

THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT REFLECTED IN THE HEADLINES OF ROMANIAN AND ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MEDIA. A COMPARATIVE STUDY¹

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ABSTRACT. *The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict Reflected in the Headlines of Romanian and English-Language Media. A Comparative Study.* This study explores the stylistic dimension of 250 news headlines in Romanian and English-language media covering the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The aim is to identify and examine the linguistic mechanisms that spark audience engagement and to illustrate the similarities and differences between the way headlines are constructed in the two languages, reflecting how stylistic choices shape meaning,

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influence perception, and captivate the public's interest. For the comparative analysis, both digital tools and manual annotations were used. The results of the comparative analysis has identified differences particularly in terms of syntax (sentence structure) and verb categories (use of certain verb tenses), thus acknowledging the role of the expressive devices at grammatical and discursive level in the composition of news headlines. Finally, the research aims to raise awareness on the power of language and communication in shaping public opinion.

Keywords: *headline, Romanian and English-language media, Russian-Ukrainian conflict, stylistic analysis, comparative analysis*

Introduction

This study delves into the stylistic features of news headlines covering the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, aiming to uncover and analyze the linguistic strategies, in terms of both commonalities and distinctions in headline construction across Romanian and English media. Through the strategic use of stylistic elements, headlines spark curiosity and frame the readers' understanding before they engage with the full article. The objective of the investigation is to demonstrate how journalists' stylistic choices influence meaning, shape public perception, and draw the attention of readers interested in the dynamics of military conflict: "Conflict and warfare are an ongoing legacy of human history; past antagonisms condition the present and future." (Kozłowska-Barrios 2024, 105).

The novelty of this work lies in the selection and comparative analysis of a bilingual data set (Romanian and English), in the context of news about an event that interests not only the Romanian public (given the geopolitical context), but also citizens across the entire world (English being the most widely spoken language in the world). The bilingual perspective highlights local narratives vs narratives at an international level, unearthing common or distinct interests at a social, economic or political level.

Following a brief overview of the specifics of stylistics and definitions of key terms such as "headline" and "headlineese", the research investigates grammatical expressive devices – morphological and syntactic – found within the corpus compiled for the international project: "The coverage and reception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in Polish, Romanian and English-language media: A comparative critical discourse study with recommendations for journalism training" (CORECON)⁴: 250 headlines sourced from Digi24.ro (Romanian) and CNN.com (English), spanning from February 2022 to February 2024.

⁴ <https://grants.ulbsibiu.ro/corecon/>

The comparative analysis employs both digital tools and manual annotations to examine stylistic devices. Findings target the significance of proper nouns and adjectives in headline composition and explore the frequency and expressive impact of verb forms in Romanian and English-language media. Ultimately, the study seeks to enhance understanding of how language and communication shape public views.

Crystal situates stylistics as “a branch of LINGUISTICS which studies the features of SITUATIONally distinctive uses (VARIETIES) of LANGUAGE, and tries to establish principles capable of accounting for the particular choices made by individual and social groups in their use of language” (2008, 460; emphasis in the original). If style is the result of “the combination of the choice that any speech must make from a certain number of availability belonging to the language and the variations it introduces in relation to these availability” (Ducrot and Schaeffer 1996, 421; our translation)⁵, then the object of study of stylistics is “the individual or collective manner to mark the personality of the speaker/author in the statement, by using some forms/procedures of expressiveness” (Bidu-Vrănceanu et al. 2005, 496; our translation)⁶. In other words, stylistics “is underpinned by the language, whether spoken or written, speakers use to make choices about words (lexical choices) and the order of such words (syntactic structure)” (Hassan 2024, 4).

Defined as the “linguistics of the context”, stylistics aims to examine the peculiarities of language and style through the prism of the connection existing between the author, the logos, and the world (Munteanu 1998, 121–122; our translation)⁷. Stylistics follows a transition often motivated by the aesthetic function of expression, what Samuel Johnson called “the dress of thought” (Ratcliffe 2011, 203). In line with Bakhtin’s view (1981, 259), that artistic form cannot be separated from its content, the verbal discourse being a social phenomenon, we can discover the way in which the content of ideas, attitudes, and emotions is transposed through means of linguistic expression. Broadly speaking, stylistic analysis reaches content (substance) through expression (form), under the umbrella of the context.

Modern stylistics combines the use of instruments of formal linguistic analysis with methods of literary criticism and a digital method (stylometry), with the aim of revealing characteristics uses and functions of language. From a descriptive perspective, stylistic research focuses on facts of style, in order to

⁵ “[...] combinării dintre alegerea pe care orice discurs trebuie s-o facă dintr-un anumit număr de disponibilități aparținând limbii și variațiile pe care le introduce în raport cu aceste disponibilități”.

⁶ “[...] maniera individuală sau colectivă de a marca personalitatea vorbitorului/autorului în enunț, prin utilizarea unor forme/procedee ale expresivității”.

⁷ “[...] lingvistică a contextului”.

discover connections, to observe occurrences in communication and the effects produced on the audience. The present study is a synchronic and comparative analysis based on a current media corpus (Romanian and English) covering the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, aiming at locating, identifying, and examining the linguistic mechanisms that go into the construal of headlines.

Defined as the first element that the reader comes into contact with, headlines have various functions: informative (summarizing or abstracting the story), interpersonal (attracting the reader), “a news value function in terms of maximizing newsworthiness”, “a framing function in terms of providing a lens on, stance towards or angle on the rest of the story” (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 100). Headlines are “the most widely read part of a newspaper – five times more than the body copy – since headlines are scanned not only by initial purchasers but also by the innumerable people in their immediate vicinity” (Isani 2011, 81). While analyzing if headlines in journalism are genre-specific, Borchmann reached this conclusion: “The results of the comparative analysis of texts are that there are functional relations between pragmatic features of headlines and the accepted purpose of the textual macro-act they form a part of, and that there are genre-specific rhetorical relations between headlines and the body of the texts.” (Borchmann 2024, 73).

General characteristics of headlines include visual features and emotional/evaluative words (Bednarek and Caple 2012, 101). *Headlines* is a specific type of language, employed “to denote simply the language used in headlines” (Mårdh 1980, 13). Considered a specific sub-genre (Isani 2011, 87), headline “saves space” and “speeds up the processing of information by the reader” (Moncomble 2018, para. 24–25), despite the risk of ambiguity.

1. Methodology

1.1. *Research design, data collection and sampling*

The basic assumption promoted by journalism studies, according to which headlines are primarily “ideational” (their purpose is to inform and provide an accurate representation of the reality), could be supplemented by the belief that headlines also acquire an “interpersonal metafunction” (they seek to engage the reader, guide their choices of what to choose to explore in detail, i.e., by reading the article) coupled with a “textual metafunction”, or by playing with words and structures in stylistically sophisticated ways (Halliday 2004). In order to triangulate the three perspectives of functional linguistics, we will analyze the war-related news headlines in our selected dataset starting from Jeffries’ textual conceptual model (2015). In line with Halliday’s three-way metafunction distinction between *textual*, *ideational*, and *interpersonal* meaning

(2004), Jeffries separates between linguistic analysis of form and function – of which we will focus on morphology and syntax – in order to decode the textual meaning, defined as “the contextual effect of how the structures produced by the underlying linguistic systems work” and the interpersonal meaning, describing “what the language is doing to/with the people in the situation” (2015, 5).

Jeffries' textual conceptual model is preferred because it operationalizes Halliday's broad metafunctional framework, providing a more detailed and systematic methodology for examining how specific linguistic choices generate meaning. Rather than treating headlines merely as carriers of information, the model enables researchers to investigate how morphological and syntactic structures contribute to the construction of textual meaning and to the shaping of readers' interpretations. In this way, it becomes possible to analyze not only what headlines say about events, but also how their formal linguistic features influence the presentation of reality, attract readers' attention, and position audiences toward particular understandings of the news. This makes the model especially suitable for the study of news headlines, where meaning is often condensed and conveyed through carefully selected structural and stylistic choices.

The research design has been built based on the following research question and its respective hypothesis:

RQ: *What similarities and differences are there between Romanian and English in terms of stylistic devices used in the headlines of the news covering the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict?*

H: *Romanian and English share comparable linguistic tools and stylistic techniques, yet the way these are applied in headline creation varies subtly, shaped by the unique syntactic structures inherent to each language.*

The research draws on a collection of media texts sourced from the online archive of the international CORECON project. For the stylistic analysis, 250 headlines were examined – 125 in Romanian and 125 in English – selected from two prominent digital news platforms: Digi24 (<https://www.digi24.ro>) and CNN (<https://edition.cnn.com>). As a branch of new media, online television possesses a remarkable ability to rapidly distribute information. It delivers immediate, real-time updates that are meant to be quickly absorbed, reflecting the fast-paced rhythm of a constantly evolving society.

The 250 analyzed titles are the headlines of war-related news selected based on:

- the relevance of the media source, according to Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report* (2024), which situate the two selected platforms on the second place in both Romania and the United States, with overall trust scores of over 60% for Digi24 online and 48% for CNN online;

- keyword search based on the word *Ucraina* (Ro)/*Ukraine* (En);
- an extensive timeline (Feb 24, 2022 – Feb 28, 2024);
- the frequency and relevance of the news (first most relevant 5 pieces of news for each month in the interval, selected with the help of the Google search engine, at the moment of corpus collection).

Romanian Dataset

For the Romanian-language headlines, we selected Digi24, a TV news channel that holds a strong online and offline presence. It covers a wide range of topics including current affairs, economics, international news, sports, live broadcasts, and opinion pieces. The platform was chosen for three key reasons: first, one of the authors was already familiar with its content, having compiled the Romanian corpus; second, Digi24 ranks as the second most preferred news source among Romanian audiences; third, its online format aligns with contemporary media consumption habits, which favor digital access over traditional offline channels.

English Dataset

The English-language headlines were extracted from CNN's online platform, selected for its prominence as a global news outlet with a strong reputation and thorough coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Recognized as one of the leading news organizations worldwide, this platform was chosen for its robust international reporting, offering timely updates, detailed analyses, and expert commentary on the war. CNN also maintains a presence on the ground in Ukraine and surrounding areas, providing direct coverage of unfolding events, humanitarian challenges, and geopolitical dynamics. Moreover, the outlet incorporates a wide range of viewpoints – from political and military experts to civilians affected by the conflict – enabling a nuanced understanding of its complexity. While acknowledging that all media sources carry some degree of bias, the decision to use CNN was based on its adherence to journalistic principles and its capacity to convey intricate developments to a global audience in a clear and accessible manner.

The Reuters *Digital News Reports* highlight how the Ukraine conflict and its broader impacts have accelerated the shift toward digital journalism, leading to diverse narrative styles and modes of delivery (2023, 10). Additionally, the reports reveal that in the surveyed countries, most online users prefer reading news over watching or listening, as text offers greater speed and control in navigating information (2023, 11).

1.2. Analytical Framework

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis was conducted with the help of AntConc Digital Tool computer software, an application that allowed essential operations in our analysis: listing words by frequency of occurrence and identifying the number of tokens. Additionally, due the peculiarities of the Romanian language, which contains distinctive norms for spelling (diacritics, hyphens, etc.), we have used manual annotations. For the interpretation of the results of the quantitative analysis, we used statistical and graphical methods in order to obtain a conclusive image that fundament the qualitative examination.

Qualitative Analysis

One of the methods of analysis used in the article focused on the qualitative investigation of the stylistic devices deployed in the construction of war-related headlines in both Romanian and English. We started from the premise that a stylistic examination capitalizes on the expressive potential of the components of the grammatical level. If the style is regarded as a “fact of verbal exemplification” (Ducrot and Schaeffer 1996, 423; our translation)⁸, the stylistic description of the text takes into account the numerous and diverse means of verbal construction used in order to obtain expressiveness.

Through expression, ideas take shape, inserting themselves into a grammatical structure. Integrated in the context, grammatical elements (morphology, syntax) can generate expressiveness and carry stylistic value. Parts of speech achieve their stylistic function based on the specific lexical-semantic and grammatical content. Thus, each part of speech has typical expressive valences, complemented by additional, more creative values, which we intended to unearth in the analyzed headline dataset.

2. Results

The quantitative analysis conducted with the AntConc Tool revealed 961 tokens for the Romanian language dataset, and 704 for the English dataset.

⁸ “[...] fapt de exemplificare verbală”.

2.1. Stylistic use of nouns

The quantitative analysis of nouns has revealed the results presented in the following figure (Figure 1):

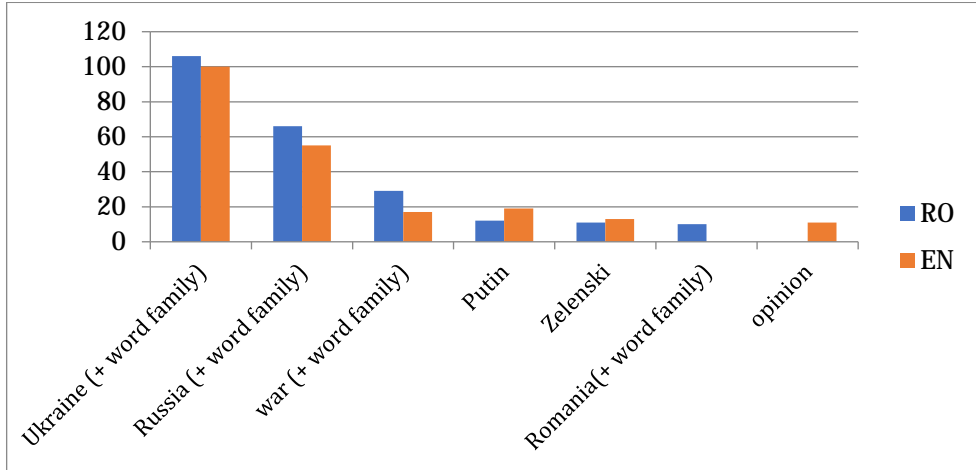


Fig. 1. Noun comparative frequency – Ro & En

It can be observed that *Ukraine* (+word family) dominates both languages, with Romanian headlines showing slightly higher frequency. This suggests Ukraine is a central focus across media, but perhaps even more so in Romanian coverage – likely due to geographic proximity and regional impact. *Russia* (+word family) and *War* (+word family) also appear prominently, again with Romanian headlines leading. This could reflect heightened concern or deeper coverage in Romanian outlets about the broader regional conflict. The proper names *Putin* and *Zelenski* show moderate mentions, with English headlines edging out Romanian ones. It is interesting to notice that individual leaders are less emphasized than the countries or the concept of war itself. The country *Romania* (+word family) appears only modestly, which might seem surprising given we are examining Romanian media, but it could indicate that domestic references are less frequent in international conflict reporting. We can conclude that the similarity between the Romanian and the English noun frequency is roughly 80 %, which indicates to a great extent that both news outlets focus on the same actors involved in the conflict on both sides (Ukraine and Zelenski vs Russia and Putin). However, Romanian headlines appear more saturated with terms related to the war in Ukraine and Russia, possibly reflecting greater regional sensitivity, more direct consequences or involvement, and a media landscape that prioritizes proximity in coverage. On the other hand, English headlines, while still focused on these topics, seem slightly more restrained, perhaps due to broader global coverage.

A wide array of words/structures denominate countries, institutions, or their representatives, seen as key actors in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Out of a total of 125 Romanian titles, only 3 titles lack proper nouns, while in the English sample there is just one headline that contains exclusively common nouns. The abundant use of proper nouns in headlines indicates the people, places, or organizations the news is about. This specificity grabs attention and sets the context quickly. The immediate connection between the story to follow and known entities or characters transmits a feeling of relevance for the readers, who thus engage with the article on a more personal level. Additionally, using proper nouns lends credibility by showing that the news pertains to identifiable and often reputable sources or significant figures. Another advantage of using proper nouns in headlines, one that is directly linked to the digital age of the present, is that they improve the discoverability of articles online. Readers searching for specific topics, names, or events are more likely to find relevant headlines containing proper nouns.

From a stylistic entry point, the analysis revealed that in both Romanian and English headlines, journalists prefer to use the names of countries and cities generically or as synecdoche (Dragomir and Sporiş 2025, 145), with the aim of emphasizing the symbolic importance of a specific part of a whole:

(1) “Ministrul rus de externe justifică invazia spunând că *Rusia* vrea ca poporul ucrainean să fie independent” (25.02.2022) [“Russian foreign minister justifies invasion by saying *Russia* wants Ukrainian people to be independent”] (Ro)

(2) “*Norvegia* anunță un ajutor de un miliard de euro pentru *Ucraina*” (01.07.2022) [“*Norway* announces one billion Euro aid for *Ukraine*”] (Ro)

(3) “*Moscova* țintește poduri și căi ferate pentru a încetini livrările de armament, (...)” (26.04.2022) [“*Moscow* targets bridges and railways to slow down armament deliveries, (...)”] (Ro)

(4) “*The West* plans to increase its military aid to Ukraine with Russia planning its next big assault” (11.04.2022) (En)

(5) “*Russians* steal vast amounts of Ukrainian grain and equipment, threatening this year’s harvest” (05.05.2022) (En)

(6) “*Kyiv* and *Moscow* agree deal to resume *Ukraine* grain exports from Black Sea ports, UN chief says” (22.07.2022) (En)

In the example: “‘Russia is not Putin’: 76-year-old Russian uses her art to speak out” (22.06.2022), selected from the English dataset, the proper name *Putin* (a single individual) is being used to represent the whole of Russia (a nation). The use of the negation implies that the actions or views of the leader (Putin) do not necessarily reflect the entire country or its people. As a rhetorical device, this figure of speech has the function of drawing a distinction between a leader and the nation they represent and, in this case, illustrates the cleavage of opinion that exists between the Russian population and their President.

2.2. Stylistic use of adjectives

Despite their high expressive potential, superlative adjectival forms are very rare in the analyzed dataset, both in Romanian and in English. We have identified 3 superlatives of superiority in Romanian (7), (8), (9) and 2 such forms in English (10) and (11):

(7) “Herson este probabil *cea mai minată* zonă din lume” (17.11.2022) [“Kherson is probably the *most mined* area in the world”] (Ro)

(8) “Ce s-a întâmplat pe 24 februarie 2022, ziua în care Rusia a declanșat în Ucraina *cel mai grav* conflict după al Doilea Război Mondial” (24.02.2023) [“What happened on February 24, 2022, the day Russia triggered *the worst* conflict in Ukraine since World War II”] (Ro)

(9) “Ucrainenii au distrus *cea mai modernă* navă ‘stealth’ a flotei ruse din Marea Neagră cu o rachetă Storm Shadow” (07.11.2023) [“Ukrainians destroyed *the most modern* ‘stealth’ ship of the Russian Black Sea fleet with a Storm Shadow missile”] (Ro)

(10) “Opinion: Zelensky’s *biggest* test yet” (19.12.2022) (En)

(11) “Russia runs the UN Security Council this month. Ukraine says it’s *the worst* April Fools’ ” (01.04.2023) (En)

The news journalists also resort to absolute superlatives, whose powerful impact is embedded in the semantic value of the word:

(12) “*Incredibila* poveste a lui Vasile, câinele-soldat care și-a ros singur laba pentru a nu cădea prizonier la ruși” (04.02.2023) [“The *incredible* story of Vasile, the soldier dog who chewed off his own paw to avoid being captured by the Russians”] (Ro)

(13) “*Remarkable* photos show what blackout in Ukraine looks like from space” (25.11.2022) (En)

(14) “Why a stalled Ukrainian offensive could represent a *huge* political problem for Zelensky in the US” (09.08.2023) (En)

We can conclude that sensationalism is no longer considered a key element in the formulation of headlines that focus on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Journalists seem to resort to other means to capture readers’ attention, arouse curiosity, and influence public opinion, among which adjectives and their stylistic values do not have priority of choice.

2.3. Stylistic use of verbs

The quantitative analysis identified 249 verb forms in the Romanian dataset and 182 in the English one, with the following distribution (Figure 2):

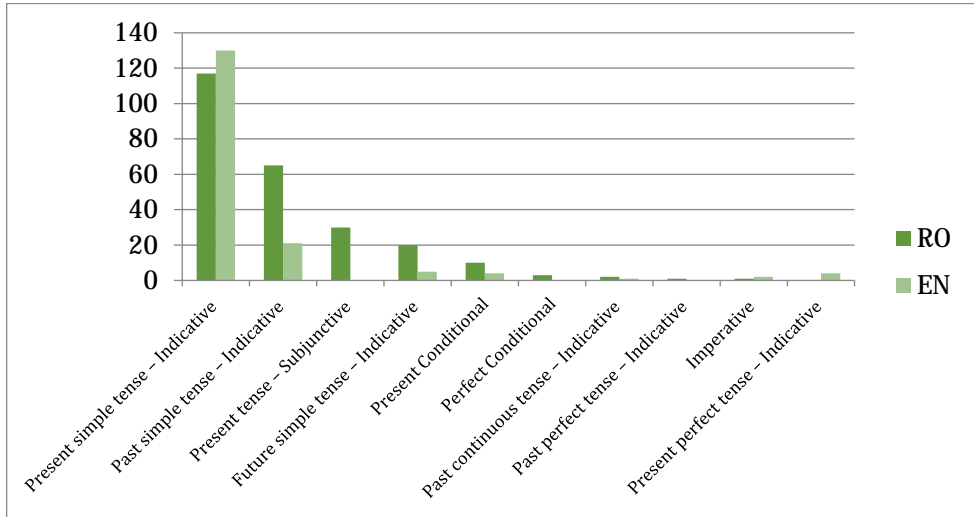


Fig. 2. Verb comparative frequency – Ro & En

Given the specificity of the English language, simple and continuous tenses have also been counted and included in the distribution (for the present tense of the indicative mood). Four present perfect instances have also been identified, which, in the given contexts and from a temporal value perspective, can be paralleled to the Romanian past tense. Modality is an important stylistic device and records 11 occurrences in the English dataset.

In both Romanian and English, the present simple tense (indicative) is the most prevalent tense form, with 117 occurrences (47%) in Romanian and 130 (72%) in English. The presence of this verb tense in almost half of the Romanian samples and in the majority of the English headlines is greatly due to the multiple stylistic values it can manifest:

- it renders true facts and ensures credibility, or, at least, the feeling of certainty. The “instantaneous present” (Guțu Romalo et al. 2005, I, 407; our translation)⁹ is usually employed in the headlines of news, which are timely and real, collected immediately after the event being reported:

(15) “Mărturia care *confirmă* că Rusia a folosit arme cu fosfor” (04.11.2022) [“The proof that *confirms* that Russia has used phosphorous munition”] (Ro)

(16) “Tensions *mount* at the Belarus-Ukraine border amid concerns of a Russian spring offensive” (16.02.2023) (En)

- it is invested with the power of dramatization, transforming the reader into a spectator, a member of the target audience, who becomes emotionally invested in the event:

⁹ “[...] prezentul instantaneu”.

(17) “Serviciile de informații americane *sunt îngrijorate* că orașul Kiev ar putea cădea în mâinile Rusiei în câteva zile” (25.02.2022) [“The US secret services *are worried* that Kiev could fall in the hands of the Russians in a matter of days”] (Ro)

(18) “Toate mamele din Rusia îl *urăsc* pe Putin” (15.07.2022) [“All Russian mothers *hate* Putin”] (Ro)

(19) “Mykolaiv in Ukraine hit with heavy shelling as Putin *threatens* ‘lightning speed’ response to interference” (31.07.2022) (En)

(20) “Opinion: The Trump factor that *looms* over Ukraine” (03.05.2023) (En)
- it creates empathy, bringing the readers closer to the event, by including them in the reported event, often with the help of the imperative:

(21) “O agenție de turism *invită* oamenii să viziteze Ucraina, în plin război: ‘Dacă vrei să vezi orașele noastre distruse, te rog, *vin!*’ ” (16.08.2022) [“A tourism agency *invites* people to visit Ukraine, as war continues: ‘If you want to see our cities destroyed, please, *come!*’ ”] (Ro)

(22) “*Welcome* to the Cold War without the communism” (10.09.2022) (En)
- it has the value of “prospective present” (Guțu Romalo et al. 2005, I, 402; our translation)¹⁰, presenting possible scenarios, which attract the attention of the audience, by sparking their imagination. This textual-conceptual function is especially found in “if” clauses, that predict a likely outcome dependent on a condition:

(23) “Aleksandr Lukașenko: Belarus va lupta alături de ruși doar dacă *este atacat*” (16.02.2023) [“Aleksandr Lukașenko: Belarus will fight alongside the Russians only if it *is attacked*”] (Ro)

(24) “Opinion: The strategy that can support Ukraine even if Trump *is elected*” (17.11.2023) (En)

- it is a verb tense usually associated with modality, which often refers to possible scenarios (25) or is used to transmit the idea of willingness or lack thereof, and intention (26), (27), or even obligation (28). The English headlines appear to be more pragmatic or even programmatic, using the present modals should and could to indicate a sense of advisability, or expectation (29), (30):

(25) “Oficial ucrainean: 150 de tone de poluanți petrolieri se scurg pe Nipru și *pot ajunge* în Mediterană, după distrugerea barajului Kahovka” (20.06.2023) [“Ukrainian official: 150 tons of oil pollutants leak into the Dnieper and *could reach* the Mediterranean, after the destruction of the Kahovka dam”] (Ro)

(26) “Ministrul rus de externe justifică invazia spunând că Rusia *vrea* ca poporul ucrainean să fie independent” (25.02.2022) [“The Russian foreign minister justifies the invasion by saying that Russia *wants* the freedom of the Ukrainian people”] (Ro)

¹⁰ “[...] prezentul prospectiv”.

(27) “Disperată că rușii *nu mai vor* să moară pentru Putin în război, Moscova *vrea* să elibereze deținuți ca să-i trimită pe front” (23.08.2022) [“Desperate that the Russians *no longer want* to die in Putin’s war, Moscow *intends* to release prisoners and send them to war”] (Ro)

(28) “Reconstrucția Ucrainei *trebuie* să înceapă acum și nu poate aștepta sfârșitul războiului, (...)” (22.03.2023) [“The reconstruction of Ukraine *must start* now and cannot wait for the end of the war, (...)”] (Ro)

(29) “Exclusive: A crypto-based dossier *could* help prove Russia committed war crimes” (10.06.2022) (En)

(30) “The conditions are ripe for talking peace. Biden *should* seize the moment” (20.03.2022) (En)

The second place in terms of prevalence is occupied by the past tense, with 65 occurrences (26%) in the Romanian dataset, and 21 (12%) in English. In the studied headlines, the past tense has the following stylistic values:

- it illustrates past actions, that are concluded at the time the event is reported:

(31) “Doi preoți ruși *au plimbat* Lumina Sfântă cu elicopterul, în apropierea Ucrainei” (28.04.2022) [“Two Russian priests *carried* the Holy Light by helicopter near Ukraine”] (Ro)

(32) “They *fled* Ukraine as war *broke out*. Now they’re throwing their homeland a party” (12.05.2023) (En)

- it expresses empathy with those affected by the war:

(33) “*Am văzut* soldați arzând de vii. *I-am auzit* țipând, apoi *s-au împușcat* (...)” (04.11.2022) [“*I saw* soldiers burning alive. I *heard* them screaming, then they *shot* themselves (...)”] (Ro)

(34) “Widow confronts Russian soldier who *killed* husband” (19.05.2022) (En)

- in relation to present tense, the past expresses actions that have sparked different attitudes (35), or triggered actions (37) and reactions (36):

(35) “Un an de la masacrul din Bucea, care *a șocat* o lume întreagă. Zelenski: ‘Nu vom ierta niciodată’ ” (31.03.2023) [“One year since the Bucea massacre, which *shocked* the entire world. Zelensky: ‘We will never forgive’ ”] (Ro)

(36) “Indignare în Serbia din cauza recrutării unor mercenari Wagner pentru războiul din Ucraina. Vucic *a reacționat nervos*” (20.01.2023) [“Outrage in Serbia over recruitment of Wagner mercenaries for war in Ukraine. Vucic *reacted angrily*”] (Ro)

(37) “100 people from one California church *opened* their homes to Ukrainians in need” (23.04.2022) (En)

Future tense records 20 occurrences (8%) in the Romanian collection of headlines, while it only appears in 5 of the English headlines (3%). In both collections:

- it expresses projected actions that are planned to occur at a specific point in the future:

(38) “Zelenski este așteptat marți în România. *Se va întâlni* cu Iohannis și Ciolacu și *va ține* un discurs în Parlament” (09.10.2023) [“Zelensky is expected in Romania on Tuesday. He *will meet* with Iohannis and Ciolacu and *will deliver* a speech in Parliament”] (Ro)

(39) “Ukraine’s defense minister says attacks on Crimea *will continue*, predicts possible NATO entry next year” (25.07.2023) (En)

- it may be used to illustrate possible future actions, but which are presented as real to the audience:

(40) “NATO: Ucraina *va învinge* negreșit Rusia, în ciuda unui an sumbru de disperare” (24.02.2023) [“NATO: Ukraine *will surely defeat* Russia, despite a bleak year of despair”] (Ro)

(41) “Patriot missile systems *will help* Ukraine’s defense but experts caution they may have limited effect” (21.12.2022) (En)

The notable observation that can be made by comparing these two examples is the degree of certainty that accompanies each of the headlines. While in the Romanian headline, the strong belief in victory is reinforced with the help of the absolute adverb *negreșit* [surely], the English example is a phrase that contains a two-part structure, of which the second indicates contrast. The use of *but* generates conventional implicature, and conveys additional meaning embedded in a cautionary statement that limits the effects predicted by the use of the future tense.

The degree of certainty only typifies Romanian headlines, further expressing conditioned consequences of possible real actions (42), (43). The studied English examples do not contain instances of first conditional constructions, indicating that the degree of certainty which the headlines are invested with is limited to rather more cautionary statements that express possible consequences that are not perceived as being real. To illustrate this, the headlines in examples (44), (45) contain either a present or a past modal in the main conditional clause.

(42) “Kremlin: Dacă Zelenski *depune* armele, ‘nu vor mai fi victime’ ” (01.03.2022) [“Kremlin: If Zelensky *lays down* his arms, ‘there will be no more victims’ ”] (Ro)

(43) “Fost general american: Rusia *va folosi* arma nucleară dacă *va fi pe cale* să piardă războiul din Ucraina” (12.01.2023) [“Former US general: Russia *will use* nuclear weapons if it *is about to lose* the war in Ukraine”] (Ro)

(44) “Opinion: The strategy that *can* support Ukraine even if Trump is elected” (17.11.2023) (En)

(45) “Ukraine *could* boycott Olympics if Russians allowed back, says sports minister” (27.01.2022) (En)

Both present and past conditionals populate the analyzed headlines in order to illustrate present (46) or past hypothetical situations (47) or conditions (48), sometimes embedded in interrogations that spark the audience's curiosity (49):

(46) "Serviciile de informații americane sunt îngrijorate că orașul Kiev ar *putea cădea* în mâinile Rusiei în câteva zile" (25.02.2022) ["US intelligence agencies are concerned that the city of Kiev *could fall* into Russian hands within days"] (Ro)

(47) "FSB a arestat un rus care *ar fi transmis* informații către americani (...)" (28.08.2023) ["FSB has arrested a Russian who *might have passed* information to Americans (...)"] (Ro)

(48) "Hungary says it *would not arrest* Putin if he entered the country" (23.03.2023) (En)

(49) "Ce *ar putea* să însemne litera Z, pictată pe tancurile rușilor" (08.03.2022) ["What *could* mean the letter Z, painted on Russian tanks"] (Ro)

In conclusion, it can be observed that, in virtue of their specific features, verb forms can render multiple connotative meanings, sometimes in combination with adverbial marks that help identify the reference time or provide stylistic nuances. From the examples analyzed above, we deduce that the semantic-stylistic deviations recorded by the verb class result not so much from the journalists' subjective opinion, but from their attitude towards the events reported, which aims at influencing or sensitizing the readers against the background of a painful context, generated by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

2.4. Elements of expressive syntax

News headlines should not be perceived as a simple chain of words, statements, and grammatical meanings, but as a compact structure, belonging to the journalistic discourse, with great impact on the general public.

From a syntactical point of view, we have analyzed the compositional elements, mainly the manner of formulation of the titles: statements (the syntactic unit capable of representing a communication, i.e., a coherent verbal act, which transmits information, attitudes and emotions), interrogations (used to request information, or to capture the receiver's attention and curiosity) and the organization of the statements (word order). Generally, headlines in both Romanian and English are not very concise, being made up of quite long statements (sentences or clauses), with some of them being made up of 2 or 3 successive statements.

In regard to the manner of headline composition and functionality, the Romanian dataset contains 3 elliptical constructions, with predicative elision, while the examination of the English samples revealed 5 such instances. The headlines in examples (50), (51) and (52) illustrate the stylistic values of this discursive practice in constructing headlines: they "can remove ambiguity,

convey non expressible aspects of meaning, establish discourse coherence, and contribute to a positive rapport with the hearer” (Kosacheva 2017, 18). In journalism, ellipses are used as “crowd-pleasers” and represent an example of “context sensitivity” (Hakobyan 2016, 3), while encouraging and motivating the readers to solve the *gap* challenge by engaging in reading the article in order to have access to the wider context:

(50) “Orașele Ucrainei, devastate de război, văzute de sus” (24.03.2022) [“Ukraine’s war-torn cities, seen from above”] (Ro)

(51) “Opinion: The surprising twist in the battle for democracy” (06.01.2023) (En)

(52) “Dwindling ammunition, a jailed artist and Kyiv’s new ‘foothold’ in the south: The latest from Ukraine” (19.11.2023) (En)

The scarcity of elliptical structures in both languages is an illustration of the fact that journalists prefer predicative constructions, which provide more action and dynamics to the reported events and are more likely to engage the audiences in the reception of the described realities of the conflict. However, the English headlines in the analyzed dataset are populated with a number of present and past participle verb forms used in elliptical constructions, with either a present continuous (53) or a passive value (54):

(53) “US *prepping* another \$800 million weapons package for Ukraine, multiple sources say” (20.04.2022) (En)

(54) “World’s largest plane *destroyed* in Ukraine” (28.02.2022) (En)

In these verb phrase ellipses, the antecedent for the auxiliary verb to be is missing, but the full meaning of the sentence is not affected, given that the meaning is delivered through context. Journalists often prefer such constructions in headlines in order to keep them short and catchy, and to focus attention on function rather than on form.

Based on the semantic criterion, the analysis identified 3 different categories of headlines, formulated as:

- assertive (110 in the Romanian dataset and 119 in the English dataset):

(55) “Biserica Ortodoxă ucraineană se rupe de Moscova și se declară ‘independentă total’ ” (27.05.2022) [“The Ukrainian Orthodox Church breaks away from Moscow and declares itself ‘totally independent’ ”] (Ro)

(56) “Ukraine morgue begins identification process after Russia hands over 160 body bags” (07.06.2022) (En)

- interrogative (13 in the Romanian dataset and 4 in the English dataset):

(57) “Ce răspund bărbații ruși din Moscova când sunt întrebați dacă ar viola femeii ucrainene” (18.04.2022) [“What Russian men in Moscow say when asked if they would rape Ukrainian women”] (Ro)

(58) “How Orban’s ties to Putin are putting European aid to Ukraine at risk” (28.01.2024) (En)

- mixed (2 in the Romanian dataset and 2 in the English dataset) - assertive and interrogative or assertive and imperative:

(59) “Imaginile dezastrului, după ce rușii au bombardat un mall și au omorât cel puțin 18 oameni. Ce spune Ministerul rus al Apărării” (28.06.2022) [“Images of the disaster after the Russians bombed a shopping mall and killed at least 18 people. What the Russian Ministry of Defense says”] (Ro)

(60) “Ukraine claims a new ‘foothold’ in the south. What does that mean for Kyiv’s efforts to keep the West on its side?” (16.11.2023) (En)

One important functionality of the Wh-clauses in news headlines is that they trigger an explanation or more details to follow, often proving arguments in support of the reported event or attitude. Their value lies in the power of introducing an implied proposition and its accompanying explanations/arguments. For the readers, such constructions generate expectations and illustrate Jeffries’s definition of the exemplifying/enumerating textual-conceptual function (2010, 76).

The analysis of the topics of title statements revealed the predominance of the objective word order, specific to both Romanian and English, languages that prefer the placement of the subject (simple or multiple/compound) at the beginning of the statement (61), (62) and (63) as well as the positioning of the subordinate element (attribute, complement) after the regent (64) and (65):

(61) “*Ucraina* negociază un acord bilateral de securitate cu România, la Davos” (14.01.2024) [“*Ukraine* negotiates bilateral security agreement with Romania, in Davos”] (Ro)

(62) “*Ucraina* și *NATO* înființează un ‘centru de analiză asupra tacticilor militare ruse’ ” (15.02.2024) [“*Ukraine* and *NATO* establish a ‘center for analysis of Russian military tactics’ ”] (Ro)

(63) “*Ukraine* says its war-torn economy is beginning to recover” (06.09.2023) (En)

(64) “Declarație bizară a președintei Ungariei: ‘Nu ne vom trimite fiii și soții pe câmpul de luptă’ ” (19.04.2023) [“Strange statement by the Hungarian president: ‘We will not send our sons and wives to the battlefield’ ”] (Ro)

(65) “Opinion: Ukraine’s path to victory runs through the streets of Moscow” (22.12.2023) (En)

For clarity and straightforwardness, journalists prefer the topicalization of the subject, in order to place emphasis on the theme of the reported event. While placing the topic at the beginning of the sentence is typical for the English language (the head-first pattern), the word order in Romanian is more permissive. However, most of the headlines in Romanian start with the subject, in order to attract attention to the key element of the statement:

(66) “*Reconstrucția* Ucrainei va costa peste 400 de miliarde de euro” (20.09.2023) [“The reconstruction of Ukraine will cost over 400 billion euro”] (Ro)

(67) “*NATO and Russia to hold long planned exercises of nuclear forces as tensions over Ukraine remain high*” (16.10.2022) (En)

In terms of word order flexibility, a specificity of the Romanian language also allows adjectives to change meaning, depending on the position they occupy in the statement – before or after the noun they modify:

(68) “*Clienții nu vor să aștepte 3 ani pentru un vas nou vs Trei noi nave cu cereale vor pleca vineri din Ucraina, (...)*” (28.07.2022) [“*Customers do not want to wait 3 years for a new vessel (~recently developed) vs Three new (~extra, additional) grain ships will leave Ukraine on Friday, (...)*”] (Ro)

However, this is not an occurrence that typifies the English language, where adjectives are almost always prepositive, with the exception of some postnominal placement instances that are characteristic to special cases not identifiable in the examined dataset of English headlines. Even in such instances, the placement of the adjective does not entail a change of meaning and is rather a matter of syntax.

3. Discussion

The linguistic and stylistic approach to the analysis of headlines allows for the identification of the mechanisms by Romanian and English journalists use headlines to create “hooks” (Molek-Kozakowska 2014, 163) that engage the readers and motivate them to follow the news reports of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The comparative analysis facilitates a better understanding of the similarities and the differences between the various stylistic elements deployed in the construction of war-related news headlines in Romanian and English.

In order to support the hypothesis that derives from the research question, we have discovered a series of linguistic resources employed stylistically that Romanian and English language journalists employ to create captivating headlines that motivate readers to engage in interacting with the full news report:

- morphological elements (especially nouns, verbs, and adjectives);
- syntactical resources (different manners of constructing headlines, ellipses, topicalization).

The similarities indicate the fact that both examined online outlets aim to stir the curiosity of the audience for the reported stories, by using stylistic devices: proper nouns as symbols for the main agents involved in the events, verb tenses that carry implicit affective values, superlative forms of adjectives, figures of speech, etc. The high percentage of similarity existing between the frequency of Romanian and English tokens (approx. 80%) indicate that the attention of the media is focused on the same players on the political, social, and economic scene.

By and large, we have discovered that similarities populate the analyzed headlines to a great extent; nevertheless, the comparative analysis has also identified differences in terms of syntactical construction and stylistic devices used in Romanian and English-language media reporting on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Although Romanian and English are both Indo-European languages, one of the main differences between them is represented by the syntax, due to their belonging to different branches (Romance vs Germanic). The examination of the Romanian and English headlines uncovered a series of particular cases that are either present in Romanian but not in English, or typify English headlines, but are not characteristic to Romanian ones. They are mainly distinctions observed in terms of syntax and in the category of verbs, especially tense usage, where the differences in aspect, meaning, connotation and structure (Herțeg 2021) impact on the construction of headlines.

One of the main differences circumscribed to the verb class refers to the 30 occurrences of the subjunctive mood in the Romanian dataset, used to express the idea of probability/possibility (a potential goal or a possible consequence), which in English is mainly rendered by modal verbs.

On the other hand, in the English-language headlines, modals seem to be more prevalent than in the Romanian dataset. They have both a deontic value, with instances of modal verbs used to express obligation, advisability or expectation, and an epistemic value, indicating possibility or prediction, especially in conditional clauses where the verb in the main clause is a present modal. The epistemic value records the most preponderant use, tapping to the interpersonal function of the text, concerned, in the context of our analysis, with the journalists' attitude towards the particular situation reported by the news piece and encapsulated in the formulation of the headline.

The continuous or progressive aspect is typical to the English grammar, therefore not found in the studied Romanian language headlines. The 21 occurrences recorded (12%) are employed to convey the idea that the described event is in full development at the moment of the report or is progressing dynamically over a timeframe. Using this tense aspect in headlines conveys immediacy and urgency, grabbing the readers' attention to a fresh and timely topic, and making the titles more engaging and action oriented. Therefore, formulations that contain a present progressive become instrumental for capturing the audience's interest in fast-paced news.

Another observable difference between the Romanian and the English headlines is the use of the infinitive with a future value in English. Mainly used for economy of expression, the infinitive with a prospective meaning is a compact way to convey future intent without using the auxiliaries that are the

mark of future tense. Furthermore, since the infinitive indicates actions that are planned, intended, or expected to occur, it automatically transmits the idea of futurity. From a stylistic standpoint, the infinitive communicates a sense of purpose for the future occurrence, while its neutrality makes it an ideal device for headlines, facilitating focus on the action or event itself without adding a subject of a specific timeframe, which are often implied by context.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that war-related headlines in Romanian and English online media perform functions that extend beyond the simple transmission of information. Consistent with the theoretical framework adopted, the findings suggest that headlines operate simultaneously at the textual and interpersonal levels, employing a range of linguistic and stylistic resources to attract attention, shape interpretation, and encourage readers to engage with the full news report. Morphological choices, particularly the strategic use of nouns, verbs, and adjectives, together with syntactic mechanisms such as ellipsis, topicalization, and compact headline structures contribute to the construction of effective “hooks” designed to maximize reader interest.

The comparative analysis reveals a considerable degree of convergence between Romanian and English media discourse. The high frequency of shared lexical items and references to the same political and military actors indicates that media outlets in both linguistic contexts construct the Russian-Ukrainian conflict around a largely common set of news values and focal points. This finding suggests that contemporary war reporting is influenced by transnational news agendas and journalistic conventions that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries.

At the same time, the study highlights the role of language-specific grammatical resources in shaping headline discourse. The use of the Romanian subjunctive mood and the frequent use of English modal verbs demonstrate different linguistic strategies for expressing uncertainty, possibility, prediction, and evaluation. Likewise, the use of the progressive aspect and the infinitive with future value in English headlines contributes to a sense of immediacy, dynamism, and anticipation that is less readily available through equivalent Romanian grammatical structures. These differences illustrate how distinct linguistic systems provide journalists with different stylistic tools for fulfilling similar communicative objectives.

The findings also support the usefulness of Jeffries’ textual conceptual model for headline analysis. By connecting linguistic form with textual and interpersonal meaning, the model makes it possible to identify how grammatical

and syntactic choices contribute not only to the representation of events but also to the construction of reader engagement. The study thus reinforces the view that headlines are carefully crafted discourse units whose linguistic structure plays a crucial role in guiding audience interpretation.

More broadly, the research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on media discourse by demonstrating that headline construction results from the interaction between universal journalistic practices and language-specific stylistic conventions. Future research could expand the corpus to include additional media outlets, longer timeframes, or other languages and conflict contexts, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic choices influence the framing of international events across different media environments.

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