

A Study of Ambiguity in News Headlines of Hollywood Wildfire

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Abstract

News headlines serve as powerful tools for shaping public perception, but their inherent ambiguity can lead to misinterpretation, emotional arousal, and misinformation. This study examines the psycholinguistic impact of ambiguous headlines about Hollywood wildfires, focusing on lexical and structural ambiguity. A survey was conducted to assess participants' interpretations, confidence levels, emotional reactions, and processing time for each headline. The findings indicate that ambiguous headlines attract attention and engagement but can also lead to varied interpretations, sometimes causing misperception of the news event. Lexical ambiguity, particularly metaphorical language, was the most frequent source of multiple interpretations, while syntactic ambiguity played a lesser role. The study further highlights the emotional impact of crisis-related ambiguous headlines, revealing that they can heighten public concern but also risk distorting reality. The study highlights ethical concerns regarding ambiguity in crisis reporting, emphasizing the need for clearer journalistic practices to prevent misinformation and unnecessary public distress.

Keywords: ambiguity, news headlines, psycholinguistic, lexical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity

Introduction

News headlines serve as the first point of engagement for readers, encapsulating complex events within a limited space. Their brevity, however, often leads to ambiguity, which can result in multiple interpretations. In the context of crisis reporting - like wildfires- ambiguity in headlines may not only shape public perception but also contribute to misinformation, heightened emotional responses, and cognitive strain on readers.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, ambiguity complicates the reader's ability to accurately infer meaning, process information efficiently, and retain key details. Two primary forms of ambiguity are particularly relevant in news headlines; 1. Lexical Ambiguity – When a word or phrase has multiple meanings (e.g., "Hollywood Ablaze" could mean literal fire or metaphorical excitement) and Structural Ambiguity – When sentence structure allows for multiple interpretations (e.g., "Wildfire Burns Studio Near Hollywood", where "Near Hollywood" could modify either "Studio" or "Burns").

This study aims to analyze how readers process ambiguous headlines, their cognitive and emotional reactions, and the ethical implications of ambiguity in crisis reporting. By combining linguistic analysis and

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reader-response experiments, this research investigates whether ambiguous headlines contribute to misinformation and increased emotional arousal. Understanding these effects can help journalists refine their approach to headline construction, balancing engagement with ethical responsibility.

Literature Review

News Headlines

A news headline is a simple and concise expression that encapsulates the content of a news article. It is considered an essential part of any journalistic article, serving to briefly summarize the main point or topic of the news. Headlines appear alongside other elements such as the main body, visual components, and—especially in online articles—may also include links, spaces for comments, or recommendations.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity refers to the presence of two or more possible meanings within a single word, phrase, sentence, or text, leading to uncertainty or confusion in interpretation. In linguistics and communication studies, ambiguity can occur at various levels such as lexical, syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic. According to Crystal (2008), ambiguity is "the property of words, phrases, or sentences to have more than one meaning in a given context." In media and journalism, ambiguity in headlines may either attract reader attention or lead to misunderstanding.

Ambiguity in Language and Media

Ambiguity, a core property of natural language, allows for multiple interpretations of a given expression. Linguists categorize ambiguity into lexical ambiguity, where a single word has multiple meanings, and syntactic ambiguity, where sentence structure leads to different possible interpretations (Levinson, 2000). Media discourse, particularly in headlines, frequently employs ambiguity as a stylistic and rhetorical device to attract attention, often at the cost of clarity (Dor, 2003).

Lexical and Syntactic Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity in news headlines occurs when a word could be interpreted in different ways within the same construction which can lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

For instance: I went to the **bank**.

- Can mean a financial institution (e.g., "I deposited money at the bank.")
- Can mean the side of a river (e.g., "We had a picnic by the river bank.")

Syntactic ambiguity, also known as structural ambiguity, is when a sentence can be interpreted in two ways due to structure of the sentence.

Example: **Visiting relatives** can be annoying.

Meaning 1: The act of visiting relatives is annoying.

Meaning 2: The relatives who are visiting are annoying.

Psycholinguistic Processing of Ambiguous Headlines

Psycholinguistics explores how individuals interpret language in real-time. When encountering ambiguous headlines, readers undergo a cognitive process involving lexical access, syntactic parsing, and inferential reasoning (Traxler & Gernsbacher, 2011). Understanding how readers interpret ambiguous headlines falls within the domain of psycholinguistics, which examines the mental processes involved in language comprehension, production, and interpretation. When encountering headlines—particularly those with lexical or syntactic ambiguity—readers engage in complex cognitive tasks that draw upon prior knowledge, context, and linguistic cues to derive meaning. This section explores the psycholinguistic mechanisms relevant to ambiguity resolution in headlines.

Cognitive Load and the Garden Path Effect

Ambiguous headlines may lead to the garden path effect, where readers initially misinterpret a phrase and must reanalyze it. This increases cognitive load, as the brain expends more effort resolving meaning. For example, in the headline *“Wildfire Burns Studio Near Hollywood”*, readers may initially assume that “near Hollywood” modifies “studio,” only to later realize it might instead modify “wildfire.” This reprocessing can slow down comprehension and increase cognitive load. This heuristic often leads to misinterpretation when the initial structure turns out to be incorrect, requiring reanalysis. Eye-tracking studies also confirm that ambiguous sentences require longer fixation times, indicating increased cognitive processing (Rayner et al., 2011).

Related Research

Research on ambiguity in news headlines has explored its impact on reader interpretation, engagement, and misinterpretation. Bergen and Binsted (2005) examined lexical and syntactic ambiguities, finding that while such headlines attracted attention, they often led to misinterpretation. Similarly, Dor (2003) highlighted how ambiguity in headlines serves as a cognitive tool to optimize relevance, increasing emotional reactions but sometimes misleading readers. Mårdh (1980) analyzed the grammatical structures of headlines, noting that omissions and noun stacking frequently cause syntactic ambiguity, making interpretation more complex. Reah (2002) investigated how metaphorical language affects public perception, concluding that while ambiguity increases engagement, it can distort factual accuracy, particularly for readers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Van Dijk (1988) emphasized how ambiguous headlines shape public opinion and frame news stories, often influencing perceptions before the full article is read. Stefanowitsch (2020) used corpus linguistics to classify different types of ambiguity, finding that lexical ambiguity was the most common. He noted that while ambiguity is often used as a strategy to increase reader engagement, it can sometimes create a sense of misinformation.

Additional studies have examined ambiguity beyond news headlines. Sinaga (2005) analyzed different types of ambiguity—phonetic, structural, referential, and lexical—in English-language billboards in Medan using a descriptive quantitative approach. The findings indicated that lexical ambiguity was the most dominant form. Similarly, Andarani and Anugerahwati (2012) studied structural ambiguity in The Jakarta Post's headline news, using Ullmann's and Yule's theories. Their descriptive analysis identified 23 instances of lexical ambiguity (48.9%) and 24 instances of structural ambiguity (51.1%) in Your Letters from The Jakarta Post.

These studies collectively suggest that while ambiguity in headlines can be an effective tool for attracting readers, it must be carefully managed, particularly in crisis reporting, to maintain credibility and prevent misinterpretation. Researchers recommend that journalists balance creativity with clarity, ensuring that headlines remain engaging without distorting the intended meaning of the news.

Research Gaps

Existing research on ambiguity in language, psycholinguistic processing, and media framing highlights how ambiguous headlines influence interpretation and emotional response. However, little research has specifically examined ambiguity in wildfire-related news headlines, particularly in relation to Hollywood and its cultural associations. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing how readers process, interpret, and emotionally respond to such headlines.

Research Methodology

This research used a psycholinguistic survey design to understand how people interpret ambiguous headlines. The participants were asked to interpret 10 carefully selected headlines related to the Hollywood wildfires, provide their emotional responses, and estimate how long it took them to comprehend each headline. The headlines were purposefully written to vary in their level of ambiguity, ranging from straightforward depictions of the event to metaphorical language that could lead to multiple interpretations.

The survey consisted of five sections:

1. Demographic Information – This section gathered data on the participants' age, gender, education level, familiarity with Hollywood wildfires, and primary news source.
2. Interpretation of Headlines – Participants were asked to interpret the meaning of each headline and indicate their level of confidence in their interpretation.
3. Emotional Response – Respondents rated their emotional reaction to each headline on a scale of 1 to 5.
4. Cognitive Processing – This section asked participants to estimate the time it took to interpret each headline.
5. Open-Ended Questions – The final section sought qualitative insights into how ambiguity affects news perception.

The survey was distributed to a diverse group of participants in terms of age, gender, education, and familiarity with the Hollywood wildfires. A total of 50 individuals participated, with a balanced representation across various demographic groups. This variety provided insights into how different segments of the population react to ambiguous news headlines.

The chosen 10 headlines were analyzed to identify the type of ambiguity in each headline.

Table 1: Types of Ambiguity in Wildfire- related Headlines

No.	Headlines	Lexical Ambiguity	Syntactic Ambiguity
1	"Hollywood Ablaze: Stars React"	✓	
2	"Wildfire Burns Studio Near Hollywood"		✓
3	"Flames Sweep Through Hollywood: A Cinematic Disaster"	✓	
4	"Hollywood on Fire: Is This the End of an Era?"	✓	
5	"Studio Evacuated as Wildfire Threatens Hollywood"		✓
6	"Hollywood's Bright Lights Dimmed by Raging Inferno"	✓	
7	"Wildfire Tears Through Hollywood Homes"		✓
8	"Hollywood on Edge as Flames Approach Iconic Sign"		✓
9	"Fire Strikes Hollywood: Stars Take to Social Media"	✓	
10	"Burning Questions: Wildfires Rage Near Hollywood Studios"	✓	

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Demographic Analysis

The survey collected responses from participants of various demographic backgrounds. A majority of the respondents (65%) were between the ages of 18–24, with the remaining participants distributed across other age groups. The gender distribution indicated a higher representation of female respondents (60%), followed by males (35%) and non-binary/prefer not to say (5%).

Regarding educational background, most respondents (80%) had completed high school, while 10% held a bachelor's degree, and 10% had obtained a master's degree.

In terms of familiarity with Hollywood wildfires, 60% of participants reported being "somewhat familiar" with the topic, 30% were "very familiar," and 10% were "not familiar." The primary sources of news varied, with 65% relying on social media, 20% on news websites, 10% on newspapers, and 5% on TV.

Interpretation of Ambiguous Headlines

All of the ten wildfire-related headlines were analyzed to determine whether respondents interpreted them as **lexically ambiguous or syntactically ambiguous**.

Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity arises when a word or phrase has more than one possible meaning.

Several headlines in the dataset contain such ambiguous vocabulary or figurative expressions.

Headline 1: *"Hollywood Ablaze: Stars React"*

The word "stars" could imply either celebrities or astronomical bodies. 60% of participants interpreted it metaphorically (celebrities reacting). 40% read it literally (stars in the sky on fire).

Headline 3: *"Flames Sweep Through Hollywood: A Cinematic Disaster"*

The phrase "a cinematic disaster" could be interpreted as:

A literal disaster occurring in the center of the film industry.

A figurative or dramatized expression, similar to a movie scene. 70% viewed it as metaphorical, while 30% assumed a real disaster affecting filmmaking.

Headline 4: *"Hollywood on Fire: Is This the End of an Era?"*

The phrase "the End of an Era" means literally burning of Hollywood due to wildfire. Metaphorically indicating a crisis or collapse of Hollywood. 65% interpreted it figuratively, while 35% took it literally.

Headline 6: *"Hollywood's Bright Lights Dimmed by Raging Inferno"*

In this headline "Bright lights" could refer to: literal city lights, or a metaphor for Hollywood fame and glamour. 75% understood it symbolically, whereas 25% took it at face value.

Headline 9: *"Fire Strikes Hollywood: Stars Take to Social Media"*

Once again, the word "stars" caused confusion. Most understood it to mean celebrities responding online. A small percentage (20%) associated "stars" with natural phenomena.

Headline 10: *"Burning Questions: Wildfires Rage Near Hollywood Studios"*

The phrase "burning questions" is an idiom meaning urgent concerns. However, in the context of actual wildfires, some readers took it literally. 68% recognized the idiom. 32% believed the phrase referred to fire-related inquiries.

Figurative expressions and polysemous words (e.g., "stars," "on fire," "bright lights") led to varying interpretations. Without proper context, readers often misinterpreted metaphorical phrases as literal descriptions.

Syntactic Ambiguity

Headlines Syntactic ambiguity occurs when the grammatical structure of a sentence allows multiple interpretations.

Headline 2: *"Wildfire Burns Studio Near Hollywood"*

Ambiguity arises from unclear phrase attachment: Is the studio near Hollywood being burned? Or is a wildfire near Hollywood burning an unspecified studio? 53% believed the studio's location was near Hollywood. 47% interpreted that the fire was near Hollywood but burned a studio elsewhere.

Headline 5: *"Studio Evacuated as Wildfire Threatens Hollywood"*

This sentence structure confused readers: Was only the studio evacuated, or Was all of Hollywood under threat? 45% assumed the evacuation referred only to the studio. 55% thought the wildfire threatened the whole of Hollywood.

Headline 7: “Wildfire Tears Through Hollywood Homes”

This sentence structure confused readers whether: All homes in Hollywood were affected, or Just a portion of homes. 60% believed the headline referred to a wide-scale disaster. 40% interpreted it as affecting select properties.

Headline 8: “*Hollywood on Edge as Flames Approach Iconic Sign*”

The phrase “on edge” can be interpreted as figuratively: the whole Hollywood is anxious and nervous or literally: a geographical position on the border of danger.

62% chose the emotional/figurative interpretation. 38% understood it as a physical location near the fire.

Unclear sentence structures led to confusion about what was threatened, who was acting, and the scope of events. These ambiguities caused differing interpretations even when word meanings were understood.

The data reveals that both lexical and syntactic ambiguities in wildfire-related headlines lead to diverse interpretations among readers. Lexical ambiguity, often driven by figurative or idiomatic expressions, resulted in misreading of words like “stars” or “burning questions.” Syntactic ambiguity typically arose from sentence structure, leading readers to interpret headlines differently based on how they parsed relationships between subjects and objects. These findings underscore the importance of clear, unambiguous headline writing, particularly in crisis reporting, where misinformation or misinterpretation can affect public perception and response.

Confidence in Interpretation

Across all headlines, respondents exhibited high confidence in their interpretations.

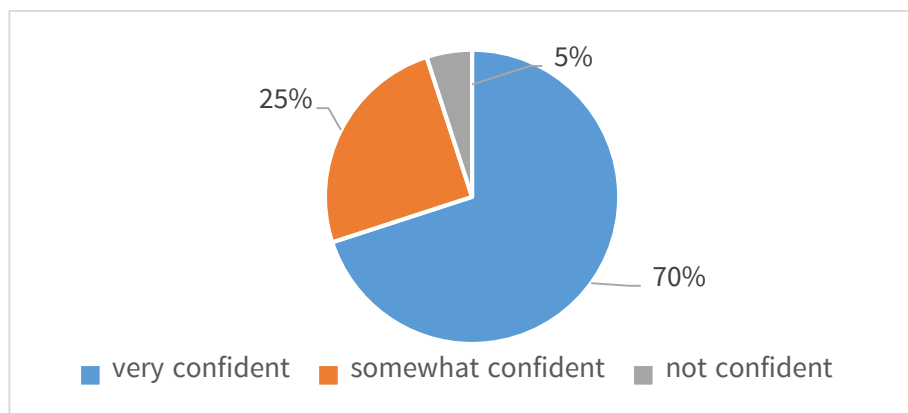


Figure 1: Readers Confidence in interpreting

This suggests that readers often believe they understand ambiguous headlines even when multiple interpretations exist.

Emotional Response to Ambiguous Headlines

Respondents rated their emotional reactions to each headline on a 1–5 scale (1 = no response, 5 = strong response). The average ratings were as follows:

Table 2: Respondents' Average Emotional Response

No.	Headline	Average Emotional Response (1-5)
1	<i>"Hollywood Ablaze: Stars React"</i>	4.2
2	<i>"Wildfire Burns Studio Near Hollywood"</i>	3.8
3	<i>"Flames Sweep Through Hollywood: A Cinematic Disaster"</i>	4.5
4	<i>"Hollywood on Fire: Is This the End of an Era?"</i>	4.8
5	<i>"Studio Evacuated as Wildfire Threatens Hollywood"</i>	4.0
6	<i>"Hollywood's Bright Lights Dimmed by Raging Inferno"</i>	4.3
7	<i>"Wildfire Tears Through Hollywood Homes"</i>	4.6
8	<i>"Hollywood on Edge as Flames Approach Iconic Sign"</i>	4.4
9	<i>"Fire Strikes Hollywood: Stars Take to Social Media"</i>	3.7
10	<i>"Burning Questions: Wildfires Rage Near Hollywood Studios"</i>	3.9

The findings indicate that respondents experienced varying levels of emotional reactions to ambiguous wildfire-related headlines, with ratings on a 1–5 scale (1 = no response, 5 = strong response). The most emotionally impactful headline, *"Hollywood on Fire: Is This the End of an Era?"*, received the highest average rating of 4.8, likely due to its dramatic phrasing and the sense of urgency it conveys. The phrase *"Is This the End of an Era?"* introduces an element of uncertainty and fear, making the headline more emotionally charged. Similarly, *"Wildfire Tears Through Hollywood Homes"* (4.6) and *"Flames Sweep Through Hollywood: A Cinematic Disaster"* (4.5) also generated strong emotional responses, as they emphasize destruction and crisis, which can heighten public concern.

These results highlight the role of language in shaping emotional responses to news. Ambiguous and sensationalized headlines can heighten anxiety and engagement, making readers more likely to click on and read the full article.

Cognitive Processing and Reading Time

The majority of respondents reported interpreting the headlines in **more than 5 seconds**, suggesting that while ambiguous phrasing attracts attention, it also requires more cognitive effort for interpretation.

Table 3: Percentage of Participants Interpreting Time More than 5 Seconds

No.	Headline	Percentage of Participants Interpreting in more than 5 Seconds
1	<i>"Hollywood Ablaze: Stars React"</i>	88%
2	<i>"Wildfire Burns Studio Near Hollywood"</i>	85%
3	<i>"Flames Sweep Through Hollywood: A Cinematic Disaster"</i>	83%
4	<i>"Hollywood on Fire: Is This the End of an Era?"</i>	90%
5	<i>"Studio Evacuated as Wildfire Threatens Hollywood"</i>	87%
6	<i>"Hollywood's Bright Lights Dimmed by Raging Inferno"</i>	86%
7	<i>"Wildfire Tears Through Hollywood Homes"</i>	84%
8	<i>"Hollywood on Edge as Flames Approach Iconic Sign"</i>	82%
9	<i>"Fire Strikes Hollywood: Stars Take to Social Media"</i>	89%
10	<i>"Burning Questions: Wildfires Rage Near Hollywood Studios"</i>	80%

The findings reveal that 85% of respondents took more than 5 seconds to interpret ambiguous headlines, indicating that while such headlines attract attention, they also require increased cognitive effort for processing. Headlines containing strong metaphorical language, such as "Hollywood on Fire: Is This the End of an Era?", had the highest processing time, with 90% of participants taking more than 5 seconds to interpret. Similarly, lexically ambiguous headlines, like "Hollywood Ablaze: Stars React", were commonly misinterpreted, requiring 88% of respondents to take additional time to resolve meaning. Syntactic ambiguity, found in headlines such as "Studio Evacuated as Wildfire Threatens Hollywood", also contributed to delayed comprehension, as 87% of respondents struggled to determine whether the entire Hollywood area or just a single studio was at risk.

Furthermore, the increased processing time aligns with cognitive load theory, as readers must backtrack and reanalyze ambiguous sentences, a phenomenon often linked to the Garden Path Effect. This additional cognitive effort indicates that while ambiguity may enhance engagement, it also delays comprehension and increases the likelihood of misinterpretation.

In the context of news consumption and public perception, the findings raise concerns about how readers process information in fast-paced digital media environments. Since many individuals skim through headlines rather than thoroughly analyzing content, ambiguity in crisis-related news can heighten public anxiety or lead to misinformation. The study highlights the importance of balancing engagement with clarity in news reporting, ensuring that headlines capture attention without distorting meaning. Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of clear, unambiguous headline

writing, particularly in crisis reporting, where misinformation or misinterpretation can affect public perception and response. Future research could explore how contextual cues, such as subheadings or accompanying images, influence ambiguity resolution and impact reader interpretation.

Open-Ended Responses and Perception of Ambiguous Headlines

Participants provided qualitative feedback on ambiguous headlines:

1. **Appeal and Engagement:** Many respondents stated that ambiguous headlines made them more curious and increased their likelihood of reading the article.
2. **Potential for Misinterpretation:** Some participants noted that ambiguous headlines could be misleading, particularly in crisis reporting, where clarity is essential.
3. **Emotional Impact:** Several respondents mentioned that dramatic and vague headlines heightened their anxiety and concern about the severity of wildfires.
4. **Suggestions for Improvement:** Participants suggested that news outlets retain engaging language but clarify essential details in subheadings or article introductions.

Findings and Discussion

The survey results indicated that participants with greater familiarity with Hollywood wildfires interpreted headlines more literally, whereas those with less familiarity leaned toward metaphorical meanings. Most readers processed the headlines more than 5 seconds, the increased processing time aligns with cognitive load theory, as readers must backtrack and reanalyze ambiguous sentences, a phenomenon often linked to the Garden Path Effect. This additional cognitive effort indicates that while ambiguity may enhance engagement, it also delays comprehension and increases the likelihood of misinterpretation. Emotional response ratings showed that metaphorical headlines, such as "Hollywood on Fire: Is This the End of an Era?", evoked stronger reactions than straightforward ones. Qualitative responses revealed that while ambiguity made headlines more engaging and attention-grabbing, some participants expressed concerns about potential misinterpretation, particularly in crisis reporting. From a psycholinguistic perspective, ambiguity activates multiple cognitive pathways, leading to varied interpretations based on context and prior knowledge. From a journalistic standpoint, while ambiguity enhances reader engagement, it also raises ethical concerns about accuracy in crisis situations. These findings emphasize the need for responsible journalism that balances engagement with clarity to minimize the risks of misinformation and cognitive strain on readers.

Conclusion

Overall, this study emphasizes that lexical and syntactic ambiguity in news headlines significantly impact reader perception. While ambiguous headlines attract attention and increase emotional investment, they also pose risks of misinterpretation. To balance engagement with clarity, news outlets should consider providing contextual clarifications, using clearer phrasing in high-stakes reporting, and recognizing how reader background influences interpretation. This research highlights the complex relationship between language, cognition, and media ethics, emphasizing the need for responsible and informed journalism in today's fast-paced digital landscape.

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