involuntarily unknown creators. When deciding what video content to share and pay attention to, the headline seems to say it all. The headline is what people notice first. It is the headline that makes a piece of content stand out, get shared and sometimes go viral. So, a headline makes a competitive edge tool on the net. For a video to go viral, it needs a certain functional element that makes the headline and content contagious and inspiring further sharing. The most recurrent *topoi* and conformable *communicative foci* of the ‘first focus’ detected by continuous sampling are those

of awe, anger, anxiety, infirmity, fear, joy, lust, shock, and – surprise. Such *affective topoi* contribute to making media content rather shareable because they trigger immediate emotions, appeal to deep, and primal emotional life needs of consumer. But how does it all really work? How can it be analyzed explained and programmed linguistically? What are the preferable *genres* and *formats* of successful youtube.com videos headings today? What magic rhetoric structures are used in modern competitive video headings? To answer these questions (at least partly) we have to share some theory and present results of our empirical study and lingua-rhetoric analysis.

II. LITARATURE REVIEW

Being the first sign in the field of recipient’s perception and apperception, the heading is the informational cue for decoding the message. Emotional reception and evaluation set is one of the predominant features of media headlines as it is the basis for the recipient’s perception and understanding of the video, the source of readers’ associations [1]. A headline can regulate the emotiveness of the transmitted information based on the producer’s choice of expressive means and schemes of the language. Thus, we have to admit both the emotive and suggestive function of the Internet headlines as aimed to organize rhetorical structure of the message and to provoke a particular reaction of the recipient. The nominative function of the headline is nevertheless essential, because a headline implements conceptual and attractive functions [2]. The logical focus in the youtube.com video headline forms the first informational focus, thus the second focus is given in the body of the video. This interconnection of heterogeneous media signs and phases of the content reception can be viewed as a sort of communication act, an “utterance” *sui generis* and can be bound with the extra-linguistic reality [3]. The first focus of reception, produced by the headline, is designed in order to change viewers’ previous informational state, receptive set and maybe emotional balance, adding or creating certain new evaluative and emotive information, essential for further media-text and media-message processing.

It is generally acknowledged that the heading accumulates meaningful intentions of the author [4]. But, what are these intentions? People share content because it is a reflection of

who we are. It says something about us, even if we are not consciously aware of it. Sometimes people share some helpful content because it makes one look more valuable, more thoughtful and helpful. So it can be conceived as a way of our self-actualization. People also share emotional, attention-grabbing content to ground self-esteem. Sometimes one shares opinionated content to show their group-belonging and satisfy the need to belong to community [5]. It also needs to be mentioned that people share content on youtube.com to increase their self-esteem, popularity, and standing among their peers [6]. Behavioral psychologist, Abraham Maslow, called this phenomenon as one of high order human needs and aspirations in his Hierarchy of Needs theoretical model [7].

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on the general principles of science and objectivity. The empirical linguistic materials are the youtube.com headlines of 2020 year on youtube.com video hosting with over 15,000 'likes' or viewings. By means of continuous sampling method, 300 examples of headings were extracted and analyzed. Specific research methods used in the article were the following: descriptive, comparative, structural, componential and stylistic analysis methods; quantitative, logical and semantic modeling methods.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

The empirical research allowed us to elicit the top popular micro-genres of youtube.com shared videos. These are List Posts'(36 per cent), 'How-to posts'(23 per cent), 'Resource Posts' (17 per cent), 'Heart-to-heart' posts (10 per cent), 'Question posts' (14 per cent) out of 300 highly shared and admired videos.

Structurally we can identify "simplistic" headlines (for example, "How to Use a Recent Sales Popup to Boost Your Revenue") and "headline complexes" (for example: 33 Things I've Never Told You (or, How to Re-Introduce Yourself and Kick Your Watered-Down Self in the Ass).

From the lingua-rhetoric point of view the analyzed headlines can be divided into (a) headlines-messages [16], (b) headlines-assertions, (c) headlines-citings, (d) headlines in the form of a reflexive question [17] or a rhetorical question (e).

Headlines-messages are usually presented in the form of 'List Posts' providing a helpful list of things, namely 36 per cent. Here are the headline examples for list posts:

- (1) Fairy Tail: 10 Hilarious Memes That Will Make You Cry Laughing
- (2) 50 Smart Ways to Segment Your Email List Like a Pro
- (3) America Has a Huge Stash of Emergency Oil. This Is Why.
- (4) 73 Types of Blog Posts That Are Proven to Work
- (5) 29 Life Lessons

- (6) 44: That's a long list

Headlines-assertions are in the form of 'How-to posts', namely 23 per cent. They provide with useful information, tools, teach, facilitate to achieve desired results. Here are some of them:

- (7) How to Optimize Your Site for a Successful Holiday eCommerce Season
- (8) How To Build A Successful Pre-Launch Marketing Campaign

The third group includes 'Resource Posts' which are guides and practical solutions to specific problems. They constitute 17 per cent. Here are some headline examples:

- (9) Win Big at Influencer Marketing: An Ultimate Guide for Beginners
- (10) The Ultimate eCommerce Optimization Guide: 13 Steps to Instantly Boost Revenue

Headlines-citings format corresponds to the 'Heart-to-heart' posts micro-genre, in which people share their deepest and brightest tales with you. The amount of such headings is approximately 10 per cent. Here are the headline examples for heart-to-heart posts:

- (11) An Open Letter to Writers Struggling to Find Their Courage
- (12) Why
- (13) Wears women's underpants

Our next group 'Question Posts' covers 14 per cent of the headlines. Such headlines are in the form of a reflexive question or a rhetorical question. 'Question Posts' give direct answers to urgent questions [14]. We expect in the heading that the author will inform us about the content of the following media-message. Thus, the theme is the meaningful element of the heading and the informational rheme will be the decoding information in the video content [15]. Here are some headline examples for question posts:

- (14) How Long Should Your Business Take to Earn Revenue?
- (15) If I'm So Smart Why Aren't I Successful Yet?
- (16) Ultimate Guide to Single Optin vs. Double Optin – Which One is Better?

Headlines-interpretations constitute a separate sub-group of 'Question Posts'. They usually contain a question and an answer in their structure, convey reflections, evaluation, self-appraisal. Question-answer parallelism and contrast can be intensified by inverted order of question and answer, here is the example:

- (17) No, You Don't Need to be Great at Everything – and Why You Shouldn't Even Try

Teun Adrianus van Dijk considers that Heading and Lead form the category of Summary [9], but it can be revealed in the headline by different ways. The category of Summary forms the two focuses of the informational structure. The first

focus represents the theme, it is stated in the headline. The second focus contains the rheme that can be given in the headline or only in the video, constituting its category of Summary [8].

On the basis of the thematic criterion applied, headlines are credited to have different degrees of topic expression, various realizations of the category of Summary. We can observe complete and partial thematization in the headings. In the following complete thematization the headline theme is money and the skill to manage the budget are discussed both in the headline and the body of the video:

(18) What's your money mindset?

In partial thematization headlines, the first headline focus correlates with only one of the many virtual features of the video. The first focus contains the theme and two or more informational categories, rhemes, represent the second information focus. Grabbing the attention and intriguing the viewer, the addresser purposefully conceals one informational category of the focus, the expected rheme, and brings about the totally unexpected information in the second focus, provoking the deceived expectations effect [19], and *reframing. the topos*. In the following example, the author raises the problem of earning money in the headline, and this theme becomes the first informational focus. The expected rhemes are the problem of earning money and the problem of treating money matters as the last crucial in life as there are more vital things. The video forwards the second rheme, the author makes an attempt to convince the readers to provide feedback and share their problems and feelings with close people in the video:

(19) How Do I Monetize My Blog (Or Podcast)?

We expect that the headline author will inform us about the content of the message making the theme of the video a meaningful element of the headline, so that the informational rheme will be the decoding information of the video, but with partial thematization headlines, it's not the case.

One of the most important components of a headline utterance is focusing on new information actual for the video content producer and the recipient [9]. The focus of the headline utterance should provide interest-sparkling and attention grabbing information for the recipient as the perceptive process activates only relevant sides of reality for the consumer of youtube.com videos. The headline utterance should not only name the situation, but transmit essentially relevant extra-linguistic information for the recipient [10]. That is why the nominative function of the headline cannot be regarded as the leading one.

Consequently, the first stage of the headline forming is focusing the recipient's attention, as the headline micro-text should contain structured verbalization of proposition [11]. The focus of the utterance should attract the recipient by revitalizing the relevant facets of reality, provoke emotional response and involvement by its informational saturation [20]. The content of the video should lay the basis for the information summarizing focus, the point of view or situational evaluation of the video. The recipient's attention is generally conceived manageable by the new information,

forming the focus [12]. The most prevalent are headline utterances with two communication focuses in their communicative structure: the first one tells the recipient about the new subject and the second one shares an opinion, a piece of advice, some self-characterization or self-appraisal of this subject [13].

One of the most eloquent examples ought to be the headlines with the semantic component "you don't need to be great at everything" as the first focus and the presupposed semantic component 'don't even try to be great at everything' as the second focus. Both foci have an implicit meaning element in common. The two semantic ideas meet in the shared component, conveying the meaning 'I am the person who doesn't follow the rules'. A graphically marked parallel construction intensifies the effect [14], which is emphasized by the reverted order of the question and the answer. Here is the example:

(20) No, You Don't Need to be Great at Everything – and Why You Shouldn't Even Try

The focus of the headline utterance is to change the viewer's informational state, de-automatize perception. In order to create a 'deceived recipient's expectation effect' the authors of the following headlines intentionally omit the second focus in the structure of the headline, thus intensifying the unexpected effect of the video, because new solutions favor content-consumer attention, for example:

(21) Why

(22) Don't need

(23) And what to do about it

B. Discussion

Summing everything up, one can admit a distinct classification of content producer's rhetoric techniques for providing exciting headlines for the video-content. The linguistic and stylistic analysis allowed for specifying the following formats of recurrent and successful (that is competitive!) digital video headlines: headlines-messages, headlines-assertions, headlines-citings, and headlines in the form of a reflexive question or a rhetorical question. The interrelationship of these format with such top popular micro-genres as 'List Posts', 'How-to posts', 'Resource Posts', 'Heart-to-heart' posts, and 'Question posts' may need to be further investigated and clarified.

The immediate results acquired reflect actuality of such ancient rhetorical schemes as estrangement, de-automatization, retardation, paradox, presupposition planting, play of words etc. for new (digital era) media. Exploitation of affective, and not seldom – strong or even negatively charged emotionally overwhelming components provides evidence in support of the stereotype – the aggressive nature of modern digital media and Internet-environment. The question, whether it is a modern media-communication universal or not, needs to be explored based on headings analysis in other languages than English (or Russian). This remark exposes the lingual and cultural limitations of the empirical research base. However,

the tendencies elicited correspond well to modern aggressive marketing approach, vastly influenced by English traditions.

The relationship between word and image (movie), analyzed in the article, allows one to trace the leading role of a word (at least in the logocentric culture of Western World) in guiding viewer's perception and estimation of visual media-message as a whole and visual elements of its content, as well as in managing recipient's attitudes and values. Analyzing, for example, musical components of the video, might also add more insight into creolized media-text rhetoric structures. The latter being a point of exorbitant interest for the present article, one can still admit that the classification of heading construction methods contributes not only to formal poetics of modern media-communication, but also to renovation and further development of the linguistic ideas about pre-programming interactivity of visual media-resource by words and utterances as means of experience exchange and meaning construction.

V. CONCLUSION

Internet-video headline can be viewed as a transmedia tool for managing recipients' attention and interpretation foci in media-message consumption context. The recurrent youtube.com videos headings analysis expressly has shown that the highest frequency of occurrence belongs to the headline utterances with two rhematic focuses in their communicative structure. The most recurrent topoi of the first focus are those triggering viewers' emotions of awe, anger, anxiety, fear, joy, lust, surprise, shock. The direct nominative and representative function of the headline in modern media discourse in Internet content consumption context is not the key one, as the headline connects the heading with extralinguistic reality through its predicative, referential, and deictic functions. The nature of modern mass media consumption admits that perceptive process activates only relevant sides of reality.

The leading communicative function of the headline utterance is to emphasize the new shareable experience as highly significant for the video content producer and the viewer. The first focus of the viral headline contains attention-grabbing information for the viewer.

On the basis of the thematic and rhematic progression criterion application, there have been elicited the two degrees of topic expression in the headline: the complete and partial thematization headings. In complete thematization headlines, the first focus presents the theme, and the informational rheme belongs to the second focus given in the video. In partial thematization headlines, the first headline focus correlates with only one of the many new features of the video. The first, verbal focus leads the theme, the second information focus in the video is represented by two or more informational categories, rhemes. The video content producer purposefully

conceals the expected informational rheme of the second focus, and then forwards a totally unexpected rheme, triggering the deceived expectations effect. The analyzed headlines can be classified into such formats as headlines-messages, headlines-assertions, headlines-citings, headlines in the form of a reflexive question or a rhetorical question.

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