THEME-POLYSEMY RELATIONS IN ONLINE NEWS HEADLINES: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Headlines represent one of the most condensed forms of media discourse, requiring journalists to communicate complex events with minimal linguistic resources. To achieve brevity and impact, headlines frequently employ polysemous verbs whose meanings must be inferred rapidly and accurately despite limited context. This study investigates how thematic organization, within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), functions as a pragmatic mechanism that constrains the interpretation of polysemous expressions in English online news headlines. Using a qualitative descriptive design, thirty headlines from BBC News, The Guardian, and CNN International (January-February 2025) were analyzed through theme–rheme structure, lexical semantics, and Relevance Theory. The findings reveal a highly consistent pattern: 26 of the 30 headlines (86.7%) positioned polysemous verbs in the rheme, while the theme activated domain-specific frames economic, political, environmental, or technological that guided readers toward the intended meaning. These results demonstrate that thematic framing systematically reduces ambiguity and supports relevance driven interpretation in contexts with minimal co text. This study contributes to SFL by providing empirical evidence that the theme is not only a textual point of departure but also a meaning constraining device that shapes semantic interpretation, and it extends Relevance Theory by showing how thematic cues narrow inferential space and lower processing effort. Practically, the findings offer implications for media literacy and journalism, as recognizing how themes guide interpretation can help readers identify framing strategies in digital news and support journalists in managing potential ambiguity while maintaining communicative economy.

Keywords: *Thematic meaning, Theme rheme structure, Polysemy, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Relevance Theory, Media discourse.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, readers increasingly consume news through online platforms where headlines often function as the primary, or even sole, entry point to information. Headlines must perform several communicative functions simultaneously: they attract attention, summarize essential content, and frame interpretation (Bell, 1991; Wulandari & Fitriani, 2023). Because their linguistic space is extremely limited, journalists commonly rely on compressed lexical choices, including polysemous words, to convey complex events efficiently (Cruse, 2004; Fadhilah, 2023). Words such as *fall*, *hit*, *drive*, and *pressure* frequently appear in headlines because they allow multiple shades of meaning to be expressed within minimal space.

Despite this potential for ambiguity, readers rarely misinterpret such headlines. For example, in "Markets fall as tech shares retreat," readers instantly understand *fall* in its financial sense, rather than in its literal physical meaning. This raises an important question: how do readers consistently retrieve the intended meaning of polysemous expressions when contextual cues are minimal?

Although scholars have examined polysemy in news discourse and separately explored thematic organization within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), existing research has not sufficiently

explained how theme rheme structures themselves constrain the interpretation of polysemous items, particularly within the uniquely compressed environment of headlines. Most studies on polysemy focus on lexical or cognitive mechanisms (Cruse, 2004; Fadhilah, 2023), while work on thematic structure emphasizes textual organization and information flow (Halliday, 1994; Eggins, 2004). Research on theme rheme in news texts, such as *Nurwahidah* (2025), has described how themes structure information, but such studies do not examine how thematic framing interacts with polysemy to guide interpretation. Therefore, the interaction between theme rheme organization and the semantic flexibility of polysemous verbs remains underexplored.

This gap becomes especially important when considering that headlines differ fundamentally from non headline texts. Headlines lack elaborating co text, rely heavily on semantic compression, and must be interpreted quickly in online reading environments. Readers encounter them without the benefit of extended paragraphs that normally help disambiguate meaning. As a result, headlines place unusually high demands on readers' inferential processes: they must interpret ambiguous lexical items rapidly and accurately despite severely restricted context. In such constrained conditions, thematic meaning becomes a crucial interpretive mechanism. The theme provides the initial conceptual frame that limits possible interpretations and signals the domain economic, political, environmental, technological within which a polysemous verb should be understood.

Therefore, this study investigates how thematic organization influences the interpretation of polysemous expressions in English media headlines. Specifically, it examines typical theme–rheme patterns, the frames activated by thematic elements, and the pragmatic mechanisms that enable readers to infer accurate meanings with minimal contextual support. By integrating perspectives from SFL, lexical semantics, and Relevance Theory, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how journalists maintain clarity, brevity, and communicative impact in digital news discourse.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design because the aim of the research is to interpret how thematic structures guide the meanings of polysemous expressions in headlines, a process that requires close reading, contextual interpretation, and sensitivity to linguistic nuance rather than numerical measurement. A qualitative approach therefore provides the most appropriate framework for capturing the meaning making mechanisms that operate within short, highly condensed texts such as news headlines. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, the study applied three qualitative quality criteria: credibility, maintained through consistent analytical procedures and theoretical triangulation across SFL, semantics, and pragmatics; transferability, supported by a clear description of data sources, sampling criteria, and contextual details; and dependability, ensured by transparent documentation of analytical steps and interpretive decisions.

The dataset consisted of thirty English-language headlines published between January and February 2025 from BBC News, The Guardian, and CNN International. These outlets were chosen for their global readership and consistent use of Standard English. Purposive sampling was used to select headlines containing at least one polysemous lexical item and a clear clause structure suitable for analysis within the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework. Each polysemous verb was verified through Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries to ensure that the ambiguity under

examination reflected true polysemy rather than idiomatic or homonymous usage.

The data were analyzed through an integrated framework that combined SFL, lexical semantics, and Relevance Theory. Each headline was first examined to identify polysemous verbs and outline their possible meanings. The headline was then segmented into Theme and Rheme following Halliday's functional grammar, allowing the researcher to determine how the initial thematic position established a contextual frame economic, political, environmental, or technological that guided interpretation. The analysis then examined how the meaning of the polysemous verb aligned with this thematic framing. Finally, insights from Relevance Theory were used to explain how readers select the most contextually appropriate meaning with minimal cognitive effort, given the limited co text typical of headlines. Through this process, the study systematically revealed how thematic organization operates as a pragmatic mechanism for disambiguating polysemy in news discourse.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of thirty English language news headlines from BBC News, The Guardian, and CNN International revealed three major findings relating to the position of polysemous verbs, the thematic domains that activate meaning, and the pragmatic function of polysemy in headlines.

Table 1. Thematic domains and interpretation of polysemous verbs

Domain	Example Headline	Polysemous Verb	Interpreted Meaning	Function of Theme
Economic	*Markets fall as tech shares retreat*	fall	decline in value	Activates financial frame
Political	*China tightens grip on Hong Kong*	tightens	strengthen control	Activates political power frame
Political	*Government hits back at opposition criticism*	hits	respond critically	Activates institutional conflict frame
Environmental	*Winds drive fires across region*	drive	propel or intensify	Activates natural process frame
Technological	*Servers crash during global outage*	crash	system failure	Activates mechan ical/IT frame

The first finding shows a highly consistent structural pattern in the placement of polysemous verbs. In twenty six out of thirty headlines (86.7%), the polysemous verb appeared in the rheme, while the theme functioned as the interpretive anchor that guided readers toward the intended meaning. This strong majority indicates that the theme rheme arrangement is not accidental but reflects a deliberate meaning making strategy in headline construction. Only four headlines (13.3%) diverged from this pattern, typically due to marked thematic structures or verbless headline forms. The predominance of this configuration strengthens the argument that thematic positioning plays a crucial role in reducing ambiguity and supporting interpretive precision.

The second finding highlights domain specific meaning activation. The economic, political, environmental, and technological domains triggered distinctive metaphorical interpretations of polysemous verbs. Economic themes such as *markets* and *prices* activated financial schemas that narrowed the verbs *fall*, *slide*, or *retreat* to the sense of "decline in value." Political themes such as *China* or *Government*

established control or conflict frames, directing readers to interpret *tightens* and *hits* as "strengthening control" and "responding critically." Environmental and technological themes similarly activated natural process and mechanical frames that shaped interpretations of *drive* and *crash*. These patterns demonstrate that thematic domains provide cognitive scaffolding that guides meaning selection.

The third finding indicates that most of the polysemous verbs in the dataset were used metaphorically rather than literally. This tendency shows that journalists employ polysemy strategically as a tool for semantic compression, allowing complex events to be communicated succinctly without compromising clarity. The interaction between thematic framing and metaphorical polysemy supports communicative efficiency by ensuring that readers infer the intended meaning quickly, even with minimal contextual support.

In summary, the findings confirm that the interaction between theme and polysemy is a systematic feature of English media headlines. Thematic cues activate contextual frames that enable readers to infer meaning accurately, while polysemous verbs provide semantic density and rhetorical impact. Together, these linguistic strategies demonstrate how journalists achieve clarity, brevity, and effectiveness in news discourse.

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that thematic organization plays a central role in shaping the interpretation of polysemous words in English media headlines. The consistent placement of polysemous verbs in the rheme and the function of the theme as an interpretive frame support Halliday's (1994) concept that the theme represents the point of departure for message development. In the analyzed headlines, the theme establishes the contextual field, allowing the reader to anticipate and interpret the polysemous verb accurately. This result confirms Eggins's (2004) argument that thematic structure contributes not only to textual coherence but also to semantic predictability in discourse.

The domain specific patterns observed in the findings also highlight the dynamic interaction between semantics and pragmatics. Themes such as *markets*, *government*, *winds*, or *servers* activate domain relevant frames that constrain how readers interpret verbs such as *fall*, *hit*, *drive*, and *crash*. These results align with the cognitive principle of relevance proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995), in which readers select the most contextually appropriate interpretation with minimal processing effort. The data illustrate how theme rheme organization provides a linguistic mechanism for achieving this pragmatic efficiency. When the theme sets the interpretive boundaries, readers can disambiguate polysemous expressions almost instantly, which explains the remarkable clarity of headlines despite their brevity.

Importantly, the findings both reinforce and extend previous research on headline interpretation. Dor's (2003) characterization of headlines as "relevance optimizers" is supported by the present study, but the results add a new dimension by showing that thematic framing itself is a relevance enhancing device. Rather than relying solely on lexical brevity, journalists use the theme to pre select the conceptual domain within which readers interpret the rheme. Likewise, Ifantidou's (2009) claim that headlines depend on pragmatic inference is strengthened by the finding that the theme systematically narrows the inferential space, making pragmatic processing more efficient and less ambiguous. The results also correspond with Cruse's (2004) theory of polysemy as flexible and context dependent, yet this study demonstrates that such flexibility becomes predictably constrained in headlines because the theme stabilizes

meaning before the verb is processed. In this way, the study does not merely replicate earlier findings but extends them by identifying the theme as the structural locus where meaning disambiguation begins, particularly in compressed media texts. These insights also complement Wulandari and Fitriani (2023), who emphasize the role of thematic cues in shaping comprehension, by providing empirical evidence that such cues are central to managing polysemy in modern digital news.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how SFL and Relevance Theory complement each other. Thematic structure, as explained in SFL, accounts for how textual organization encodes communicative priorities, while Relevance Theory explains how readers infer meaning based on cognitive economy. Together, they form an integrated framework for explaining how meaning is negotiated between text and reader. The results of this study show that the theme not only organizes information flow but also activates mental models that determine the interpretation of polysemous words.

Practically, the findings hold implications for media writing and language pedagogy. For journalists, the results suggest that strategic thematic placement can help achieve maximum communicative impact while maintaining clarity. For language teachers, the study underscores the value of teaching theme rheme analysis as a tool for developing discourse awareness and improving students' reading comprehension of authentic texts. Recognizing how thematic organization shapes meaning can help learners interpret polysemous and metaphorical expressions more effectively.

Overall, the findings confirm that the interaction between thematic meaning and polysemy is systematic and functional rather than incidental. The theme provides the contextual anchor necessary for guiding interpretation, while polysemous verbs enrich headlines by enhancing semantic density and rhetorical strength. This interplay between structure and meaning highlights the efficiency and sophistication of headline discourse and provides a strong foundation for the conclusions presented in the following section.

CONCLUSION

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In conclusion, the discussion confirms that the interaction between thematic meaning and polysemy is not coincidental but systematic and functional. The theme provides the contextual anchor necessary for accurate interpretation, while polysemous verbs enrich headlines by enhancing semantic density and rhetorical strength. This interplay between structure and meaning exemplifies the efficiency and sophistication of journalistic discourse.

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