Credibility effect in online news: media-rhetoric perspective (based on color terms use)

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Abstract. The article deals with creating credibility effect in online news by means of using basic color terms when appealing to believability, expertise and reputation. First, historical changes of rhetoric aim are identified and the correlation between persuasiveness and credibility is established. Second, the topics of invention, namely definition, division, relationship, circumstance and testimony, are studied from the perspective of creating effect of credibility.
Keywords: basic color terms, credibility effect, topics of invention, persuasiveness, appeal to believability.

Introduction. As information is spreading massively in the age of digitalized communication and the number of internet sources appearing globally is constantly increasing, there is a growing concern to retain readership by making them trust the sources of information. One of key tasks of the writer these days is to make people believe in what he writes about in a particular article, which leads to the credibility of the source in general, turning the edition into the means of influence and consequently persuasion of the audience.

A brief overview of the related publications. Numerous scientific research works are dedicated to the study of linguistic means of appealing to public in media discourse and advertising. A lot of attention is paid to the analysis of different institutionalized discourses [2], text layout and visuals [1, p.111], as well as to implementation of rhetorical canons and ways of persuasion [5, p.62-72]. However, the issue of choosing argumentation means and their application in the modern Internet discourse requires further investigation, proving the **topicality** of this study.

The **aim** of this research is to establish linguistic ways of creating credibility effect in online articles by means of using color terms. The set goal is achieved by completing the **following tasks:** 1) to establish the way persuasion became predominant aim of rhetoric; 2) to define the notion of credibility in the online texts; 3) to describe *topoi* as set means of argumentation; 4) to group English color terms and identify their functions which add to the credibility of texts.

Materials and methods. In this article we shall study how the effect of credibility is created in online news articles (taken from Voice of America, BBC News, AP News) by means of using basic color terms and their derivatives in nomination of common topics of invention. By basic color terms we mean units of primary color nominations which reflect the universal characteristics of color and include eleven nominations, namely *white, black, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, brown, pink, purple, grey*. The research is conducted in media-rhetoric perspective.

Results and discussion. Nowadays, inherited traditions of ancient rhetoric as *art* of effective communication [10] get their contemporary application in mass media analysis.

Initially, in the times of Ancient Greece rhetoric implied a learned (in contrast to natural abilities) and methodically skilled approach to eloquent speech rather than the persuasiveness [3, p. 79]. Persuasion had a negative connotation in terms of the disregard of ethics, as there was a clear distinction between persuasion and ethical appeals of rhetoric. There existed various interpretations of Latin term *persuasio*: Cicero used it in the meaning "convincing" and "persuasive", while post-Augustan Latin writer Quintilian used it as "conviction", "persuasion", "belief" and "opinion". Such interpretations as well as growing use of rhetorical canons in the events of public communication assisted the shift from elaborate speech to persuasive communication. Definition of rhetoric was altered into the *power* of persuasion by Aristotle [6] who introduced rhetoric topics (topoi) as theoretical instruments of argumentation applicable to any subject. According to Aristotle and his follower Cicero the rhetorician's predominant aim was to see what is possibly persuasive in every given case (ibid), in other words to discover the available means of persuasion, which will be able to use when delivering speech.

It is remarkable that in the classical rhetoric *persuasiveness* was applied to the spoken speech exclusively, i.e. was a typical feature of oral language. However, with the passage of time (in late Medieval times and Renaissance) the written word acquired feature of persuasiveness, being later used as strong propaganda tool during various epochs [3, p. 97]. At present canons of classical rhetoric are applied as means of persuasion both in oral and written texts, with persuasion being of high demand among magazine editors.

Based on the understanding that rhetoric implies persuasion and persuasion takes place in front of real or virtual audience, speech or text requires not only appeal to arguments and proofs (logos), but also to credibility (ethos) and emotional attitudes (pathos) [6].

Credibility as fundamental part of appeal to ethos refers to the character of a writer/speaker and his reputation of having expertise in the subject at hand [9]. Credibility is essential, when knowledge and logical argumentation is not enough, because it effects the perception of information by the audience. Creating credibility in the text can be generally understood in broader and narrower sense. In bigger scale, making the text credible and trustworthy is speaker's fundamental task achieved when the public trusts his reputation, appearance, knowledge and skills. In smaller scale, credibility is achieved by making a convincing text and using convincing language. The

latter shall be called *credibility effect* or effect of credibility in the text.

Credibility effect of an online article is judged primarily according to the linguistic means which appeal to believability, expertise, reputation. The author chooses vocabulary and syntax which will, first, make the described subject understandable and convincing; second, in the best way present the chosen argumentation strategy, i.e. topics (*topoi*) – argumentative schemes that enable dialectician or rhetorician to construe an argument for a given conclusion [8, p.208] on the state of text invention.

Owing to Aristotle's heritage, topics of invention are often introduced by a formula that sometimes functions as a sort of name of the strategy, as it is presented in a typical form that indicates the main concept on which the strategy plays and which acts as the basis of the inferential process [7, p. 16]. In this light, it looks as if topoi represent the logical level of argumentation and serve as variation of argument schemas (ibid), somehow similar to syllogisms, however, might be represented both on syntactic and verbal levels. According to Cicero, topics are shared by the speaker (ethos) and audience (pathos) opinions and content-oriented statements, general in their nature [4, p. 449] and thus acting as common wisdom of a culture and expressions of some formal law of inference and the establishment of conclusions in the mind of the audience.

In general, within rhetorical invention of the text, the author may choose among seven common topics: *definition* – belonging to the basic fundamental category; *division* – a description of the whole and its constituent parts; *comparison* –similarity and opposition to others; *connection* – causal interaction; *circumstance* – description of not/possible, not/expedient; *evidence* – references to experts, precedent; *notation and combination* – argumentation based on the connection of language form and referent [11, p. 14].

Having analyzed the basic color terms and their derivatives used in online news, we found out that to achieve credibility effect the authors appeal either to believability, or expertise, or reputation.

Appeal to believability as call for having confidence in the truth, the existence, or the reliability of subject is implemented in the texts by color terms dealing with two common topics – *definition* and *division*.

Topic of *definition* invites the readers to consider the larger group to which something belongs [11, p. 14] as well as refers to the similarities and differences the subject shares with the members of that group. In online news discourse this topic is presented by general nominations of color spectrum, e.g., *color, shade, hue, palette*, and basic color names, e.g., *green, blue, yellow*, etc. which create the impression of trustworthiness among the readership, in other words, the data author provides does not suggest any contradictions to what is generally known and believed in by the readers. For instance, when writes inform about artworks or fashion they appeal to color as predominant visual characteristic of objects, creating the effect of realistic and credible text (see example No. 1): (1) *Grey Smith, Heritage's director of vintage posters, says the draft poster for the 1980 movie "The Empire Strikes Back" is unique because it shows Roger Kastel's complete <u>artwork</u> in the original <u>color palette</u>* (Voice of America, Draft Poster for 'The Empire Strikes Back' Sells for $26,400, July 31, 2018). In this extract color collocation *color palette* attracts readers' attention to the way the vintage poster is done, while additionally used adjective *original* appeals to trustworthiness. Likewise, using basic color terms which nominate visual characteristics of nature and landscape makes the audience believe in the story, as they refer to objective reality, known and understandable for vast majority of people. For instance, when the writers depict sky with color term *blue* in example No. 2, sand with *white* No. 2, grass with *green* No. 3, flowers with *pink* No. 4, the description coincides with readers' generally held believes and their worldview, thus credibility effect is created in the texts: (2) *My new home was a banda built on the beach, with the endless coming and going of the waves and the smell of seawater. There are coconut palms, <u>white sand</u> and a <u>blue sky</u> above the azure Indian Ocean* (Voice of America, COVID-19 Diaries: trapped in a Tanzanian Paradise, May 11, 2020); (3) *And more are returning land to its literal roots — by planting native <u>grasses</u> that <u>green</u> with the slightest rain and grow dense roots that hold soil in place* (Voice of America, US Farmers Restore native Grasslands as Groundwater Disappears, September 10, 2021); (4) *Not the <u>pink flowers</u> themselves; they arrived on schedule in mid-March along Washington's Tidal Basin. But for Washingtonians, the cherry blossoms are more than a tree* (Voice of America, Tradition-Bound Washington Adjusts to Life in Pandemic, April 20, 2020).

Topic of *division* amplifies and clarifies the description of objects, appealing to the whole and its constituent parts or the parts which make the whole, creating the effect of detailed, thus believable, description. By its nature, topic of *division* is closely related to *definition*, latter might be the larger embracing category. *Division* is implemented in the online English Internet news by means of color phrases, which include nominations of color in general, e.g. *shade, color*, and / or basic color terms located close to each other on the color spectrum, e.g., *green-blue, red-orange*, the interrelation of which is additionally highlighted in the context: (5) *The <u>colors</u> are very <u>neutral, yet it's popping</u> in like this, <u>the greens</u>. This is another one. It's very geometric, like <u>blues</u> and <u>shades of blues</u>. So, it is my batik, a lot of textures and florals and even the geometry is not very straight* (Voice of America, Textile Artist, July 02, 2021). In this extract the author uses topic of division, saying that separate shades, nominated with basic color terms *greens, blues* and *shades of blues* all belong to the general category of *neutral, yet popping colors*, thus he makes the description of fabric detailed, visual and believable.

Appeal to expertise as call for professional skills and knowledge in the particular field is implemented in the media texts when the writer provides professionally grounded information about the way colors are created or changed as well as about the possible / impossible color combinations. The goal is to make readers believe in the data, based on experts' opinion. Appeal to expertise is achieved by the common topics of invention: topic of r*elationship* and of *circumstance*.

Topic of *relationship* predominantly establishes the correlations between cause and effect, antecedent and consequence, contraries, contradictions. In addition to

using basic color terms that visualize objects which are in the focus of attention, verbs nominating changes are widely applied in the nearby context, e.g. *to turn, to become, to alter*. Persuading the readership by indicating the cause and effect is very effective as the public can easily trace the logic of authors assumptions; for instance, in the following example No. 6 it is clear that *grassy lawns turn green* because of *spring* coming: (6) *Spring comes earlier to dense cities, and while that might be great for city gardeners and outdoorsy types, it might be bad for native birds and insects. [...] For example, grassy lawns in the suburbs became green before trees in urban areas, even though the temperatures were higher in the city* (Voice of America, Spring Comes Earlier to Urban Environments, May 26, 2016). Antecedent and consequence relation between subject of the text, nominated with basic color terms, and the results of color change, is very similar to cause and effect, though implies higher level of probability as is syntactically built using "if … then" relations. For example, in extract No. 7 the writer convinces the readers in the relation between climate change and fast altering the color of tree leaves in autumn, using if-clause nominating antecedent and general color term "color" nominating the consequence: (7) *"If climate change is going to mean significant drought, that means trees are going to shut down, and many trees are just going to drop their leaves," he said. "Severe droughts that really mean that the tree just can't function — that doesn't improve color."* (Voice of America, Why Climate Change Is Making Harder to Chase Fall Foliage, October 02, 2021). Appeal to contrary relations as means of argumentation is always done when contrary or opposite color terms occur in close context and nominate characteristics which exclude one another. For instance, in extract No. 8, when the write describes better ecological situation in New Delhi with collocation *turned blue* related to sky, he excludes the opposite state of the air – *a city typically shrouded in gray smog* – thus he appeals to his own expertise and knowledge about the ecological issues in the city and proves his vision by using topic of contrary relation, nominated with basic color terms *blue* and *gray*: (8) *The skies in the world's most polluted capital [New Delhi] have turned blue — something a city typically shrouded in gray smog would have celebrated with gusto in normal times* (Voice of America, New Delhi Shutdown Brings Cleaner Air, But No One Breathes Easy, April 09, 2020). Contradictory relations are very similar to contrary ones, and are implemented in the media texts with using opposite color terms nominating different issues; however, they appeal to denial rather than opposition. For example, in the following extract the writer states that introduced capitalized spelling of word *Black* to nominated people of Afro-American origin, will not be applied to spelling *white*, thus he appeals to contrary relations, convincing the readers by his expertise: (9) *Columbia Journalism Review, the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, USA Today, the Los Angeles Times, NBC News and Chicago Tribune are among the organizations that have recently said they would capitalize Black but have not done so for white* (AP News, AP says it will capitalize Black but not white, June 20, 2020).

Topic of *circumstance* is used by the writers when they describe colors and shades of objects, proposed as either possible or impossible, to convince the readers by encouraging them to believe the experts' opinion. Basic color terms in this case are used along with the adjectives of possibility in the near context, e.g. *available, possible, probable*. For instance, for description of newly-invented ultra-white shade of roof paint (example No.10), basic color term *white* in comparative and superlative degrees is used and the circumstance is additionally nominated with adjective available: (10) *Scientists in the US have developed a paint significantly "whiter than the whitest paint currently available". Tests carried out by researchers at Purdue University on their "ultra-white" paint showed it reflected more than 98% of sunlight.* (BBC News, 'Whitest ever' paint reflects 98% of sunlight, April 16, 2021). The author appeals to the topic of possible circumstance to convince the readers that long scientific research has made the new energy-saving paint shade, nominated with prefixed color term *ultra-white*, available.

Appeal to reputation as call to trust a widespread belief about a particular person or organization adds to credibility effect in the media texts and is implemented by topic of *testimony*. In this case the authors rely on the image a person or organization has, rather than his own one. Among the common examples of using color terms when appealing to topic of *testimony* are the names of public organizations or political institutions, which have basic color names included in their name, e.g., *The White House, Greenpeace, Red Cross, Yellow Vests, Red Berets*, etc. For instance, in example No.11, The White House spreads information about vaccination in Ghana, being a reliable and convincing source of information: (11) *The White House told VOA the 565,110 doses of the vaccine shipped on Tuesday* (Voice of America, US Donates 560,000 COVID Vaccine Doses to Ghana, February 02, 2022). Appeal to the authority in this extract adds to the credibility of the data.

Conclusions. To sum up, credibility effect is created in online news by using basic color terms which describe the subject of the article and appeal to believability, expertise and reputation. When appealing to believability, the authors build their argumentation using topics of definition and division to describe the true natural colors of the environment. For focusing on expertise, the writers apply topics of relationship and circumstance, nominating colors of things and establishing correlations between cause and effect, antecedent and consequence, contraries, contradictions. When appealing to reputation, they use color terms in names of public organizations and political institutions to shift readers' attention to the image of the latter. Further research could be conducted regarding creation of subjectivity effect in the news discourse which is implemented by derived color terms used in topic of comparison.

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