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Interpersonal Meaning in Media Headlines: A Systemic Functional Analysis of "Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University"

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interpersonal meaning embedded in the media headline "Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University" through the lens of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly focusing on the interpersonal metafunction. The research aims to uncover how language choices in headlines shape social relations, attitudes, and reader engagement. Using Halliday's framework, the analysis explores mood, modality, and appraisal elements that contribute to the speaker–reader interaction. The findings reveal that the imperative mood and evaluative lexis in the headline construct a provocative and authoritative stance, positioning the writer as an assertive informant while inviting readers into a shared evaluative perspective. This interactional strategy not only grabs attention but also subtly influences public perception of the university experience. The study highlights the persuasive power of headlines and their role in constructing ideological stances in media discourse.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language does not solely function as a tool to convey information factually or transmit messages, but also has a much more complex and profound function in human life (Rabiah, 2018). One of the main functions of language is as a means to build and maintain social relationships, express attitudes, and influence audiences in various communication contexts. This function shows that language is not only a neutral means of communication, but also a mirror of the social, cultural, and psychological dynamics between the speaker or writer and his or her listener or reader.

In the study of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by M.A.K. Halliday, language is seen as a social semiotic system that has three main metafunctions, namely ideational,

interpersonal, and textual (Aminudin, 2023). Among the three metafunctions, interpersonal functions have a very important position in shaping social interactions. This function allows the speaker or writer to express his attitudes, views, emotions, as well as to position himself in social relations with his audience. Through certain linguistic choices, such as the use of mood (declarative, interrogative, imperative), modality (possibility, certainty, necessity), and evaluative expressions, speakers can indicate whether they are neutral, convincing, inviting, commanding, or even provoking the audience (Siregar et al., 2021).

This interpersonal function is not only present in face-to-face communication, but is also very dominant in mass media texts, especially in online news. Mass media strategically uses language not only to convey information, but also

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to build appeal, shape public perception, and influence the emotions and ways of thinking of its readers (Absattar et al., 2022). One of the most prominent strategies in the media realm is through the preparation of headlines or news titles, which have great power in attracting attention while directing readers' interpretation of news content.

One example that reflects this phenomenon is the headline "Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University". The title explicitly uses language loaded with affective expressions, such as the words "shocked" and "offended," which have a fairly strong emotional charge. The choice of words indirectly serves to build a certain expectation in the reader, namely that the content of the news will contain something surprising, unexpected, or even potentially offensive. Psychologically, this kind of language triggers curiosity, anxiety, and even tension that encourages readers to continue reading the content of the news.

More than just conveying information, this news title also forms an interpersonal relationship between the media and its readers. The media, through the language used, subtly positions themselves as parties who have knowledge about certain realities or situations that are unknown to the reader, so that they have the power to direct the reader's attention and perception (Carter, 2013). This relationship ultimately not only builds cognitive engagement, but also builds emotional engagement that has an impact on the way readers interpret news content.

Therefore, analyzing interpersonal meaning in news headlines is a very relevant study, especially in the context of digital media that is competitive and full of linguistic persuasion strategies (Alraimi & Abdalla, 2019). Through this study, we can better understand how language works not only as a means of communication, but also as a tool of power, social control, and the formation of public opinion.

The study of interpersonal meaning in news headlines is very important because headlines are the earliest components that are read and are the main determinants of whether readers will continue to read the content of the news or not (Dykstra, 2019). Headlines do more than just provide a summary of the content; It acts as a strategic tool to attract attention, build curiosity, arouse emotions, and even influence readers' perception of the content of the news itself (Youvan, 2024). Through the choice of words, sentence structure, and tone used, the headline not only conveys information briefly, but also conveys the author's attitude, position, and builds

interpersonal relationships with the audience (Braca & Dondio, 2023).

In the context of modern media, especially online media that rely on clickbait, the use of sensational, provocative, or even controversial headlines is becoming increasingly prevalent (Munger et al., 2020). Headlines such as "Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University" not only aim to provide information that the experience at university can be shocking or offensive, but also invite readers to be emotionally involved, feel alert, or at least intrigued to understand more about the content of the news. This is where interpersonal function works significantly.

The study of interpersonal functions in headlines is becoming increasingly relevant considering that the media today not only plays a role as a conveyor of information, but also as a shaper of public opinion and the construction of social reality. Through lexical and grammatical choices, the media can position its readers in a certain attitude, whether it is agreeable, wary, angry, or even afraid. However, in-depth studies of how interpersonal meaning is constructed in the headlines, especially with the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach, are still limited. Most SFL studies focus on news texts as a whole or on political and educational discourse, while specific studies on sensational and provocative language headlines are rare.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how interpersonal meaning is constructed in the headline "Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University" using the analytical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The main focus in this study is on the elements of mood, modality, and evaluative lexis used in the headline to build an interpersonal position between the author (media) and the reader. This research is expected not only to contribute to the realm of functional systemic linguistics, but also to provide a broader understanding of how media utilize linguistic strategies to influence readers in specific social and cultural contexts.

II. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method that aims to describe and analyze the interpersonal meaning contained in the news headline "Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University". The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on an in-depth understanding of linguistic phenomena in social contexts, especially in the use of media language. The descriptive method is used to

describe systematically, factually, and accurately the linguistic characteristics that appear in the headline.

The theoretical framework used in this study is based on the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) developed by M.A.K. Halliday. In this theory, language is seen as a system of choice of meaning that reflects social functions. The main focus in this study is on interpersonal metafunctions, one of the three metafunctions of language according to SFL, which function to build social relationships, convey attitudes, and position writers and readers in discourse interactions. The three main components of interpersonal meaning were analyzed including mood, modality, and evaluative lexis. The mood component includes grammatical structures that show the relationship between the subject and the predicate, as well as sentence types such as declarative, imperative, or interrogative. The modality component serves to express the author's level of certainty, possibility, necessity, or desire for the message conveyed. Meanwhile, evaluative lexis deals with the selection of words or phrases that carry a judgmental content, attitude, or emotion, which reflects how the writer wants to influence the reader.

The data in this study is in the form of the headline text "Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University" which is taken from the online media source where the news is published. The data collection technique was carried out with text documentation, which was then analyzed qualitatively. The data analysis process is carried out through several stages. First, identify linguistic elements related to mood, modality, and evaluative lexis in the headline. Second, the data that have been identified are classified based on linguistic categories according to SFL theory. For example, in the aspect of mood, the researcher identifies the type of mood used, whether it is in the form of declarative mood, imperative mood, or interrogative mood, and then analyzes the implications for interpersonal relationships. In the modality aspect, the researcher explores whether there is an expression of probability, desirability, or obligation in the headline. In the evaluative lexis aspect, researchers mapped words such as "shocked" and "offended" as expressions of judgment or emotional attitudes.

Furthermore, the results of the classification are analyzed with an interpretive approach to understand how interpersonal meaning is constructed and how the choice of language affects the reader. The analysis is also directed to

interpret the social position built by the author towards the audience, whether the author positions the reader as a party who needs to be alert, prepared, or prepared to face an uncomfortable experience. The validity of the data in this study is maintained through the theory triangulation technique, namely by comparing the findings with other supporting theories in functional linguistics studies, media discourse, and relevant previous studies. In addition, the researcher also applies the member checking technique by asking for input from linguists to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation and maintain the credibility of research results.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following is the news used in this study,

Be ready to be shocked and offended at university, students told (point 1)

Students should be ready to be shocked and offended at university, according to the man in charge of ensuring free speech on campuses.

Arif Ahmed, from the Office for Students (OfS), which regulates universities, told the BBC that exposure to views which students might find offensive was "part of the process of education".

It comes as the OfS published guidance for universities in England on how a new law, designed to protect free speech, will work when it comes into force from August.

But the National Union of Students UK (NUS UK) said the latest guidance was "just more nonsense playing into the so-called 'culture wars'".

NUS UK president Amira Campbell said "students and academics overwhelmingly already believe that universities and students' unions know how to do freedom of speech, and there is already plenty of legislation around the issue".

"I am disappointed in the governing bodies who have prioritised this over protecting and supporting marginalised students," she added.

The guidance on the new law was issued after universities requested clarity from the OfS on how to best uphold freedom of speech, after the University of Sussex was fined £585,000 for failing to do so in March.

The university was issued with the fine earlier this year under existing powers, after the OfS said its policy on trans and non-binary equality had a "chilling effect" on freedom of speech.

Kathleen Stock had previously resigned from her post as philosophy professor at the university, following protests by students against her gender-critical views.

The university has begun a legal challenge against the fine, arguing that the investigation was flawed.

Universities UK, which represents 141 institutions, said at the time of the fine that it would write to the OfS to clarify what would represent a breach of freedom of speech rules.

They now say they are "pleased" the OfS has taken on feedback, and would "make sure universities are appropriately supported to comply" with the new rules.

From this summer, the new law will place a stronger responsibility on universities in England to uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom.

The OfS can sanction universities, with the potential for fines to run into millions of pounds, if they are found to have failed to do so.

Almost every aspect of university life - from protests to debates, training and teaching - is covered by the new guidelines on how the law will be applied.

For returning students, or those starting university this year, there may not be a noticeable immediate change, but Dr Ahmed says the law is about the freedom for anything to be discussed or taught.

Speaking directly to students, the director for free speech said: "You should expect to face views you might find shocking or offensive, and you should be aware that's part of the process of education."

He added that students should be able to express any view, no matter how offensive it is to others, as long as it is not outside what is generally allowed by law, such as harassment or unlawful discrimination.

The Union of Jewish Students said it was pleased

the guidelines said Holocaust denial was not a form of protected speech under the law, while also ensuring that universities will have to protect students against antisemitic harassment.

'Be respectful of everyone's opinions' (point 2)

Hope Rhodes/BBC Two young black women sit in a booth at a bar smiling at the camera. Paris on the left wears a brown hoodie and Marie-Louise on the right wears a grey baseball cap. Hope Rhodes/BBC

Paris (left) and Marie-Louise (right) say it's important to respect others' opinions

Paris and Marie-Louise, who both study mental health nursing at the University of Salford, said they felt that being respectful of others' opinions is key.

Paris said she thought it was important to be able to "express your emotions and feelings without being disrespectful", and allow others to do so too.

"I think it's important to be able to allow other people to express themselves, because at the end of the day everyone's gone through different situations that may lead to them having different opinions," she said.

Similarly, Marie-Louise said freedom of speech "doesn't mean you have to be nasty" or "act out of manner", but rather "just stay true to yourself".

In the OfS guidelines, 54 detailed scenarios are used to explore how the new law might be interpreted, with some likely to provoke debate and even controversy.

One looks at "simulated military checkpoints" as part of student protests about Palestine - something that has happened in the United States, but not on campuses in the UK.

The right for peaceful student protests is balanced with universities being able to limit the time and place they happen, in order to ensure no students are intimidated or prevented from attending lectures.

The guidelines also make it clear that any agreements with foreign states that enable censorship on campus must be changed or scrapped.

'Offensive, shocking, controversial or disturbing' (point 3)

But not everyone accepts there are serious issues around freedom of expression at universities.

When challenged on the scale of the issue, Dr Ahmed pointed to polling carried out for the OfS, which he said suggests a fifth of academics do not feel free to discuss controversial topics in their teaching.

The issues most frequently highlighted by those expressing concern were race and racism, as well as sex and gender, with women more likely to feel unable to speak out.

The guidelines also make clear that the OfS expects universities to support and protect academics whose views might provoke protest from students, and not to delay speaking up in their defence.

Dr Ahmed told the BBC universities could not sack a lecturer "simply because that person expresses views students find offensive, shocking, controversial or disturbing - and that's essential to academic freedom."

Edward Skidelsky, philosophy lecturer at the University of Exeter and director of the Committee for Academic Freedom, said the OfS guidance was "reassuringly robust" and "makes clear that academics and students may not be penalised for speaking their mind".

What is less clear is what happens when an academic leaves a job because they feel the situation is untenable.

Prof Jo Phoenix won a case for constructive dismissal with the Open University, and a tribunal found she had faced harassment for her gender-critical views.

She said she welcomed the OfS guidance, but said some universities might take more to change their workplace culture, adding: "It's like bringing a bucket of water to a burning fire."

Another employment tribunal, due to take place next year, will look at an allegation by a different academic that he was constructively dismissed after students boycotted his teaching over his opinion that racial diversity programmes had gone too far.

In the meantime, the law will come into effect, with a complaints system to follow.

Students will be able to complain to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator if they feel free speech or academic freedom is not upheld, while academics or visiting speakers will go direct to the OfS.

Universities have expressed unease about the new system, pointing out they already have a legal obligation to uphold free speech.

A Universities UK spokesperson said: "We strongly agree that universities must be places where free speech is protected and promoted."

It added that issues were complex, and said it was pleased the regulator had taken on board feedback on its previous draft guidelines.

Source: (Jeffreys, 2025)

1) Mood analysis (Interpersonal Structure)

The headline sentence "Be ready to be shocked and offended at university" uses an imperative mood structure. This is a form of indirect order from the author to the reader (in this case students), which positions the reader as an actor to "be ready". This imperative structure indicates the presence of strong interpersonal forces; The media puts the reader in a position to be prepared, as if facing something threatening or uncomfortable.

In addition, quotes from Dr. Ahmed such as:

"You should expect to face views you might find shocking or offensive."

Using a declarative mood but with the addition of "should" capital that reinforces demands or suggestions that are almost like obligations. This shows how the media builds a serious and stressful interpersonal position towards readers, especially students.

2) Modality Analysis

The modality in this news uses many expressions of obligation and probability. Examples:

- "You should expect..." (obligation) → the reader is directed that preparing to face offensive views is a must in the educational process.
- "... that exposure to views which students might find offensive was part of the process..." (probability) → the use of "might" indicates the possibility of such an experience occurring.

This modality shows the attitude of the author and the resource person towards reality; that

discomfort in the face of controversial views is something natural and part of the educational process. On the other hand, this expression also serves to frame the view that freedom of opinion should take precedence even though it has the potential to hurt the feelings of some parties.

3) Lexis Evaluative Analysis (Lexical Choice of Attitude Value)

Headlines and news content are full of words that carry affective content, such as:

"shocked", "offended", "controversial", "disturbing", "nasty", "harassment", "chilling effect", "culture wars", "burning fire", and so on.

The words are not emotionally neutral. They bring an assessment of the social situation, highlighting the tension between freedom of speech and the protection of vulnerable groups. This evaluative lexis clarifies the attitude of the media and resource persons, that there is a risk of discomfort, conflict, and even insecurity in dealing with freedom of speech in the university environment.

The results of the analysis show that headlines and news content not only convey information about the regulation of freedom of opinion in universities, but also build strong interpersonal relationships between the media and readers. The media positions students as parties who must be prepared to face potential discomfort, both emotionally and ideologically, in the learning process.

The mood structure in the form of imperative in the headline is used to govern or direct students, while modality in the form of obligation and probability reinforces the impression that facing a surprising or offensive view is a must in education. In addition, lexical choices with high affective value are used to create a tense, controversial atmosphere of discourse, while clarifying the idea that freedom of speech is a right that should not be violated, even though it has the potential to cause tension.

In the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the interpersonal function of language aims to mediate social relations between speakers/writers and listeners/readers. Halliday (1994) stated that interpersonal meaning reflects how the speaker or writer positions himself towards the audience and vice versa.

The use of imperative mood in the headline shows a strong interpersonal influence, which is to build a position that the reader (student) is the party who needs to obey or prepare for something. This supports Halliday's theory that mood is a key tool in shaping interpersonal relationships.

The use of modalities, particularly obligations and probabilities, reflects how the media and sources manage the strength of their claims and how they manage the reader's expectations. According to Halliday & Matthiessen (2004), modality is an instrument for expressing attitudes, uncertainties, or obligations in linguistic interactions.

Evaluative lexis, which contains the content of affection, judgment, and moral determination, acts as a tool to build stance or attitude. Martin & White (2005) in the theory of Appraisal which is a development of SFL, states that the choice of words that carry the expression of attitude is part of the Attitude system (affect, judgement, appreciation), and this headline clearly uses Affect (emotion) and Judgement (social judgment) to influence the audience.

This analysis proves that the headline "Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University" is not only informative, but also persuasive and builds a strong interpersonal position. The interpersonal function in this text is realized through mood structures, modality choices, and lexical content full of attitudes. This is in line with the main principle in the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics, which states that language is a tool to perform three metafunctions, one of which is the interpersonal metafunction, which is to build and maintain social relationships through language choices.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the results of the analysis of the news headline "Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University" with the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) approach, especially on the aspect of interpersonal meaning, it can be concluded that the headline not only serves to convey information, but also plays an important role in building an interpersonal relationship between the media as the author and the audience as the reader.

The analysis shows that the use of mood, especially imperative mood, is used to provide indirect encouragement or commands to readers to prepare for surprising or offensive views while in a university environment. This builds an interpersonal position that puts the reader as an active party and must be mentally prepared.

In addition, the choice of modality, especially in the categories of obligation and probability, reinforces the message that facing an uncomfortable view is an inevitable part of the educational process. This shows the affirmation of the attitude of news writers and resource persons

regarding the importance of freedom of opinion in the academic environment.

In terms of evaluative lexis, it was found that headlines and news content use many words with affective content and social judgment, such as shocked, offended, controversial, and disturbing. This lexical choice builds an atmosphere of tension but at the same time emphasizes the importance of courage to face differences of opinion for academic freedom and freedom of opinion.

Overall, the results of this study prove that interpersonal functions in media headlines are not only limited to linguistic tools to attract attention, but also a means to shape attitudes, influence perceptions, and build social positions between authors and readers. These findings support the basic principle in the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics, that language has a strategic role in building social relationships and constructing social reality through language choices.

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