

# Clickbait as a Linguistic and Cultural Phenomenon (Based on Russian-, French-, and English-language Material)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This article considers a specific type of headline that is common in modern mass media discourse, namely clickbait. The novelty of the research is in the object of study and the material represented in three languages – Russian, English and French. Clickbait as a phenomenon has not been investigated before, nor has its national and cultural specificity in the three analysed linguistic cultures; this fact determines the relevance of the study. The analysis of the language material was based on the hypothetical-deductive method, the continuous sampling method, and on stylistic and contextual analysis. The purpose of this work is to identify the content and stylistic characteristics of clickbait in the Russian -, English- and French-speaking information space. Initially, the English-language lexeme “clickbait” was borrowed into Russian and French, where it received additional nominations. In the Russian language, this word is almost assimilated as a language unit. The authors believe that clickbait is a type of a manipulative influence exerted on the mass audience, the essence of which is to attract and retain the recipient’s attention using false or dubious information. To this end, a variety of language and audio-visual tools are used that allow us to assign clickbait to a creolized text type. The authors believe that clickbait is a global phenomenon in the modern information space, whose national and cultural specificity is determined by a national “agenda.” The article is addressed to philologists, psychologists and sociologists. The research results may also be useful for undergraduate and postgraduate students specializing in the Humanities.

**Keywords:** clickbait, headline, information space, virtual reality, impact on mass consciousness, creolized text, mass media discourse, perceiving audience

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<sup>1</sup> English translation from the Russian text: Buriakovskaya V.A., Dmitrieva O.A. 2020. Klikbejt kak lingvokul'turnyj fenomen (na materiale russkogo, frantsuzskogo i anglijskogo jazykov). *Filologicheskie nauki v MGIMO [Linguistics & Polyglot Studies]*. 23(3). P. 105-112. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2410-2423-2020-3-23-105-112>

Human beings today exist and actively communicate in two realities: virtual and real. Both are closely interconnected; they constantly interact with and interpenetrate each other. As actors in the information space, we draw information from both realities. According to I.G. Ionin, the ratio of the real to the virtual is such that “practically all existing systems of knowledge, which at the initial stages of their existence are virtual realities, are alive and influence the actual physical reality embodied in it. Strictly speaking, implementation and incorporation (in the true meaning of the Latin word) are modes of existence in virtual systems” (Ionin, 2004).

Ionin believes that two factors are needed in order to create a virtual reality: the distinction between relevance and reference, and the establishment of relevance. Let us take a closer look at these factors. “The establishment of relevance is the arbitrary association of certain objects (or attributes of an object) into an integral ‘environment’ called the analysis environment of virtual reality (or virtual object). Relevance is not determined by real, tangible connections between objects or their attributes. Virtual reality is not a ‘reflection’ of actual reality. The establishment of relevance is a random act of the ‘creator’ of virtual reality. Therefore, it is not actual reality that affects virtual reality, but the other way around. Reference is the real relationship between virtual and actual realities. This relationship is constantly changing under the influence of virtual reality, that is, its transformation into actual reality” (Ionin, 2004).

On the one hand, virtual reality is secondary. On the other hand, information obtained from virtual reality has great potential for influencing actual reality. Accordingly, the information field of virtual reality to a certain extent determines the real life of a person, dictating stereotypes to him or her and imposing values and certain patterns of behaviour on them.

Clickbait occupies a specific niche in the information field of virtual reality. The essence of this phenomenon is succinctly expressed in the words of Anne Roumanoff, quoted in an article by Nicolas Jacquard: “Qu’est-ce que le Putaclic et est-ce une stratégie payante?”: on ne sait pas ce qu’on y cherche, mais on trouve tout ce qu’on ne cherche pas. (“The internet: we don’t know what we are looking for, but we find everything we are not looking for”<sup>2</sup>).

Our analysis shows that the lexeme “clickbait” has been borrowed into both French and Russia with the exact same meaning as the English:

**Clickbait** – something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to the semantic borrowing of the word “clickbait,” the following units nominating this phenomenon have appeared in French:

<sup>2</sup> Jacquard N. Qu’est-ce que le Putaclic et est-ce une stratégie payante? Le journal du CM. 2017. 19 mai. URL: [www.journal-dumcm.com/putaclic/](http://www.journal-dumcm.com/putaclic/) (accessed: 10.01.2020). (In French).

<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary. URL: [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clickbait](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clickbait) (accessed: 20.01.2020); O’Donovan C. What is Clickbait? Nieman Foundation for Journalism. Nieman Lab. 2014. 25 August. URL: [www.niemanlab.org/2014/08/what-is-clickbait/](http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/08/what-is-clickbait/) (accessed 20.01.2020).

**Piège-à-clics** – Qualifie un article ou une vidéo dont le titre ou le résumé est exagéré délibérément afin d’attirer d’avantage de lecteurs ou de spectateurs. Titre aguicheur, racoleur destiné à provoquer un clic. (“Piège-à-clics – used to refer to an article or video whose title or summary is deliberately exaggerated in order to attract a large number of readers or viewers. A seductive headline designed to get the user to click on the relevant link”)<sup>4</sup>.

It should be noted that, in 2020, French Language Enrichment Commission announced the forthcoming publication of the *Dictionary of Culture*, the purpose of which is to define various terms in the fields of audiovisual communication, IT, fashion, etc., as well as to provide translations of anglicisms into French. Both “clickbait” and its French equivalent, “piège à clics,” were included in the dictionary, with the latter being the preferred use<sup>5</sup>.

The topic of how to convey “clickbait” into French was widely discussed on social media. A post asking the question “Est-ce qu’il y a une expression en français qui équivaut le mot ‘clickbait’?” (“Is there an expression in French that is equivalent to the word ‘clickbait’?”) received the following replies:

*En cherchant sur internet, j’ai trouvé «piège à clics» (“Searching on the internet, I came across the expression ‘piège à clic,’ meaning ‘click [of a mouse] trap”);*

*On dit aussi «pute-à-clic» mais c’est très vulgaire (“They also say ‘pute-à-clic,’ as in ‘prostitute click,’ but that’s extremely vulgar”);*

*Il me semble donc que la traduction exacte de «clickbait» est «putaclic»... Ce mot est littéralement utilisé à la place de «clickbait» par les français et il est donc parfois utilisé comme un nom «Un putaclic» ou comme un adjectif («Les titres putaclic») (“It seems to me that ‘prostitute click’ is an exact translation... The French literally use this word instead of ‘clickbait,’ sometimes as a noun (a ‘putaclic’) and sometimes as a verb (to ‘putaclic’ on the headline of an article)).*

*Ce terme est beaucoup moins formel et certes encore un peu jeune, mais il reprend l’idée de clic et de racolage vulgaire tout en sous-entendant que le «journaliste» serait prêt à se prostituer pour des clics («pute à clic») (“The term is far less formal and, of course, still quite young, but it contains the idea of clicks and swear words, while at the same time implying that the author of the article is willing to ‘prostitute’ their work for clicks”)<sup>6</sup>.*

<sup>4</sup> Stackexchange. URL: [french.stackexchange.com/questions/19022/un-titre-clickbait-lemploi-en-adjectif](https://french.stackexchange.com/questions/19022/un-titre-clickbait-lemploi-en-adjectif) (accessed: 13.02.2020). (In French);

Wiktionary. URL: [fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/pi%C3%A8ge\\_%C3%A0\\_clics](https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/pi%C3%A8ge_%C3%A0_clics) (accessed 20.01.2020). (In French).

<sup>5</sup> Ficca S. De nouveaux «équivalents français» pour réduire les anglicismes. [www.presse-citron.net/ne-dites-plus-spoil-clickbait-ou-podcast-mais-divulguer-piege-a-clic-et-audio-a-la-demande/](https://www.presse-citron.net/ne-dites-plus-spoil-clickbait-ou-podcast-mais-divulguer-piege-a-clic-et-audio-a-la-demande/) (accessed January 10, 2020);

Ficca S. Ne dites plus «spoiler», «clickbait» ou «podcast», mais «divulguer», «piège à clic» et «audio à la demande». [www.presse-citron.net/ne-dites-plus-spoil-clickbait-ou-podcast-mais-divulguer-piege-a-clic-et-audio-a-la-demande/](https://www.presse-citron.net/ne-dites-plus-spoil-clickbait-ou-podcast-mais-divulguer-piege-a-clic-et-audio-a-la-demande/) (accessed January 10, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Forum on clickbait. WordReference.com Language Forums. 2017. 18 January. URL: [www.forum.wordreference.com/threads/clickbait.3277213/](https://www.forum.wordreference.com/threads/clickbait.3277213/) (accessed 10.01.2020).

As the above examples demonstrate, the French audience, or at least some part of it, tends to interpret clickbait as a phenomenon of corrupt journalism. The people who posted in the thread noted that texts containing clickbait do not differ in terms of the quality of their content, originality, readability and grammatical correctness. All these characteristics are secondary to the desire to attract attention and get the reader to click on the headline: *Et tant pis pour la qualité du contenu, tant pis pour l'originalité, pour le confort du lecteur, pour l'orthographe... Dans le putaclic (on dit aussi plus poliment « piège-à-clic »), tout ceci est secondaire. ("The worse the quality of the text, the less original it is, the harder it is to read, the more the spelling suffers ... all these things are secondary when it comes to clickbait (or, more politely, 'click trap')"*<sup>7</sup>.

According to the Russian Concise Dictionary of Information Technology, "clickbait is a derogatory term used to describe web content whose purpose is to generate income from online advertising, especially at the expense of the quality or accuracy of information. In some cases, generating income is not the main goal"<sup>8</sup>.

In modern linguistics, clickbait is understood as "a means of attracting an audience through the use of specific headlines, which in certain cases are accompanied by graphic materials that coax internet users into reading specific content based on the natural human feelings of curiosity, indignation or bewilderment" (Volskaya 2018).

Clickbait as a tool can trace its roots back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the press first started to look for ways to win the attention of readers through intriguing headlines. The main function of clickbait is to attract the attention of internet users and encourage them to follow the link by clicking on it (Nikolayeva 2018).

The phenomenon of clickbait is interesting, first of all, from the linguistic point of view: how is clickbait constructed? What linguistic means are employed in its construction? What strategies are used? How does it impact readers? Second, the reaction of the audience to clickbait makes it possible to set the value priorities of internet users, thus revealing the axiological component of this linguo-cultural and social phenomenon.

What is more, the influencing power of clickbait is manifested in the fact that, "as a result of the use of clickbait with certain discursive practices leads, false topoi of events become fixed in the mind of the reader, ultimately leading to the creation of false or falsified information" (Volskaya 2018).

Clickbait has become an integral part of advertising discourse, whose effectiveness is measured, among other things, by the number of clicks. Websites that contain clickbait material and not informative; their sole purpose is to generate as much traffic as possible in order to earn revenue from online advertising. In this sense, it is hard not

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Concise Dictionary of Information Technologies. Humanitarian Technologies Laboratory. URL: [www.ht-lab.ru/knowledge/dictionaries/kratkiy-slovar-it/4445/](http://www.ht-lab.ru/knowledge/dictionaries/kratkiy-slovar-it/4445/) (accessed 07.11.2019). In Russian).

to agree with Zygmunt Bauman when he writes, “in a world over-saturated with information attention turns into the scarcest of resources and only a shocking message, and one more shocking than the last, stands a chance of catching it” (Bauman 1995).

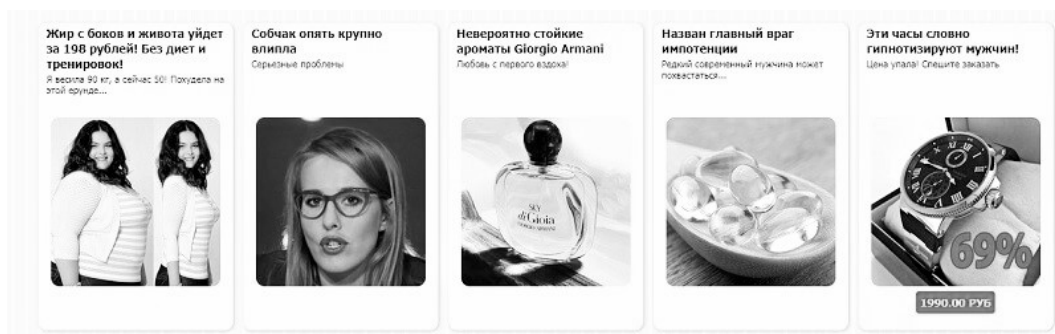
From a pragmatic point of view, as N.N. Volskaya correctly notes (Volskaya 2018), the use of clickbait is limited in its scope to the following areas:

- 1) In internet marketing – to increase the number of visits to the target site
- 2) In mass media – to generate interest in the article the clickbait leads to
- 3) In online advertising – to generate income from ads
- 4) In offline advertising – to hold the reader’s attention on promotional content.

In modern life, the competition for the reader’s attention is great, and clickbait is becoming the main tool for getting eyes on a particular target site. Originating in tabloid journalism, clickbait has become one of the ways to influence mass consciousness in politics.

We believe that this can be explained by the fact that the official media pay attention to the frequency and recurrence of clickbait, viewers get used to these models and pay greater and more active attention to them.

In the Russian information space, a certain niche is occupied by websites containing teaser ads. These sites can be characterized by as clickbait sites. Owners of this kind of web resource are happy to include any kind of paid content. Teasers can often be found on news sites and online streaming services. The impact of clickbait in these teasers is enhanced by images. These include photographs of celebrities and stars, which are used in conjunction with the goods being advertised:



*Figure 1. Examples of teasers within the Russian information space*

*Table 1. Examples of teasers within the Russian information space (with translation)*

<b>Жир с боков и живота уйдет за 198 рублей! Без диет и тренировок!</b> Я весила 90кг, а сейчас 50! Похудела на этой ерунде...	<b>Lose that side and belly fat for just 198 roubles! Without dieting or exercising!</b> I went from 200 to 110 pounds, all thanks to this...
<b>Собчак опять крупно влипла</b> Серьезные проблемы	<b>Sobchak puts her foot in it again</b> She's looking at some serious problems
<b>Невероятные стойкие ароматы Giorgio Armani</b> Любовь с первого вдоха!	<b>Unbelievable long-lasting scents from Giorgio Armani</b> Love at first breath!

<b>Назван главный враг импотенции</b> Редкий современный мужчина может похвастаться...	<b>Impotence's main rival revealed</b> The rare modern man can boast...
<b>Эти часы словно гипнотизируют мужчин!</b> Цена упала! Спешите заказать	<b>The watch that has men mesmerized!</b> Price drop! Hurry to order yours

Most English-language sites that contain clickbait are geared towards popular culture. For example, the English-language sites Upworthy and BuzzFeed were created specifically to influence the target audience in issues pertaining to politics, business and the environment, yet they are full of tabloidesque content on various topics that are mostly utilitarian or scandalous. This content is divided into categories (*Quizzes, Best of the Decade, Shopping, News, TV & Movies, Trending, Newsletters, Best of the Week*), although it does not venture beyond three key topoi: celebrities, shopping and entertainment. These sites cover politics in the same way that they cover news about Hollywood stars. The information is “reinforced” by posts from social networks:

*Selena Gomez Said She Doesn't “Stand For Women Tearing Women Down” After Hailey Bieber Denied Shading Her;*

*Trump Said He's Building A Wall In Colorado, And No One Knows What He's Talking About.*

French-language sites that cover politics include a number of *des sites complotistes* (“conspiracy websites”), including *Conspiracy Watch, Cadoitsesavoir.fr, Onsaitcequon-veutquonsache.com*, which were shut down in 2018.

There are also the specialty websites (*Reveoulezvous.fr, Quelmonde.fr, Unmonde2fou, Tu sais quoi*, etc.) set up by John Faqra, which are also closed at the moment. Faqra also runs a number of websites that actively promote false medical information (*Alter santé, Le Mag Santé, A ta bonne santé, Osons rêver d'un monde meilleur, Santenatureinnovation, Sante-nutrition and Topsante*). These sites are not moderated by medical professionals and cannot be considered a reliable source of medical information<sup>9</sup>.

The ubiquity of clickbait is evident on the YouTube video hosting service, where videos often contain provocative titles designed to attract as many users and generate as many views as possible.

Our analysis of the research material found that the following characteristics of the content of clickbait in particular stand out: lack of information, misinformation and falsification, all of which create a manipulative effect. For example:

*Cucumbers are not the same as they used to be...*

*They stole my granddad's apartment...*

*Lail est 15 fois plus puissant que les antibiotiques (“garlic is 15 times more potent than antibiotics”)*

*Female doctors share bikini pics...*

<sup>9</sup> Air du temps, sites anti-complotistes et sites anti-fakenews. Observatoire du journalisme. 2019. 29 Octobre. URL: [www.ojim.fr/air-du-temps-sites-anti-complotistes-et-sites-anti-fakenews/](http://www.ojim.fr/air-du-temps-sites-anti-complotistes-et-sites-anti-fakenews/) (accessed 20.01.2020). (In French).



In terms of lexical features, the following are particularly interesting: the use of demonstrative pronouns (this, that, these), which is done intentionally to create a sense of dialogue with the recipient; the tendency to address the reader as “you”; and the inclusion of phraseological units, catchphrases and colloquialisms in headlines/titles:

*Learn how to earn 5000 roubles a day!*

*You’ve never seen anything like it!*

*Cet enfant est un vrai prodige. Découvrez ce qu’il a fait ...* (“This kid’s a bona fide wunderkind. What did he do?”).

*These mayors are leading the way ... / Эти мэры идут в направлении к .../*

The stylistic features of clickbait include the use of ellipses for no apparent reason, question and exclamation marks, rhetorical questions and plays on words, epithets, and hyperbole:

*SHOCK! This was found in a woman’s body!*

*Don’t miss your chance to win 1 million roubles...*

*Une mère est capable de tout faire pour ses petits... Cette vidéo émouvante d’une chienne de rue le prouve!* (“A mother will do anything for her children... this touching video of a stray dog will prove it!”)

*Look at the horror of what he did...*

*Le Top 10 des plus... Le 3e est incroyable !* (“The Top 10... Number 3 is incredible!”)

*‘The Kissing Booth 3’ Was Just Announced and after that Shocking Cliffhanger, I’m So Relieved. OH MY GOD!!!!*

*Antoni Porowski Posted a Photo of His New Haircut and He’s Officially the Sexiest Man Alive.*

A distinctive feature of English-language clickbait headlines is the use of extended syntax – complex long sentences that often do not contain any punctuation. Headlines with numerals are extremely common:

*Just 29 Random Products We Really Love*

*21 Things That Are Totally Legal Even Though They Seem Questionable*

*17 Unbelievable Photos of Things That Fit So Perfectly It Hurts<sup>10</sup>.*

Thus, clickbait is characterized by creolization and recurrence. On the one hand, the text is supported by a relevant picture or video. On the other hand, it is necessary to repeat the information frequently.

The Russian, English and French examples of clickbait headlines we have used clearly demonstrate the prevalence and universality of clickbait in these linguistic cultures.

Unlike the English- and French-language information space, there are no special clickbait sites in the Russian-language information space. However, many online publications contain clickbait headlines.

<sup>10</sup> BuzzFeed. URL: [www.buzzfeed.com/](http://www.buzzfeed.com/) (accessed 17.11.2019);

Upworthy. URL: [www.upworthy.com/](http://www.upworthy.com/) (accessed 11.03.2020).

A certain ethno-cultural feature can be detected in the French-language information space, where speakers actively use French language units. This offers an insight into how clickbait is perceived in the modern mass consciousness and, to some extent, into the language policy in France.

The universal features of clickbait can be seen in all the linguistic cultures we have looked at. From the point of view of text design, clickbait is a creolized text. Images are used to enhance the manipulative impact of the title on the recipient. Most often, the image is fascinative, that is, the headline is accompanied by an eye-catching image designed to shock the recipient and produce a range of emotions – from anger, disgust and fear to curiosity and delight. The verbal component of the text, enhanced by a picture or video, has great pragmatic potential.

Clickbait is a global phenomenon in today's world. Language tools are used in the creation of a clickbait item to somehow attract the attention of the audience, regardless of the language they speak. At the same time, there is an appeal to basic human emotions, since the content of the clickbait title is ambiguous, scandalous or vague. Russian-, English- and French-speaking audiences are subjected to manipulation, which differs only in the content of the respective national “agendas.”

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#### **Conflicts of interest.**

The author declares the absence of any conflicts of interest.

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