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## SHAPING PERCEPTION THROUGH HEADLINES: DISCURSIVE FEATURES IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN PRESS COVERAGE OF UKRAINE

**Summary.** Headlines function as semiotic gateways to news stories, a condensed form of meaning that can shape readers' interpretations before they engage with full articles. In mass media, particularly in political reporting, headlines serve as discursive representatives and perform not only an informative but also a manipulative function, often framing events in ways that influence public opinion, political discourse, and policy insight. This article explores the linguistic features and corresponding pragmatic tools to shape reader perception in British and American press headlines, with a special focus on coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war (2022–2026). The study encompasses over 685 headlines from the British (*The Times*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*) and American (*Politico*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*) press. Drawing on the research of the recent vivid examples, syntactic structure, the pragmatic effect of different appearances of numerical data, and the modality of the headlines are regarded. The quantitative analysis illustrates a prevalence of declarative sentences, which function beyond simple information delivery. In contrast, the single use of an exclamatory sentence out of the sample acts as a deliberate emotional instrument, atypical for this type of discourse. Statistical values function as discursive tools that shape evaluation, emotional response, and perceived credibility. Through strategic choices between digits and words, approximation and precision, magnitude and focus, headline writers guide interpretation while maintaining an image of objectivity. The study illustrates the pragmatic application of high, median, and low modality with or without epistemic adverbs. Overall, the article highlights how the formal choice of the sentence type, numerical data, and modal value dictates the pragmatic effect, manipulating the readers to gain the strategic goal of the press outlet.

**Key words:** headline, linguistic manipulation, epistemic modality, numerical data, British and American press, Russian-Ukrainian war.

**Problem statement.** Headlines act as a brief spotlight of the news article, designed to capture immediate attention in today's fast-paced digital landscape. This makes them a formidable tool for shaping public discourse, as they mediate how society perceives global events and influence collective opinion. Whether through traditional media like TV and print, or digital channels like social networks, the media remains a primary vehicle to inform the target public. However, the impact of this news depends largely on how the headline is constructed.

The study of media discourse stands out as being one of the most relevant and modern areas in linguistics. It refers to interactions that

take place through a broadcast platform, whether spoken or written, in which the discourse is oriented to a non-present reader, listener or viewer. In other words, media discourse is a public, manufactured, on-record form of interaction [1].

In the age of accelerated information flow, ongoing global instability, and persistent uncertainty, people increasingly turn to multiple sources of trustworthy information in order to stay informed about the crucial events and to shape their own interpretations of contemporary developments. The role of mass media has never been more influential, functioning as an intermediary between factual reality and public awareness. Nevertheless, the manner in which information is framed significantly affects audience perception. In this respect, the importance of headlines as carriers of first impressions cannot be overstated, as they often set the tone and conceptual direction of the entire article. This phenomenon is particularly salient in the coverage of geopolitical conflicts, where discursive choices may reflect ideological positioning, national interests, or broader political agendas, while also enabling subtle forms of linguistic manipulation that may reconfigure or distort representations of reality. In discourse studies, manipulation is understood as an illegitimate or covert influence by means of discourse, where language structures are used to make audiences accept ideas or attitudes often aligned with the interests of the speaker or media outlet. According to Van Dijk, manipulation differs from open persuasion as it operates through subtle linguistic cues rather than overt argumentation. Manipulation in headlines occurs when language strategically emphasizes, omits, or skews information to provoke emotional responses, reinforce ideologies, or frame narratives beneficial to certain actors [2].

**The objective** of the research is to examine the discursive devices and headline-structuring strategies used in British and American media discourse to shape, frame, and potentially manipulate readers' interpretations concerning the Russian-Ukrainian war from 2022 to 2026.

The articles and their corresponding headlines were selected from media reports on major political events during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The sample comprises 685 analyzed headlines from well-known press outlets, particularly those in the United Kingdom, such as *The Times*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, and those in the United States of America: *The New York Times*, *Politico*, and *The Wall Street Journal* published during 2022–2026.

**Research results.** At present, the Russian invasion of Ukraine remains a focal point of international media discourse. It serves as

a striking example of how the media can shape global perceptions, views on Ukraine, its position in the international arena, and sometimes even decide the future. The language of newspapers has peculiarities that make it different from scientific literature, the language of fiction, and from colloquial speech [3, 4].

Contemporary studies on headlines focus on their functional roles [5] and linguistic features [6], with a particular emphasis on epistemic stance and persuasive strategies [7, 8, 9]. Additionally, recent studies have explored the manipulative strategies and tactics within news titles [10, 11, 12].

Media outlets strive to make their headlines as impactful as possible to capture reader attention. Statistics show that digital readers often judge a story by its headline alone, which should ideally be no longer than twelve words. Because this brief text determines whether a reader engages with the full article, authors must employ diverse discursive tools, including varied sentence structures, strategic word choice, and numerical data, to remain both memorable and persuasive [13, 14].

As the first textual element that attracts readers' visual attention while scrolling through news content, **headline sentence structures** play a crucial role in framing interpretation even before the full text is accessed. A comprehensive analysis of the gathered data reveals that the sample of British and American headlines is distributed as follows (Fig. 1).

Therefore, it is evident that the majority of *declarative* sentences (91.68%) serve a primary function to state facts. Notably, such headlines as “*Russia invades Ukraine: A dark day for Europe*” [29, 2022], “*Freedom’s Price*” [29, 2025], “*Russia fires hypersonic Oreshnik missile at Ukraine in massive attack*” [30, 2026] exemplify not only informative but also emotive escalation framing to draw reader attention to the unfolding high-stakes developments. Declaratives present geopolitical interpretations as universal truths. Statements such as “*World War III is already underway. In Ukraine.*” [31, 2024] act as assertives that bypass the reader’s critical filters. By avoiding emotive exclamations, the media maintains the image of impartiality, making the underlying ideological stance, the inevitability of global conflict, seem like an indisputable fact rather than a subjective projection. Moreover, the directives in the form of modalized declarative sentences, such as “*We should not be saving Putin’s face*” [30, 2022], utilize the illocutionary force of a persuasion to align the reader with specific moral or political

stances. This minimizes the space for independent deliberation, pushing the audience toward a call to action.

A modest presence of *interrogative* sentences (5.4%) within the headlines provokes curiosity, inviting the reader to seek resolution within the article. The questions serve to highlight areas of doubt, uncertainty, or ambiguity, especially in the context of rapidly evolving global crises such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, where concrete information is scarce or needs clarification: “*Will the Russia-Ukraine war escalate into a global conflict?*” [29, 2024], “*Why has Ukraine invaded Russia?*” [30, 2024], “*Will Europe send troops to postwar Ukraine?*” [31, 2025]. Furthermore, they operate as powerful tools for agenda-setting. From a pragmatic perspective, questions like “*What next after Ukraine’s shock invasion of Russia?*” [32, 2024] carry heavy presuppositions. It does not merely ask for information; it forces the reader to accept the premise provided. For example, it is firmly stated that the event was a ‘*shock*’ or an ‘*invasion*’ before the question is even answered. This manipulates guiding public perception by framing their doubts and concerns.

A few *imperative* sentences (2.77%) were found among the headlines analyzed. They are mainly used to command, call to action, provoke a particular response, or draw attention to current crises: “*Join Nato and deploy deterrents – Zelensky unveils ‘victory plan’*” [29, 2024]. Moving from information to action, the headline “*Give Ukraine fighter jets to counter Putin’s drone war, West urged.*” [29, 2022] deliberately employs the imperative mood rather than a declarative structure. This choice is designed to capture reader attention and elicit a perlocutionary effect by emphasizing situational urgency. Even though the reporting tag ‘*West urged*’ appears at the end, the reader first processes the message as a direct command, which increases the psychological impact and engagement.

Within the analyzed corpus of headlines, only a single exclamatory structure (0.15%) was identified: “*Dispatch from Ukraine’s front lines: Here, casualties have faces. Time for Ukraine to talk to Russia? ‘Nuts!’*” [31, 2024]. That is a highly emotional marker. The unique presence of this exclamatory sentence underscores a strategic use of emotional punctuation. By isolating the exclamation within reported speech, the headline achieves a powerful desired outcome, triggering a sense of defiance in the reader, while the newspaper maintains its structural posture of objective reporting.

Distribution of Sentence Types

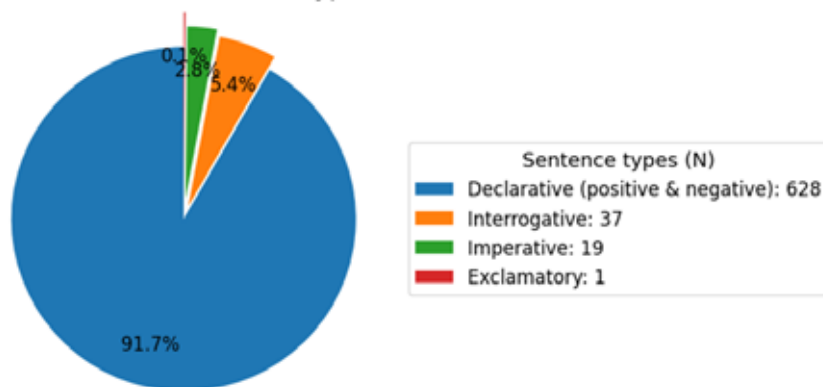


Fig. 1.

Thus, headline structures are strategically chosen to serve the specific goals of the article. Overwhelming dominance of declarative sentences suggests a primary function of neutral information-sharing, posing questions seeds specific uncertainties, and imperatives provoke an action. By avoiding exclamatory syntax, the press outlets prioritize an illusion of discursive impartiality, effectively suppressing overt emotional markers that might otherwise signal subjective bias to the reader. The rarity of an exclamatory type indicates a deliberate editorial commitment to formal detachment.

Regardless of the syntactical layout, **numerical data** is another strategic tool to catch the eye of the reader and influence their perception. Statistics, without exaggeration, is a part of the contemporary world. It is a pervasive feature of daily life, shaping the way we think and behave in ways that many of us no longer realize. Almost every key aspect of modern life, from the quality of the air we breathe to the national leader we want to vote for, is statistically measured in one way or another. It goes without saying that numerals in news headlines add a sense of credibility, precision, and urgency, which often make headlines more compelling and impactful even before the full text is consulted. Research on headline evolution by Nickl, P., Moussaid, M., & Spreen, P.-L. shows that online news titles have grown longer and adapted stylistic features historically associated with higher engagement. In the digital age, headlines compete not just for attention but for clicks and interaction metrics. Pressures from online platforms have shaped the linguistic style of headlines toward attention-grabbing features, where numbers serve as strategic hooks for the reader. Longer headlines with numerical data can outperform plain text in terms of visibility and reader appeal, although increasingly these practices resemble clickbait strategies [15]. As Cushion, S., Lewis, J., Thomas, R., Davies, G., & Sambrook, R. argue, the inclusion of numerical data in headlines is not merely for informational purposes. It is deliberately used to project the image of impartiality in order to make speculative claims appear more authoritative. According to the statistics, a large proportion of headlines contain at least some quantitative or statistical information [16]. Interestingly, in an experimental study on news interpretation, Koetsenruijter W. demonstrated that the use of specific figures rather than descriptive quantifiers such as *'many'* makes people more inclined to judge a story as credible, as does adding more numbers [17]. This effect has its roots in widespread assumptions that quantification is inherently objective. Numbers are thought to lend legitimacy and reduce perceived subjectivity, even when they do not inevitably increase accuracy or depth [18, 19].

Round numbers simplify information processing, making the data clearer, more impactful, and easier for readers to remember. For instance, the headline *"Ukraine has one million ready for fightback to recapture south"* [29, 2022] employs the rounded figure *'one million'* to evoke a sense of magnitude and collective strength. Such large, approximate quantities function symbolically rather than statistically, foregrounding scale and mobilization while implicitly shaping reader perceptions of military capacity and national resilience in Ukraine.

The graphic representation of numbers as digit-based rather than in verbal form further intensifies their perceptual effect, particularly when large figures are involved: *"More than 10,000 civilians killed in Ukraine in war; UN says; Berlin unveils £1.1bn military aid package – as it happened"* [30, 2024]. For instance,

in the headline *"Ukraine war casualties 'near 500,000'"* [29, 2023], the numerical form *500,000* produces a visually striking and emotionally charged impression with fear and panic. Readers tend to contextualize such figures by intuitively comparing them to familiar demographic units, such as city or regional populations, thereby grasping the magnitude more vividly. Notably, numerical headlines do not necessarily convey negativity or alarm. In certain contexts, they serve an evaluative function, framing developments in terms of success or progress. The headline *"Ukraine has recaptured 6,000 sq km in counteroffensive, says Zelenskiy"* [30, 2022] inspires optimism or even encouragement in readers rather than loss or threat. In contrast to the previous headlines, this one exemplifies how quantified territorial gains indicate strategic achievement and convey a sense of triumph, capturing the attention with the digit. Evidently, rounded numbers (*'6,000 sq km'*) often elicit a more profound emotional response than exact figures, such as *'5,986 sq km'* or *'6,010 sq km'*, due to their clarity and perceived immensity.

Precise numbers tend to project specificity and authority, making the data appear more accurate, reliable, and deliberately calculated. As a result, readers are more likely to interpret them as confirmed or verified statistics rather than rough estimates: *"Ukraine reconstruction and recovery will cost \$524 bn over next decade, says report – as it happened"* [30, 2025], *"31,000 Ukrainian soldiers killed since Russia invaded, Zelenskiy says – as it happened"* [30, 2024]. Unlike broad war statistics, specific figures tied to local events in Ukrainian cities are more effective at engaging the public. These details foster a stronger emotional intensity, increase interest in the report immersing the reader with the reality of the reported event as exemplified by the headline *"The United Nations refugee agency says 4,869,019 Ukrainians had left the country since Russia invaded – as it happened"* [30, 2022], *"At least 16 dead as Russian missile hits shopping centre in Ukraine"* [30, 2022].

Within the analyzed corpus, numerical expressions appear in 62 cases, representing approximately 9% of the total dataset of 685 headlines. This quantitative presence, while not dominant, is nevertheless significant, as numerical data perform distinct pragmatic and persuasive functions in headline discourse. Numerical framing shows that readers interpret the same information differently depending on how it is quantified or presented. It is a manipulative tactic that journalists can exploit through strategic numeric phrasing in headlines. While round numbers are utilized to create strong emotions like hope or fear, precise figures tend to evoke perceptions of statistical authority. By choosing specific figures to highlight either personal tragedies or big military wins, the media guides the audience toward a specific viewpoint. Ultimately, the perceived impartial appearance of statistical data is used to bypass the reader's critical filters.

Simultaneously, **modality** is a pervasive linguistic mechanism utilized to manipulate audience perception within news headlines. By adjusting the tone and defining the level of certainty or obligation in a sentence, it is achieved by strategic usage of modal verbs (e.g., *must, may, should*) and evaluative lexical markers, such as epistemic adverbs (e.g., *probably, certainly*) and adjectives (e.g., *likely, possible*). Modality articulates the author's epistemic commitment, the degree to which the addresser signals confidence in the accuracy and credibility of the assertion [9, 20]. Considering modal intensity, modal verbs are categorized into hierarchies of high

modality (expressing necessity or high certainty: *must, ought to, will, shall*), median modality (expressing probability or obligation: *would, should, can*), and low modality (expressing possibility or hesitation: *may, might, could*) [21].

High modality headlines function as directives, shifting from reporting news to issuing moral or political commands. By using 'must', the press outlets eliminate any middle ground, presenting the suggested action as the only logical track: "Zelenskiy says 'Europe must wake up' after assault sparks nuclear plant fire" [30, 2022], "The war is going badly. Ukraine and its allies must change course" [32, 2024], "Ukraine shall remain a sovereign energy hub: The case for total grid independence" [33, 2026]. This creates a high epistemic commitment, where the writer or authority figure positions themselves as not merely predicting the future, but demanding it, framing specific political or military actions as inevitable necessities.

The analysis of recent war headlines demonstrates the tendency to strategically employ **attributed modality**. By quoting high-certainty words from officials, outlets create authoritative, catchy headlines, bypass factual commitment and project absolute certainty to the reader while offloading all responsibility for the claim's truth onto the speaker [22]. In the Ukrainian war context, headlines often feature authorities making categorical predictions (high modality): "Peace has no alternative, Zelenskiy tells Davos summit" [29, 2026], "Zelenskiy: Military innovation will 'transform' air defences" [33, 2026], "'We will succeed': Zelenskiy says Ukraine ready to launch counteroffensive" [30, 2023], "'Ukraine will never be a victory for Russia, Biden says" [31, 2023]. Staying credible, the outlet reports the high certainty of the claim without the risk as it's just the reported speaker's stance.

In contrast, median modality serves as a tool for logical prediction and strong probability without the strict tone of high-intensity markers. For instance, the use of 'should' in statements by leaders such as "Zelenskiy says Ukrainian territory should be under 'Nato umbrella' to stop war" [30, 2024] functions to suggest moral or strategic necessity. While high modality demands action, median modality projects the success of those actions [23], which is an example of true diplomatic strategy that fosters reader resilience by framing victory as a matter of 'when' rather than 'if' [24, 25]. Consequently, "should" serves as a strong recommendation, while the action remains unrealized; it is presented as highly anticipated, as illustrated: "Europe should pivot its defense industry toward permanent high-capacity production" [34, 2026]. This high degree of confidence effectively transforms a prediction into an inevitable fact for the audience. The modal verb 'can' possesses lower modal intensity than 'should,' yet it effectively directs the reader toward a specific logical conclusion by framing potential as a realistic outcome: "Hope and scepticism in Ukraine as Zelenskiy says Trump can bring about 'just peace'" [30, 2025], "New maritime corridors can secure Kyiv's status as a global grain superpower" [31, 2026], "Ukraine can contribute to EU energy security" [31, 2025]. While high modality explicitly demands action, median and low-median markers project the feasibility and strategic value of those actions, reflecting sophisticated diplomatic rhetoric. The verb 'can't' denotes a restricted lack of ability. It conveys a realistic assessment rather than an absolute denial, qualifying it as a medium-strength claim instead of a categorical one: "Europe Can't Make Ukraine Enough Weapons – So It's Paying Kyiv to Do It" [33, 2024].

Low modality allows the press to engage in speculative reporting and manage public anxiety while avoiding responsibility for the accuracy of the outcome. By using 'may' or 'could', headlines can present dramatic, click-worthy scenarios, such as total victory or global disaster, without technically claiming they are facts: "The Ukrainian air battle has begun: it may decide the entire war" [29, 2024], "Trump tried to extort Zelenskiy and was impeached – now he may succeed" [30, 2025]. In these examples, 'may' as a marker of possibility reflects a cautious, speculative tone that keeps the outcome open, thereby preserving the profound seriousness of the potential consequences. Forecast, possibility, or hope without a guaranteed result is exposed by 'could' or 'would'. It protects the publication's credibility. If the prediction fails, the press still successfully manages the reader's sense of fear or uncertainty. For instance, "Russia's War... could run for years" [30, 2024], "War in Ukraine could be won or lost on Capitol Hill" [29, 2024], "Zelenskiy says he would 'quit for peace' as he refuses US demand for Ukraine minerals" [30, 2025]. The prevalence of low-modality threat-opportunity framing in recent years reflects the ongoing evolution of online news headlines, where speculative uncertainty is utilized to maintain reader curiosity and psychological tension [15].

Moreover, **epistemic adverbs** regulate the speaker's degree of certainty in a truth-claim [26, 27]. These markers range from absolute certainty (e.g., *undoubtedly, clearly, obviously, certainly*) to significant doubt or distancing (e.g., *allegedly, supposedly, seemingly, reportedly*). By using modality, defined by Nuyts J. as a subjective stance in which adverbs signal the speaker's knowledge and commitment to a proposition [22, c. 31-34], media outlets can strategically utilize these indicators to prioritize institutional impartiality.

A significant manipulative nuance arises with evidential adverbs such as 'obviously' and 'evidently'. Although these lexical choices are frequently employed to signal objective impartiality, they often serve to naturalize the speaker's perspective as an undeniable fact, for instance, "Ukraine's Path to NATO is Obviously Long, but the Direction is Set" [31, 2023], "Evidently, Putin is Betting on Western Exhaustion" [29, 2024]. By suggesting that the conclusion is based on confirmable proof or shared general knowledge, the writer effectively bypasses individual skepticism, presenting a subjective interpretation as an objective, self-evident reality [22, 28].

The epistemic adverbs are strategically potent. They can either support or change the modal value [8]. In the headline "Ukraine will undoubtedly reclaim its status as Europe's primary energy battery by 2027" [33, 2026], the verb 'will' and the adverb 'undoubtedly' mutually reinforce the statement's modality, creating a modal harmony of high-intensity truth-claim, which is a powerful rhetorical tool used to project total confidence and strategic leadership. Occasionally, they act as an epistemic modifier that effectively shifts the modality from categorical certainty (high modality) to a reasoned estimation (median modality): "Kyiv will probably secure the 2026 reconstruction package despite EU budget friction" [31, 2025]. To evade institutional accountability, media outlets use adverbs like 'reportedly' or 'allegedly' to establish an epistemic distance, signaling that they are merely relaying information rather than verifying it: "Allegedly, a 2026 ceasefire deal is being brokered behind closed doors in Switzerland" [31, 2026]. According to Wierzbicka A., these adverbs function as

'hearsay markers', protecting the outlet's credibility if the claim is false [26, с. 278–282]. 'Seemingly' and 'conceivably' manage public anxiety by introducing threats without confirming them as facts: "The Kremlin seemingly lacks the manpower to sustain another year of high-intensity conflict" [32, 2025].

Thereby, this modal range allows a publication to shift between commands (high), predictions (median), and speculation (low). This ensures the reader remains emotionally engaged and ideologically aligned with the preferred narrative, even as situational realities remain highly unstable. "Defeat for Ukraine would be a global disaster. Nato must finally step in..." [30, 2024] is a bright example of modality shifting. It starts with median modality (*would*) to paint a hypothetical dark future and then switches to high modality (*must*) to provide the only solution. It creates a potential threat, then provides an absolute command to fix it as a classic manipulative structure.

**Conclusion and further research.** The headlines of 2022–2026 prove that media discourse is a secondary battlefield. It is one of the most explicit and impactful elements of news reporting, carefully created with specific discursive features. By analyzing syntactic mood, statistical evidence, and epistemic stance, the research demonstrates how headlines function not merely as information summaries but as strategic tools designed to shape global perception and maintain geopolitical momentum. The prevailing number of declaratives among the others gives the field for the other communicative elements to affect the reader. By foregrounding numerical representation and selective lexical framing, headlines strategically manipulate audience interpretation. Whether employing round figures or precise statistics, numerical data serves to enhance credibility, amplify scale, and intensify emotional responses such as urgency, hope, or fear while often obscuring contextual nuance. The sample of analyzed British and American headlines illustrates that modality helps outlets to adjust their certainty, letting them report on the war in Ukraine without being 'wrong' if things change. By using words like 'could' or 'reportedly', the media can hedge their claims to protect their reputation while still shaping the reader's sense of urgency or doubt. Ultimately, these discursive features demonstrate how seemingly factual elements function as effective tools of influence, directing interpretive frames and priming emotional responses before a reader even engages with the full text. Studying these features deepens our understanding of how media shapes public interpretation and underscores the importance of critical engagement with news content. Further studies should explore syntactic architecture and lexical framing through a multimodal context. Moreover, diachronic analysis would offer valuable insights into how these media strategies have evolved over the course of the conflict.

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#### Гаврилюк О. Дискурсивні особливості заголовків про Україну в британській та американській пресі як інструмент впливу на аудиторію

**Анотація.** Заголовки виступають первинними індикаторами змісту, що стисло відображають суть публікації та моделюють когнітивну установку читача ще до його ознайомлення з повним текстом статті. У масмедіа, особливо в політичних репортажах, заголовки слугують дискурсивними репрезентантами і виконують не лише інформативну, а й маніпулятивну функцію, часто подаючи події під таким кутом, що це впливає на громадську думку, політичний дискурс та розуміння державної політики.

У цій статті розглядаються лінгвістичні особливості та відповідні прагматичні інструменти формування читацького сприйняття в заголовках британської та американської преси, з особливим акцентом на

висвітленні російсько-української війни (2022–2026). Дослідження охоплює понад 685 заголовків із британських (*The Times, The Economist, The Guardian*) та американських (*Politico, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal*) видань. На основі вивчення актуальних прикладів досліджено синтаксичну структуру, прагматичний ефект різних способів репрезентації числових даних та модальність заголовків. Кількісний аналіз ілюструє, що декларативні речення є найпоширенішим типом конструкцій у вибірці, виконуючи функції поза межами простого інформування. Водночас поодинокі окличні речення є прямим емоційним інструментом, нетиповим для цього виду дискурсу. Статистичні показники виступають дискурсивними засобами, що формують оцінку, емоційну реакцію та рівень довіри до інформації. Завдяки стратегічному вибору між цифрами та словами, приблизністю та точністю, масштабом та фокусом, автори заголовків формують контекст сприйняття читачем, зберігаючи при цьому видимість об'єктивності. Дослідження демонструє усвідомлене застосування високої, середньої та низької модальності з епістемічними прислівниками або без них. Загалом, у статті підкреслюється, як формальний вибір типу речення, числових даних та модальних значень визначає прагматичний ефект, дозволяючи маніпулювати сприйняттям читачів для досягнення стратегічних цілей видання.

**Ключові слова:** заголовок, лінгвістична маніпуляція, епістемічна модальність, числові дані, британська та американська преса, російсько-українська війна.

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