THE ROLE OF TRANSLATING HEADLINES DURING THE ARAB SPRING CONFLICTS

Valentina Magdalena Drocan

PhD Student, University of Bucharest

Abstract: In a world where competition plays an important part, writing a catchy headline represents both a challenge and a need of providing a perfect combination between content and form, able to stir the readers' interests towards specific materials.

During the Arab Spring events, under the time constraints as well as for ensuring objective and real information, the journalistic practices varied and, up to a certain extent, appeared influenced by the foreign writing tendencies.

Within this framework, the present paper examines the manner in which translators managed to keep, in the Romanian articles, specific parts taken from English resources, as well as the motivational factors and principles for carrying out their professional tasks.

Keywords: newspapers, headlines, news, Arab Spring, translation

Headlines are particularly important because, most of the times through translation, they enable journalists to choose materials from foreign media. They also determine the people to get interested in certain articles. The variety of topics is constantly changing, involving knowledge from many fields. The translator's role as an interpreter is seen from the phase of selection. Not only does s/he decide what should get to the public, but s/he also has the ability to establish how they are to be presented.

"The headline has the capacity to encapsulate a story, and the headlines in a particular edition give the reader the overall picture of the current news (headline content), its relative importance (visual impact and position in the paper), its classification (…)." (Reah 2002: 14)

Ellipsis of the verb is a procedure used to draw attention upon the most essential elements that are needed for understanding the overall messages. The rest can be

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

discovered by reading the news. It seems that the minimum information which should get to them has to comprise: the names of leaders or the countries/cities where they are from (the events take place) and something which the more outrageous it is, the better. However, this is not a unitary tendency i.e. to be generally available, because media has freedom of expression and thus, any kind of change is possible.

Many times the word *update* is preferred, written with capital letters, which appears more as a shocking title, making the readers stop and read, rather than give them the feeling that the material "has been updated". Somebody's statements, although rendered in the target language, do not appear with quotation marks.

"A good headline offers a promise to the reader. More often than not, it spells out a benefit to the reader as well. And it does this provocatively so that the reader will pay attention." (Newssom and Haynes 2011: 286)

In the headline *UPDATE Mubarak ar putea fi eliberat în 48 de ore, anunţă avocatul său* (Adevărul, 19 Aug. 2013), apart from being stated what was mentioned previously, a preference of the media towards avoiding specific references (names of institutions or persons) is indicated, choosing other constructions instead, such as: „anunţă avocatul său", <<anunţul armatei egiptene relansează "Primavara arabă", afirmă liderul opoziţiei liberale în ţară>>.

Unlike journalistic writings that presented titles as being tools for manipulating the public opinion, the current paper tried to discuss about few characteristics that translators considered when transferring meaning from source to target texts. The tendency seemed to vary in the sense that there was a multitude of possibilities. Thus, they were rendered either partially or entirely. The latter option was more suitable for not operating changes or because the content involved dramatism, violence or mockery.

"Another aspect to be considered is that modern newspapers tend to split up one news story into a number of different articles, each concentrating on one specific aspect of the whole story (…)" Schneider (2000: 54)

Being the first ones to be noticed and also to appear under the forms of tags while reading online materials, they had the role of determining the receivers to want to find out more about the mentioned topics. Thus, all the available resources were employed which, along with translations, enabled reaching specific intentions. Some might say that the special attention which was given to them that they became devoid of errors. The most

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

problematic issues were due to the incorrect use of the Romanian orthography and punctuation norms as well as the improper lexical knowledge.

Translators had a preference towards keeping the labels associated to the leaders from the source texts into the target texts. These were written by specific graphical design or with the help of the English quotation system. In other instances, there was a need for emphasizing the so-called "typical" or "classical" conflict, according to some popular beliefs, between America and Russia with the latter appearing as the undeclared ally of Syria. What resulted was a total transfer of meaning which got to the Romanian readers in an unchanged manner, regarding the level of understanding and comprised ideas coming from the exterior. Thus, decoding the originals led to common opinions which had to be included in the end products as such, with the same connotative value. Standardization could not be carried out; the most frequent practices were presented instead, offering insights into the news translation work.

Saxena (2006: 198) remarked that "all Internet headlines are spread across a uniform width. The user does not have the advantage of establishing news value of a report on the basis of headline width or the number of columns used to write a headline – as happens in the case of print headlines".

In the case of some statements from headlines, quotation marks were rather omitted, being preceded by the names of public figures and/or official positions, which appeared articulated with definite article and followed by colon. The tendency was kept from English, differing from the fact that if, in Romanian, the version was shortened, in the source texts declarative verbs such as *says* or *comments* were employed. In other instances, the statements were not attributed to specific individuals; the names of countries were mentioned instead because, when dealing with international news, it seemed easier for the readers to find the specific information that they were looking for. On the other hand, such kind of categorizing enabled, through search engines, easiness of access. Moreover, the beneficiaries were led into considering that what was published represented, in fact, the official positions towards some aspects as well as the essence of the entire messages.

Omitting parts regarding when and where statements were issued, coupled with leaving out special graphical signs, apart from being the influence of the source text, was also a practice for reducing social distances; thus, anything that might have been a mechanism for blocking reaching communicative purposes was removed.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

Moreover, when the quotations were mentioned as belonging to specific persons, identified not by the names as it would have been normal, but rather by their statuses (e.g. *secretarul, generalul, amiralul*), the beneficiaries immediately associated the information with the institutions that the individuals were working for. To complete the images, their nationalities were also given, enabling space localization as well as extending opinions as if they were of the entire country, because significant representatives were chosen from the whole "communities" that they belonged to. For example, by indicating the military ranks, the receivers thought that those were the policies or official opinions of the army.

Including adjectives referring to nationalities such as: *Syrian, Libyan, Egyptian*, the first connection that could come to mind was that of social geography, with the attempt of justifying the people's actions as being typical for the parts of the world they lived in. The different fights between classes seemed reasonable due to the existing disparities between them or their statuses, which usually resulted in changes of political regimes towards reaching a so-called "balance". Among the lexical choices made by translators in order to display the periods of turmoil and their sequencing, the following could be mentioned: *a demisionat, a fost numit, a numit pe* and so on and so forth.

If at the beginning of the events we could find out about some places where atrocities or isolated protests took place such as: near ***a*** *market*, ***a*** *square*, as the things progressed, the names of locations gained significance because they were seen and interpreted through the citizens' perceptions and representations who were able to understand the links, the established connections, being described with all the emotional and social implications, despite the fact that some might have never visited them.

The geographical distance was reduced and the information appeared to be more accessible and justified within the political framework. If finding out in a headline that *Tahrir Square* was a place where demonstrations were organized, when encountered again, within a similar context, the beneficiaries already had an idea about the previous experiences associated to it and the patterns of thought could justify the translators' decisions towards keeping specific parts in the target texts. If, for the readers, the location was seen from a wider perspective, including generalizations, for the protesters experiences were unique, carrying deeper significances.

The choices of having proper names in titles had the purposes of anchoring the events in reality, of making them relevant. If the leaders' lifestyles were presented from an

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

inside view, that of their homes which was mainly full of luxury, the protesters appeared in the open, resorting to extreme actions or having feelings of unrest.

The balance that existed in Arabic families, so much described in the literary works from the past, seemed somehow far during the uprisings. The traditional role of the woman as being in charge of the home was changed, picturing her as protesting along with men on the street or being online (at home) asking others to participate. Thus, space was presented through emphasizing the actors and the policies that guided them.

Two opposing sides such as: *opoziție islamistă și partidul de guvernământ, Frații Musulmani și Guvern, dictator și protestatari* were often mentioned, including at least one official authority or institution, suggesting the struggles for power, hopes and expectations. Associating words which had a wider extent (e.g. *islamist* and *musulman)* involved perceiving all the people through the presented actions as well as labeling them. If a specific dangerous group comprised in its name one of the above-mentioned terms, it did not mean that all those with a single feature in common had to be treated from the perspective of other aspects which did not characterize them.

There were inconsistencies in writing the names of organizations or factions, alternating between using capital or small letters for the first elements, trying to give more importance to entities than they actually had.

Headlines seldom had a positive content because, as paradoxical as it might have seemed, the materials with a certain level of negativity got the readers' attention. Words like: *haos, tensiuni, tortură, ciocniri, confruntări violente, criză politică* prevailed because they created immediate reactions. The informative dimension of news was changed to one that included surprising, trivial or even shocking parts.

"The politics of fear relies on a compliant mass media that will carry news reports and other popular –culture messages that promote fear." (Altheide 2006: 47)

A word with a high occurrence was *atac* to which the translator made several connections in order to make the setting even more dramatic. Thus, it appeared as *eșuat, direct, islamist, al coaliției, cu elicoptere,* suggesting some hypotheses for decoding the messages. As it could be noticed again, a lexical unit with a negative connotation was associated with *Islam*, being no wonder why so many people did not make the difference between Arabs, Muslims and violence.

Although the events took place in the Arabic countries, headlines also included rhetorical questions such as *What would USA think about…?* which, despite the fact that

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

they were limited in number, they anticipated further actions. Thus, in the years 2012 and 2013 a lot of political prominent figures were quoted, reacting to what was going on in the places involved in conflicts.

After the decline of Hosni Mubarak and Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, periods of political instability and novelty came, being inherent for bringing a sense of normality to life. Citizens wanted to express their choices not only verbally, but also in elections. Some might say that those were the moments for the chaos to get higher dimensions. Translators included additional information in the target titles, either to explain the necessity of such changes or to emphasize that, after so many years of tyranny, people got what they expected and fought for. *Alegeri* was usually associated with: *prezidențiale, legislative, parlamentare*, *libere, cruciale, istorice, democratice, corecte*, etc.

The political monopoly held by dictators was replaced by new authorities and leaders, who more or less corresponded to the individuals' expectations. The time factor played its role in deciding the outcome. Romanian journalists wanted to display those periods of transformation and their importance for the Arab societies.

Conflict involved an antagonistic relation of forces, in the struggle for power or for gaining specific rights. It enabled creating associations between persons or groups with common interests. Specifying these categories (e.g. *coaliție, opoziție*) in titles was done to suggest that articles would include information regarding their objectives and interests or inside misunderstandings as well as suspicions connected with them.

Politics presupposed differences of opinions. With the "common enemy" being removed, what seemed to be a unanimous desire changed to a wide range of beliefs, extending from local to institutional or even worldwide levels. Thus, the official statements made by UN, NATO or Arab League representatives were selected from the entire source text content, translated into Romanian and placed as headlines. Reading them, without further explanations was meaningless for the receivers, because they were not frequently encountered in news discourse. They were mere creations of the translators, mainly improper ones, resulting from the lack of organization and knowledge.

In verbal choices such as: *critică, acuză, amenință, avertizează*, the power of Arabic rhetoric was lost, due to the fact that the issuers did not master the qualities which could remind us of the art of dialogue. The resulting image was one with people shouting and screaming at each other; solutions to the real problems were far from being found.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

When mentioning *morți, dezertori, cadavre, răniți*, prior to numerals, two constructions were preferred, i.e. *cel puțin* and *peste*, increasing the negative perception. Moreover, in case multiple source texts were used for creating a headline, for avoiding potential discrepancies that could have appeared while interpreting the message, such forms of imprecise communication were chosen. On the other hand, because so many people died or were injured day by day, the best way to report about the numbers was to use approximation, despite the fact that it was not as such in the original. Translating properly did not always mean to comply with the source text writer's ideas.

When transferring meaning, if something enables presenting the material in an improved manner, there should be no constraints in issuing a new product which is at a better level than that of "the source". Journalists/news translators have this freedom of action and thought.

"In order to successfully inform, the headline has to provide answers to one or more basic questions (who, what, where, when, why)." (Runjić-Stoilova and Galić 2013: 257)

Two distinctive categories which received a lot of attention not only in headlines, but also in the articles themselves were the *army* and the *security forces*. The approaches to them were numerous not only from the perspective of the associations made, which varied, but also from the employed lexical choices.

With their primary roles of protecting the people, of ensuring the national safety, they could have used all the available capabilities for accomplishing them. Their social characteristic by definition should have involved interacting with individuals in directing the actions towards protecting the country. However, many times through paraphrasing and additions, they were blamed for atrocities, for accomplishing orders that went against innocent citizens. A lot of readers were shocked by the headlines comprising information about a female student protester who was violently beaten and her clothes were ripped off. As if the words were not enough, a picture was added to create a more surprising image.

The source text writers presented the Army as being supportive of the authoritarian regimes, fulfilling similar roles with those of the police. To support this idea even more, quotations that included warnings to those that dared to oppose them were chosen.

Associations between *military intervention*, *dead* and *wounded* could be frequently encountered. The actions were *asked* rather than *ordered* by the Arab presidents. By

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

torturing or killing individuals, it was impossible to say if the forces achieved their purposes of maintaining and promoting the national interests.

The selected translated parts from headlines did not include the protesters' requests addressed to the chiefs of forces. Thus, rather than presenting hopes or expectations, other perspectives were considered appropriate, including lexical choices such as *killed* or *injured*.

The relation between civilians and military was seen as a one-way, with the latter category having detrimental influence. Instead of an institution that should have been characterized by attributes like: *honor, dignity* and *respect*, the readers found out about *barbarism, violence, favoritism*. The Romanian translators chose to keep such materials, proving compliance with the source text reporting tendencies.

Emphasizing the power invested in the *army* or *police* was done by writing the names of the authorities with capital letters. A lot of actions were presented such as: armata *a tras în locuitori, a asediat un oraş, a preluat controlul,* with too little being said about some generals that refused the orders which had been given to them, regarding sending troops to start the fire against their fellow countrymen.

Indeed, the role of the military in conflicts varied from one place to another, but by analyzing news content, it was clear that negative image reports prevailed. Metonymy was used in headlines in order to indicate the alliances being made and, rather than saying that a representative favored particular policies or courses of action, the emphasis was extended to the country or city level and not to that of the individuals. As an example, instead of mentioning that *president Putin supported Bashar al–Assad* we read that *Moscow was Damascus' ally*.

By opting for a literal procedure when transferring the significance in a title, it did not mean that translators had to be blamed. Moreover, "the personal touch" could be observed from few additions such as *Foto*, followed by either a dot or a colon, or placed under parentheses. In the same category were *FOCUS* and *FOTO SOCANTE!* all for the purposes of capturing the people's attention through external stimuli.

"Pressed to say more in less space, headline writers have developed a specialized vocabulary that serves their purpose of writing effective headlines. This specialized vocabulary consists of words that are short, powerful, and attention-grabbing, used as substitutes for longer, and more widely used general terms". (Reza Shams 2013: 24)

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

The basic instinct when reading these "shock-words" was to immediately seek for other materials (videos or photos) that accompanied the articles. If they had been well-chosen, they could have added value to the entire target texts.

Analyzing the content of headlines, two categories which were worth being discussed emerged, i.e. *distortion* and *discrepancy*. News presupposes information which is true and objective. However, due to the fact that journalists wanted to be as creative as possible, they interpreted the source text messages in their own subjective manners and presented them "slightly" different, bringing to light "hidden" significances mainly under the forms of additions. Thus, the articles became a mixture of reporting and editorial, combining personal opinions with translated quotations about politics, for example. On the other hand, the receivers were misled by the headlines towards reading materials which did not have any connection to what was mentioned in the forefront.

The old images of cities with: laughing children finishing classes, a lot of street vendors trying to convince the buyers about some products (shouting specific discounts), religious prayers emerging in every possible corner (from shops to minarets) and the smell of delicious sweets were replaced by the pictures or videos of killings, of places where people died because their human rights were not respected, with women that were either beaten or raped for daring to protest. The traditional values did not prevail during the Arab Spring.

Between 2010 and 2014, when reading news about the countries involved in the conflicts, feelings of anger, violence and unrest were presented. The context of the events did not enable selecting the source texts with dominant positive attitude because that would not have been according to the realities.

On one side of the axis regarding the use of the language in the media, there was common vocabulary as opposed to stylistic devices which facilitated creating a superior product. As examples that perfectly seemed to integrate in the former category, the following could be mentioned: *nu se dă dus* and *se dă lovitura de grație* which characterized oral forms of communication rather than writing. Thus, medium value expressive means were chosen which, apart from being familiar to the receivers, did not involve a lot of effort for being decoded.

For well-educated people, such kinds of headlines could create distrust towards the ones that wrote the articles, and even diminish the importance level of the institution they were working for.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

Romanian translators made an option for the source texts based on the titles that they had read. Thus, what was considered as being interesting or connected to a proposed topic was preferred. Such primary filter of sorting the material was characterized by a degree of superiority, being part of the natural process of selectivity.

Some headlines were clear as well as concise and included a limited amount of words. The manners in which they were presented to the beneficiaries offered insights into the expected reactions and potential interpretations. Alternating writing the concepts with either small or capital letters indicated what was considered highly important by the translator.

Apart from being easier and read more rapidly than the articles themselves, indications were given regarding the editorial policies of the institutions that the journalists were working for. The more trivial or oriented towards the spoken language the title was, the more likely the whole material kept the same formatting, with the emphasis being placed not on exactness, but rather on providing "shocking" content.

In what punctuation rules are concerned, it could be observed that they were not followed, appearing as if the translators guided their activity by other conventions, rather than the ones employed for the rest of the articles. Perhaps the most frequent irregularity was in the preference for the English quotation system over the Romanian one. Due to the fact that a lot of people did not have time to read the entire texts and being presented with so many headlines that disregarded some norms, they might have thought that those became the accepted forms.

Our instinct as humans is to protect ourselves against any kind of dangers. It is our survival instinct. Choosing tags about harmful or negative aspects as well as omitting names of places make the readers want to be informed, in order to avoid something that might directly involve them. Moreover, receivers take positive news content as such, without issuing hypotheses or scenarios. It seems that the thinking processes are more active when the individual attention is drawn this way.

A lot of events take place in the world every day. Internet is overloaded with materials. The virtual environment presupposes fast access, being few seconds for actually stirring interest. In the economy which characterizes every headline, any word choice must have a specific role. Online competition involves creativity. Bringing new products means exceeding limits, as well as an improper balance between content and form, with the language being somewhere in the middle, more like a way of reaching intended purposes.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)

Bibliography

Altheide, David L. *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006.

Newssom, Doug and Haynes, Jim. *Public relations Writing: Form and Style*. Ninth Edition. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2011.

Reah, Danuta. *The Language of Newspapers*. Second Edition. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Reza Shams, Mohammad. *Newspapers in the ELT Classroom: A Guide to the English Newspaper for ESL/EFL Students*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2013.

Runjić-Stoilova, Anita and Galić, Josip. "The Representation and Reception of Paraphrase in Newspaper Headlines". *What Do We Know about the World? Rhetorical and Argumentative Perspectives*. Ed. Gabrijela Kišićek and Igor Ž. Žagar. University of Windsor, 2013. 257-270.

Saxena, Sunil. *Headline Writing*. London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2006.

Schneider, Kristina. "The Emergence and Development of Headlines in English Newspapers". *English Media Texts: Past and Present*. Ed. Friedrich Ungerer. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000. 45-66.

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureș, ISBN: 978-606-8624-03-7

BDD-V4037 © 2016 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 05:55:32 UTC)