# Critical Discourse Analysis of RT news headlines on Venezuela's post-coup crisis in 2019-2020

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**Abstract**

This article researches the biased content of the propagandistic channel RT through the prism of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It attempts to uncover the linguistic means of creating biased content in RT headlines that cover the Venezuela's post-coup crisis of 2019-2020. It offers a CDA approach to the systemic bias in the headlines of 375 news stories featured on one of the most tendentious webcasters, the Russian state news provider RT. The current CDA focuses on presuppositions and implicatures, back- and fore-grounding, agency, lexis, punctuation, and briefly on other figurative linguistic means in the headlines and traces their relative recurrence that might form a pattern.

**Keywords:** CDA, headlines, presuppositions, implicatures, agency, bias

## 1. Introduction

In the heavily polarized political reality of the post-Cold War world, of rapid digitalization and instantaneous access to the internet data, news webcasters as well as more traditional media are becoming more involved in political power struggle. As corporations and states' ideologies, influence-groups and leaders are eager to promote their desired image, it is obvious that the news providers are becoming increasingly engaged on the battlefield of virtual reality, disseminating a fair amount of partial material, or the material that is not completely neutral. Consequently, a new stage of media literacy should be actuated for the vast readerships to see through the genuine and fabricated ways of presenting news.

If we narrow our search for news providers from the viewpoint of their journalist ethics and financing, the reliable sources for the USA would be *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *NBC News* and *The New Republic* that used to have fired journalists for the breech of professional ethics (Glader 2017); for the UK – the *BBC, Sky News, ITV, Google News* (Watson 2021); for Europe ─ *Euronews, ARD, TV2 News, Le Monde, RTVE, RTL* (Matsa 2018). But few other companies can rival RT (formerly *Russia Today*, started in 2005) in terms of its suspiciously quick rise in popularity (1 bln views on Youtube in 2014) and its extensive state

funded budget (400 mln USD as of 2015-17 with a no-cuts presidential promise (Elswah and Howard 2020). However, the channel's popularity is countered with the harsh criticism from multiple sources about its newsworthiness; the series of its bans started with the Lithuania's National Council in 2020, and after Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine on February 22, 2022 it gradually disappeared from air in the EU and other countries across the globe (Anstrate 2020).

The announced reason and the main intention of the channel were to present "a more complete picture" of life in Russia (Dowling 2017), however, its issue barely features on the news, which per se contradicts the channel's proclaimed mission. In the separate section Russia and FSU (former Soviet Union) the average percentage of the claimed content may reach up to 15-20 % with a positive picture on its polities, or energy supplies, or some neutral wildlife issues, etc.; the tendency to propagate Russia's viewpoint has been a priority since its foundation in 2005 and has been growing rapidly since Russia's full scale war against Ukraine (RT newsfeed, April-Dec., 2022). However, some of RT's material is harmless, or at least neutral; some of its reporting is genuine, and the primary issue is to distinguish that from propaganda, according to Misha Glenny, the author of *McMafia* (Elswah and Howard 2020).

Scholarly investigation and substantiated opinion on the propagandistic content of RT feature in numerous research articles, such as (Carter and Carter (2021), (RT and Sputnik 2022), (Reidy 2022), (Crilley et al. 2022), (Brown 2022), looking both into the expansion of RT's broadcast and the response of the surveyed audiences about their political standpoint after following RT's stories. However, there are no analogous researches on the CDA of news headlines on RT within our reach. Another reason for undertaking this research was the media bias indicator that raises doubts about the credibility of RT's coverage (RT bias, 2022), (Lomas 2022). When the reliability index is only 24.28 out of 64 and the lower threshold for problematic quality reporting is 24, this evidence is enough proof to search for propagandistic content on the level of language including its macro-structures (RT News Bias 2023).

## 2. Approaches to the research

Given all this background information, we work on the assumption that apart from RT's bias in news on the cognitive level (news stories selection, fact distortion, etc. as claimed by the channel's critics (Dowling 2017), (Elswah and Howard 2020), (Scott 2020), (Erickson 2017), the newsmakers would certainly imbibe ideological slant in the pragmatics of the text production (favorable presuppositions, nominalizations, agency, modality, etc.). Here, at the outset of the current article, we assume that the critical discourse analysis of the news stories will reveal reporters' bias at the level of presuppositions, implicatures, agency, fore- and back-grounding, politically polarized lexis selection, figurative language in the service of ideology, etc.

In the course of our research on the headlines a tendency was discovered that they hold a much deeper appeal to the audiences than the articles themselves. The likelihood of both paper- and internet-focused readership glancing at the headlines is much higher than at the news story itself. In addition, the layout of most webpage listing totally excludes the initial paragraphs, thus leaving the readers exposed to the headlines alone. Chances are that the prominently worded and attractively designed headlines will eventually be selected for reading; thus, apart from the

graphic foregrounding, certain linguistic features make the headlines particularly memorable and effective, such as alliteration and assonance, puns and metaphors, elaborate epithets and striking zeugmas, intensive punctuation and rhetorical questions among others (Develotte and Rechniewski 2001).

In the wake of the research carried out by Roger Fowler et al. (1979), Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1988), Roger Fowler (1991), N. Fairclough (1995), Eric Alterman (2003), Teun van Dijk (2008), Teun van Leeuwen (2008), and others, we launch our analysis from the hypothesis that news is a product which is to be consumed in terms of semiotic and social values and its primary ingredient is the language. Although, in practice, it is the more obvious cognitive aspects of the news stories that attract sociolinguists rather than the language of the media itself; whenever bias could be detected from a linguist's point of view, thematic analysis would prevail, wavering between competing ways of analyzing events from the media outlets' and journalists' own perspectives and interests (Fowler 1991), (Philo and Berry 2004), (Konnikova 2020). Thus our approach will focus on the language and on tracing any reappearing discoursal features that might form a pattern. Other metalinguistic aspects, such as the webpage layout, visual stylistic choices, the arrangement of other multimedia, which carry significant information in news stories, will remain beyond the scope of this article.

## 3. Basic premises

Before analyzing the language of news stories several premises that influence news production have to be outlined: the first one is that any representational discourse – syntax, lexis, stylistic features, etc. – stems from a particular viewpoint, ideological position or tradition, even though it is called upon to form an objective representation of the world in news stories (Fowler 1991), (van Leeuwen 2008). However, what Roger Fowler (1991) and Theo van Leeuwen (2008) and other authors kept less focus on is how aggressively state media may develop their propagandistic strategies under an intense dictatorial state funding, as is the case for RT (Holitsyna 2015). The second premise is that before the news appears in the media, it undergoes the conventional processes of selection: not all events are inherently newsworthy, but become such only after their inclusion in the news reports. Since only a fraction of events are mentioned in the news, this selection itself produces a partial view of the world, influenced, among others, by mass consumption and the call for sensationalism (Fowler 1991).

The third one is the fact that news making is a business that occupies a rightful place in the world's economic affairs. Thus the expectations are that the output of the news providers will be partially correlated to the need to make money or even prosper by the distribution via profitable channels, by seeking potential advertisers, etc. The fourth premise, related to the previous one, deals with the fact that news stories, as any other literary output, are not exempt from colloquial and figurative language, which assists readability. Such stylistic features as alliteration, parallelisms, metaphors and puns, and other eye- and mind-catching devices are relied upon, especially in the 'necessary' news headlines, which are often ideologically tailored (Fairclough 1995).

The fifth premise is the fact that any news story is comprehended at the micro- and macro-levels; the former includes the news' main body text itself consisting of the story line or a single

event report, more or less detailed descriptions, witnesses' accounts, journalists' viewpoints, optionally accompanying multimedia, and nowadays — forum entries; whilst the latter is represented by the news headlines, which not only contain the gist of the reports, but also resort to generalizations, concise representation, professional assessments, etc., in order to make the story look newsworthy and memorable (van Dijk 1989), (Halas 2017).

## 4. CDA of the RT headlines

We assume there is enough evidence to center one's research on headlines, as according to Teun van Dijk (1989) they are made all the more prominent by visual enhancers, such as type and size, punctuation, page layout, etc. Moreover, when metaphors, irony, puns, and other figurative language are activated, headlines can produce the effect equivalent to that of defamiliarization that occurs in belle letters (Guillermo 2010), (Erdinast-Vulcan 2013). It is when the reader "experiences a heightened awareness of what is being said, and becomes freshly critical of it" (Fowler 1991: 31).

Headlines do not occupy a sizeable space in news feed, yet, by their succinct nature, their own stylistics and functions, they deserve to be treated as a separate sub-genre in CDA of news discourse. In terms of their pragmatics and function, headlines aim at; a) immediacy (the intention to reach out for the readership directly); b) compelling must-read (conditioned by their graphic prominence, sheer logic or long instilled habit of traditional reading); c) the claim for the utmost importance (enticing the readers to browse for alternative content); d) dependency on presuppositions (reference to geopolitical and current news competence); e) investigative nature (encouraging the reader's own discoveries albeit drawn from the inbuilt presuppositions). Headlines constitute the centerpiece of news stories, and although they are brief and prone to ellipsis, within the context of the news coverage they exert a considerable impact on the readership.

News coverage, as part of our time-linear cognition of reality, is perceived in its own continuum. It is dependent on the previous stories, and the news by itself constitutes a foundation for other stories to come. Headlines, as macro-structures of news stories, undergo a similar comprehension process: their perception is more firmly rooted in the previous background knowledge and presuppositions than in other factors (Fowler 1991), (Alterman 2003). By means of inserting such heavily contextualized referential lexis as *elsewhere, formerly, neighboring, prior, against, as, just, at least, these days*, etc., the meaning of an utterance can be grasped only by referring to the reality beyond the headline in question. And those of seemingly neutral status, such as *rhetoric, awareness, discontent, think-tank, regain, facilitate, pardon*, inadvertently draw on larger contextualization and acquire their unique pragmatically honed meaning. Finally, the reader almost unmistakably identifies with such strongly connotative lexis as *figurehead, clash, slam, pioneering, bloodthirsty, getting roasted, carefully orchestrated, cozy up to, scuffle with, conspiracy and sabotage, strategic blunder, double standards, decoy imitation, color revolution, python and tiger, crippling sanctions, tit-for-tat, hammer and sickle, Nazi*, which constitutes the most frequent usage on RT regarding the Venezuela's crisis.

## 5. Headline lengths

The most conspicuous criterion for the headlines is that of their length: the longer the utterance, the more informative it becomes. Comparative analysis of the length of headlines for different online news providers throughout the year 2020 shows that their average word-count amounts to 12.2 words for *The Independent*, 11.9 for *The Syndication Bureau*, 11.4 for *The New York Times*, 10.8 for *The Guardian*, 9.8 for *The Wall Street Journal*, 9.4 for *The Times*. RT outruns them all with a record 15.6 words per average headline. Even if this is not a direct propagandistic evidence, such stark statistics raise questions about its purpose and why the editorial staff are not leaning to the classical standards of headline brevity (Marinakos 2020), (Kevan 2014).

However, online marketing research company Backlinko looked into the reposts of more than 900 million blog posts and the result was that longer headlines (14 to 17 words) outperform short ones. Headlines and titles ending with a "?" are 23.3% more likely to get shared than the ones with traditional statements (Dean 2020). There is also another feature of RT headlines ─ they literally abound in punctuation, some of which might be either in rapport with the length of the headlines featuring more than single sentence utterances or pursuing another aim.

In fact, a typical RT headline might constitute a micro-story in itself. Here we provide two of the most typical examples of headlines from the three different media:

from *The Wall Street Journal*:
> Iron-Ore Prices Buckle as Evergrande Adds to China Concerns
> Global Economic Warfare Intensifies as Military Conflict Recedes

from *The New York Times*:
> Spain Arrests Former Venezuela Spy Chief Accused of Drug Trafficking
> Bouncy Castles and Grenades: Gangs Erode Maduro's Grip on Caracas

from *RT*
> Take that, Trump! Venezuela's oil shipments from Iran show how alliances can help defy US sanctions
> Was Maduro the 'jackpot'? Former US Green Berets reveal new details of botched Venezuela coup in interrogation tapes

If we were to rate headlines in terms of their memorability and impact, the selective criteria would be: 1) authorization, i.e. reference to the opinion of "convenient" public figures or celebrities; 2) figurative or emotionally charged language; 3) "convenient" intertextuality; 4) sensational nature; etc., as exemplified in the following:

> 'Leave the Venezuelan people alone': <u>Roger Waters</u> calls US actions 'insanity'
> Trump's <u>coronation</u> of Guaido as Venezuelan president – <u>Al Capone redux</u>
> <u>Hate in the heartland</u>: America is stumbling towards disaster one <u>virulent tweet</u> at a time
> <u>From zero to hero</u>: How Venezuelan opposition leader Lopez made Juan Guaido the man of the day

RT, as well as other news platforms, does not follow the Anglophone tradition of using capital letters, which results in another means of fore- or back-grounding information at the level of visual perception in the very lead-in to the news story. Although capitalization practices can vary across different media outlets, the issue of visual appeal actuates various formatting and emphasizing techniques to attract attention to certain words.

## 6. Presuppositions and implicatures

In order to detect and analyze presuppositions in the current headline corpus, we turn to Steven Levinson's pragmatics triggers, i.e. proper names/definite descriptions, quantifiers, temporal clauses, change-of-state verbs, as well as to his elaborated findings on presuppositions shortlisted to a few dozen (Levinson 1983: 181): definite description, fact verbs (*know, be sorry/proud*), implicative verbs (*forget, manage*), change-of-state verbs (*stop, finish, leave*), iteratives (*another time, repeat, restore*), verbs of judging (*accuse, criticize, blame*), temporal clauses introduced by *before, after, while, since*, cleft sentences (*It was Y who…*), comparisons and contrasts, non-restrictive relative clauses, counterfactual conditionals, etc. However, over time new modes of presuppositions may evolve in propagandistic discourse, e. g. gradable adjectives in the superlative, relative positions of key structural elements, positive or negative attributes placed next to certain countries, leaders or ideologies, etc.

Obviously, in order to reach understanding between the news provider and the reader, common-sense presuppositions about the nature of modern geopolitical world should be activated as part of the mediated reality. And the reality of the RT world, even as we take a dozen random stories from any given rubric of its webpage (RT Newsfeed), is that the West and its allies are doomed, whilst Russia, its fossil fuels, or Sino-Russian values are held in a high regard. Having analyzed the corpus of 375 news headlines from RT on the Venezuelan crisis throughout 2019 – 2020 in terms of their content, one might end up believing that the only salvation for conflict-ridden Venezuela could come from Russia or China, but nowhere near Europe or the USA, or from Venezuela itself. The ideological pursuit is clearly after the hegemony and dominance that will inevitably affect the choice of trade partners, educational and tourist exchange, banking services and investments, which in the long run might tip the balance in the world politics and economy.

Presuppositions on our designated RT headline corpus are predominantly of a prescribed geopolitical nature along with their more situational counterparts – implicatures. These, and to some degree other bias techniques analyzed here, defy the quantitative approach; their propagandistic nature could be disputed. However, it is worth venturing into the approach that was mainly shaped by our research corpus, namely – the relative sentence position of 'them' and 'us,' and the use of the definite article in the headlines. The working definitions of **presuppositions** (P.) and **implicatures** (I.) based on online dictionaries, S. Levinson's *Pragmatics* (1983) and L. Jeffries' *Critical Stylistics* (2010) have been selected: (P.) – a notion tacitly accepted as a valid premise in advance or taken for granted; (I.) – any kind of situational background assumption against which an action, theory or interpretation makes sense or is rational. Our definition, based on the analysis of 375 headlines, would be for P. – generally accepted and implicit assumption about reality deducted from a given discourse that allows creating a convincing epistemological background, against which the interpretation of the utterance takes place; and for I. – subtle notional and structural prompts that communicate ideas beyond the literal meaning of the utterance. These definitions foreground the idea of mediated reality, which is a valid entity for a researcher in news feed continuity and is instrumental in creating a persuasive ideological backdrop.

Pragmatically motivated identifiers of presuppositions listed in S. Levinson (1983) are frequently featured throughout the corpus. However, we argue that their pragmatic function is best defined relative to other contextual factors; in particular, the most memorable initial and final positions in the headlines, as in ***America masterminded 'color revolutions' around the world. Now the very same techniques are being used at home*** or **Trump unchained: How the 'God-Emperor' is ending American Empire with Syria gambit,** where RT writers tend to tarnish their opponents; or, on the contrary, to advance Russia's mission, ***Three heavyweights in the ring: As US-China hostility escalates, what role will be played by the world's other great power, Russia?*** (Marinakos 2020) The first headline highlights the idea that America has orchestrated the color revolutions in terms of geography and, consequently, recent history, starting with the Yellow Revolution in the Philippines in 1986 up till the one in Venezuela in 2019. Collocation "the very same techniques" narrows the reader's focus, rejects any other interpretation rather than "What goes around comes around" easily identifiable as credible folk wisdom. The predicate "mastermind" must have been used accusingly in the meaning "to orchestrate a crime operation" only because of the dominating contextual presupposition and the relative position of this verb in the sentence, i. e. America is to blame, not any other state. However, its regular meaning provided in modern English language sources is "to plan and direct an ingenious and complex scheme or enterprise." The notion of "color revolution" is also given an unfavorable status as a threat to stability, although it is much better than the war or "special military operations." The latter of the three headlines introduces the idea of the boxing ring, i.e. evoking the image of a battle or resolving political issues by physical force; and triumphantly winds up with the nominal construction glorifying he sponsor-state of RT. These ideologically dense headlines constitute the overwhelming majority in our corpus, with only a handful of neutral ones.

Presuppositions and implicatures are found in other discourses and literary genres, however, they are valid tools for certain geopolitical environments, and both depend on individual and communal (re)interpretations. Very often they carry irony or sarcasm, e.g. ***US-backed Venezuela opposition caught embezzling 'humanitarian aid' cash,*** or rhetorical questions ***Hitting the reset button? French defense minister & top diplomat visit Moscow for talks*** or ***Happy… Communism? Socialism-bashing Trump congratulates Xi on anniversary of Chinese revolution***; implicit event assessment and situational feedback ***'International lawlessness': Galloway slams Lima group gathering with US, without Venezuela*** and ***Cuba, Russia, China, Iran – Pompeo lists every nation that 'must leave' Venezuela, except one.*** Verbs of implicative harshness or criticism (*slam, ditch, screw, etc.*) abound throughout the corpus ***'Let them talk!' Rumors of Russia mulling a military base in CUBA shot down by PM Medvedev***. This headline might well function without the initial exclamation, but it would not have displayed the scorn that Russia holds for "them." The news story itself actuates the possible American response to having a Russian military foothold in the Caribbean; it contains just 268 words of text, but features five sizeable photos of benevolent smiles and military might on Russia's behalf. If Russia "shoots down" rumors, chances are it might deploy real weapon against those who is not in step with its political lineup. "Them" does not specify the target so that it could be anywhere in the rest of the world, implicating disregard and contempt. Sentence

*There are also no plans for Russian warships to escort oil tankers to the island nation amid a US crackdown* contains predication that hides *warships, escort, oil tankers* within its limits, but positions *US crackdown* (not "sanctions") as not only something indisputable but also under the dignified political standards. There is no structural agency in it as well, *plans* are denied, however, they are written out in detail, well styled and vivid. By juxtaposing *the island nation* and *US* (Venezuelan oil supplies to Cuba were on hold because of sanctions) the implicature of inequality, harassment or even bullying is actualized, similar to the Cold War propaganda. The key message of that news might be attributed to sentence *"We discussed cooperation, remembered our past, how we met for the first time,"* voiced by the Russian PM; the central "we" reiterates the idea of unity, brotherhood, remembering and revering the past.

Besides the obvious propagandistic discoursal features, the news contains this information *While the Soviets <u>never established</u> a permanent base on Cuba, a so-called training brigade was stationed on the island in wake of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The unit, consisting of Soviet military specialists, was a heavily-guarded secret until 1979, but played <u>more or less symbolic role</u>.* By consulting Norman Polmar's article *The Soviet Navy's Caribbean Outpost* (Polmar 2012) or other non-Russian historical sources, this article testifies to stark state-sponsored falsehood on RT. The second underlined phrase has a potential to outlast the previous information as it is placed last. Although we are researching headlines, this glimpse behind macro-structures can shed light on the scale of Russian propaganda even on the factual level that can be disproved in a few clicks, but would be impossible to "crack down" in olden Soviet times of closed (dis)information.

Historical and political evolution of humanity per se creates a fertile ground for **implicatures** or **models**, which derive from both the global news continuum and the local, occasional or individual experience therein, and might be characterized as widely variable across societies and cultures, and thus elusive for assessment. The mainstream tendencies of modern world of information overload tend to lean towards the sketchy or the most typical interpretations in the minds of millions of news consumers, aided by geo-political or societal meaning and interpretations of the news feeds. Over time these can evolve into **presuppositions** or **scripts**, e. i. quite ubiquitous, socially accepted opinions, parts of a larger culture of news consumption uniting millions of citizens across vast geographical expanses. Headlines, or rather their perception, call on implicatures and presuppositions, and retrieve individual and societal knowledge each time a news report is perceived (Levinson 1983), (Jeffries 2010).

As a result of this analysis, a clear trend is surfacing – when *Venezuela* is part of nominalizations or other closed non-predicative constructions, it features as a victim of western interference, sanctions, and other oppressions, i.e. one cannot directly question such presentation. In initial positions, i.e. when one can, technically, pose an argument in the form of a question, the predication transits towards Russia or its allies in the affirmative mode, or other non-western influences. Although the ratio of the former and the latter is about 65 % to 38 % (based on mutually non-exclusive occurrences), these findings testify to a strong ideological bias in the form of closed syntactical construction, coupled with open predication of a biased geopolitical slant, e.g. **Russia suspends INF Treaty in 'mirror response' to US**

**halting the agreement**. The news provider is achieving its propagandistic goal both through the unquestionable negativity and questionable 'reasonable' response (Jeffries 2010).


## 7.  Lexis and bias

The analysis of the lexical aspect of the headlines opens yet another perspective of the news manufacturing on RT, as compared and contrasted with those of CNN, BBC, NYT, WSJ, etc. Apart from traditional journalistic jargon so ubiquitous in headlines, nowhere else could we come across a language so charged with heavily connotative vocabulary referring exclusively to the western political camp. High-profile politicians are referred to as *dopes, warmongers, war hawks, henchmen, kraken on steroids, charade, horned QAnon shaman, the paper ripping tiger, swamp monsters, specter*, etc. accompanied by verbals, such as *unload on, slap, leave a minefield, pull the wool, wage a culture war, covet, whack a mole, scold, ban, humiliate, oust, sabotage*, etc. and nominal, such as *snafu, rocky relations, flip-flops, the American Empire, the God-Emperor, swamp, mistrial, phony charges, gambit*, etc. Not one of these makes reference or comes anywhere near Russian leaders or its associates in terms of mere sentence structure, e. g. **Venezuela slams US sanctions on Russia's Rosneft as an attempt at grabbing control of global oil market**. In fact, "Russia" is found amid inherently positive lexis or is victimized by the West in a handful of headlines.

Although lexeme "Russia" features in the news headlines 72 times, the content and the surrounding lexis is either neutral, e. g. *agree, suspends, head for, help, apply*, etc. or unequivocally positive, e. g. *brace, cooperate, boost, deal with, thank, mediate, propose, second-biggest, alternative media*, etc. There are only nine headlines carrying negative content or posing Russia as a victim of western aggression, as in **Russian, US resolutions on Venezuela fail at UN Security Council**, and that is a shared blame with the US, or **Russian and alternative media denied access to Venezuela meeting in Canada.** In fact, only 3.74 % of all the headlines might be termed as bias free as they function outside the geo-political power struggles, e. g. **Blackout shuts down Venezuela's oil exports** or **Venezuela declares an energy emergency**.

However, Russia's political adversaries, the US and the EU feature 96 and 15 times correspondingly (111 out of 375 headlines) collocated with such unfavorable lexis as *imperial, ceased, morph into riots, fallen, end of, decline, cynical, US-driven threat, sanctions, invasion, sway, weaponize, intervention, negative, conflict, pressure, failure, coup, provocation, impose*, etc. used multiple times, with the neutral ones *invoke, election, support, software power*, used once, with no positive context whatsoever.

The focal point of these headlines, Venezuela, features 78 times, preceded by *account for, save, bound for, push, shut down, encircle; coup, crisis, recognition, interference, intervention, invasion, protests, pressure (on), relief, demands, power rationing, sanctions against*, etc. and followed by *sanctions, regime change, oil deal, lose power, accuse, suffer, blockade, affairs, (is) toast, slams*, etc. When preceded by the above lexis, epistemically, it is positioned as a victim and, structurally, as an object or in passive constructions, e.g. **Maduro to Americans: You are bigger than Trump, don't let him start 'Vietnam' war against Venezuela** or **Make Latin America Great Again? On the REAL chances of a US invasion of Venezuela**. Venezuela, as

subject or agent, is in a defiant position against the US and its allies or siding with Russia, e. g. **Venezuela strongly rejects EU backing for Guaido, promises to 'revise relations' with bloc** or **Venezuela sanctions serve warning to 'external actors' like Russia against helping Maduro – Bolton.** Subtly, this active, and hence positive, role is implicit of Russian connections or triggers such implicatures. Out of total 78 cases, 38 feature a suffering country under the US pressure, another 19 attributive usages, 2 neutral content and the remaining 19 explicitly contain a call for Russia's "brotherhood."

There are more or less linguistically neutral cases (about a handful), e. g. in **Crisis in Venezuela 'fueled' from outside, those responsible not interested in talks – Turkish FM**. But even in the open adverbial position *Venezuela* is located between turmoil-charged items, the second of which is ironic since Venezuela has the richest oil deposits in the world, and this wording might signify the world's thirst for cheap oil. The second clause after comma starts with the distancing pronoun "those" that might include anyone except the speaker, i.e. RT, although Turkey has been cozying up to Russia mainly in terms of economic partnership. And the strong negative modality exerts criticism if not condemnation of the existing tensions.

An approximately similar statistics is found with the noun and adjective *Venezuela*(*n*) used 34 times. Its initial position in a clause or other syntactic elements, e.g. **'Tired of politicized pastors': Maduro alerts Pope that Venezuelans are DITCHING Catholicism** (in about 14 examples, or 33 %), is indicative of the resistance to opposition leader Juan Guaido, the defiance to the US and its allies, and the strong implicit siding with the anti-American and anti-European part of the world, its "pioneering" vaccines and economic support; as part of predication, an attribute or as an object (in about 20, or 67 %) it is presented as a victim of Western aggression, e. g. **'Leave the Venezuelan people alone': Roger Waters calls US actions 'insanity.'**

At the same time, the word "Russia" is most often combined with s*uspends, rejects, denies, hail cooperation with, braces, boost oil exports, largest oil company, approve Sputnik V; alternative media, official visit, president, parliament, trial data, pioneering vaccines, experience, agenda, final straw, China*, etc., the discoursal value of which must be the projection of Russia's firm stance on the world arena to thwart any doubts of the "benevolent" Russian mission.

## 8. Punctuation 'revisited'

A misbalanced use of any means in a discourse continuum attracts attention and assumes additional communicative intent that serves in the interest of a news provider or its sponsor. Such means may comprise key lexis or structural repetitions, forms of address or bynames, etc. However, RT headlines favor punctuation to a stark visible degree as compared to other credible or less engaged platforms, such as *the Guardian, the NYT, NPR, Reuters, AP, the WSJ*, and others. Among the most frequent punctuation are quotation marks, question and exclamation marks, three dots, colons, dashes and hyphens. These textual markers render the headlines more appealing, again, attempting to approach the natural diction of the spoken medium. Skillfully applied, they are capable of incorporating accentuation, pauses, consequences, verbatim utterances, or, on the other hand, they may highlight the implicitly intended nuances in the message.

The use of 'quote-unquote' features 240 times throughout 375 headline corpus. This punctuation tool brings credibility and authenticity, as in **'Applauding keeps your hands off the trigger': Russia claps back at US Venezuela regime change rant;** or activates non-literal, 'desired' usage, **New push to 'restore democracy': US launches Venezuela affairs unit … in Colombia.** The latter case proves a ubiquitous fact that the quote-unquote should not be taken in its literal meaning, but rather in its ironic, "with tongue in cheek" manner, invoking historical or interpretative presuppositions and implicatures, which is in abundant supply on RT news feeds, e. g. the initial "New," which signals an implicature of similar previous attempts. Another aspect should be added that all RT news stories are interspersed with hyperlinked headlines at a ratio of about two to four per story, depending on the text size. And those are not necessarily interconnected with the story itself or supply further contextual reading. In our view this phenomenon testifies to one of the basic principles of propaganda – the incessant repetition of falsehood until it becomes so wide-spread that it is self-evident.

In addition to it, throughout the corpus of 375 headlines there are 41 usages of question marks. Since its traditional usage of requesting information is blocked in one way communication, except for the feedback sections, which are found at the farthest end of the news feed, only the remaining pragmatic functions are activated, such as rhetorical questions, hints at the "obvious" answers, emotional enhancement, appeal to common sense, presuppositions and implicatures, etc. as in **Mixed messages? US drops record number of bombs on Afghanistan amid peace efforts with Taliban.** The cognitive dissonance of the ideas that follow "?" might be confusing or might be a direct preconceived target to entice the reader into believing that the double standards are inherent for Russia's political enemies.

Another punctuation device, which slightly seconds the previous one, and is comparatively rarely encountered in RT headlines (in nine cases throughout the corpus) is three dots "…"; however, its impact cannot be underestimated, e.g. in **Twitter lists Guaido among 'world leaders' condemning Capitol takeover… forgets his attempt to storm Venezuelan parliament** or **George Galloway: Kiss of death – The winner of the most coveted Henry Kissinger endorsement is… Joe Biden.** And the pragmatic usage of this punctuation is none of the omission, pause or digression, but to enhance the contradictory, the unexpected, the weird, which, more than the traditionally worded ones, raise the headline onto another level of appeal and the long-term memorability.

## 9. Agency highlights

Fore- or back-grounding agency is yet another subtle but powerful device in an efforts to promote a desired ideological cause; nevertheless, we argue here that no discursive device is harmful as stand-alone entity, yet, when persistently reiterated in the news coverage, usually by the same news providers, it acquires its substantial share of the actual news discourse, which becomes both part of local or global history and the touchstone for further narratives.

Foregrounding equals to motivated prominence; in fact, it is so ubiquitous that we seldom pay attention to highlighted elements elsewhere, e.g. in architecture, in outfit designs, in photographs and films. Music, poetry or prose exist because of the oscillating patterns of

prominence and decadence in meaning, tension, words or sounds, their regularities, their ability to make an impression or fade away. So do speech and writing that thrive on the oscillating patterns of the known versus unknown, the opulent vs obscure, and when skillfully used by the propagandistic newsmakers it yields a necessary pre-conceived shift in agency accentuation. M.A.K. Halliday wrote that "if a particular feature of the language contributes, by its prominence, to the total meaning of the work, it does so by virtue of and through the medium of its own value in the language – through the linguistic function from which its meaning is derived" (Halliday 1971). Propagandistic discourse thrives on this prominence; it presents a distorted picture of mediated reality mostly by latent triggers, such as implicatures, nominalizations, modality, foregrounding and back-grounding of agency, etc.

Having scanned the headlines according to the usage frequency of key political actors' names, the results are as follows: Venezuela(n) 142, Trump 60, Guado 40, Maduro 38, Russia(n) 71, the EU 15, America(n) 20, Washington 14, Biden 13, China or Chinese 13, Iran 10, Colombia 7, Cuba 6, Moscow 6, MSM (mainstream media) 5. If we exclude Venezuela on the ground of it being the target of the news, and add all the cases of negative versus favorable presentation, the relative ratio of the political players on the scene divided into the two camps of downplayed western powers versus the positive pro-Russian ones would be 260 vs 142, or 150 vs 37 as used in their nominal forms. This evidence testifies to RT's more prolific negativity towards the adversaries than presenting the host and its camp in an agreeable manner. The juxtaposition of "them" vs "us" camps is still a powerful device for denouncing the West and praising their adversaries, as in **As millions of Venezuelans starve, the US must take its share of the blame for the humanitarian and economic crisis** (van Dijk 1989), (van Dijk 2008).

Venezuelan opposition leader Guaido is mentioned 21 times out of 40 in nominalizations within larger collocations where he is denied grammatical agency, e. g. **Venezuela's Guaido-led opposition holds alternative vote and then BURNS BALLOTS after boycotting legislative elections**. The remainder consists of six listings that feature him as an agent of negations and questions, with only three neutral cases, and 13 prepositional phrases. Guaido's opponent Maduro, mentioned 38 times, on the other hand, is found five times in the agency-deprived grammatical positions, ten times as a (prepositional) object, and the remaining 23 times as an agent as in **Maduro uses Venezuelan Independence Day to call for dialogue, Guaido to denounce 'dictator'**. Even in this random example Maduro is attributed full predication, while Guaido's is elliptical and should, in a way, be deducted before further processing. Even if RT's claims for impartiality and alternative viewpoints find some supporters in the world, 'dictator' is in the farthest position from 'Maduro', and, taken in quotation marks, does little harm to the latter.

It is common knowledge that in CDA, i.e. the analysis that views texts as an intertwined system of hierarchical and heterogeneous elements that reflect societal culture of power dynamics, every element of texts counts, such as the possessive case – or another subtle aspect of impacting agency. Since no element is absolutely equal in its discoursal impact, the binary nature of the possessive case foregrounds the agent, i.e. the possessor, and passivates the object possessed. In case of our corpus, Guaido is mentioned 19 times as the object of the possessive case (47.5%). Maduro, on the other hand, is listed only twice (5.3%). It is too stark a discrepancy

to be ascribed to a coincidence. In terms of possessors, the former is used once, while the latter thrice; in terms of an objective ratio it is a two-fold increase in favor of Maduro.

## 10.    Colloquial language

A prominent feature of modern propagandistic headlines is the foregrounding of oral models of linguistic expression within the printed newspaper text. Although it departs from the mainstream journalistic practice, this proximity to the spoken language produces an illusion of a live conversation about political matters that usually takes place in more familiar domestic contexts and again gives an impression of ultimate truth. Among other reasons in favor of using conversational language is bringing in the feeling of "informality, familiarity, friendliness" (Fowler 1991), (Sai-Hua Kuo 2007), (Fairclough 1994). We also argue that beneath this triad, however, lies another psychological power of conversation: we usually speak out in safe environments, i. e. where we are accepted and understood. Spoken language as opposed to written, or more academic, is usually seen as more trustful and natural; it is the first linguistic connector between the individual and community, between the close family circle and larger societies, most of which experience is usually accompanied by simple accessible lexis. From hence this linguistic comfort of familiar expressions is carried into adult life, colloquial formulas introduce the undertones of security and understanding (Tannen 1987). In the case of reading news, spoken language seemingly removes the asymmetry of power and knowledge, introduces cooperation between the news consumer and the social institution of news-making.

Another factor that makes RT headlines stand out is their colloquial language that sometimes exceeds decent norms of journalistic ethics. However, for the propagandistic journalism of RT, as we may assume after all the above analysis, the purposeful use of spoken language and slang aims at winning attention of the large audiences worldwide as an alternative medium "questioning more". Several random headlines prove this point: **Illiberal Undemocrats say 'boll\*\*ks' to the people in the name of 'liberalism' and 'democracy'** or **'So crass and so obvious': Pressure from Washington pushes Venezuela closer to Russia.** Striking nonce words, taboos, decontextualized colloquialisms, direct addresses, phrasal verbs, etc. do have a potential to attract attention, although they baffle and disorient the reader, as in **Repeat after me, protests in Venezuela good, protests in France bad!** The initial imperative resembles school talk, and we do not have a clear idea who is "me," presumably the state favoring Venezuela's uprising.

## 11.    Other devices

Professional news manufacturers take into account the fact that not all stories are read in full, which might be the reason why most RT headlines contain regular predication, written out in extended structures rather than traditional elliptical ones found on such sites as CNN, BBC, etc., e. g. **Macron knows for Europeans the 'problem' country is not Russia but US** or **What if neither Democrats nor Republicans want to win in 2020? No one wants the task of changing the full diaper of US Empire.**

Most headlines on RT are, in fact, stories concisely told and offered to the reader in case one is willing to skip the full text of the news. Article "the" helps sustain references and presuppositions and is thus indispensable for the story line, nevertheless its overuse in headlines is inconsistent with the journalistic traditions in the Anglophone world. The frequency statistics for the definite article in our corpus is 103 per 375 headlines and is not significantly higher than in CNN International headlines, for example; and some of them are ingrained into the language tradition, e. g. *the world, the press, the White House, the same*, etc. The less typical usages, 22 out of 85 detected ones on RT, narrow down the scope of interpretations and are likely to produce the effect of being "right" or "the only one," or introduce the confusion as in *the American Empire*, *the Trump trap*, *the kraken*, *the full diaper*, etc. Headline **China is winning the offshore oil game** might as well function without "the" having two penultimate attributes before an easily identifiable noun; nevertheless, if the article is dropped, the sentence is interpreted in a slightly less restricted way, less geopolitically engaged. The case might be counter-argued that "the" signals the noun phrase preceded by two different parts of speech; however, the transitivity of "win" might suffice in bringing in enough structural clarity. Although the number of the definite articles in structures where its necessity might be disputed, and its contextual pragmatic interpretations might vary reaches a quarter of all cases, it is indicative of the trend, and a closer and stratified CDA might reveal all the discoursal nuances of the use of the definite article in propagandistic newscast.

A separate case comprises those items that convey intense modality — *similar to, because, enough, potential,* verbs *(won't) dare, vow, deny, propose, allege, mean*, etc., as in **Russian parliament proposes convening international organizations to tackle US tech-giant-driven threat to free speech**. Their function is directly related to foregrounding certain worldviews by means of disseminating a strategic grid of causal, consequential and attitudinal relationships that, being reiterated time and again, have a serious potential to brainwash vast audiences out of their critical approach and substitute it with the "necessary" version of truth (Jeffries 2010). Any news provider would realize that spreading propagandistic contents might trigger criticism by more or less discerning readership. In order to offset the manipulative content and entice the reader into believing in the rest of the stories, newsmakers introduce non-biased content that might neutralize the propagandistic newsfeed and make it less negative. They usually feature the sponsor-state of RT, accidents, statistics, etc. and amount to 15 out of 375, e. g. **Trade, science & culture: Russia, Venezuela to draw up 10-year cooperation plan.**

Our corpus exemplifies powerful prosodic tools inherited from Old English, such as alliteration and assonance, operating primarily at the acoustic level and reaching to the esthetic and emotional aspects of language processing. Although they are not so numerous, they testify to their long-lasting status and prove time-resilient, aiming at creating memorable utterances, e. g. **From zero to hero: How Venezuelan opposition leader Lopez made Juan Guaido the man of the day** or **Anchors aweigh: White House announces crackdown on 'birth tourism,' to jeers, cheers, and confusion**

It would be necessary to dedicate a new research into the accompanying multimedia to the news stories, especially videos and photos. Placed immediately at the beginning of stories they inadvertently set a scene and a tone to further reading. Below we provide a most vivid example

of image-making and spreading it across the globe. These photo pairs appear in two separate stories and picture the two leaders quite differently: on the left, President Maduro, clad in state regalia looks assertive and positive; Juan Guaido, on the right, was captured in emotionally intense moments, and, contrasted to Maduro, is not seen to an advantage.



## 12.    Conclusions

In conclusion we can state that the propagandistic content in RT headlines amounts to an alarming rate. Apart from the linguistic aspects analyzed in the article, the cognitive categories of the news, e.g. topicality, urgency, time, location, circumstances, relationships, values, reasons, cause and effect, etc. exert a heavy pressure on readers' opinions, emotions, attitudes, ideologies, etc. In this article we set up a goal and proved that RT headlines contain bias in terms of headline length, presuppositions and implicatures, lexis selection, agency, punctuation, prosody, functional elements such as the definite article, and touched upon picture bias. Consequently, any findings expressed in numerical terms should be taken as part of a larger picture, impossible to gauge precisely due to the unpredictable human factors.

Applying numbers in a linguistic research is quite tentative, since what we ever see or hear is just a means to convey information, to appeal to emotions and beliefs, to entice us to action, or otherwise. However, the quantitative approach can visualize the relative weight of the key aspects against the whole corpus. In order to gauge the ultimate effectiveness of news stories with the broad readership, we would have to turn to sociological methods of polls or questionnaires, which might prove beyond ones means to accomplish.

As humans, we feel predisposed to some issues and biased against others. Moreover, the situation is getting more complicated with the long-established routine in the news coverage in different parts of the globe. As G. Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay (1984) point out "… it follows that discourse can never be taken as simply descriptive of the social action to which it ostensibly refers, no matter how uniform particular segments of that discourse appear to be," which is especially true in the modern fast-pacing world of changing values and beliefs, and the eternal human quest for the truth.

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