HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MEDIA: IS LANGUAGE THAT POWERFUL?

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ABSTRACT: This article reports an empirical study of the emotional power of media language in terms of its influence on shaping public opinion concerning human trafficking. The primary interest in this research lies in revealing whether media texts filled with stylistic devices substantially contribute to a change of readers' emotional states, and if so, to what extent. The statistical sleuth has been undertaken in order to test the media effect. The results have great value for the study of media discourse within the paradigm of cognitive linguistics.

KEYWORDS: media discourse; human trafficking; lingua-stylistic means; metaphor; readers' emotions

1) Introduction

The present research concentrates on the study of human trafficking in modern media discourse on the basis of an empirical approach. More precisely, its primary interest lies in responses to media differences in the treatment of such issue.

Human trafficking is viewed as a construal being framed in a certain manner in the media discourse (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998). The public opinion toward this social situation is predetermined by the contours that, being filled with verbal means, provide the way and direction of the verbal conceptualization of the event shown in media texts (Rayner et al. 2001). Following the recent trend to ground theory in empirical data, this research makes use of such to investigate concrete hypotheses within the area of cognitive linguistics (Miall and Kuiken 1994).

The paper focuses on the analysis of the peculiarities of the verbal representation of human trafficking which are crucial in shaping

public opinion regarding the ideas that are primed on the conceptual level and embodied verbally.

It has become a common belief that media discourse has great potential in influencing public opinion. Moreover, it has become a widely spread assumption that expressive means and stylistic devices contribute a lot to shaping readers' attitudes. This idea is generally taken for granted by a number of researchers when analyzing media language.

Consequently, these thoughts have given me an impetus to undertake an inquiry which is explorative in nature, i.e. I aim at carrying out an empirical research which will prove or disprove the abovementioned. The general purpose of the research is to analyze whether the stylistic devices in texts contribute to changing readers' opinion and, if so, to what extent.

This research includes the following steps: (a) selection of the texts for the survey; (b) evaluation of the emotional potential of the texts, i.e. analysis of the positive/negative valency of verbal units; (c) questionnaire design; (d) data collection and processing, and (e) an explanation of the results.

2) Media through the lingua-stylistic lenses

As a preliminary stage, I have evaluated the emotional power of media texts with the help of the traditional lingua-stylistic analysis. I have then identified numerous expressive means and stylistic devices such as metaphor, simile, irony, parcellation, allusion, antonomasia, parallelism, etc. In the process, I have noticed that metaphors and their varieties are more frequent than other devices in media texts. As a prediction I can claim it is mostly metaphor that plays a crucial role in the conceptualization process of the social situation investigated here.

The inventory I have compiled contains the following examples of stylistic devises and expressive means in media articles on human trafficking:
- Metaphor: 'he would never let his son marry a victim of trafficking.
    "There's a big difference between wearing a new T-shirt and an old

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T-shirt," he said.' [The Telegraph, 13.09.2003]; 'Sex tourism, the dark underbelly of the tourist trade...' [The Telegraph, 13.09.2003]; 'I escaped this chamber of horrors…' [The Telegraph, 13.09.2003]; 'Cambodia is a big anarchy machine…' [The Telegraph, 13.09.2003]; 'she has had glimpses of hope' [The Observer, 03.02.2002]; 'there is a hungry market demanding younger, and cheaper, women' [The Observer, 03.02.2002]; 'Locked in the world of sexual cruelty, exploitation and drugs' [The Guardian, 19.06.2002]; '"They are nothing more than a commodity," he said.' [The Guardian, 19.06.2002]; 'being lost under a wave of misinformation' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004]; 'clouded by misinformation and fear' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004]; 'Europe is not going to be a fortress, nor do we want it to become one, but it will not either be a chasm where anything can pass through.' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004]; 'Knock, Knock... Who's there? Many Migrants!' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004]; 'their trade in the currency of human hope' [The Observer, 03.02.2002]; 'tip of the iceberg' [The Observer, 03.02.2002];

- <u>Irony:</u> 'They were going to a better life.' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004]; 'They're thinking, This may not be so bad.' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004]; 'sending their kids off to a "better life"' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004];

- <u>Allusion:</u> 'their idea of prostitution is "Pretty Woman,"' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004];

- <u>Alliteration and assonance:</u> 'apartment for appointments with various Johns' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004];

- <u>Parcellation:</u> 'tourists looking for sex with young girls. And for sex with children.' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004];

- <u>Parallelism and repetition:</u> 'It was easy to pass as the man's sister because no questions were asked. Easy to become anonymous. Easy to slip into a life of domestic slavery in modern-day Britain' [The New York Times, 25.01.2004]; 'Out of life of selling plastic cups and plates at the side of the road for no pay and a regular beating to a life as a "maid" working from 6am to midnight,

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looking after seven kids and cleaning a house for no pay and a regular beating.' [The Guardian, 19.06.2002].

The examples mentioned above represent just a small portion of the stylistic devices used in media texts. The chosen sample, however, is a sound basis to test my hypotheses about the power of media language.

Nevertheless, it still remains disputable whether verbal means really possess distinctive power in shaping public opinion. Having recognized the presence of stylistic devices in the depiction of human trafficking, I have decided to undertake this research to discover whether stylistic verbal means truly contribute to changing readers' emotional states.

3) Hypothesis

The objectives of my empirical study are to check (a) the dependence of readers' altered emotional states, (b) the extent of this effect on stylistic means, and (c) the extent of changing readers' opinion. My initial hypothesis is that a text filled with connotative language units predetermines the rapid change of readers' emotional states and attitudes towards the social situation. In other words, lingua-stylistic means contribute to the change of participants' emotional states and opinions to a large extent.

I also predict that the level of such change will be much higher when reading a text rich in stylistic devices than while reading a less stylistically emotional text. Moreover, I will compare the effects on readers of the factual, informative text and the interpretative text intermingled with some elements of a narrative.

4) Participants

Fifty Humanities students aged 19-22 participated in the study. All of them were randomly chosen students of Kyiv National Linguistic University. They were divided into two groups according to the type of text read.

5) Case study

For this survey, two types of text were chosen according to the criteria of presence/absence of stylistic effects and informativeness/interpretativeness of the given media text.

Text 1 is a factual media article without stylistic devices ("Trafficking in human beings in South Eastern Europe: a UNICEF report"). Text 2 is an analytical media article intermingled with narrative elements and containing literary devices ("The girls next door: how sex trafficking works" by Peter Landesman from The New York Times published on January 25, 2004).

For the purpose of my research, I have labeled the first text 'neutral', and the second text 'emotional'.

6) Procedure

The two groups were distinguished according to the type of text read. Group 1 read Text 1 and Group 2, Text 2. Both groups were given the same questions, which were grouped into three sections: personal information, pre-reading questions and post-reading questions. After the participants filled in the blanks, their questionnaires were collected and the data were processed in order to find out whether the presence or absence of literary devices present in the texts correlated with the extent to which readers' opinions changed.

The demographic information was processed with frequencies and descriptive statistics. Most participants are female (92%) and are 19.8 years old on the average. They read newspapers in English (84%), but such reading takes place mostly once a week (33.3%) or once a month (33.33%). They like to read cultural news (42.2%) and news on society (31.1%). There is an awareness of the human trafficking situation among 94% of the participants. Concerning the language used, most of them rated it as 'rather not' difficult (62%) while 32% stated that it was not difficult at all. It was also stated that the text was absolutely clear (48%) and rather clear than not (40%).

I was interested in whether there is a difference between responses to the pre-reading questions and to the post-reading ones. To test this, participants answered seven similar questions before and after reading a given text. Examples of questions are provided below.

Do you believe that a trafficked person is…
(a) a victim of poverty?
(b) an illegal migrant?
(c) a slave?
(d) an adventurous money-seeker?
(e) a highly paid worker?

What is the possibility of you being in the same situation?

Do you feel sympathy with the trafficked person?

I was also interested in whether there is an observable difference between groups after reading the text. I predicted that media texts contribute to the change of readers' attitudes. On those variables that were normally distributed, I conducted parametric tests, to compare the given means, namely paired-samples T-tests. The reason for using this test lies in comparing the paired variables. The difference within a pair indicates the degree of attitude change after reading a given text.

The results proved to be statistically significant only for the following:

(a) a victim of poverty ($t = 3.060$, $df = 49$, $p = 0.02$, 1-tailed), mean: before 2.00, after 2.38;

(b) a slave ($t = 4.899$, $df = 48$, $p = 0.00$, 1-tailed), mean: before 2.1, after 2.8;

(c) a highly paid worker ($t = 5.315$, $df = 49$, $p = 0.00$, 1-tailed), mean: before 2.5, after 1.6;

(d) the possibility of being in the same situation ($t = 4.204$, $df = 49$, $p = 0.00$, 1-tailed), mean: before 1.6, after 2.1;

(e) sympathy for victim ($t = 7.506$, $df = 49$, $p = 0.00$, 1-tailed); mean: before 1.8, after 2.5.

The results show that the belief that a trafficked person is *a victim of poverty*, *illegal migrant*, and *slave* indeed increased to some extent; as did the level of *sympathy for the victim* and *possibility of being in the same situation*. In contrast, there is no change in the perception of a trafficked person as *adventurous money-seeker*, and the level of belief that a trafficked person is *highly paid* decreased to some extent.

The significance of five out of seven variables confirms the hypothesis that a text does contribute to a change of readers' attitudes toward a trafficked person. However, it remains to be seen which of the texts, *neutral* or *emotional*, has a stronger influence on attitude change, and to what extent.

To pursue this question, I took the mentioned variables and applied an independent samples T-test. The results proved to be significant in three cases out of five:

(a) *the extent of sympathy for a victim* (t = 6.546, df = 48, p = 0.00, 1-tailed), mean: neutral 1.9, emotional 3.2 (cf. Graph 1);

(b) *the degree of belief that a trafficked person is a victim of poverty* (t = 2.140, df = 48, p = 0.0185, 1-tailed), mean: neutral 2.1, emotional 2.6 (cf. Graph 2);

(c) *the degree to which participants could imagine being in the same situation* (t = 5.107, df = 48, p = 0.0185, 1-tailed), mean: neutral 1.6, emotional 2.6 (cf. Graph 3).
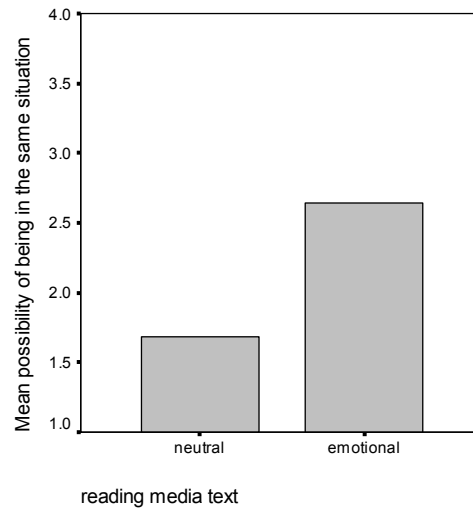
In sum, a text rich in stylistic devices has a greater power to change previous attitudes of readers than a *neutral* text.
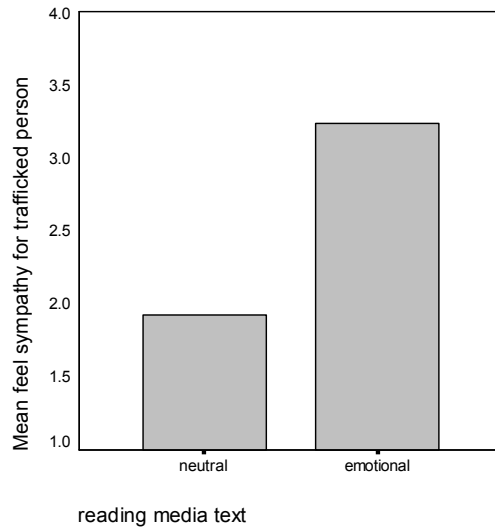
Graph 1: The degree of sympathy for a victim
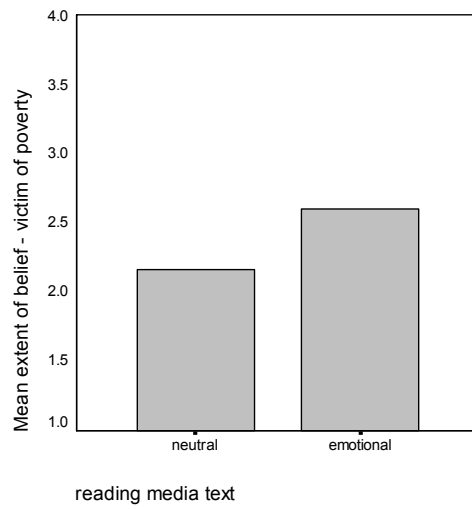
Graph 2: The degree of belief that a trafficked person is a victim of poverty

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Graph 3: The degree to which participants could imagine being in the same situation

I also predicted that a text contributes to a change of the emotional state regarding the reaction to human trafficking depicted in the texts. To investigate this aspect, participants were asked whether their opinion changed after reading the text and whether they were affected by it. The data was investigated with the help of an independent samples T-test:

(a) the result for *the degree of opinion change* is not significant (p = 0.320, 1-tailed), mean: neutral 2.4, emotional 2.2;

(b) the result for *the degree of being affected by the text* is highly significant (t = 8.544, df = 48, p = 0.00, 1-tailed), mean: neutral 1.7, emotional 3.3 (cf. Graph 4).

Thus, readers' opinions did not change significantly after reading the neutral media text, whereas the level of being emotionally affected proved very high for the emotional media text, which contained numerous stylistic devices.

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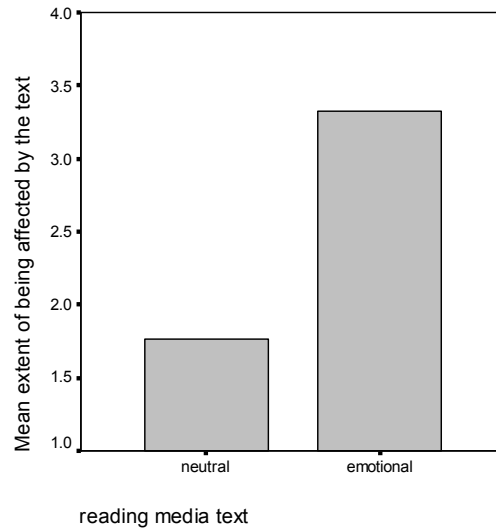
Graph 4: The degree of being affected by the text

An *emotional* text has a great power to influence readers emotionally. In a next step, it is attempted to find out which particular emotions participants feel while reading media texts on human trafficking. Emotions were measured by means of an independent samples T-test. With the help of post-reading questions, such emotions as 'anger', 'disappointment', 'sadness', 'ambivalence', 'indifference' were measured.

Only two of the five variables were significantly different. More precisely, the variables *ambivalence* (mean: neutral 2.6522, emotional 1.6800) (cf. Graph 5) and *indifference* (mean: neutral 2.6800, emotional 1.6000) (cf. Graph 6) have a decreasing tendency after reading the *emotional* text in comparison with the neutral text. After reading the *emotional* text the level of *ambivalence* of their emotions and *indifference* decreased significantly, which indicates that the *emotional* text had a more significant impact on readers.

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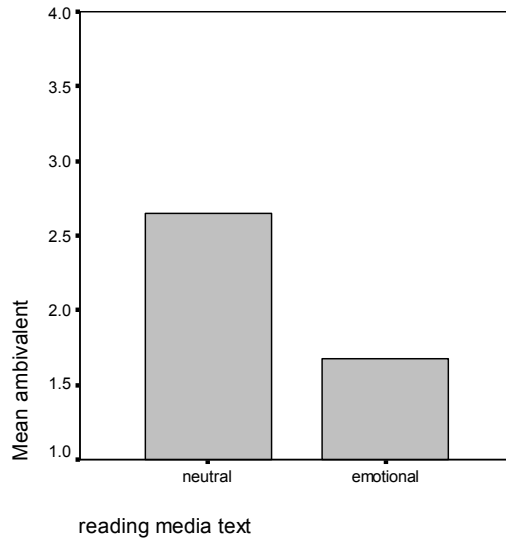
Graph 5: The degree of ambivalence
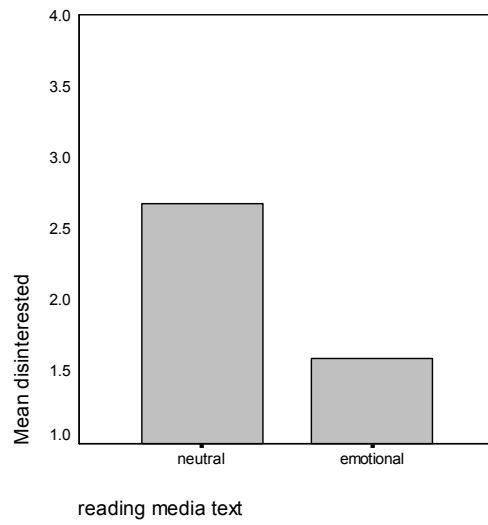
Graph 6: The degree of indifference

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The analyses described above proved that media texts rich in lingua-stylistic means contribute to an alteration of readers' emotional states. In addition, it is worth investigating whether there is some correlation between *reading newspapers in English* and *the degree of being affected by the text* as well as between *awareness of human trafficking* and *the extent of being affected by the text*. I conducted a Spearman correlation test to answer this question:

(a) between reading newspapers in English and the degree of being affected by the text ($p = 0.189$, 1-tailed) = not significant;

(b) between awareness of human trafficking and the degree of being affected by the text (Spearman's rho = -0.3, $p = 0.017$, 1-tailed) = significant.

The results above show that although correlation is significant as $p < 0.05$ ($p = 0.017$), it is negative and weak (-0.3). This suggests that the more participants heard about human trafficking, the less they are affected by the text emotionally. However, the value rho = -0.3 shows that this correlation is rather weak, which does not give the high extent of correlation between the variables. So, the *awareness of human trafficking* does not influence on the extent of being affected by the text.

7) Discussion

Stylistic devices do not contribute to a change of readers' opinions; however, they do contribute to a change of readers' emotional states.

Initially, I predicted that media texts would influence readers' opinions, but the lack of statistical significance for the results point to a lack of regularity between reading media texts and changing of readers' opinions. Apparently, a single text does not significantly contribute to the change of public opinion; however, it does seem to have a great emotional impact on readers. Consequently, priming effects are needed to create a special context for the interpretation of the situation and shape the audience's opinion.

The degree of being affected by the text, nevertheless, increased after reading the text rich in lingua-stylistic means (emotional text). The participants showed a lower degree of ambivalence and indifference after reading the emotional text than after reading the neutral one. Thus, a single text has a great potential of emotional influence on the reader if it is filled with stylistic devices.

In sum, I think it is reasonable to claim that the emotional power of the stylistic devices of media texts is a pre-requisite of the possibility to shape public opinion, provided that a series of texts are given to readers. Affecting readers by means of language creates a ground to develop a particular public viewpoint on any topic which has been the focus of attention in media.

8) References

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