Click bait: Forward-reference as lure in online news headlines

Jonas Nygaard Blom [1], Kenneth Reinecke Hansen [*]

Centre for Journalism, University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, DK-5230 Odense M, Denmark

Abstract

This is why you should read this article. Although such an opening statement does not make much sense read in isolation, journalists often write headlines like this on news websites. They use the forward-referring technique as a stylistic and narrative luring device trying to induce anticipation and curiosity so the readers click (or tap on) the headline and read on. In this article, we map the use of forward-referring headlines in online news journalism by conducting an analysis of 100,000 headlines from 10 different Danish news websites. The results show that commercialization and tabloidization seem to lead to a recurrent use of forward-reference in Danish online news headlines. In addition, the article contributes to reference theory by expanding previous models on phoricity to include multimodal references on the web.
© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Online news headlines; Forward-reference; Cataphora; Discourse deixis; Media commercialization; Tabloidization

1. Introduction

What makes the reader click? This question can be considered the single most important issue for a journalist when writing headlines for online news media. If the readers do not click (or tap) on the headlines, they do not read the stories, leading to less activity on the news page and, thus, less potential for commercial revenue.

Journalists, by tradition, use a variety of strategies to make their headlines catch the readers' attention. Some use stylistic and narrative devices to make the headline seem (more) interesting (Lindemann, 1990; Schaffer, 1995; Bucaria, 2004; Ifantidou, 2009), while others center on sensationalism (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013), provoking content (Wallberg, 2013:13) and other types of gossip-like content emphasizing sex, scandal, self-improvement, tragedy and the para- or supernatural (Schaffer, 1995). This paper will focus on a widely used, but sparsely described, variant of the stylistic and narrative techniques in online news: forward-reference.

Forward-reference in headlines occurs in two forms, discourse deixis and cataphora. Following Yang (2011:129), we define forward-referring discourse deixis as *reference to forthcoming (parts of the) discourse relative to the current location in the discourse*, e.g. 'This is the best news story you will ever read.' In comparison, cataphora (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) is a closely related concept. Cataphors point forward as well, though not at the discourse level, but to a word or a phrase later in the sentence or text, e.g. 'When he arrived at the crime scene, the journalist interviewed the victim's wife.' Here, the pronoun *he* refers to the postcedent, *the journalist*, later in the sentence.

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +45 65 50 22 44/27 26 67 25.
  E-mail addresses: blom@journalism.sdu.dk (J.N. Blom), krh@journalism.sdu.dk (K.R. Hansen).
[1] Tel.: +45 65 50 21 67/21 17 82 13.

The use of forward-referring headlines on the web is illustrated in the following examples. The first is a headline from an editorial blog on bbc.co.uk, the second a news headline from thesun.co.uk, while the third is a headline from the media site upworthy.com.

(1) This is an A-minus paper? (bbc.co.uk)
(2) He loves Beatles, menthol cigs..and longs for muscles like Van Damme [sic] (thesun.co.uk)
(3) This Amazing Kid Died. What He Left Behind is Wondtacular (upworthy.com)

In (1) the pronoun *this* refers deictically to a forthcoming discourse segment in the full text that must be read or viewed in order for the reader to understand what is being referred to. Thus, the pronoun can be regarded as a sort of teaser, an information gap (Loewenstein, 1994, 2003; Golman and Loewenstein, 2013) that must be filled, inciting the readers to click and see what *this paper* is. Later in the text, it is revealed that it is a very short and presumably plagiarized final essay by an athlete from University of North Carolina's athletic department that received a grade of A minus. The paper was part of an academic fraud scandal in the spring of 2014.

Similarly, the pronoun *he* in (2) points forwards, not at a discourse segment, but at a name, and is thus an instance of cataphora. If the curious reader clicks and reads on to find out who *he* is, it is, surprisingly, revealed that the person being referred to is North-Korean despot Kim Jong-un.

Finally, (3) is an example of a viral hit that has gained over 15 million pageviews (Grobart, 2013). This popularity is perhaps prompted by the emotional wording, or, as proposed by Fitts (2014), by the curiosity inducing information gap created by the pronouns *this* and *what*.

As observed by Baicchi (2004): ''The use of such empty pronouns is strategic and satisfies the need for creating expectations and suspense.'' (2004:26). A point elaborated on by Wulff (1996) and Wales (1996): ''The greater 'the distance', so to speak, between 3PP [third person pronoun] and NP [nominal phrase], the greater an effect of suspense and anticipation. It is not surprising, therefore, that cataphora both within the sentence and between sentences is now a regular journalistic device.'' (Wales, 1996:39).

It should be noted that it has not been comprehensively examined if forward-reference in headlines actually generates curiosity and suspense – it might as well, in some instances, lead to annoyance if the reader just wishes to skim the headlines.[2] However, a reception study conducted by Ifantidou (2009) found that the readers, in this case college students, did not care if there were underdetermined semantic meanings in headlines as long as they were found creative and riveting. It can thus be assumed that forward-reference does not lead to annoyance, but rather curiosity and suspense, as long as the reference is used in a way that is considered creative and riveting by the reader.[3]

Furthermore, concerning the claim of generated anticipation, previous effect studies (van Gompel and Liversedge, 2003; Kazanina et al., 2007) show that when encountering a cataphor, the parser predicts that the postcedent will occur later in the discourse and, thus, builds up (syntactic) anticipation. This effect has been summarized by Strauss and Feiz (2014): ''*Cataphoric* reference [. . .] requires that the listener or reader attends more closely to the upcoming discourse, because a referent has just been introduced *as if it were* already known or previously mentioned, when in fact, it will not emerge until some time later in the discourse.'' (2014:148, original emphases).

2. Research question

In this paper we will suggest a multimodal expansion of the phoric reference system based on the different types of references that occur in headlines in online news media. Using this as a stepping stone, we will set up an analysis of 100,000 headlines on 10 different Danish news websites in order to examine how forward-referring headlines are used in online news media, to what extent and in which type of content.

In an international setting, Danish news websites can be considered a fitting case due to the widespread usage of internet in Denmark[4] leading to a widespread consumption of web news: Second to TV, web news is the primary form of news consumption in Denmark (Nielsen and Schrøder, 2013:21).

Still, a reservation has to be given. It is somewhat uncertain in what way an analysis of forward-referring headlines in Danish media can be considered representative for other cultural settings, since discourse deixis and cataphors may be expressed in different ways in different languages. For instance, in Nunggubuyu, a non-Pama-Nyungan language of

---

[2] According to a recent unpublished survey on click-bait in newsfeeds, conducted by Facebook researchers El-Arini and Tang (2014), ''[. . .] 80% of the time people preferred headlines that helped them decide if they wanted to read the full article before they had to click through.''

[3] Moreover, forward-referring headlines seem to be widely read. Of the 10 most viewed stories in 2013 on Danish public service news pages tv2.dk and dr.dk, more than half of the headlines – 5 and 7 on tv2.dk and dr.dk, respectively – were forward-referring (Blom and Hansen, 2014).

[4] According to Reuters Institute (Newman and Levy, 2013:7), 90 percent of Danes use the Internet.