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ONLINE PRESS DURING COVID-19: LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE HEADLINES PUBLISHED ON *Ávilared*

La prensa digital en tiempos de la Covid-19: análisis lingüístico de los titulares publicados en *Ávilared*

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Abstract

The situation of social and health instability caused by the COVID-19 has been contained on press. This work investigates the linguistic codification of the published headlines on the main online newspaper in the city of Ávila (Spain) —*Ávilared*—. There are few studies on the analysis of headlines from the traditional newspaper (Zorrilla, 1996; Nadal Palazón, 2012), there are even fewer on the headlines of the online newspaper. We begin with a description of the formal characteristics of 90 digital headlines: impersonal third person, verb in starting position, *quoting conditional*, *bimembration*, ellipsis, nominal structures and numerical expression. The results point to a difference between the linguistic mechanisms used in the online media and the traditional one.

Keywords: Linguistic Analysis, Headlines, Health, Online Newspaper, COVID-19, Ávila.

Resumen

La situación de inestabilidad social y sanitaria advenida por la enfermedad COVID-19 ha supuesto la inclusión obligada de contenidos informativos sobre esta cuestión de salud y sus consecuencias en la prensa. Este trabajo se aproxima a una investigación que desea dar a conocer la codificación lingüística de los titulares de noticias publicados en el principal periódico digital de la ciudad de Ávila (España) —*Ávilared*—, por el escaso número de trabajos que estudian los titulares de prensa en papel (Zorrilla,

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1996; Nadal Palazón, 2012), que son menos aún sobre los que hay en soporte digital. En este sentido, avanzamos con una descripción de las particularidades formales de los titulares digitales, ya que esta “nueva prensa es tan joven que no tiene ni teoría, ni historia, ni manual actualizado de sus innovaciones” (Fogel y Patiño, 2007, p .7). El análisis, basado en un corpus de 90 titulares publicados durante todo el período de estado de alarma en España, atiende a siete elementos formales; a saber, la bimembración, la estructura nominal, el empleo de expresiones numéricas, la impersonalización, el inicio con verbo, la aparición del condicional “de rumor” y la omisión de cualquier categoría gramatical. Se demuestra la divergencia de algunos planteamientos resultantes de análisis de titulares de prensa en papel.

Palabras clave: Análisis lingüístico, Titulares, Salud, Prensa digital, COVID-19, Ávila.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Real Academia Española in its online dictionary defines the term 'headline', in its fifth meaning, as "each of the titles of a magazine, newspaper, etc., composed in larger types" (<https://dle.rae.es/titular>). The perspective adopted by Martínez Albertos (1983) is similar when he understands it as a system of informative content determined by paralinguistic conditioning factors. In a work that intends to analyze these journalistic statements, it is insufficient to dwell on their external aspect ("composed of larger types"), especially when this quality is typical of the traditional press.

From the point of view of traditional linguistics, the definition of 'headline' also lacks completeness because it does not take into account its textual features. In this line, we find the one proposed by Alarcos (1977, p.128) when he determines that they are "the signs with which the content, object or destination of a piece of writing printed in newspapers is indicated or made known [and is endowed with the elements of an autonomous sign]".

It is well known that a good headline presents the summary of the main idea of the informative content and defines the orientation that the publication channel gives to the fact (Van Dijk, 1990), so it forms a representation of the body of the news. If we add to this the reading routine on digital platforms, in which only a superficial glance at the headlines is taken, its wording has a decisive influence on the interest of readers to *click* and go to the full text. In this sense, the information contained in them acquires a higher relevance than the news itself and, sometimes, satisfies the information needs of readers (Fundéu, 2012; Francescutti, 2009), since "if a sublime text has been written but

the right headline is not found, it is as if nothing had been written at all" (Fundéu, 2012, p. 341.).

Despite the outlined importance (information and creativity), there are voices that still manifest the lack of studies of this structural part of the discursive genre 'news' (Zorrilla, 1996; Nadal Palazón, 2012) despite of the attempts that have been made in the Hispanic-American field (Fernández, 2016; Gallardo-Paúls and Enguix Oliver, 2014; Rebollo, 2008; Ruiz Acosta, 1992; Soria Cáceres, 2017; Zorrilla, 1996). Now, has it been the same interest level shown for the digital headline? The answer, unfortunately, is hopeless.

In this paper, we propose an approach to the linguistic peculiarities that have been used by the editors of the main digital newspaper of the city of Ávila, *Ávilared*, to headline the news published during the period of the state of alarm decreed by the Spanish Government, that is, from March 14 to June 21, 2020. The fact that the study is limited to this newspaper is due to two reasons: first, it is the only one that was originally created in digital format, that is, there is no analogical counterpart (as is the case of *Diario de Ávila*); the second, because of the widespread belief — for some time during the confinement — that newsprint could carry the coronavirus (which the world press soon denied and the Media Association published a report on "Sources related to the transmission of COVID-19 through paper" — https://www.farodevigo.es/media/documentos/2020-12-31_DOC_2020-06-22_13_15_43_ami-oms.pdf —).

2. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this research is to approach the linguistic analysis of the news headlines published in a digital newspaper in the city of Avila during the state of alarm decreed by the COVID-19.

The specific objectives are the following:

- Identify the number of headlines containing the term COVID-19 in the headlines.
- To analyze the structure of headlines according to the criteria that have been studied in the traditional press, i.e., bimembration, omission of grammatical categories, nominal construction, impersonality, verbal onset, use of the conditional "de rumor" and the use of numerical sequence, given the importance that numbers have had during this time.
- To quantify the linguistic features mentioned above.
- To determine whether there are predominant features in digital headlines or whether they maintain the trend of those appearing in the print press.

METHODOLOGY

To develop the analysis of the headlines, we searched the newspaper's digital archive with the content limiters shown in image 1. We selected all the headlines containing the generic term 'COVID' regardless of the section of the newspaper in which it was found, but with a time limitation (from when Royal Decree 463/2020, of March 14, declaring a state of alarm for the management of the health crisis situation caused by COVID-19 becomes effective until the end of the same).

Hemeroteca
Utiliza el buscador para localizar contenidos de nuestro digital.

En Sección

-- Todas las secciones · ▼

Desde fecha

14-03-2019

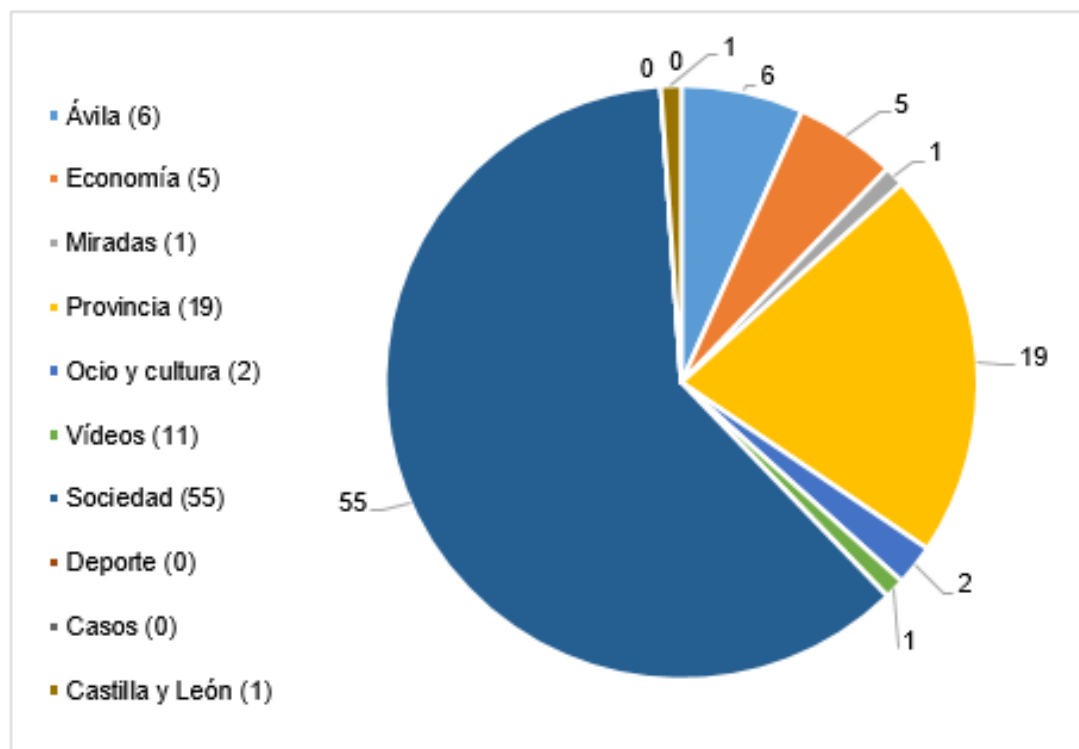
Hasta fecha

21-06-2020

Image 1. Search elements in the *Ávilared* newspaper library.

Source: <https://avilared.com/library/26>.

Therefore, the analysis is based on a corpus of 90 headlines appearing in eight of the ten sections of the newspaper (Avila, Province, Society, Cases, Economy, Leisure and culture, Sports, CyL, Miradas, Videos), with a single time frame, from the effective implementation of the state of alarm until the end of the same, that is, from March 14, 2020 until June 21 of the same year. Specifically, the statements of our interest are distributed as follows: an outstanding appearance of headlines containing the word COVID in the "Society" section (55) is followed far behind with news about the coronavirus in "Province" (19) and are reserved with less than ten occurrences in the rest of the sections. This is better observed in graph 1.



Correspondence of headlines containing the term COVID and newspaper section.

Source: Own elaboration.

In terms of percentages, a logical distribution of the news in the reviewed sections is evident. Thus, 61.11% of headlines reporting on the pandemic disease are positioned in places of greater generality, such as "Sociedad (abulense)", and are particularized in specific episodes when they specify the place of the news; namely, "Por Ávila y Cs plantean crear un espacio en la capital en recuerdo a los fallecidos por los fallecidos por la Covid-19" (TA04 ². In "Ávila", May 24, 2020); "The mayor thanks the effort of those who work 'altruistically' against Covid-19" (TA01. In "Ávila", April 21, 2020); "233 deaths due to Covid-19 in the province of Ávila" (TP08. In "Provincia", April 30, 2020); "La Adrada approves a 2020 budget adapted to the Covid-19 crisis" (TP19. In "Provincia", May 15, 2020); or some activity related to leisure and culture is highlighted: "La Banda de la Escuela Municipal de Música rinde homenaje a las víctimas de la Covid-19" (TOyC01. In "Ocio y cultura", May 28, 2020).

By considering headlines as authentic texts that can be read autonomously and independently as a concrete expression of the semantic macrostructure of the news story (Van Dijk, 1990, pp. 77-79), we analyze, on the one hand, the linguistic coding of the typical features of the initial journalistic summary, such as bimembration, ellipsis,

² All the headlines of the corpus have been registered by means of a code that informs the section in which it appears and the number of the headline within the section. Thus, the code TA04 refers to headline number 04 of the section "Ávila". TS refers to those in "Sociedad"; TE, in "Economía"; TP, in "Provincia"; TM, in "Miradas"; TOyC, in "Ocio y cultura"; TV, in "Vídeos"; and TCyL, in "Castilla y León".

nominal structures, impersonality, the use of the verb in the initial position of the statement and the use of numerical expressions and the conditional "of rumor". On the other hand, we quantify the use of these mechanisms, in order to determine whether there are discrepancies between the defining features of traditional headlines in print and those of the digital press.

4. ANALYSIS

In this section we propose a succinct and certainly by no means exhaustive approximation of the mechanisms referred to above, which are characteristic of the classic studies on newspaper headlines.

As already mentioned, headlines are independent texts, produced in specific contextual situations, which play between information, creativity and linguistic economy. Alarcos (1977) pointed out as a characteristic feature of this type of statements in the printed press the "expressive bimembration", whose intention is aimed at either to oppose those two elements of the substance of the situation that we call theme and thesis, or to break up by marginalization or by relief one of the constituent elements of the complete linguistic sequence, or —in cases of coordination— to mark the contrast between two themes or two theses connected with the same thesis or, respectively, with the same theme. (Alarcos, 1977, p. 148)

In other words, with this mechanism, the familiar and the new information form a segmented structure, either by marginalization or by relief, but maintaining the complete sense of the linguistic sequence. Let us give some examples of this structure:

- (1) "Covid-19: difference between positive and diagnosed cases" [TS42].
- (2) "The worst day of Covid-19: eight dead in Avila" [TS39].
- (3) "The first Covid-19 infected person to leave the ICU: 'You guys are awesome, I can't say another word'" [TS37].
- (4) "Mediana de Voltoya: also small towns fight against Covid-19" [TP17].
- (5) "The nursing home of Mombeltrán, free of Covid-19" [TP05].

In examples (1) and (2) a thematizing element is isolated by means of the use of the graphic marking of the colon. There are also headlines in which the lexical subject and the direct complement of the verb are located, also omitted by the colon and with the option of using quotation marks (3 and 4).

By eliding copulative verbs, we find structures whose lexical subjects and attributes are confronted, opposed, since it is easy for the reader to retrieve them comprehensively. Examples such as (5) are the ones that best glimpse the informative function of subject and rema.

The omission of linguistic units such as articles, nexuses and nouns, which is recognized in the corpus of Nadal Palazón (2012), is nonexistent in our study. Only one case of prepositional elision is recognized, possibly a typo due to forgetfulness given the

speed of editing and publication on the newspaper's website. The headline to which we refer is:

- (6) "The Popular Party asks the Government for autonomy to allocate the surplus to Covid-19" [TE05].

The tendency of analogical journalistic headlines to unimember structure is indisputable (Alarcos, 1977; Nadal Palazón, 2012), a feature also notorious in our corpus, such as those reproduced in the following exemplifying sequence:

- (7) "Alzheimer's in the time of Covid" [TM01].
- (8) "New Covid-19 death on a day without any PCR positive" [TS11].
- (9) "Ávila health zones with more and less deaths due to Covid-19" [TS19].
- (10) "Decalogue for pet owners in the face of Covid-19" [TS43].
- (11) "233 deaths due to Covid-19 in the province of Avila" [TP08].
- (12) "Instructions on waste treatment before Covid-19" [TP15] [TP15].

These sequences represent the clearest value of the headline, that is, to synthesize the news, to convey a specific event with brevity and clarity (Grijelmo, 2008:16).

Nadal Palazón (2012) states that it is very common, especially in Mexican newspapers, to start the headline with an explicit verb, possibly due to the journalist's intention to highlight the concepts of greatest interest and to orient the reading public. In our case, it is not strange to find the presence of these hyperbolic formations (13-15) as it is a common recommendation in digital journalistic style manuals in order to attract the attention of readers (Narvaja de Arnoux, 2015, p. 145) and avoid "exhausting [their] patience or getting bored" (Fundéu, 2012, p.51-52):

- (13) "Naturávilas closes its doors due to Covid-19" [TP14].
- (14) "Donate all your funds to purchase materials in the fight against Covid-19" [TP12].
- (15) "Covid-auto starts operating in Avila" [TS48].

Although the above examples refer to verbs in the personal form, we also include sentences whose beginnings are participles, because, as Grijelmo (2008:16, p. 477) states, "[the use of this form is] a way of compressing the idea we wish to bring to the headline" and it is not an incriminating error as a bad copywriter (Grijelmo (2008:16):

- (16) "Sixth floor of Sonsoles Hospital disinfected after Covid patients left without patients" [TS26].
- (17) "Covid-auto tent dismantled." [TS08]
- (18) "Funeral for Covid-19 victims called" [TS09].
- (19) "Aid to small tourism companies called to mitigate the effects of the impact of Covid-19" [TE01].

The phenomenon of the impersonal construction in the third person plural is very rare in our corpus without observing any deviation from what has been observed in the study of the Spanish press (Nadal Palazón, 2012). With them, the journalist acquires the indeterminacy typical of unknown subjects or those who are not interested in making known:

- (20) "Organ donations encouraged after finding 85% drop in donations due to Covid-19" [TS10] [TS10].
- (21) "Covid residencias' teams are created to go to nursing homes" [TS50].

Closely related to impersonality is the use of the conditional verb tense, since, as grammatical studies show, it is a mark of indirect discourse not attributed to anyone. This value justifies the multitude of terms used to refer to it: "of quotation", "of indirect style", "of conjecture" or "of rumor" —for which we have opted—. However, "it does no good to the journalist who [uses it], since they convey insecurity, rumors. Even more so we must express this censorship with regard to headlines" (Grijelmo, 2008:16, p. 474).

- (22) "The National Police School could host 132 people infected with Covid-19" [TS40].

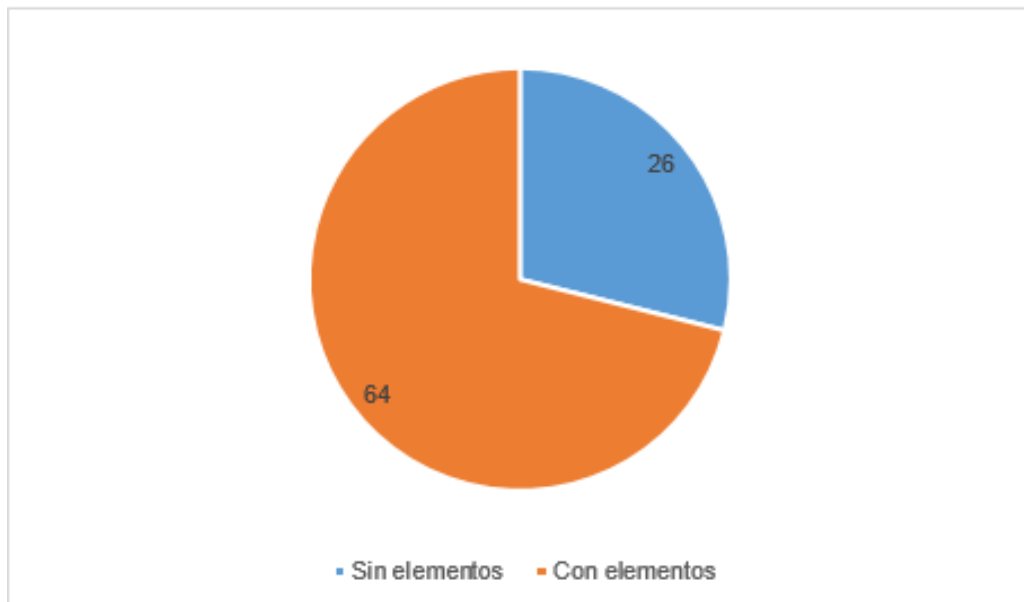
In contrast to what usually happens with the abusive use of numerical language, during the last few months figures have been the protagonists of the news on the television news and in the written press; and their appearance in the headlines, as a space that brings together relevant information, is more than necessary. This feature, which may be optional in other circumstances, in the first wave of COVID-19 in Spain has turned out to be prescriptive due to the daily need of the citizen to be informed of the evolution of the pandemic in the country or of the consequences suffered by part of the population due to COVID-19. In this sense, we indistinctly located labels with numbers represented by figures (23-26) or with words —denominated "numerals"— (27-28) or hybridization of the two previous ways (29). Now, the encoding of numerical data in writing is subject to the general criterion of preferring the use of figures in headlines for their conciseness and clarity, but if the word is chosen "it is not advisable to mix in the same statement numbers written with figures and numbers written with words" (RAE and ASALE, 2019, p. 500):

- (23) "Sanidad cifra en 209 las muertes vinculadas al Covid en la provincia de Ávila" [TS20].
- (24) "More than 140 Parkinson's patients are left without rehabilitation because of Covid-19" [TS33].
- (25) "Those diagnosed by Covid-19 exceed 2500 in Avila" [TS36].
- (26) "Covid-19 has infected 51 healthcare workers in Avila" [TS46].
- (27) "The worst day of Covid-19: eight dead in Avila" [TS39].
- (28) "Two new deaths in Avila raise death toll from Covid-19 to new" [TS49].
- (29) "In two days, eight elderly residents die with Covid-19 and another 20 with symptoms" [TS34].

5. RESULTS

Of the 90 headlines analyzed, 26 (28.88%) respond both to the canonical enunciative constructions (subject + verb + verbal complements) and to those that do not include any of the aforementioned mechanisms. In this sense, they are close to the style

standards for journalistic headings, are informatively complete and facilitate the quick comprehension of the news item.

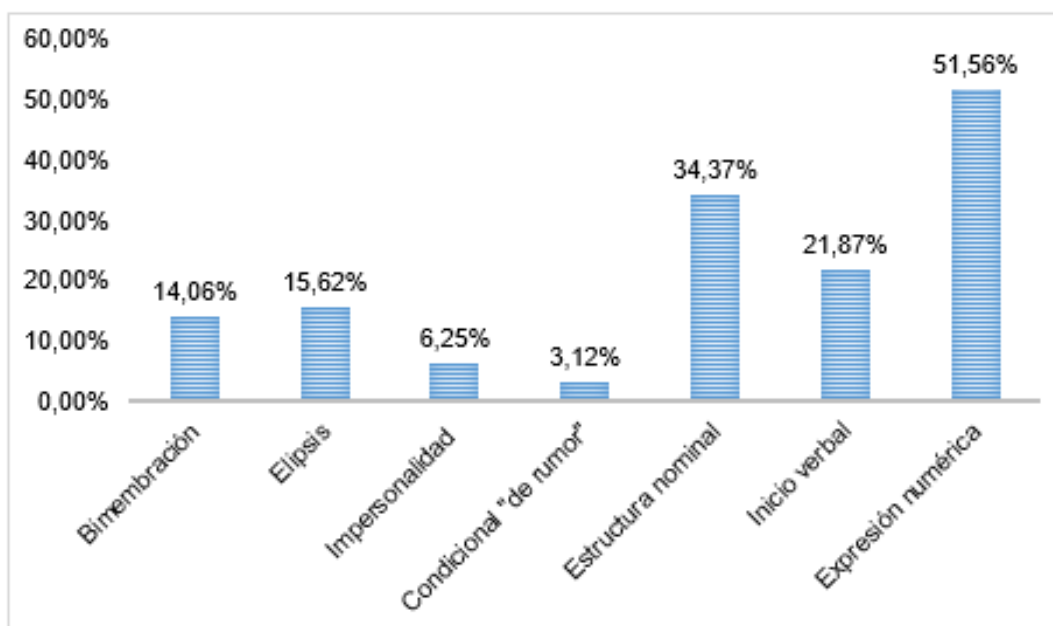


Contrast between headlines that contain some formal feature and those that do not.

Source: *Own elaboration.*

Within the group with analysis features, we quantified that only 9 headlines are characterized by bimembral structures; 10 contain elision of verbs, either *dicendi* or copulative, without appreciating the omission of other grammatical categories as it is usual in print headlines. Sentences with a degree of impersonality due to both the unspecific entity of the verbal action and the conjectural value of the verb tense of the conditional are almost non-existent, with a total of 6 occurrences.

More than 10 recurrences are counted the linguistic features promoting the clear, brief and informative expression of the digital journalistic practice: the nominal structure, the beginning with a verb (either conjugated or in its non-personal form in participle) and the specificity of numerical expression.



Percentages of formal features appearing in the 64 headlines.

Source: *Own elaboration.*

6. CONCLUSIONS

Although headlines are only a minimal part of the news story, this succinct analysis has allowed us to know the formal articulation of this type of text in the digital press of a provincial city during the four months of the state of alarm. Thus, it is possible to validate the preference for syntactically complete and canonically ordered statements that are direct for the reader of the 21st century.

Headlines with numerical statements predominate, given the situation of informative need that the Spanish citizen was living at that time, and with nominal structures, a choice corresponding to a level of abstraction with the presentation of events as static situations. Likewise, headlines with verbal onset also stand out as a constant feature in our corpus. These three elements exceed 20% of recurrence. In this sense, their appearance confirms the practical recommendation of digital journalistic style manuals: simplicity, clarity and restriction of meaning games, as far as possible.

On the other hand, unlike the printed press, which is subjected to the prescription of space and columns and with it the elaboration of bimembral headlines with ellipsis of different grammatical categories, the number of appearances with noticeable formal features in a corpus of headlines on COVID-19 is scarce. For the time when confusion reigned in the viewer and/or reader, there has hardly been room for indeterminate structures and rumorology promoters. It was not (and is not) the time for it.

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