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TARGETED CENTRIC APPROACH TO FAKE CONTENT (BASED
ON CORONAVIRUS PUBLICATIONS)

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a study of fake news widely used in the modern media space, including the Internet. This discursive phenomenon is studied within the addressee-centric aspect, i.e. in the modeling aspect of pre-text expectations of an addressee. The addressee-centric approach to describing fake discourse involves their study regarding such questions as “What does the addressee want to know?”, “What are the types of addressee of fake news?”. The study was performed on the material of fakes on coronavirus widely represented in the media and social networks. A variety of fake content about the COVID-19 pandemic is considered and it is proved that the creation and distribution of fakes is caused not only by the intentions of the authors, but also by the expectations of addressees to quickly receive relevant information set forth in a form accessible to the mass addressee. It is proved that the dictating-modus organization of fake discourse is focused on the type of addressee that trusts the authoritative source to which the Internet belongs. Two types of fake content addressees were identified, depending on the preferred receptive-interpretive activity when perceiving news information: rational-logical and emotional-sensitive. The emotional-sensitive type of addressee is a person who perceives information in general, in a negative or positive fashion, trusting primarily the modus, without requiring specific facts. This type of fake information has the following discursive features: lack of statistical and digital data; lack of facts; evaluation vocabulary; explicit or implicit calls for action; exclamatory or interrogative sentences.

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Keywords: Addressee types, addressee expectations, COVID-19 pandemic, fake news, social networks



1. Introduction

The relevance of the study is caused by the fact that in the past decade the problem of fake news has become especially relevant due to its extraordinary distribution in modern media space. Such a widespread spread of fakes is associated with the digital revolution, the emergence of social networks and digital media. The need to create visible information, i.e. information attracting the attention of the reader, leads to the creation and dissemination of fakes (Ivanishcheva, 2020). Besides, the reason for the spread of fakes is the development of unprofessional journalism (Wall, 2015).

Today we may talk, on the one hand, about the centuries-old history of the existence of fakes as a phenomenon in terms of its ontology, and, on the other, about the absence of a deep diverse study of this phenomenon in terms of epistemology.

Fake news in literature refers to “articles that are an alternative to facts and accurate data” (Ilchenko, 2016); “intentionally forged (fake) stories distributed on social networks and media, as well as stories discrediting the work of some news publications” (Ivleva, 2020, p. 499); “false information, i.e. untrue information; this is a message with reduced (or absent) value for society” (Sternin & Shesternina, 2020, p. 12).

The indicators of fake information were identified and described in the literature: **1) linguistic features of an article:** information does not contain facts, is biased; entertainment, narrative type of presentation; logical errors in the presentation of information; emotional charge of the publication; capital letters and exclamation points in the heading; the heading does not match the text and is often clickable; **2) sources of information and intentions of the author:** sources are not verified, do not deserve respect; transmission of false information; the authors’ goals involve a financial interest; 3) structure: section “About us” does not have an indication of the editor or registered owner of the site; comments: call to users to comment on the article in order to access the authors of the comments; 4) authorship: written using algorithms or bots (Deineka et al., 2020).

Thus, fake news, as a rule, contains negatively colored sensational stories or deliberately designed conspiracy theories. Fake news content often contains information in an emotional language register; information characterized by an extreme degree of partiality, suggesting blind faith and the inability to double-check it. Such content is often placed on sites created to generate revenue from advertising. It is these fake indicators that we take into account when selecting discursive material and analyzing this content.

The phenomenon of fake news that filled the media space, especially the Internet environment, needs a comprehensive scientific understanding, since fakes are destructive for society, spread panic, direct society to search for false enemies, incite unrest, deceive consumers, destabilize the audience (Bikbaev, 2020; Dorofeeva, 2019; Karadzhev, 2014; Sukhodolov & Bychkova, 2017).

Today, fake content is studied in the socio-legal, sociological, socio-psychological, linguistic-legal, media-communicative, linguistic and linguoculturological aspects.

This paper implements the addressee-centric approach, the main principles of which were presented in the already classic article by Arutyunova (1981) and a number of other studies (Kaminskaya, 2020).

2. Problem Statement

The study is based on the provision that the wide representation of unreliable (false) publications in the media, including in the Internet, is caused not only by the author's intensity, but also by the *addressee's pre-text expectations*. The concept of *expectation (anticipation)* is associated with cognitive-linguistic activity. The provisions that were previously developed to anticipate the meaning in interpreting the text are important for further analysis (Kim & Belyaeva, 2019). The problem of the study is to consider the interaction of the author and the addressee of fake news, the embodiment of the author's intentions in fakes as a reaction to the pre-text expectations of the reader – the addressee of the text containing false information.

3. Research Questions

Based on the aforesaid, the paper addresses and solves the following issues:

- Linguostylistic (dictating-modus) description of fake information about coronavirus and modeling the pre-text expectations of addressees.
- Establishment of the types of fake content addressees based on the analysis of interpretive-receptive strategy used to perceive information content about coronavirus.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to justify the hypothesis that the type of addressee of fake information, and thus used interpretive-receptive strategies determine the dictating-modus organization of fake news.

5. Research Methods

The material of the proposed study is fake texts about coronavirus widely presented on the Internet (access mode: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2020/05/08/fakes/>; <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/70302310>). When selecting fake material, we proceeded from the following deductive principle: "The addressee wants to know about the pandemic, who / what / how / what / which / when...". The fake content selected for analysis, extracted from the Internet sources with links, was verified in two ways: 1) analysis for the presence of the above fake indicators; 2) official refutation of information in authoritative publications and its qualification by specialists as fake.

When analyzing fake news we based on the provision that the intention of the author of fakes ("I want to attract the attention of the audience, so I tell the most incredible, sensational stories about coronavirus, not caring about their reliability") coincides with the pre-text expectations of addressees ("I want to get as much information about coronavirus as possible, and as quickly as possible", "I want to get information from authoritative sources to which the media and the Internet relate" and "I trust the information that is reported in the media and the Internet"). In other words, the intentions of the authors of fakes and the intentions of the addressees to receive information generate fake news and serve a trigger for their dissemination.

The study utilizes the method of scientific description, which is implemented within particular methods of analysis, synthesis, systematization, classification, comparison.

6. Findings

We classified the collected and verified fake news in accordance with the addressees' requests for information: Who is to blame, or who is the source of the infection? What is the statistics on the spread of coronavirus infection? How to make sure you are healthy? What actions of cheaters and villains can the population expect? What measures do the authorities take to combat the infection? What popular methods can be used to prevent the disease? Is there an infection vaccine and where can it be purchased? Or maybe there is no dangerous virus and the dissemination of information about it is beneficial to someone?

Responses to these addressee requests are explicitly or implicitly contained in fake content. In other words, fake materials are the authors' response to the information requested by the addressee.

Who is the source of the infection?

The media and the Internet flooded the news that "the first Chinese contracted coronavirus from bats, which were freely sold for food in Wuhan markets" (<https://newzfeed.ru/2020/03/20/10-fejkov-okoronaviruse-v-kotorye-mnogie-uspeli-poverit/>). Such news was quite consistent with the addressee's expectations, since there is a stable myth that the Chinese eat any animal, not especially taking care of sanitary standards. Further, this information began to be intensively spread around the world, and the mass addressee received an answer to the question that he was concerned with.

However, the Chinese addressee expected to receive information about another source of infection, since the traditional nutrition system in China had not previously caused such infections. In response to these expectations, news soon appears that the US military could bring the virus to Wuhan. "When did the "zero" patient appear in the USA? How many people are infected? What hospitals were they hospitalized in? It was probably the American military that brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be frank! Reveal the data. The US must explain everything to us!" (<https://twitter.com/globaltimesnews/status/1237974799999062016>).

For addressees who expected to receive confirmation of the conspiracy theory, fake news spread that the coronavirus was artificially bred in secret US bacteriological laboratories: "American military virologists allegedly synthesized a dangerous virus by experimenting with bats. And they started all this business to win the trade war with China" (<https://zen.yandex.ru/media/id/5dde58b321552277da47ba1a/feiki-pro-koronavirus-s-ih-posleduiuscim-razoblacheniem-5e8322ab4b7ab909516e36db>).

One version of the conspiracy theory is presented in fake news that poison is secretly added to tap water for infection. Don't drink from the tap! (<https://zen.yandex.ru/media/id/5dde58b321552277da47ba1a/feiki-pro-koronavirus-s-ih-posleduiuscim-razoblacheniem-5e8322ab4b7ab909516e36db>).

What actions of cheaters and villains can the population expect?

The addressees frightened by the danger of the disease, as well as by the possible actions of cheaters, receive news that falls on fertile soil, especially if there are children and elderly people in the house: "People visit homes! In medical and chemical uniform. They say that there is a case of coronavirus infection in your house, disinfection of apartments is taking place! They enter the apartment, put on gas and take everything out of the apartment. Keep your eyes open, pass the word! Call the hotline and the

Federal National Guard Troops Service immediately! Especially warn children and pensioners!” (<https://yandex.ru/search/?clid=2380813&text=jkom%2Fsmolnarod.ru%2Fsn%2Fmedicina%2Fpo-domam-xodyat-lyudi-v-ximkostyumax-usplyayut-gazom-i-grabyat-massovaya-isteriya-v-socsetyax-okazalos-fe&l10n=ru&lr=64>).

What measures do the authorities take to combat the infection?

On social networks and instant messengers, information is circulating that disinfectants will be sprayed from helicopters. Moreover, in various versions of this fake, details are specified: “Today at 23:00 and until 5:00 in the morning, helicopters will spray medicine for disinfection, windows and balconies should be closed and it is impossible to be on the street after 23:00. Reported from the military unit”. Another news – Moscow authorities are taking action to close the city. “Merciless PR expert: Girls, our birds report that there are already some cases when the residents with a registration in Moscow region are not allowed to enter Moscow. It is reported that the traffic police posts on highways near Moscow are asking not to move further towards the capital. Please plan your movements accordingly and reduce the number of your movements from the region / to the region and from the capital / to the capital” (<https://riafan.ru/1261467-kakie-feiki-o-koronaviruse-rasprostranyali-rossiiskie-smi-i-inoagenty-za-proshedshuyu-nedelyu>).

What popular methods can be used to prevent the disease?

As is well known, a certain part of the population is more used to trusting popular methods of treatment. It is to such addressees that fakes are sent offering various traditional ways of preventing and treating a new infection.

In the Whatsapp messenger in early March, an audio message from a famous doctor Leonid Roshal was spread allegedly, in which a person with a similar voice urged a person to eat garlic in the morning – swallow like pills. The information was presented as if Roshal spoke about the effectiveness of these measures at one of his lectures to medical students. In the interview to Komsomolskaya Pravda the president of the Research Institute of Emergency Pediatric Surgery and Traumatology said that this audio message is fake (<https://www.kem.kp.ru/daily/27101.7/4174573/>).

In other messages it is recommended to breathe vodka: “The person defeated coronavirus in one day!!! The recipe surprises with its simplicity. Alexander Kolosov is the Russian doctor has been working in Italy in the medical structure sponsoring elderly people for 20 years” (<https://marafonec.livejournal.com/13854021.html>). However, there are numerous denials of this way of treatment in the network (<https://www.mk.ru/social/2020/05/07/vrach-komarovskiy-razoblachil-kollegu-vylechivshegosya-ot-koronavirusa-vodkoy.html>).

Or perhaps there is no dangerous virus and dissemination of such information is beneficial to someone?

The sceptics are allegedly addressed the fake by the doctor of medical sciences who claims that there is no epidemic of coronavirus and it is only about the local outbreak of the disease not studied earlier. Further the author assumes that someone needs this “epidemic” for some reason. As an argument professor Pavel Vorobyov gives an example of the cruise liner which stayed two weeks on quarantine near Yokohama: “If the virus was really extremely infectious and deadly, then, being indoors so long, all people would “burn down” during this time. Here there is a specific example disproving all talk about the

pandemic, epidemic and so on”, – professor said” (<https://sensay.mirtesen.ru/blog/43417573172/> Feyk-
vsemirnogo-masshtaba-Komu-ponadobilos-razduvat-epidemiyu-ko).

As we see, in the informative context the content of fake news is quite diverse and reflects various set of requests for information on coronavirus.

The dictating-modus organization of fake discourses is focused on the type of the **addressee trusting an authoritative source** which, undoubtedly, is the Internet. There are two types of addressees of fake content depending on the preferred receptive and interpretative activity when the news information is perceived: **rational-logical** and **emotional-sensitive**.

News fake content addressed to the **rational-logical type of addressees** contains specific information, numbers, cause-effect structures. At the same time, the authors of such fakes refer to an allegedly authoritative source. Thus, a video fragment with the phrase of the deputy chairman of the government of the Russian Federation Tatyana Golikova taken out of the context is distributed in social networks: “Following the results of the forum in Sochi, the government chairmen were given recommendations to establish planned indicators of total mortality of the population in regional projects by May 1, having agreed on these values with the Ministry of Health. As it turned out, for the purpose of manipulation the authors of this fake cut out an excerpt from the real speech of T.A. Golikova within the framework of the government hour at the plenary session of 2019, in which she appealed to the deputies with a request to monitor the work of the regions on the issue of mortality rates, and asked to reduce this indicator.

The **emotional-sensitive type of addressee** is a person who perceives information in general, in a negative or positive manner primarily trusting the modus, without requiring specific facts. On the social networks of Bashkiria, an anonymous message from a resuscitationist-anesthesiologist from Ufa appeared: “A resuscitationist-anesthesiologist from Ufa is voluntarily and forcibly offered to sign a refusal of allowances for working with coronavirus patients. I don’t understand why doctors even go to work? It’s just humiliation”. Of course, this message caused outrage among the readers, as the authors of fake news expected. The Ministry of Health of Bashkiria, in turn, also denied this information (<https://coronafake.ru/fakes/vracha-v-ufe-zastavili-otkazatsya-ot-putinskix-nadbavok>). The authors of the next fake also count on the general negative reaction of addressees dissatisfied with the actions of the police. A video appeared on the Internet with the screaming heading “Moscow police staged an epic pursuit of a violator of a self-isolation regime”. “The video in the best traditions of the Benny Hill show was shot in Golyanovo. At first, a police car chased a man running away through the lawns and bushes, then the security forces got out of the car and rushed to catch him by foot. Despite the good shape, the violator of self-isolation was nevertheless overtaken by the police and, according to eyewitnesses, got the lumps from them”. The press service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs said that a man was detained by traffic police officers who tried to get rid of six packs with a substance that, according to the examination, is N-methylephedrone (<https://coronafake.ru/fakes/466>).

The reaction of the addressee’s emotional and sensitive type, including the category of persons of the retirement age, is focused on the information warning that “People visit homes! In medical and chemical uniform. They say that there is a case of coronavirus infection in your house, disinfection of apartments is taking place! They enter the apartment, put on gas and take everything out of the apartment.

Keep your eyes open, pass the word! Call the hotline and the Federal National Guard Troops Service immediately! Especially warn children and pensioners!” (<https://yandex.ru/search/?clid=2380813&text=jkom%2Fsmolnarod.ru%2Fsn%2Fmedicina%2Fpo-domam-xodyat-lyudi-v-ximkostyumax-usyplyayut-gazom-i-grabyat-massovaya-isteriya-v-socsetyax-okazalos-fe&l10n=ru&lr=64>).

This type of fake information has the following discursive features: lack of statistical and digital data; lack of specific facts; evaluation vocabulary; explicit or implicit calls for action; exclamatory or interrogative sentences.

7. Conclusion

The addressee centric approach to describing fake discourse allows studying the aspect of solving the questions “What does the addressee want to know?”, “What are the types of addressee of fake news?”. In terms of content, the content of fake news is quite diverse and reflects many various requests of addressees for information about coronavirus. The dictating-modus organization of fake discourse is focused on the type of *addressee who trusts the authoritative source* to which the Internet belongs. Depending on the preferred receptive-interpretive strategy, when perceiving news information, rational-logical and emotionally-sensitive types of addressees are revealed. The addressee type determines the dictating-modus organization of fake content.

News addressed to the rational-logical type of the addressee contains specific information, digital data; such discourse has a logically organized structure, contains causal structures; lexical units are devoid of emotionally expressive connotations, relate to neutral words; dosed use of terms, in punctuation terms, this type of discourse is presented by narrative sentences.

News content designed to perceive the emotional-sensitive type of the addressee, as a rule, does not contain statistical and digital data, it does not present specific facts; it contains evaluation vocabulary as well as explicit or implicit calls for action; in terms of punctuation, such discursive content contains exclamatory or interrogative sentences.

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