WHAT'S IN A HEADLINE? LEARNING AND TEACHING THE USE OF RHETORICAL STRATEGIES TO STUDENTS OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS THROUGH *THE ECONOMIST*

Cecilia Boggio and Ilaria Parini *
(University of Turin and University of Eastern Piedmont, Italy)

Abstract

Newspaper and magazine headlines have been the subject of abundant research over the years and, because of their peculiar characteristics, they can be considered as a genre. One of their main functions is to catch the attention of the reader and, to achieve this goal, headline writers make use of different rhetorical strategies. *The Economist* is a newspaper which is well-known for its witty headlines. Some of the strategies used to engage the reader in a "dialogic language game" (Bowker 2008: 167) are linguistic devices, such as puns, metaphors, and phonological schemes (i.e. alliteration, assonance and rhyme), whereas others are based on cognitive mechanisms, such as allusions to idioms, quotations, titles of novels, films, and songs. Drawing on a study conducted by R.J. Alexander in 1986, this article will first present the results of the analysis of a dataset of 118 headlines of articles published in *The Economist* dealing specifically with two of the major events that have recently hit the world, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The goal of this investigation is to establish whether the rhetorical strategies observed over thirty-five years ago by Alexander are still found in contemporary headlines, especially in the case of such serious and sensitive global issues. Then, the article discusses the results of a closed-ended questionnaire on the rhetorical strategies used by *The Economist* in its headlines taken by a cohort of 100 EFL/ESP learners, Italian undergraduate students specializing either in Economics or Business. The goal of this analysis is to assess the above-mentioned students' reading comprehension skills in English and, more specifically, their ability to identify and understand what lies "beyond the information given" (Alexander 1986: 176).

1. Introduction

The objective of newspapers and magazines is to disseminate news about local, national, and/or international politics, business, sports, social issues, education, entertainment, etc. An essential role of news stories is played by their headlines which have the crucial function of grabbing the readers' attention, as well as summarizing the essential information contained in the article itself. Newspaper and magazine headlines

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have been the subject of abundant research over the years, and they can be considered as a genre, as rightly pointed out by Isani (2011: 83-84). In fact, if we refer to the definition of genre provided by Swales (1990), it is possible to observe that headlines present all the features that the scholar identifies in this specific kind of discourse. According to Isani (2011: 83), "within the multifunctional and multiple umbrella genre that is generally referred to as headlines, there exist certain characteristics not common to all headlines but sufficiently recurrent in others to constitute a sub-genre which we propose to distinguish from the parent genre by the term *headlinese*", a term that had been previously coined by Mårdh (1980).

The Economist is a newspaper which is especially well-known for its witty headlines[1]. In particular, Alexander (1986) focused on the tendency of *The Economist* to engage in "wordplay of various forms in the headlines of its articles" (*ibid*.: 159) and, most importantly, he identified the many different rhetorical strategies used in its headlines to catch the attention of the reader. He concluded his study by claiming that, given the importance of *The Economist* – both as textual material for teaching and source material for essays and oral presentations — for students of English specializing in Economics and Business, if they "can be sensitized to some of the features employed, it is likely that their reading comprehension will be enhanced; they will, at least, have learned one necessary reading strategy, that of 'going beyond the information given'" (*ibid*.: 176).

Starting from these premises, the aim of this paper is twofold. First, it examines 118 headlines from articles published in the "Europe" section of *The Economist* dealing with two major events that have recently hit the world, namely the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukraine conflict. The goal of this investigation is to test the hypothesis that the rhetorical strategies observed over thirty-five years ago by Alexander are still employed in contemporary headlines, especially in the case of such serious and complex global issues. To the best of our knowledge, prior research on the key rhetorical strategies employed by the headlines of *The Economist* is limited to Alexander's 1986 study. Three works which are more recent - although they are still quite dated - touch upon this topic. The first one (Roberts 1998) focuses on the use of wordplay in the British press, the second one (Bowker 2008) on *The Economist*'s use of humour in its headlines, and, finally, White (2010) investigates the use of phonic resources, morpho-syntactic ambiguity and metaphors in newspaper and popular magazine headlines. All the remaining research devoted to the study of newspaper and magazine headlines has focused primarily on headlines as a genre. The second part of the article discusses the results of a closed-ended questionnaire on the rhetorical strategies used by *The Economist* in its headlines administered to a cohort of 100 EFL/ESP learners, second- and third-year Italian undergraduate students specializing in either Economics or Business at the School of Management and Economics of the University of Turin, Italy. The goal of this analysis was to assess the above-mentioned students' reading comprehension skills in English and, most importantly, their figurative competences, meaning their

[1] Although nowadays technically a magazine – printed in a magazine format, with a colour cover and colour on all inside pages and published weekly – *The Economist* still refers to itself as a "newspaper". This is so because from its launch on 2 September 1843 until the middle of the 20th century it was a black-and-white periodical devoted to the coverage of current affairs, features that made it more similar to a newspaper than a magazine. Despite the transformation from newspaper to magazine format, the habit of referring to itself as a "newspaper" remained (Standage 2013).

ability to identify and understand what lies, in Alexander's (1986: 176) words, "beyond the information given".

Considering the crucial role played by rhetorical strategies in the headlines of *The Economist*, if our hypothesis that the rhetorical strategies singled out by Alexander in 1986 are still employed in current headlines is confirmed, the findings of this study can help obtain a better understanding of what the students' main difficulties in comprehending them are, as well as the major sources of such difficulties. This can enhance the quality of EFL/ESP teaching and learning particularly in non-linguistic disciplines, such as Economics and Business, in which the prior knowledge of rhetorical devices of learners of English is mostly based on knowledge acquired in their (Italian) literature classes in high school.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. *Newspaper and magazine headlines as a genre*

Newspaper and magazine headlines have been the subject of abundant research over the years. Apart from Alexander (1986), other researchers (such as Bell 1991, Jucker 1992, Morley 1998, Dor 2003, Bucaria 2004, White *et al.* 2004, Brône and Feyaerts 2005, Herrera Soler and White 2010, Bowker 2008, Ifantidou 2009, White and Herrera 2009, Brône and Coulson 2010, Isani 2011, Amelia and Muth'im 2021, Borchmann 2023) have analysed the intriguing field of headlines, acknowledging their specific elements. As stated by Crystal (1987: 388), the headline is "one of the most distinctive features of a newspaper" and it is a form of discourse specific to the written press. Moreover, headlines are also the most widely read part of a newspaper, as they tend to be read five times more than the body copy (Isani 2011: 82).

Although they were first only concerned with literary genres, today genre studies are an interdisciplinary discipline which involves researchers in linguistic, rhetorical, social and even scientific disciplines. Researchers in ESP, such as Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), have considered the concept of genre as a social phenomenon, with the fundamental pedagogical motivation of using it as an analytical tool to apply the teaching of English to non-English-native speakers in academic and professional settings.

As is well known, Swales (1990) defines "genre" as a category of communicative events sharing common purposes recognized by experts within a discourse community. These purposes shape the genre's structure and influence content and style choices. Essentially, a genre is defined by its communicative purposes, which give it an internal structure formed by conventional rhetorical elements from the discourse community. Additionally, he notes that genres are stable and recognizable classes of communicative events, consisting of texts and their encoding/decoding procedures, influenced by text roles and environments. Acquiring genre skills, therefore, requires knowledge of the world, previous texts, and relevant tasks. Isani (2011) specifically draws on Swales's theories in her analysis of newspaper headlines as a genre, and of headlinese as a subgenre. Indeed, Isani (*ibid.*: 84), referring to Swales's definition of genre, maintains that:

- headlines and headlinese can be considered as a class of communicative act;
- journalists/texts/readers are involved in encoding and decoding procedures;
- the interpretation of the text can be seen as processing procedures;

- journalists and readers are the members that share a set of communicative purposes, as well as the expert members of the parent discourse community;

- the textual, linguistic and cultural parameters of headlinese can be said to shape the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains the choice of content and style.

As far as the functions of headlines are concerned, both Isani (*ibid*.: 84) and Kronrod and Engel (2001: 685-686) claim that the main functions are to *inform* and to *persuade*. These two functions are also highlighted by White (2010: 97), who claims that "the most outstanding characteristic [of headlines] is considered to be summarisation of content and that this has to be given with clarity. On the other hand, headlines should attract the reader to the news item and encourage him or her to read on". The same concept was already put forth by Bell (1991: 189), who singled out summarization and attracting the reader as the essential headline functions. Similarly, Dor (2003: 720), after stating that the umbrella function of headlines is to act as "negotiators between the stories and the reader", identifies three micro-functions of headlines, namely, to summarize, highlight and enable selection, and attract.

However, White (2010: 97) also points out that studies by Ifantidou (2009), White and Herrera (2009) and Brône and Coulson (2010) have demonstrated that "headlines dismally fail in summarisation". Conversely, the function of attracting the attention of the reader is achieved through the linguistic devices put into the crafting of headlines, which play a major role in bringing about such attraction. Among such devices, White (2010) identifies the use of phonic resources, morpho-syntactic ambiguity and metaphors and states that it is precisely the use of such devices that makes the understanding of headlines particularly challenging for non-native speakers of English.

2.2. *Newspaper and magazine headlines in the EFL/ESP class*

Newspaper and magazine headlines are undoubtedly material that poses various kinds of challenges to EFL/ESP students. Indeed, as White (2010: 96) claims, despite their goal to enhance communication, headlines often cause confusion as they are frequently characterized by phonic, syntactic and semantic unorthodoxy as opposed to conventional sentence structure, which constitutes a noticeable difficulty for the EFL/ESP learner. Although they may represent a challenge also for the native speaker, the decoding process involved is necessarily more pronounced for the non-native speaker and EFL/ESP learner.

As far as phonic resources are concerned, White (*ibid*.: 98) maintains that the tendency to exploit this device in headlines may turn out to be rather difficult for the EFL/ESP student, as the lure of alliteration or rhyme, which will be very clear to native speakers, making the headline attractive and eye-catching, may go unnoticed by EFL/ESP students. As regards morphosyntactic ambiguity, on the other hand, the difficulty for the EFL/ESP student mostly lies in the fact that the same words in English can belong to different word classes, which can contribute to perplexity in parsing. Finally, as White (*ibid*.) points out, a highly effective strategy that enhances the metaphorical range of headlines while also imparting a witty or humorous effect is known by various terms: interface (White *et al.* 2004; White and Herrera 2009), double-grounding (Brône and Feyaerts 2005; Brône and Coulson 2010), or topic-triggered metaphor (Koller 2004; Semino 2008). When this strategy is employed, lexical items from the semantic field of

the topic dealt with provide the linguistic metaphor for an expression. This means that a lexeme can be used in its literal meaning in the context provided, but at the same time it can also function figuratively. Among the various examples provided by White (2010: 104), the following two headlines taken from the aviation semantic field, where both a literal meaning of the lexemes and a figurative one are possible, help exemplify this strategy: "Alitalia *takes off* amid protests" and "Air alliance runs into *turbulence*". According to White (*ibid.*), the lack of source knowledge in cases like these may be another "stumbling block" for the EFL/ESP learner.

Besides ambiguity, a most important characteristic feature of headlines which may constitute yet another barrier for foreign learners of English is the use of wordplay (Roberts 1998: 115). This is because learners may not be culturally aware and informed of social, political or cultural events that took place, or are taking place, in a specific country or region of the world which the wordplay alludes to. The issue of wordplay will be analysed in more detail in the next section of the article, as it constitutes a most variegated and multifaceted element which deserves specific attention.

2.3. *Article headlines in* The Economist

The Economist focuses on current affairs, international business, economics, finance, politics, technology, and culture. According to Alexander (1986: 159), *The Economist* represents an extremely important resource for EFL/ESP students specializing in Economics and Business as it provides them with both textual material to practise and improve their English, and source material for oral presentations, final papers, and theses.

Bowker (2008: 171) claims that *The Economist* "can be considered semi-specialized if placed on a cline of economic and scientific technicality, with a very varied audience in terms of specialist knowledge, background and shared expertise". In her opinion, this is the reason why an extensive use of playful language is used in the magazine's headlines, as it seems that the special pragmatic effect of this seemingly frivolous language play is to create a stark contrast with the seriousness and often technical nature of the magazine's content (*ibid.*). In fact, "[t]he lightened mode of the headline preparatory to reading makes the more sober material which is to follow more palatable and has a softening, mitigating effect" (*ibid.*). Moreover, she argues (*ibid.*: 167) that *The Economist* headlines have much in common with the prefabricated joke, and take the form of a "dialogic language game". In other words, through its skillfully crafted headlines, *The Economist* seems to invite its readers to play "the game", and consequently it solidifies its shared readership identity, demonstrating that the reader is "an insider", that he/she is "part of the club" (*ibid.*: 171-172). This reinforces the idea of the readers as expert members of the community who share a similar set of communicative events, as previously seen in the definition of genre provided by Swales (1990: 58).

Alexander (1986) also highlights *The Economist*'s tendency to use various rhetorical strategies in its headlines to engage in a sort of a "game" with its readers, while observing that *The Economist* is not the only one to do this in the British media. This is also confirmed by Isani (2011), who carried out her research not only on the headlines of *The Economist*, but also of *The Guardian, The Independent* and *The Daily Telegraph*, and whose results seem to support this claim. However, the case of the headlines of *The Economist* is particularly relevant for our purposes because, as Alexander (1986: 159) notes, "for students of economics the confrontation with puns and wordplay in the

context of serious economic journalism may clash with expectations". In his research, Alexander analysed the article headlines of four issues of *The Economist* published between December 1 and January 19 1985, highlighting the use of different rhetorical strategies employed "to catch the attention of the reader in a witty fashion or to provide a wordplay which ties in with the subject of the article" (*ibid.*: 159). For our research, we analysed a selection of headlines from *The Economist* following closely the system of categorization proposed by Alexander.

3. Methodology, data analysis and discussion

The data selected for this study are headlines from articles about the two major world events that occurred between 2020 and 2022 published in the "Europe" section of *The Economist*. More specifically, firstly we focused on articles relating to the Covid-19 pandemic, published in the period from February 2020 to February 2021, which corresponds to the first year of the pandemic. Secondly, we identified articles that dealt with the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, published from June 2021 to June 2022, which encompasses a period of a year spanning from the escalation of friction between the two countries to the first four months after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army. Altogether, we collected 118 articles: 62 articles relating to the Covid-19 pandemic and 56 articles relating to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Before moving on to the analysis of our dataset of headlines, it ought to be noted that headlines in newspapers and magazines are usually made up of different sections, also called "decks". As Mårdh (1980: 14) claims, "A headline is set in a size and style of type which is different from the running text. It consists of one or more decks, which also differ typographically from one another". More specifically, a deck entity is made up of a superheadline, the headline proper, and a subheadline. As Figure 1 shows, the superheadline appears above the headline proper, and it is printed in a smaller font size. Moreover, the name of the section of the newspaper, in this case "Europe", is written in red. The headline proper is written in a larger font size and in bold characters. Finally, the subheadline is written in a font size which is smaller than the headline but larger than the superheadline.

Figure 1. Structure of headlines in *The Economist*

Since our main purpose was to investigate not only *The Economist*'s tendency to engage in wordplay but also EFL/ESP undergraduate students' competences in recognizing the rhetorical strategies identified by Alexander, our study focused only on superheadlines, as this is the section where the use of such strategies was mostly found.

3.1. *Analysis of superheadlines*

According to Alexander (1986: 160), the foregrounding devices used in *The Economist* headlines tend to cluster around the following main areas:

- puns
- metaphors
- alliterative and assonance mechanisms
- further allusive techniques

The latter broad category may involve allusion to one or the other of the following:

- (well known) sayings
- idioms
- quotations – literary and other
- catchphrases, titles of books, films, etc.

Drawing on the taxonomy of rhetorical strategies that Alexander compiled almost thirty-five years ago, we performed a predominantly qualitative analysis which was carried out manually. The 118 superheadlines were first selected, then scrutinized, and finally classified. Table 1 summarizes the results of the analysis. The rhetorical strategies detected in the superheadlines were identified as either linguistic devices or allusive techniques. Linguistic devices include puns, metaphors, and phonological schemes (such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and mimicry), whereas allusive techniques include oblique references to idioms, sayings, quotations, films, books, songs and game

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN THE CORPUS	
Linguistic devices	**Allusive techniques**
pun homophony near homophony phonological similarity polysemy **metaphor** **phonological schemes** alliteration assonance rhyme mimicry	**allusion** idiom saying quotation film book song game

Table 1. Rhetorical strategies in our dataset of superheadlines from *The Economist* by type

names. Examples of the different types of linguistic devices and allusive techniques found in our dataset of superheadlines are given below.[2]

Linguistic devices

Alexander (1980: 6) delves deep into the predisposition for punning which the English language manifests. He first distinguishes between a "narrow" and a "broader" sense of the term "pun". In the narrow sense, by "pun" he means what is commonly defined as a "real pun" or a "genuine pun" (Alexander 1986: 163), where:

> [...] we find involved either the polysemy of a single word (i.e. one form with multiple meanings) or the use of homonyms or near homonyms (i.e. lexical items having identical or, less often, similar phonetic or graphetic form but different meanings).

In the broader sense, he uses the term "pun" to refer to playing on words in which strict homonymy is not necessary as "it is sufficient for a person to allude to a word or to distant formal similarities" (Alexander 1980: 6). In other words, within this broader sense of the term "pun" he includes any form of allusive technique involving some sort of oblique intertextual reference. In our study, we decided to reserve the term "pun" for the narrow sense only and consider allusive techniques as a separate category. Within the category "puns in the narrow sense", Alexander (1986: 164-165) distinguishes between different subcategories of puns based on their linguistic characteristics, namely puns originating in 1) homonymy, 2) near homophony, 3) phonological similarity, and 4) polysemy. In our corpus we found all four subcategories of puns. One example for each subcategory is given below.

> 1) **pun originating in homophony**: *Herd on the street* (16 May 2020), which plays on the homophony of the noun "herd" and the past participle verb form "heard".
> 2) **pun originating in near homophony**: *Germany's wurst jobs* (23 July 2020), which plays on the near homophony of the noun "wurst" ("sausage" in German) and the superlative adjective form "worst".
> 3) **pun originating in phonological similarity**: *Paris masked* (30 May 2020), which plays on the phonological similarity of the words "masked" and "match", and, at the same time, alludes to the French magazine *Paris Match*.
> 4) **pun originating in polysemy**: *Shots fired* (27 January 2021), which plays on the polysemy of the word "shot", which can refer both to "the action of firing a gun or another weapon" and to "an injection, or an amount of the drug or vaccine put into the body by a single injection"[3].

In his study, Alexander (1986: 172) also considers headlines which employ metaphors to hint at the topic dealt with in the article. In our dataset, we identified nine superheadlines which belong to this subcategory, such as the following two examples.

> 1) *After the honeymoon* (7 May 2022), where the term "honeymoon" is used in a metaphorical sense to refer to the relationship between Russia and Austria. In fact, whereas the

[2] The full dataset is available from the authors upon request.

[3] Retrieved April 2023, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/shot

two countries used to be on notably friendly terms in recent decades, after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Austria immediately backed EU sanctions against Russia.
2) *Thinking about the endgame* (26 May 2022), where the term "endgame" – whose literal meaning refers to the last stage in a game of chess when only a few of the pieces are left on the board – is used in a metaphorical sense to refer to the potential tactics which ought to be used by the Western allies in order to end the war between Russia and Ukraine.

Moreover, also certain phonological features of language, such as alliteration, assonance and rhyme, which Alexander (*ibid*: 173) refers to as phonological schemes, tend to be employed with a certain frequency both in the headlines he investigated and in the superheadlines we scrutinized. Indeed, they seem to play a very important role in grabbing the reader's attention or, in Alexander's words, in engendering "catchiness" (*ibid*.: 162). Also of note is a further subcategory of phonological schemes that Alexander (*ibid*.: 175) included in his study, namely "mimicry and style imitation", which he defines as wordplays that seem to be "attempts to hint at or imitate either spoken language, accents or a particular register". The following are examples from our dataset for each subcategory of phonological schemes mentioned above.

1) **alliteration:** *A terrible toll on tourism* (11 April 2020)
2) **assonance:** *A euro row* (*The Economist*, 18 April 2020)
3) **rhyme:** *From battleground to playground* (9 April 2022)
4) **mimicry:** *Who's next?* (5 February 2022)

Allusive techniques

As previously mentioned, by allusive techniques Alexander (*ibid*.: 167) means strategies that involve "more or less oblique reference to other texts", where the term "text" includes idiomatic expressions, sayings, well-known quotations, film, book and song titles, and game names. In our dataset, as the examples below demonstrate, it is possible to observe superheadlines employing semantic allusions to all the "texts" mentioned by Alexander. In some cases, as example 5 shows, the same superheadline may embed more than one rhetorical strategy; in example 5, for instance, there are both an allusion and a pun.

1) **allusion to an idiom**: *No ports amid the storm* (14 May, 2022), an oblique reference to the idiomatic expression "any port in a storm" which is "used to say that in a difficult situation, people get help from wherever or whoever they can";[4]
2) **allusion to a saying**: *One man's terrorist* (16 January, 2021), a partial reference to the adage "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter", i.e. the definition of a terrorist depends entirely on the subjective outlook of the definer;
3) **allusion to a quotation**: *Free at last* (14 May, 2020), a direct reference to the conclusion of the famous "I have a dream" speech, delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963;
4) **allusion to a film**: *High noon in the High North* (9 June, 2022), an oblique reference to the film *High Noon* (1952) by Fred Zinnemann;

[4] Retrieved April 2023, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/any-port-in-the-storm.

5) **allusion to a book**: *Crimea and punishment* (21 July, 2021), a reference to the novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866) by Fyodor Dostoevsky. In this superheadline it is also possible to note the presence of a pun originating in the phonological similarity of the words "Crimea" and "crime";
6) **allusion to a song**: *Waiting for the freeze* (30 November, 2021), an oblique reference to the song "Waiting for the sun" (1968) by the rock band The Doors;
7) **allusion to a game:** *Hide and seek* (5 June 2022), a direct reference to the popular children's game.

The quantitative results of the analysis of our dataset are significant. Table 2 summarizes them by showing the total number (%) of rhetorical strategies in the dataset divided by topic and type. The last row of the table shows the number of superheadlines which do not employ any rhetorical strategy for each topic.

NUMBER (%) OF RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN THE CORPUS			
Covid-19 pandemic (total number of superheadlines: 62)		**Russia-Ukraine conflict (total number of superheadlines: 56)**	
Rhetorical strategy		**Rhetorical strategy**	
pun	10 (16%)	pun	6 (11%)
metaphor	5 (8%)	metaphor	4 (7%)
alliteration/assonance	13 (21%)	alliteration/assonance	9 (16%)
rhyme	1 (2%)	rhyme	2 (3,5%)
mimicry	4 (6%)	mimicry	2 (3,5%)
allusion	16 (26%)	allusion	19 (34%)
No rhetorical device	13 (21%)	**No rhetorical device**	14 (25%)

Table 2. Number (%) of rhetorical strategies in our dataset of superheadlines from *The Economist* by topic and type

As far as the articles related to the Covid-19 pandemic are concerned, we identified the use of all the rhetorical strategies investigated by Alexander in his study. More specifically, out of a total of 62 articles, we detected 10 instances of punning devices, five instances of metaphor, 13 instances of alliteration/assonance, one instance of rhyme, four instances of mimicry and 16 instances of allusive techniques, whereas 13 superheadlines do not employ any rhetorical device. Also in the case of the articles related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict we identified the use of all the rhetorical strategies investigated by Alexander. More specifically, out of a total of 56 articles, we detected six instances of punning devices, four instances of metaphor, nine instances of alliteration/assonance, two instances of rhyme, two instances of mimicry and 19 instances of allusive techniques, whereas 14 superheadlines do not employ any rhetorical device.

Overall, the analysis clearly demonstrates a persistent use in *The Economist* not only of rhetorical strategies but also, and most importantly, of the same rhetorical

strategies over almost four decades (1986-2022). As discussed in Section 2.3, the newspaper's skillful use of puns, metaphors, phonological schemes and allusions manages to lighten the tone of serious content, creating the "mitigating effect" mentioned by Bowker (2008: 171) and/or to create an eye-catching effect that attracts the readers' attention (Alexander 1986: 162). Moreover, the recurrent employment of these rhetorical strategies, even in the context of global crises/serious topics, is an unquestionable sign of the newspaper's commitment to linguistic play as an integral part of its identity and reader engagement.

3.2. *Closed-ended questionnaire – data collection*

Starting from the aforedescribed analysis, we conducted a survey to determine EFL/ESP undergraduate students' level of understanding of the rhetorical strategies in the headlines of *The Economist*. The data were collected between November 2 and December 10, 2022, through an online closed-ended questionnaire in English, administered to 100 undergraduate students enrolled in the School of Management and Economics (SME) of the University of Turin and specializing in either Economics or Business. All 100 students are native speakers of Italian (Italian L1) and, thus, learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as well as learners of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), that is, English for Economics and Business, with an average level of English between B1 and B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Both the Economics students and the Business students must fulfil an English language requirement which, however, differs considerably between the two-degree programs. Undergraduate students in Economics are expected to attend a two-semester lecture course (96 hours, 12 credits) titled "Business English, Communication & Presentation Skills" in their second year and must pass a final examination (both written and oral) which is graded on a 30-point scale and is calculated into their cumulative GPAs. Since all third-year classes of this undergraduate degree program are taught in English, the above-mentioned course is in particular designed to improve the students' ESP proficiency, so that they can profitably take their third-year classes in English. On the other hand, undergraduate students in Business satisfy their English language requirement by taking a pass/no pass computer-based English language test (*LTEST*, 2013)[5]. A "pass" grade in this exam requires a level of performance at least equal to a B1.2 level of the CEFR (equivalent to an overall IELTS band score of 4.5) and earns 6 credits but is not calculated into their cumulative GPAs. To prepare for the computer-based test, they are advised to attend a one-semester English language course at pre-intermediate to intermediate levels, depending on their entry level.

We sent an invitation email via the students' course pages on the Moodle e-learning platform which asked them to kindly respond to an online questionnaire (found by clicking on the link attached to the email), specifying that the answers would be anonymous. The purpose of the questionnaire, created using Google Form (see Figure 2 for a sample question), was not explained to the respondents and there was no further contact with them. This was done to avoid any potential stress-related factor which might affect their performance, as the activity was not assessed in any way.

[5] *LTEST* [Computer software]. (2013). Roma, Italy: TeamTeaching.

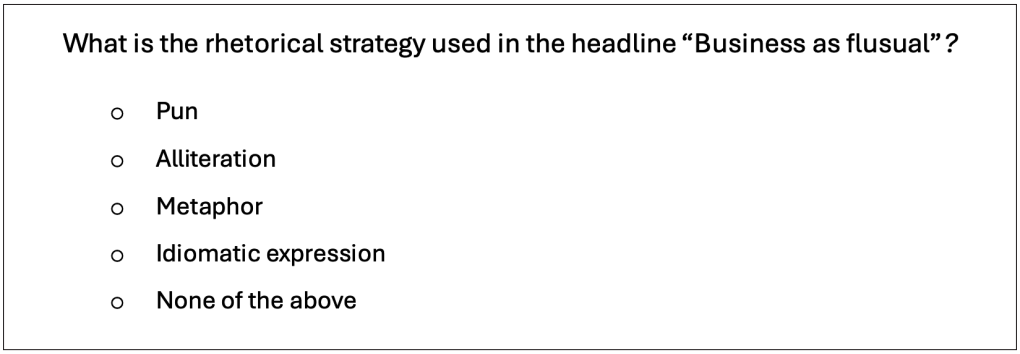

Figure 2. Closed-ended questionnaire – Google form sample question (1 of 12)

A total of 104 students submitted the questionnaire. However, the study sample we created, and which is analysed hereafter, is made up of 100 questionnaires as we agreed on discarding the four questionnaires which had been submitted without any answers. In the anonymous questionnaire the respondents were first asked to provide their gender, undergraduate degree program and year of enrolment (second or third year). More specifically, 49% of the respondents identified themselves as male, 47% of the respondents identified themselves as female and 4% of the respondents preferred not to specify their gender identity. At the same time, 62% of the respondents declared Economics as their field of specialization whereas 38% of them declared Business as their field of specialization. Finally, 53% of the respondents were second-year students and 47% of them were third-year students.

The participants in the questionnaire were then provided with 12 superheadlines selected from articles about the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine conflict published in *The Economist* between February 2020 and July 2022, with no additional information as to the content of the articles they precede. For each superheadline, they were asked the question "What is the rhetorical strategy used in this magazine headline?". The 12 superheadlines were obtained as follows. From the grand dataset of 118 superheadlines, 16 superheadlines with a "language play" (Alexander 1986: 159) involving social, political or cultural references unfamiliar or foreign to the respondents were removed, to obtain a restricted dataset of 103[6]. Then, we drew 12 superheadlines from the restricted dataset. This draw was random except for the requirement that the sample of 12 be representative of the different rhetorical strategies identified in the first phase of our research (Section 3.1). No mention of the source of the superheadlines was ever made. For each superheadline, the respondents were given four

[6] For instance, two of the superheadlines we removed are *Raoultmania* (*The Economist*, 11 June 2020) and *The guns of January* (*The Economist*, 22 Jan 2022). The former is a blending of "Raoult" and "mania". Didier Raoult is a French microbiologist specialized in infectious diseases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he was highly criticized for promoting hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for the disease. Because of the lack of evidence for its effectiveness, the World Health Organization (WHO) banned its use. The latter, instead, is an allusion to "The guns of August" by historian Barbara Tuchman published in 1962. The book is an account of the early stages of WWI and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General non-fiction in 1963.

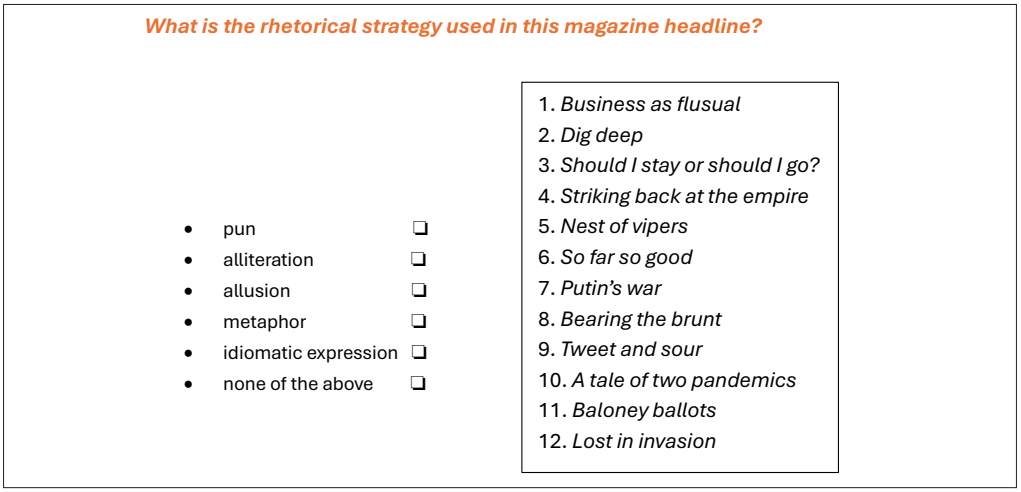

Figure 3. Closed-ended questionnaire – Identification of the rhetorical strategies

What is the rhetorical strategy used in this magazine headline?

Headline	Rhetorical strategy	Correct answers, in %
Business as flusual	pun	22%
Dig deep	alliteration	43%
Should I stay or should I go?	allusion to song	61%
Striking back at the empire	allusion to film	36%
Nest of vipers	metaphor	50%
So far so good	allusion to idiom	57%
Putin's war	none of the above	53%
Bearing the brunt	alliteration / allusion to idiom	22% / 30%
Tweet and sour	pun	22%
A tale of two pandemics	allusion to book	31%
Baloney ballots	alliteration	49%
Lost in invasion	allusion to film	51%

Figure 4. Closed-ended questionnaire – Results

different options of rhetorical strategies (plus a "none of the above" option) and asked to identify the strategy used in each of the 12 superheadlines (Figure 3, right side). The five strategies were selected out of the six possible answer options (Figure 3, left side). The order of the answer options for each question was randomized to avoid biases introduced by order and/or survey fatigue. During the survey, no explanation of the meaning of "rhetorical strategy" or any exemplification of the rhetorical strategies was given. However, unlike students specializing in Business, students specializing in Economics who had attended the course "Business English, Communication & Presentation Skills"

had been previously exposed to articles from *The Economist* as well as the rhetorical strategies in its headlines as part of their course material.

3.3. *Closed-ended questionnaire – data analysis and findings*

The analysis of the questionnaire results allows us to draw some interesting inferences. Figure 4 shows the question, which was asked 12 times, and a table with the 12 superheadlines in the questionnaire (column 1), the rhetorical strategy employed in each of them (column 2), and the percentage of respondents who correctly identified the superheadline's rhetorical strategy (column 3).

Looking at the percentages of correct answers in column 3, it is possible to notice that they are almost always below 50%. There are, however, three exceptions, the superheadlines *Should I stay, or should I go*? (3), *So far so good* (6) and "*Putin's war*" (7). *Should I stay or should I go?* (61% of correct answers) is an allusion to the song with the same title, released in 1982 by the English rock band The Clash. Most importantly, given the respondents' age group (20-22 years), however, this song is one of the iconic 1980s songs in the soundtrack of the popular Netflix's TV series "Stranger Things"[7]. It is likely that the respondents who answered this question correctly heard this song while watching the above-mentioned TV series. *So far so good* (57% of correct answers) is a fairly common idiomatic expression used in English when someone wants to state that an activity has gone well until now. Moreover, a song titled "So far so good" was released in 2006 by Canadian singer-songwriter Bryan Adams. However, this idiom could also be a "phraseological Anglicism" (Pulcini *et al.* 2012) heard by the respondents while watching or listening to the news in Italian[8]. This would explain why 57% of the respondents chose the correct answer, the second highest percentage of correct answers in the questionnaire. *Putin's war* is the only headline in the questionnaire which does not use any rhetorical device, thus, the correct answer to give was "none of the above". Slightly more than half of the respondents (53%, the third highest percentage of correct answers in the questionnaire) correctly noticed that there is no rhetorical strategy employed in this headline.

The lowest percentages of correct answers correspond to the two superheadlines that employ a pun; namely, *Business as flusual* (1) and *Tweet and sour* (9), both with 22% of correct answers. As explained in Section 3, they are both puns originating in near homophony. The pie chart in Figure 5 shows the distribution of answers for *Business as Flusual*. This pun blends the terms "flu" and "usual" and sounds almost the same as the phraseological unit "business as usual". The bar chart in Figure 5, instead, illustrates the demographics – gender, degree program and year of enrolment – of the respondents who chose "pun" as their answer. Worthy of notice is the much higher number of correct answers by students in Economics than by students in Business,

[7] *Stranger Things* is an American science fiction/horror drama television series created by the Duffer Brothers for Netflix and set in the 1980s. The first season was released on July 15, 2016 and the fifth and final season was released across November and December 2025.

[8] Furiassi (2017: 38) maintains that the Anglicization of Italian has become so pervasive that "units larger than words or compounds are borrowed from English alongside single lexical items, namely Anglicisms". Although Furiassi does not mention *So far so good* among the ones he takes into account, he also states that no phraseological Anglicism has yet been recorded in Italian monolingual dictionaries. Therefore, our claim is that *So far so good* may well be one.

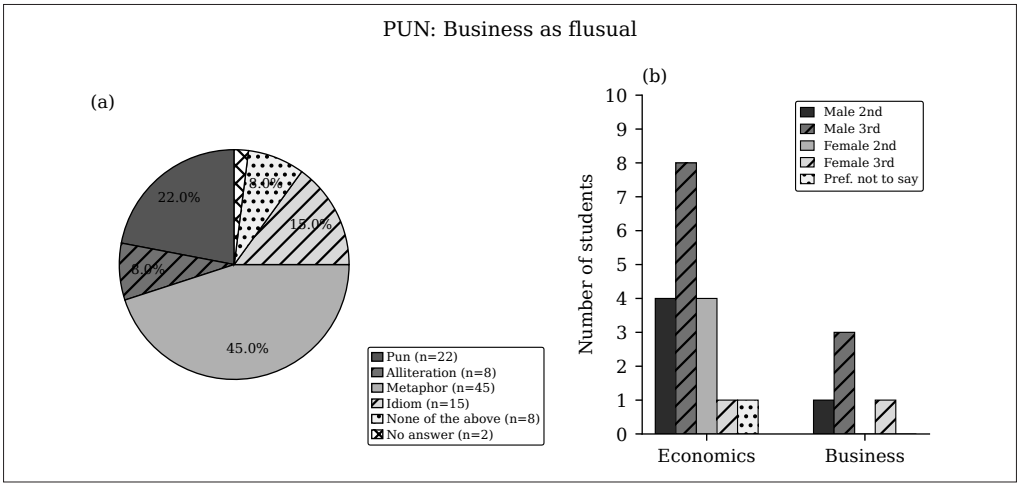

Figure 5. *Business as flusual* - Distribution of answers

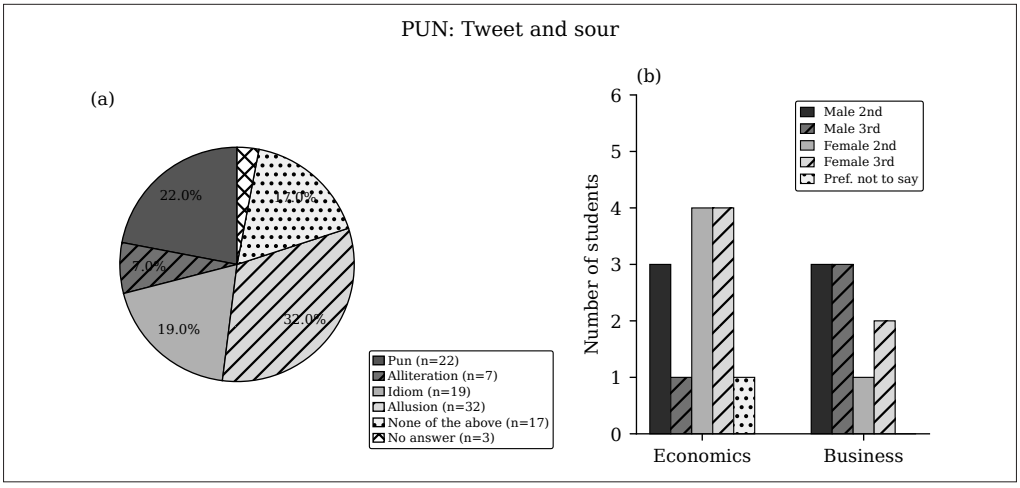

Figure 6. *Tweet and sour* – Distribution of answers

which can be explained by the fact that the former, as described in Section 3.2, are more exposed to English for Economics and Business English than the latter, and may thus be more familiar with "Business as usual" either as an idiomatic expression in English or a "phraseological Anglicism" in Italian (Furiassi 2017: 38), just like the idiom "So far so good" discussed in the previous paragraph.

Figure 6 reports analogous figures for the other superheadline employing a pun, *Tweet and sour*, which sounds almost the same as the adjective "sweet-and-sour" used to describe the taste of food cooked in a sauce containing sugar and either vinegar or lemon. By substituting "sweet" with "tweet", the superheadline becomes a telegraphic summary of the article it refers to which criticizes Elon Musk's use of the social media site Twitter to comment on the Russia-Ukraine war so as to sway his followers. Here, if

	Headline	Rhetorical strategy	Correct answers, in %
Linguistic devices	**Business as flusual**	**pun**	**22%**
	Tweet and sour	**pun**	**22%**
	Nest of vipers	**metaphor**	**50%**
	Dig deep	**alliteration**	**43%**
	Baloney ballots	**alliteration**	**49%**
	Bearing the brunt	**alliteration / allusion to idiom**	**22% / 30%**
Allusive mechanisms	*Should I stay or should I go?*	*allusion to song*	*61%*
	Lost in invasion	*allusion to film*	*51%*
	Tweet and sour	*allusion to film*	*36%*
	A tale of two pandemics	*allusion to book*	*31%*
	So far so good	*allusion to idiom*	*57%*
	Putin's war	none of the above	53%

Table 3. Closed-ended questionnaire – Superheadlines in our dataset according to the division proposed by Alexander

we look at the bar chart, we observe a less marked difference in the number of correct answers given by students in Economics than by students in Business. Moreover, if we look at the distribution of answers in the pie chart, we notice that although only 22% of the respondents identified *Tweet and Sour* as a pun, 19% of them identified it as an idiom and 32% of them as an allusion. Taken together, these results seem to suggest that many respondents recognized in this headline the adjective "sweet-and-sour", which is not specific to the language of Economics and Business and, nowadays, is often found in restaurant menus in Italy and around the world. It is thus a sort of global Anglicism used also by people who have a school-level knowledge of English.

As Table 3 shows, if we group the 12 superheadlines in the closed-ended questionnaire according to the division proposed by Alexander described in Section 3.1 (i.e. superheadlines using linguistic devices and superheadlines using allusive mechanisms), and we look at the percentages of correct answers, it is possible to deduce that the headlines using linguistic devices (in bold in the table) are in general less easily recognized by the respondents than allusive mechanisms (in italics in the table). Even the headline *Bearing the brunt*, which includes both the use of alliteration and of allusion to an idiom, confirms this deduction[9]. The respondents were given both options out of the five given and, among the respondents who chose one of these two options, 22% of them chose "alliteration" and 30% of them chose "allusion to idiom".

[9] *To bear the brunt* is an idiomatic expression which means "to endure the worst part or chief impact of something unpleasant". Retrieved February 2023, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/brunt.

However, among the superheadlines using linguistic devices, instances of alliteration, i.e. *Dig deep* (43%) and *Baloney ballots* (49%), and the metaphor *Nest of vipers* (50%) were more easily recognized than puns. The reason may be that recognizing alliteration (and assonance) is an almost mechanical ability that the respondents may have acquired in high school, when studying Italian literature, and it is an ability that can be easily transferred across different languages. Similarly, 50% of the respondents were able to recognize *Nest of vipers* as a metaphor, a rhetorical device which draws a direct comparison between two distinct semantic domains. Besides the fact that also in this case the respondents' previously acquired literary knowledge in Italian may have come into play, it must be pointed out that the origin of the word "viper" (a small poisonous snake) in English is the Latin word "vipera", which is also the Italian word for "viper". Hence, the English "viper" and the Italian "vipera" are cognates as, at least in its written form, "viper" closely resembles its Italian equivalent and has an identical meaning. Most important of all, both languages share a non-literal use of the word "viper", i.e. a very unpleasant person whom you cannot trust[10], a metaphorical meaning that half of the respondents were able to identify in this superheadline. All of this is further proof of the fact that identifying punning headlines in English is a more challenging endeavour than recognizing other types of rhetorical devices as it requires, besides a high level of English language proficiency, a cultural background that needs to come into play before the processing of meaning construction.

The questionnaire also presented five allusions, namely one allusion to the title of a song (*Should I stay or should I go?*), two allusions to film titles (*Lost in invasion* and *Striking back at the empire*), one allusion to the title of a novel (*A tale of two pandemics*) and one allusion to an idiom (*So far so good*). Among these five allusions, for only two of them are the correct answers well above 50%, i.e., S*hould I stay, or should I go*?, a direct reference to the iconic 1980s song by The Clash, and *So far so good*, a direct reference to an idiom. Both these allusions have previously been discussed. The other three allusions, *Lost in invasion* (51% of correct answers), *Striking back at the empire* (36% of correct answers) and *A tale of two pandemics* (31% of correct answers), are only oblique references to film titles, "Lost in Translation" (released in 2003 and directed by Sofia Coppola) and "The Empire Strikes Back" (Episode V of the "Star Wars" saga, released in 1980 and directed by George Lucas), and to the title of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens (1859) and, therefore, more difficult to unpack by our respondents.

A perusal of the results of the only headline in the questionnaire which does not employ any rhetorical device, i.e. *Putin's war* (correct answer "none of the above"), provides further insight into the challenges the respondents had to face while answering our questionnaire. Here, too, there is a slightly higher percentage of correct answers by Economics students than by Business students. The second most chosen answer option for this superheadline – and, as a matter of fact, for all the superheadlines when available – is "idiom". This answer option seems indeed to work as the salient answer option that the respondents choose when they do not really know what to answer. Also of note is that the third and fourth most chosen answer options are "pun" (14%) and "metaphor" (7%) respectively, which demonstrate that a significant number of the

[10] Retrieved February 2023, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/viper.

respondents do not have the lexical sophistication in English to understand whether a headline employs a rhetorical device or not.

4. Conclusions: the importance of "going beyond the information given"

Since, to our knowledge, little research has been done on the figurative competence of EFL/ESP students, this study aims at being a contribution to a slowly growing body of research supporting the view that figurative language learning must be part and parcel of EFL/ESP learning and teaching. Considering the crucial role that rhetorical strategies still play in the headlines of *The Economist*, our findings suggest three important pedagogical implications that can help enhance the quality of EFL/ESP teaching and learning.

The first implication is that the respondents' proficiency in figurative language is positively correlated with their overall language proficiency. This is why, in general, students specializing in Economics, who are more exposed not only to the English language but also to the language of *The Economist* during their undergraduate studies, gave a higher number of correct answers in the questionnaire than Business students who, during their three years of undergraduate studies, are only required to take a B1.2 level pass/no pass English language exam. The second implication is that headlines in general, and headlines that employ rhetorical strategies in particular, such as the ones in *The Economist*, need to be taught as a genre. They are "a specific kind of linguistic phenomena" (Bucaria 2004: 280) and, as such, form a class of communicative acts with very specific features and functions. Hence, unless they are taught this way, we cannot expect our EFL/ESP students to be able to process and decode the meaning of lexical, syntactic, and phonological ambiguities in the headlines.

The third and final implication is that the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of headlines using rhetorical strategies are not only due to linguistic but also cultural gaps that must be filled before the processing of meaning construction even starts (Silaski and Durovic 2013). This means that the correct unpacking of headlines by non-native speakers of English requires the right cultural background as, when it is missing, headlines remain either incomprehensible or are erroneously interpreted. We must keep in mind that many Italian students specializing in both Economics and Business consider English as a vehicular language. They do know they will need a good working knowledge of English in their professional life, but they seem to be thinking of it as a mere technical tool, just like a programming language, rather than a full-fledged expression of a culture. Therefore, an explicit focus on headline patterns and rhetorical strategies in the classroom would help them not only to improve their ability to decode them but also to qualitatively advance in "idiomaticity skills" (White 2010: 114) and thus acquire a more exhaustive understanding of the English language and its cultural aspects which would give them a competitive advantage for the job market.

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