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Analysing Fake News through Linguistics: Detecting Manipulation Tactics

Análisis lingüístico de las noticias falsas: Detección de tácticas de manipulación

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the purpose of this study is to look at how fake news in English is written and how it affects people's opinions. This topic is necessary because disinformation now has a major impact on our views about the COVID-19 pandemic, politics and climate change.

Method: the research includes several strategies like content analysis, discourse analysis, psycholinguistic techniques and comparative analysis. Samples of fake news articles that totaled 75 were selected from different social media sites and were compared with other news stories on the same subjects.

Results: it has been shown that fake news often uses strong language, makes exaggerations, states things in a clear way and alludes to respected authorities for support. The most commonly used techniques are playing on people's fears, changing the facts and using language that divides people. If we compare these articles to authentic news, we notice many differences in their style, tone and what they try to achieve.

Conclusions: fake news becomes more emotional and easier to share because of the features of language used in them. It points out that developing skills to spot misleading news and creating automated systems to catch misleading content is very important and it asks for further research from experts in other fields.

Keywords: Fake News; Linguistic Analysis; Manipulative Strategies; Disinformation; Media Linguistics; Stylistic Features.

RESUMEN

Introducción: el objetivo de este estudio es analizar cómo se escriben las noticias falsas en inglés y cómo afectan a las opiniones de la gente. Este tema es necesario porque la desinformación tiene ahora un gran impacto en nuestras opiniones sobre la COVID-19 pandemia, la política y el cambio climático.

Método: la investigación incluye varias estrategias como análisis de contenido, análisis del discurso, técnicas psicolingüísticas y análisis comparativo. Se seleccionaron muestras de 75 artículos de noticias falsas en diferentes redes sociales y se compararon con otras noticias sobre los mismos temas.

Resultados: se ha demostrado que las noticias falsas suelen utilizar un lenguaje fuerte, hacen exageraciones, afirman las cosas de forma clara y aluden a autoridades respetadas para apoyarse. Las técnicas más utilizadas son jugar con los miedos de la gente, cambiar los hechos y utilizar un lenguaje que divide a las personas.

Si comparamos estos artículos con noticias auténticas, observamos muchas diferencias en su estilo, tono y lo que intentan conseguir.

Conclusiones: las noticias falsas resultan más emotivas y fáciles de compartir por las características del lenguaje utilizado en ellas. Se señala que es muy importante desarrollar habilidades para detectar noticias engañosas y crear sistemas automatizados para detectar contenidos engañosos, y se pide que los expertos de otros campos sigan investigando.

Palabras clave: Noticias Falsas; Análisis Lingüístico; Estrategias de Manipulación; Desinformación; Lingüística de los Medios de Comunicación; Rasgos Estilísticos.

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to find out how English-language fake news are structured by examining them closely. Today, fake news is considered one of the biggest threats to democracy across the world. It encourages fake news, worries the public, influences thoughts and damages the confidence that people have in real media publications. These new platforms have enabled people to share such content quickly and often without checking it properly first. People who produce fake news frequently use a credible journalism style, but they include strategies aimed at emotions rather than messages based on reasoning. Sometimes these strategies make use of strong emotions in language, threats with no real danger, big claims with little proof and the use of certain facts while ignoring others. Because English is the main language for global communication, noticing how fake news operates in English materials is very important for boosting global media education and protecting information. While earlier research looked at fake news from journalistic, sociological and technological points of view, this paper studies it through language. It helps media linguistics by studying how fake news uses language to cause certain emotions in people, give the appearance of truth and impact the audience's understanding. The research is mainly focused on discovering and classifying the signs of manipulation in texts that are labelled as fake news. The analysis in my study depends on several approaches: content analysis, discourse analysis, psycholinguistics and comparison with findings from other disciplines. The study sets out to spot the linguistic signs that tell apart disinformation from actual reports by journalists, serving as a basis for new ways to deal with deceptive communications.

METHOD

The research design used here allows us to figure out and classify the approaches used in false stories published in English. To achieve its aims, the methodology uses important approaches such as content analysis, discourse analysis, psycholinguistic methods and comparative analysis. Because it looks at language use in many ways, we can analyze how manipulative messages are structured and interpreted. Systematizing the 75 fake news texts was done through content analysis allowing the extraction of their recurring themes and patterns of persuasion. I had to analyze which words or terms, grammar and formats help the distortion of the data.

Discourse analysis helped me look at these texts in their ways of communication and their roles in society. It was based on considering the author's purpose, who the message was made for and the role of exaggeration, emotional language and respected sources to evoke the desired thoughts. Psycholinguistic analysis was done to study how fake news language affects people emotionally and mentally. The authors explained which characteristics of speech create fear, anger or trust and how people build reputation through emotional words. Fake and genuine articles on the same topics were studied closely to make a comparison. By doing this comparison, it became apparent how different writing styles and arguments separate fake reporting from the real stuff.

RESULTS

Fake news is defined as specially created material - news or an event - containing distorted or fictitious data that can discredit a particular person or group of people in the eyes of the audience. Such information is disseminated for disinformation, propaganda, provoking aggression, raising doubts, panic, or changing established views. It can manipulate the audience into acting or thinking in a way that is favourable to the addressee and is often difficult to distinguish from truthful material.^(1,2,3)

However, fake news is not always purely false information. True facts can often be presented manipulatively, focusing on certain aspects and thus distorting objective reality.^(4,5) The same message, presented through different prisms, can be perceived as credible or fake.

In a broader sense, fake news is disseminating information in the media or through other channels about events, facts, or circumstances that are partially true, fictitious, or presented through subjective interpretation. In a narrow sense, the dissemination of distorted information benefits specific individuals or groups to achieve

manipulative goals.^(6,7)

Fake news can be disseminated through any source - print and electronic media, blogs, and social networks. Western researchers often use the term “fake news” to refer to fabricated or false information that is disseminated through available media channels, including print, television, and the Internet. Such content should not be confused with political satire or parody, which have a different nature and purpose.⁽⁸⁾

Headlines such as “Bill Gates planned to give people microchips through the vaccines in the COVID-19 pandemic” became common. Fear and trust in somebody seen as credible are both used by fake news, as shown by the words “control” and “microchips”.^(9,10) Examples such as “Everyone who learned about COVID-19 kept it under wraps at their secret lab!” and “Global warming is a false idea to gain money from research” make people doubt both science and scientists by claiming there are unfair interests in science.^(11,12) It is easy to see that fake news aims to create division and excitement by talking about polarising subjects. Examples that claim Clinton’s election will put the United States in a socialist disaster or that Trump’s plans could destroy the planet and lead to many species losing their lives, belong to fear-mongering metaphors and over-the-top statements.^(13,14) In their view, fake news’s ability to influence people mainly relies on this “economy of emotions”.⁽¹³⁾

For example, some tactics involve overdramatic language (“COVID-19 vaccines have led to thousands of deaths worldwide!”), made-up scientific ideas (“Vaccines have been proved to change your DNA!”) and strong words (“5G towers can make you ill and are used for mass surveillance!”), making people fear and doubt more.^(3,9,15) Even without true facts, knowing about these topics may give them a more credible appearance in people’s minds.⁽¹⁰⁾ Social media is particularly vulnerable to these techniques because people there read and pass along information very fast and don’t always think about it critically.^(2,8) According to Przybyla, fake news pieces have certain features that make them unique such as short declarative statements that create a negative feeling for readers.⁽¹⁶⁾ The linguistic analysis of our corpus agrees with the previous observations: manipulative phrases (27 %) and negative keywords (20 %) were some of the most popular aspects we found (table 1).

The following example of fake news, “*New study proves that organic food is a scam: It is no healthier than junk food!*” manipulates through an appeal to authority by using the words “new study” and “proves”, which imply scientific credibility, although no sources are cited. The term “scam” has a negative connotation, creating emotional outrage and questioning the audience’s choice. The use of an antithesis (“organic food” vs “junk food”) simplifies a complex issue into a categorical statement that is misleading. The strategy of unjustified expectation is also used here, i.e. a statement that contradicts popular opinion attracts attention by being provocative.

In the following example, “*Aliens have been spotted on Mars, and NASA is hiding the truth!*” the phrase “hiding the truth” uses conspiratorial rhetoric based on the assumption of a conspiracy. The terms “aliens” and “spotted” create a sense of sensationalism, and the mention of “NASA” serves to reinforce credibility, as the audience associates this organisation with scientific truth. The headline is full of semantic ambivalence: it simultaneously arouses curiosity (“aliens”) and distrust of authority (“hiding the truth”). The stylistic strategy of emotional intensification is also at work here, creating anxiety in the reader.

Another example of fake news, “*New secret weapon can destroy entire cities in seconds!*” uses lexical escalation, increasing the impact by combining words such as “secret weapon” and “destroy entire cities”. The lexical unit “secret” suggests that information is being withheld, causing anxiety. The verb “destroy” together with the time marker “in seconds” creates the idea of an instantaneous catastrophe, enhancing the emotional resonance.

We can see the distortion of credibility in the following example: “*Climate change is a natural cycle: Scientists admit they were wrong!*” because of the phrases “natural cycle” and “scientists admit”. Combining such lexemes creates the impression that the scientific community has retracted its conclusions. Using categorical language through the words “were wrong” creates the illusion of a complete discussion, leaving aside all the complexities of the problem. Stylistically, the text uses the strategy of “winning the truth”, which appeals to the reader’s need to simplify complex topics.

All of the above examples are based on emotional manipulation and lexical means of influence. The use of words with negative connotations (“cancer,” “scam,” “destroy,” etc.) is aimed at increasing fear and anxiety. Techniques such as hyperbole and appeals to authority create drama and sensationalism, which increases the likelihood of such news being spread. The manipulative style of fake news is contrasted with the balance and factual argumentation of reliable texts, which focus on the objectivity and balance of information.

A comparison of fake news with authentic texts shows significant differences in style. For example, a fake news story about a hurricane has the headline: “*Hurricane X devastates entire East Coast: Millions homeless and without food!*”. The use of the words “devastates”, “entire”, and “millions” significantly exaggerates the actual situation. Instead, a reliable news story might look like this: “*Hurricane X causes damage across multiple states; relief efforts underway.*” While fake news focuses on the dramatic elements, authentic news focuses on the facts and the response. Another example concerns the economy. Fake news: “*The stock market crash will wipe out all the savings of ordinary Americans!*” uses the phrases “wipe out” and “all savings” to create

panic. The actual text might read: *“Recent stock market volatility raises concerns among investors, experts urge caution.”* Fake news in healthcare texts, for example: *“Hospitals overwhelmed with vaccine injuries: Doctors refuse to speak!”* creates a picture of chaos, while the authentic text provides balanced information: *“Hospitals report a minor increase in post-vaccination visits, cases being closely monitored.”*

Table 1 gives the outcomes of the analysis made by the authors on a collection of 75 English-language fake news stories published on social media and online news platforms from 2020 to 2024. It includes the main features of language used in the texts, their frequency and their share among all the right answers.

Linguistic features	Number of examples of fake news	Percentage of utilisation (%)
Use of Negative Keywords	15	20
Appeal to Fear	10	13
Exaggeration	8	11
Use of Authority Names	7	9
Conflict and Catastrophe Language	9	12
Polarisation	6	8
Manipulative Phrasing	20	27
Total number of	75	100

As can be seen from the data, manipulative phrases (27 %) and negatively coloured keywords (20 %) are most often used in fake news. Appeal to fear and exaggeration are used to a lesser extent but also significantly impact the reader’s emotional reaction. Mentions of authoritative names, such as *Bill Gates*, account for only 6,5 % but contribute to the illusion of credibility.

Thus, fake news is characterized by increased emotionality, exaggeration, and provocative language. The use of manipulative strategies (appeal to fear, distortion of facts, and mention of authoritative names) makes such texts convincing to readers, creating a false impression of credibility.

DISCUSSION

The outcome of the analysis of 75 fake news texts (in table 1) demonstrates that the main approaches include deceiving language, using words with negative meanings, appealing to feelings, exaggeration and fact distortion. Such features help in efficiently changing the public’s feelings toward an issue. To be precise, using feelings, distorting the truth and choosing sharp vocabulary make up the main approaches and all of these techniques give the text greater power over the audience’s mind and heart.

Another point of success for fake news has been eliciting an immediate emotional response. Examples of texts about vaccines use expressions such as “toxic metals” and “alter your DNA,” designed to stir up fear and suspicion against scientific and medical institutions. Such statements are often not supported by evidence, but they appeal to essential emotional reactions, such as fear for health or outrage over potential violations of personal rights. This technique works exceptionally well in social media, where information is often received intuitively rather than critically.

Discourse analysis has shown that fake news actively uses the language of conflict and disaster to create tension and polarisation. For example, metaphors like “socialist nightmare” or “devastates entire East Coast” create in the reader’s head the image of extreme danger, which facilitates the news’s spreading among vulnerable groups.

Using such expressions in political or emergency news manipulates the mass consciousness, dividing the audience into supporters and opponents of a specific position.

Particular attention should be paid to the effect of exaggeration, which is often used in fake news to increase drama. Statements such as “*millions homeless*” or “*wipe out all savings*” are clear examples of how manipulative language exaggerates real-life circumstances to cause panic or force the reader to share information. This becomes especially dangerous in crises when accurate information is critical (figure 1).

A comparison of fake news with credible texts showed that the former were much more likely to use negatively colored words, categorical statements and emotional assessments. Reliable texts usually have a neutral tone, more precise wording, and references to authoritative sources. For example, instead of the dramatic phrase *“Doctors refuse to speak!”* a credible text will provide balanced information: *“Cases being closely monitored by healthcare professionals.”*

In general, manipulative strategies in fake news show a high level of adaptation of such texts to the modern information environment. Emotional appeal, exaggeration and distortion of facts are key tools that ensure the effective spread of disinformation. The paper is an argument for enhancing critical thinking among information

consumers, raising digital literacy, and creating and perfecting algorithms for automated recognition of fake news, considering the linguistic features identified.

Fake news (differentiating features)	Credible reports (differentiating features)	Common features
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Negatively coloured vocabulary•Categorical statements•Emotional assessments•Lack of reliable sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Neutral tone of voice•Precision of wording•References to authoritative sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Message subject line

Figure 1. Comparison of fake news and authentic reports

CONCLUSIONS

The study has revealed that fake news has specific linguistic features, such as emotional appeal, exaggeration, distortion of facts, and provocative vocabulary. Specific strategies are aimed at provoking fear, indignation, or other strong emotions, enhancing such texts’ impact on the audience. There are the main differences in style, such as far-out categorical statements with negatively coloured vocabulary in one and neutrality and factuality in the other, found in comparison with credible news. Such characteristics of fake news lead to its viral proliferation, especially in social networks where instant emotional reactions promptly replace critical thinking. Further research is promising for improving automatic fake news detection algorithms considering lexical, stylistic, and contextual features. A very important area is research into the role of cultural and social factors in the perception of disinformation and the integration of psycholinguistic models with new technologies. Most promising are developments in media literacy education programmes that will increase audiences’ critical thinking. An interdisciplinary approach that combines linguistics, psychology, and computer science will contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of fake news and effective counteraction.

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