Review

for Ruslana Margova's PhD dissertation
Linguistic features of fake news

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bilyana Mihaylova

Ruslana Margova's PhD work is dedicated to a very burning topic: disinformation and the ways in which it is achieved in the mass media. The studies in the dissertation are situated in relation to important events of recent history and the present times: Brexit, the election of Donald Trump as president, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The author has many years of experience in journalism.

The work has a theoretical, empirical and applied aspect. Although primarily focused on linguistic techniques to achieve disinformation, it is interdisciplinary.

As a subject of research, disinformation is multi-layered and is the object of study by a number of sciences. It can be analyzed, for example, from a psychological, social, philosophical, logical, ethical, military point of view. Here, the PhD student sets herself the task of limiting the study of disinformation and so-called fake news in the field of linguistics, which I do not know if she completely achieves.

The aim of the present study is to discover the linguistic characteristics of disinformation, fake news and maliciously harmful claims. The ultimate goal is to more easily establish linguistic mechanisms for recognizing so-called fake news and disinformation.

The hypothesis developed in the dissertation is that it is possible to find formal linguistic features that suggest that a given text is not credible, or more generally: that it is disinformation.

Ruslana Margova's doctoral thesis consists of seven parts.

The introduction presents the topic of the research, the purpose and tasks, the methodology of work. Here, the PhD student describes the main difficulties related to her work, which she separates into three groups: distinguishing fake news from disinformation, difficulties related to data selection, and difficulties related to the conceptual apparatus.

In the second chapter of her work, Margova tries to define the terms related to fake news, examines their development in historical and philosophical terms. Many of these terms are neologisms and are not defined in

Bulgarian dictionaries. The systematization of terminology in the field of fake news is one of the main contributions of this dissertation.

A number of theories related to fake news and disinformation have been explored. Sufficient scientific literature has been cited on the matter.

The third part of the work is very curious. It is, on the one hand, a historical overview of the topic of fake news, and on the other, it relates a number of historical anecdotes.

In the fourth part of the work, the PhD student pays attention to the border areas of knowledge related to disinformation – psychology, medicine, physiology, sociology, political science, law, public relations, education.

The fifth part discusses philosophical issues related to the problem of disinformation. This question is related to the question of truth and the search for truth and falls into a philosophical topic that I would not like to enter, as it is not in the field of my scientific knowledge. It is interesting how in this chapter of the PhD dissertation, in the discussion of the ideas of fallibilism, and post-truth, the grammatical category of evidentiality intervenes.

Fallibilism is an idea according to which any scientific knowledge is in principle not final, but only an intermediate interpretation of the truth, which implies subsequent replacement with a better interpretation. The term "post-truth" is used to refer to circumstances where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs.

The linguistic category "evidentiality" is directly related to truth and the true. R. Margova follows R. Nitsolova's definitions in defining this language category, which indicates the speaker's source of information. There are four types of evidentials in the Bulgarian language: indicative, renarrative (transmission of information received indirectly), conclusive/inferential (in case of conclusion), dubitative (in case of doubt). In all cases, except in the indicative, the speaker conveys in his utterance information of which he is not a direct witness. Margova rightly notes that "the attitude towards truth is implicit in the grammatical category analyzed by the present work." The speaker's distance from the information in the utterance can be interpreted as some kind of confidence in the message. The category of evidentiality is also related to the famous Grice's maxims.

The following chapters of Ruslana Margova's dissertation are essential in relation to the chosen title. Here the PhD student tries to discover linguistic markers for fake news.

In the sixth chapter, a summary of the main strategies used in computer linguistics to detect unreliable news in Bulgarian is presented. The opinion that the renarrative should be considered as the main means of achieving

disinformation in the Bulgarian language is emphasized here. This is also the main specificity compared to English, for which a rich theoretical literature is available.

The seventh chapter of the doctoral thesis is of particular importance. It addresses the issue of renarrative as a possible marker of doubtful content. I am impressed by the detailed review of the theories of evidentiality in foreign and Bulgarian linguistic literature. The forms of evidentials in the Bulgarian language have been examined. In the end, the R. Margova came to one conclusion:"

"let us assume that this homonymous construction of the renarrative with the inferential imperfect, with the perfect of constatation, with the admirative in the present tense – regardless of its grammatical value and definition, in certain cases, often found in journalistic texts, can fulfill a pragmatic function and it is to deceive. This very form can also be indicated as a grammatical marker for misinformation. When in journalistic headlines we have the use of the renarrative – regardless of the tense or its homonyms, plus the inferential imperfect, in the third person, we must be alert to how true the content is. " (p. 137).

On the other hand, this chapter complements the study of linguistic markers already discussed in the previous chapter. Here, the focus is mainly on the news headlines and less on the main content. The doctoral student's thesis is that in journalistic texts the renarrative is used to say something that is not necessarily verified and not reliable for sure. The use of a renarrative is a kind of alibi for journalists that they are not misinforming, since the very form of a renarrative contains no certainty that what is being reported actually happened. According to Margova, journalists do not always use renarratives with the aim of deliberately disinforming. They are forced to publish unverified news in order to keep up with their colleagues. Moreover, today the possibility of correcting and deleting the text leads to a certain irresponsibility in journalistic behavior. What the PhD student said brings us to the conclusion that this is about creating fake news out of irresponsibility, not out of a desire for disinformation.

In the following pages, R. Margova presents evidentiality in linguistic terms, the typology of this linguistic category, some controversial issues and examines in detail the concept of evidentiality in Bulgarian linguistic science.

The eighth chapter examines practically the uses of renarrative in the media. The PhD student points out that in renarrative, on the one hand, the author of the statement hides, depersonalizes himself in order not to bear responsibility, but on the other hand, he depersonalizes and hides himself in

order to institutionalize what was said in the context of this depersonalization of true statements. The mechanism is similar to that in impersonal, reflexive and indefinite constructions, i.e. constructions in which the subject of the action cannot be identified. The analysis of news as fairy tales is interesting. The renarrative is used in fairy tales as well as in some more popular historical works, showing the author's distance from the information. Some ambiguities appear in the handling of linguistic terms. For example, Margova claims: "Journalists use renarrative by mixing it with other tenses – probably somewhat accidentally, somewhat unconsciously." Of course, it is a matter of mixing different evidentials – indicative and renarrative – and their tenses. It has been argued that the switch between renarrative and indicative is not always on a conscious level.

Margova believes that the homonymous construction of the renarrative with the inferential imperfect, with the perfect for constatation, with the admirative in the present tense – regardless of its grammatical value and definition, in certain cases in journalistic texts fulfills a pragmatic function, and that is to deceive. I would very much like to see examples of this directly below the stated theses.

Chapter nine examines other strategies that aim to attract or mislead the reader yet in the headline: so-called clickbait headlines, lead changes that make the headline unclear about the content of the news, genre mixing, use of present indicative tense, hedge words, disclaimers, etc.

The title of the tenth chapter is promising and intriguing: linguistic experiments with renarrative. The first experiment is related to the annotation and analysis of an array of titles selected manually from online media, the other is related to the analysis of specific examples from practice.

A serious attempt has been made here to reveal the role of evidence in influencing the reader, shaping his opinion, which ultimately leads to disinformation.

622 headlines from online media were manually collected over a period of 7 years (from 2015 to 2022) from Bulgarian news sites. The task that the researcher sets herself is to find the renarrative or its homonymous forms in the titles and to trace its function. After the titles were collected, they were annotated by three speakers according to how true they sounded.

An interesting conclusion is that the news that is perceived by readers as real is mainly when the renarrative is accepted as a retelling of someone else's speech, i.e. in its use in its primary and original function. Some of the titles cited do not actually contain renarrative or its homonymous forms (*Арестуваха момиче явило се на изпит вместо сестра си*, *Арестуваха мъж убил*

публично котка в Бургас). The missing commas seem to have misled the PhD student in the analysis.

In the second experiment, specific texts are considered. Of greatest interest is the use of renarratives in political news, because these news are of public importance and disinformation in them can do the most damage. I get the impression that readers are least likely to trust the renarrative in this type of news.

The last chapter of the work presents documentary accounts of the perception or creation of fake news and disinformation.

Ruslana Margova shows that the renarrative and its homonymous forms can actually be seen as a marker of doubtful content, which stems from the semantics of these forms, which are intuitively perceived as doubtful by native speakers, due to their inherent linguistic attitudes. The PhD student's analysis is mostly accurate, but it seems linguistically insufficient to me. It is aimed rather at the stylistic features of the texts and, above all, at certain journalistic techniques to achieve an impact of a different nature on the readers, and it would be useful to work more deeply on the grammatical and, of course, on the lexical level.

Ruslana Margova's work shows important trends in the development of the media, which can be summarized with the following statement: "responsibility is borne less and less by the writer and more and more by the reader of the given content". It would be interesting to trace historically the use of renarrative in the media as an "emanation of this trend".

As the Margova herself points out, renarrative is one of the hallmarks of proficiency in the Bulgarian language: children acquire it at a late stage of their development, and learners of Bulgarian often fail to master it.

Ruslana Margova's PhD thesis lays the foundation for this kind of research, which could be deepened in a purely linguistic perspective. In my opinion, it is in the examination of the evidentials specific to the Bulgarian linguistic environment as a means of disinformation that the main linguistic contribution of Ruslana Margova's doctoral thesis lies.

For me, however, it remains an open question to what extent the renarrative is really a marker of misinformation or in some cases simply a retelling of information, an indication of uncertainty about authorship, or a means of avoiding responsibility. It is undeniable that the renarrative gives the reader a lower degree of certainty about the information than the indicative. But the use of indicative in a number of the cases considered by Ruslana Margova is unnatural and could possibly be seen as a marker of disinformation. In this sense, an algorithm is needed to recognize the cases in which the

renarrative actually aims to disinform, to mislead the reader. This PhD thesis is an important step in this direction. It would also be important to explore in more detail the role of the inferential and the dubitative in achieving impact on the reader.

I would like to mention that hardly the use of the past perfect active participle (see the example on page 221, as well as the above-mentioned titles of the type *Арестуваха момиче, явило се на изпит вместо сестра си*.) can be seen as a fake news marker.

Ruslana Margova's abstract corresponds to the content of the dissertation. The scientific contributions of the work are precisely defined. The PhD student has more than the required number of publications on the topic, as well as three citations.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize again that Ruslana Margova's dissertation "Linguistic features of fake news" is a contribution to the study of the means of achieving disinformation and the creation of fake news, and more specifically to the study of their linguistic markers. I hope that this work will serve as a basis for the further activities of the PhD student. With conviction, I will vote "YES" for awarding Rusana Margova the educational and scientific degree "PhD".

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June 15, 2023   Assoc. Prof. Bilyana Mihaylova