

Describing the Enemy in Headlines

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Abstract: *Behind any crisis, there is a threat. And behind any threat, there's an enemy. An enemy can come in all forms and shapes: it can be human or not, it can be a new enemy or an existing one, it can be a group, or it can be a person. In this paper, we will discuss the language used to describe the enemy, building upon existing research on dehumanization of the enemy in post 9/11 media representations, applied to the language used in Romanian newspaper article titles referring to specific current threats (the war in Ukraine). This article also discusses the various methods in which enemies are typically presented, with the aim of seeing how Russian actors in the war are currently depicted in newspaper headlines. This, in turn, can help us ascertain if these actors are seen as enemies.*

Keywords: *enemy, headline, war, language, online media*

Introduction

This paper started from existing research, namely two articles by Canadians Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills (2009 and 2010), where they analysed the language used in newspaper headlines to refer to terrorists in the post-9/11 political and social climate.

There are similarities between their context and ours: first and foremost, they were analysing headlines written in a country that was not directly affected by the analysed events, while the current article is analysing the language used to describe the war in a neighbouring country. Second, they are mostly concerned with how the enemy is framed, described, analysed, and reported, in other words, with how the enemy is constructed in language. One major difference is the timeframe covered by the studies: while the two authors

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had over 8 years of collecting and selecting headlines in physical newspaper about a threat that had started almost one decade prior, the present paper analyses 5 weeks' worth of headlines from 3 major online publications, about an ongoing conflict less than one year old.

The language of enmity is complex and sometimes difficult to recognize. It can be masked or enhanced by irony, metaphors, and, we argue, is culturally defined. We therefore set to explore whether the same imagery discovered by Steuter and Wills – “the enemy as animals, particularly noxious, verminous, or pestilential animals, or as diseases, especially spreading and metastatic diseases like cancers or viruses” (2010, p. 153) also applies to Romanian newspaper language in our situation.

Our research has shown that the enemy can be represented in several ways: in archetypal imagery, resorting to myths and stories, by dehumanization, where the enemy is reduced to the status of animal, so they can be dominated and potentially killed, or by criminalization, where the enemy is so atrociously bad that they become a sort of “second-class” humans, which need to be found, fought, and imprisoned or killed. One other way of referring to the enemy is speaking about it as if it were a disease – a combination of dehumanization and criminalization, where the (non-human) Other needs to be identified, found, and eradicated.

While analyzing the collected data, we shall attempt to see what type of language is employed in Romanian headlines to refer to a current enemy (not a direct one, but one seemingly acquired through the logic of “the enemy of my friend is my enemy”, or simply an older historically perceived threat, re-activated by current events).

Us and them

All societies are based primarily on stories. Stories define how people see the world, how they position themselves in it, what their main beliefs are, in other words, who they are as opposed to who others are. These stories are “repeated tales that carry moral truths, prescriptions for behaviour, lessons about success and failures” (Ruth, 1996, p. 3).

Stories are the ones that provide identity, as well as moral guidelines and prescriptive rules for a group. Group identity (or “corporate identity” according to Keene, 1986, p. 17) is created and maintained through the sharing of tales, in which the world is generally seen in dualistic pairs – good vs. evil, light vs. darkness, us vs. them. People “imagine that their own society represents both the best and the most natural order, and they take part in communal rituals that express and renew this view” (Kertzer, 1998, p. 37). In other words, they will always see themselves as “the good guys”, the heroes,

the owners of truth, the positive actors in any story. The alternative is simply intolerable to the human psyche.

In order to create the basic good-evil dichotomy, for instance, stories will most often employ archetypes, strong triggers of emotional responses. And, according to Lule (2001, p. 15), when stories refer to archetypes, they become myths. Archetypes are a primary component of our shared culture and values. While for earliest theorists, such as Jung, archetypes were primitive mental images, present in the collective unconsciousness, more recent research has analysed them as intermediary, "acquisition" stages of a psychological complex (Saunders & Skar, 2001) or childhood associations between images and concepts (Mandler, 1992, Knox, 1997). Faber and Mayer (2008) conducted a study to assess the relevance of early Jungian archetypes for current realities. According to their clarifications on the neo-archetypal theory, archetypes a) represent generic story characters, b) are psychologically represented as mental models, such as prototypes for the self and for the other, c) tend to evoke strong emotional responses in those subjected to them, d) operate on an automatic or subconscious level, and e) are learned conceptualizations. They also identify 13 "valid" archetypes: caregiver, creator, everyman / everywoman, explorer, hero, innocent, jester, lover, magician, outlaw, ruler, sage, and shadow. The latter is "[r]epresented by the violent, haunted, and the primitive; the darker aspects of humanity. Often seen in a tragic figure, rejected; awkward, desperately emotional. Can be seen to lack morality; a savage nemesis" (Faber & Meyer, 2008, p. 309).

One additional archetype, which is not included in their study, but is defined by De Verteuil (1966) and later by René Girard (1982/2010) and is also included by Lule in his master myths, is the scapegoat.

When it comes to interpersonal relationships, the dichotomy that is the most interesting for this study is the friend-enemy one. In Mannarini and Salvatore (2020, p. 88) were discussing the "politicization of otherness" – due to the conflation of the public and private dimensions, many domains have become "political" (public), therefore "economic competitors, sport adversaries, members of cultural minorities or opposite opinion-based groups, have all assumed the configuration of public enemies". The other side of the coin is the "privatisation of enemies" – where collective entities are perceived in terms of personal confrontation, "highly impregnated with emotionality", as happens in close relationships. And "the more these threatening others are felt as close and tangible, the more people feel vulnerable, exposed to risks, and frightened". One venue worth investigating in the future is how the language of headlines in conflict situation supports or disproves these ideas, as we believe their theory may prove an effective framework of analysis.

In 2010, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone analysed the enemy as an essential archetype, proving its existence from a phylogenetic perspective, creating a framework for differentiating between the stranger and the enemy. As even Jung had defined archetypes as having a positive aspect and a negative one (Jung, 2003, p. 46), we can thus say that the stranger and the enemy are the two facets of the same archetype – the Shadow. While the stranger is neutral (or potentially good) to us until proven otherwise, the enemy is forever a negative opposite, therefore bad.

Where do we stand, as a way of thinking, of defining ourselves as humans in the 21st century? “Modern societies [...] have modern conceits. [...] they believe they have no need of heroes, villains, exemplary figures, portrayals of good and evil. [...] They fool themselves” (Lule, 2001, p. 17-18). Lule goes on to demonstrate the similarities between myth-telling and news-telling, identifying seven “master myths” in the news: the victim, the scapegoat, the hero, the good mother, the trickster, the other world, the flood.

Whereas myths tell stories of origins, of creation and identity, news “most often tells stories that support and sustain the current state of things” (Lule, 2001, p. 26). In crisis situations, mostly cultural models and techniques of thinking, based on the logic of myth are employed (Coman, 2003, p. 107)

The enemy in news articles can thus be easily framed within the following myths: the scapegoat, the trickster (as a partially dehumanized, stupid, or malicious character), and partially in the ‘other world’ (seen as a “threat, as a dark and disagreeable land that harbours an enemy” – Lule, 2001, p. 24).

Images of the Enemy

Besides the archetypal images described above, past studies have shown that a perceived enemy will also be described using **animal imagery** (Steuter & Wills, 2009, 2010). This is because the enemy needs to be dehumanized – a moral human being cannot kill another human, but will easily and freely destroy the depersonalized, remote image of evil (Sheets-Johnstone, 2010, p. 151; Keene, 1986, p. 17). By dehumanizing the enemy, one rises above it, as man rules the other beings on Earth according to most religions and mainstream beliefs. Vermin, rodents, pests in general carry diseases which can endanger us, therefore they need to die so that we can survive. Just as they need to be exterminated, so does the enemy – it becomes an undesirable component of the environment, an unhealthy ingredient that endangers society and morals. It needs to be destroyed so that we can remain alive, safe, and healthy.

This is also why there are so many similarities in how we talk about war and how we talk about **diseases or crime**. There is a “fight” against terrorism, but we also fight an illness. We “defeat” a cancer the same way we may defeat

an enemy on the battlefield. As the pests described above, this is about the fight for survival. It is us or them. Health issues, attacking armies or rodents – they are all threats, they are all enemies. What they have in common is the threat to the established order, as well as the antagonistic group (the defeaters).

Another way of describing enemies is by very literally calling upon **folk tales and myths**. Enemies can be “beasts”, terrible beings to be vanquished, difficult to exterminate (see the Hydra, where one cut head gives place to another two). Typically, the beast needs to be tricked to be defeated. Brute force alone is not enough, and the hero will often resort to subterfuge (in other words, the fight is unequal from the very start, since the monster is large, strong, and apparently undefeatable, so the hero is entitled to make use of any means necessary). It is not a fair fight by either party, as this is no honourable battle between moral equals, but a literal struggle for survival.

One interesting characteristic for Romania is the existence of a type of culturally **specific enemy**, the Communist image of the “enemy of the people”. This is a type of public enemy, which is not depersonalized, but criminalized (Tismăneanu, 2018). The strategy in this case is not as much dehumanization, but alienation. The mechanism of creating the enemy in this case was described by Keen (1986) as “consensual paranoia”: “Paranoia reduces anxiety and guilt by transferring to the other all the characteristics one does not want to recognize in oneself. [...] We only see and acknowledge those negative aspects of the enemy that support the stereotype we have already created.” (p. 19)

One last but important aspect which should be noted is the general perception of Russians in Romanian society. As Lucian Boia notes, since mid-19th century, in a desire to get closer to Western Europe, and particularly to the French model, Romanians started to give up on their Slavic inheritance, which was bound to reverberate in an essential depreciation of the Russian model and of the relations with Russia (Boia, 2022, p. 303). Current analysts consider that “the authenticity of a natural anti-Russian attitude within the Romanian population cannot be contested” (Ștefureac, 2015, p. 75), a statement which is supported by numbers – the 2021 survey conducted by Strategic Thinking showed that Russia had the lowest level of trust among the Romanian population (16%) (Public Distrust, 2021).

Method

Our aim was to collect newspaper headlines relating to the enemies researched in this paper, then to apply an inductive frame analysis to identify the specific language used and to identify potential patterns.

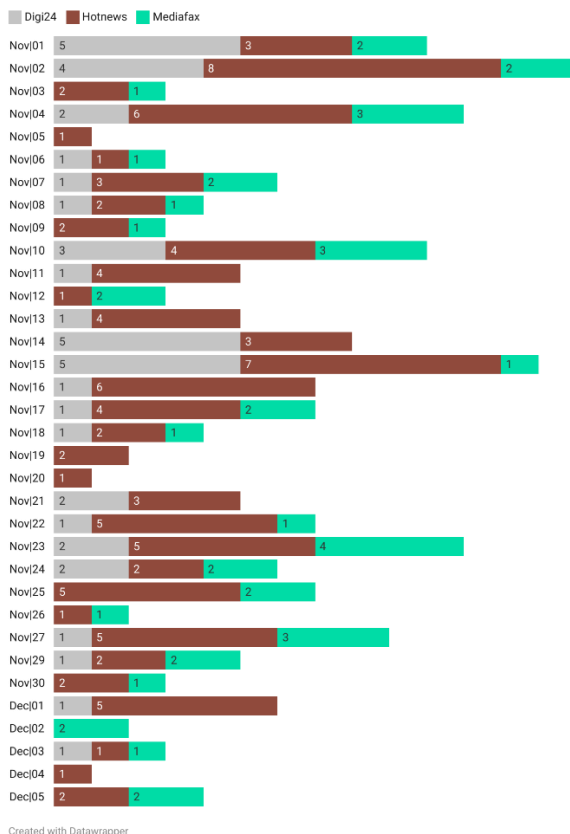
Unfortunately, we could not identify one centralised accessible database of Romanian online news (like ProQuest for the rest of the world) to extract data, but we had to rely on a semi-automatic extraction of article information

(including headline, date, and publication), using custom-made Python scripts, from 3 Romanian online publications: *Digi24*, *Hotnews*, and *Mediafax*.

The data belongs to articles published from November 1st to December 5th 2022, covering the war in Ukraine. Headlines were sorted to include the keywords “Russia”, “Putin”, “Russians”, “soldier”, or “war”. Subsequently, false positives were removed (for instance, in Romanian “soldat” – *soldier* can also be the participle of the verb “a se solda” - *to result in*). We have also excluded headlines that were clear quotes from various local or international personalities or institutions, or from other publications, as our interest was in the representation of a certain enemy by the respective media outlet, not by outside voices.

Finally, we obtained 187 headlines, with the distribution in Figure 1.

Distribution of headlines



actor	instances
group	47
neutral	93
individual	47

Table 1 - Distribution of agents

Figure 1 - Distribution of headlines/day

The data was centralized and processed in MSEXcel, and the tables, charts, and visualizations were made in MSEXcel and Datawrapper.

The creation of the grid was not easy, as an empirical grid had to be employed. Therefore, we carefully reviewed each headline, trying to find the best words to describe the agent presented (Russia, Putin, Russian soldiers, Russians, various Russian political personalities), and a general descriptor. To further simplify our analysis, we have grouped actors in three main categories: individuals, groups (Russians, Russian army, etc.), and neutral (Kremlin, Moscow, Russian, Russian media). The distribution per day is presented in Table 1 above.

After the initial analysis, we proceeded to a translation from Romanian of relevant headlines, to be included in this study. Most language was easily translatable, with one exception which needed extended explanations, as the title was inspired by a popular Romanian folk tale (see below).

Analysis and findings

One first major finding is that neutral actors are represented twice as often as human actors, be they individuals or a group. This seems to support the theory of dehumanization, as Kremlin, Russia, or Moscow are not perceived as human beings, but as institutions.

The most common descriptors encountered were “weapons”, “loss”, “propaganda” and “crime” (see Figure 2). At a first glance, the main concerns are the technicalities and numbers related to conflict – the weapons used or needed, the losses encountered, but also the mechanisms supporting the war (propaganda) or specific actions (crime). All these most frequent descriptors are associated with neutral actors (See Figure 3).

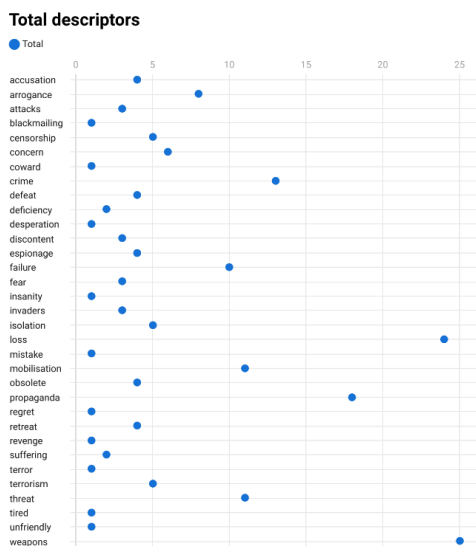


Figure 2 - Empirical grid – descriptors



Figure 3 – Descriptors by agent category

The top neutral actor is Russia. It is launching weapons and satellites, it is manufacturing, buying and deploying all sorts of weapons. Russia is also using non-conventional weapons (“Russia Using Gas as Weapon”, “Russian General ‘Winter’ Killing at the Heart of Europe”). While at the start of the analysed interval the language was related to the acquisition or manufacturing of weapons, towards the end of the analysed period (late November and early December), Russia is facing “significant shortages”, resorting to “improvisations” and unconventional weapons (“General Winter”). The second most associated term with Russia is “loss”, and this distribution seems to be constant throughout the analysed interval. Loss comes in many forms, not just the usual losses of human life or weapons (with weekly reports on Russian soldiers’ deaths), associated with war; there are also economic losses (“Russia Lost Over 90% of its Oil Market in Northern Europe”, “Russia Entering Recession”). One interesting association is with crime – not only Russian soldiers kill, but Russia as an entity as well (“Russia Committed 46,000 War Crimes in Ukraine Over Last Eight Months of Invasion” – November 14th vs. “Russia Committed over 51,000 War Crimes, according to Kiev” – December 5th).

Kremlin, the second neutral actor as number of occurrences, is associated with propaganda (“Kremlin Counting On ‘Kitty’ Propaganda Fighting Against the Western ‘Rhinoceros’”), announcing news about the military mobilization, preparing retreats or anticipating losses (“Kremlin Expects 100,000 Russian Soldiers To Be Killed By Spring”), yet weak when it comes to protecting its own (“Kremlin’s Anemic Reaction, After Two Russian Billionaires Renounce Citizenship”).

The least mentioned neutral actor is the Russian media, only present in the context of fear (“Funeral Atmosphere At Russian TV Stations Upon Kherson Retreat”).

When it comes to human actors, the most frequent association is between Russian soldiers and Russians in general, with crime (5 and 4 occurrences, respectively).

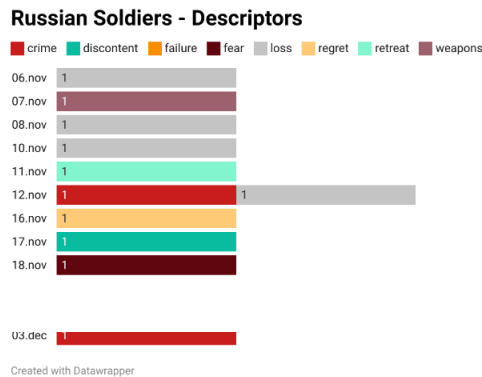


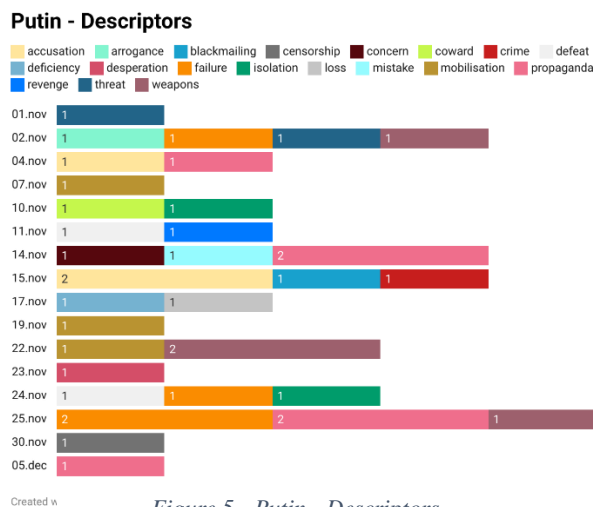
Figure 4 – Russian Soldiers – Descriptors

Russian soldiers seem to receive the most negative associations – they are criminals (“Over 1,000 Russian Soldiers, Officially Accused Of War Crimes”, “Castrated Men, Raped Women, and Abused Children: How Russian Soldiers are Terrorizing Ukrainians”), thieves (“Russian Soldiers Retreating From Kherson Did Not Leave Empty-Handed”), they suffer losses, they are sick (“Russian Soldiers Ill Before Arriving on Front”) and poorly or unconventionally trained (“Monk Teaching Russian Soldiers How to Load a Kalashnikov the Orthodox Way”). As seen in Figure 4, in early November most associations were related to the losses suffered by this agent, while towards the end of the interval (following widespread media reports), the image shifts and their main descriptor is “crime”.

The Russian army as a group agent is considered an invading force (“Invading Army, Retreats from Kherson”), inhuman even to its own soldiers (“Russian Soldiers Sent To Front At Gunpoint”), plagued with discontent (“Daily Revolt in Russia. Colonel Threatened With Beating By Dozens of Furious Recruits”, “Russian Officer, Hit and Cursed By a Discontent Soldier...”), using obsolete weapons and tactics (“WWI-Like Images on the Only Front Where Russian Army Still Attacks”, “WWI-Like Trenches Dug By Russians in Kherson”), therefore suffering losses (“The Fate of the Tank Was Already Sealed”, “Major Defeat for Putin’s Army”).

The term “Russians” proved to be one of the most problematic in the context of this analysis, as it is used to describe Russian soldiers/the Russian army, Russian propagandists, the Russian state, or the Russian people. While on the front they are firing weapons, killing civilians (“Mines Left By Russians Killing Civilians”, “New-born Killed In Most Recent Russian Bombardments

In Ukraine”), back home Russian civilians are concerned (“Russian Mothers Launching Anti-War Petition”, “Some of Russian Soldiers’ Mothers Requesting Parliament to Withdraw Russian Army from Ukraine”), tired (“Survey Shows Russians at War Are Tired”), or plain traumatized (“Russians ‘Gobbling Up’ Antidepressants and Going to Therapy Because of the War [...]”). Russian propagandists are concerned as well (“‘It Would Be a Disaster’. Rare Debate on Kremlin-Controlled TV Station. Russian Propagandists Concerned About Ukraine Defeat”)



When it comes to individual actors, Putin is the most represented individual (37 total occurrences, that is 19.8% of the total titles), and his name comes in association with propaganda (6 instances), weapons and failure (4 instances each), and mobilization and accusations (3 instances each). He receives the closest description to an animal (“Refuses to Leave ‘Burrow’”), and is generally presented as

accusatory, an “agent of chaos”, vengeful (“How Putin Takes Vengeance Against USA”), threatening, yet concerned (“A Concerned Putin in Kremlin Reads Reports on Meeting Between Biden and Xi”), impoverished (“War Has Impoverished Putin”), isolated (“Even Autocratic Allies Keep Away From Putin”), likely to make mistakes (“Putin About to Make Big Military Mistake”).

Other individual actors (Kerimov, Lavrov, Lukashenko, Medvedev, Peskov, Rogozhin, Shoigu) are mostly described as arrogant/cynical: “Top Nerve. Lavrov Claims Westerners Believe Russians Trying to Protect Civilian Population and Infrastructure in Ukraine”, “Lukashenko’s Nerve: Kyiv Should Negotiate With Moscow Without Prior Conditions”, “Peskov’s Cynical Answer [...]”, they use strong language (“What Has Medvedev Been Ranting About”, “Medvedev, New Hallucinating Claims”) and propaganda (“‘Heroic’ Images Of Dmitri Rogozhin On War Front, Almost Fully Clad In NATO Equipment”) and talk of mobilization (“Shoigu: 87,000 of Mobilised Soldiers Already Sent to Front”).

In terms of specific language, we have identified the use of metaphors (“Putin Refusing to Come Out of His Burrow”, “Moscow Left Without

Wings”), mythological/archetype references (“A New ‘Scapegoat’ for Russians?”), personalization (“General ‘Winter’”), strong descriptions, often with negative connotations (“nerve”, “rant”, “hallucinating”, “cynical”, “Putin Puts Gag on Press”, “butchering”). Among the most interesting titles found was a reference to an old Romanian tale, where the greedy but stupid bear is tricked by the cunning fox and ends up losing its tail (“*Urusul (sic!) rusesc, păcălit de vulpea ucraineană: focar fals de Covid pentru a împiedica ocuparea spitalului din Herson*” – roughly translated as “Russian Bear Tricked by Ukrainian Fox: Fake Covid Hotbed to Prevent the Occupation of Hospital in Herson”, with the note that the original spelling “*urusul*” is a play upon words, a mix between *urs* – bear and *rus* – Russian).

Conclusions

The language used in newspaper headlines indicates that there are actors in the war in Ukraine who are perceived as enemies by the Romanian press. However, it is not in the way we expected, that is, the enemy is not described through dehumanizing language – they are not likened to animals, pests, or diseases, as described in the articles which inspired the present study. Rather, they are dehumanized through generalization (seen as a group) or criminalization. This tactic is described by Keen (1986), who observes that the enemy can be described as barbarian, greedy, criminal, torturer, rapist. It would be interesting to see this study extended throughout the duration of the conflict, to analyse how the language used evolves with the progression of hostilities. On the other hand, it would be extremely interesting to see how the other actors, the Ukrainians / Ukrainian army / Zelenskyy are presented in relation to this conflict. The research conducted for this paper suggests they would be framed as the hero / the innocent / the everyman etc.

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