



INVESTIGACIÓN/RESEARCH

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**ECONOMIC INFORMATION IN THE DIGITAL GENERALIST
PRESS: A PROPOSAL FOR IMPROVEMENT AND SIMPLIFICATION
OF STRUCTURES**

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ABSTRACT:

Economics and finance are embedded in the daily life of citizens despite the fact that, on many occasions, information in this field is alien and abstract. Knowledge that public opinion, in general, presents about topics related to economics and finance is far from being satisfactory, according to several recent studies. Through this study, we want to know the linguistic characteristics of informational texts of the field of economics and finances published in generalist digital newspapers. The final goal is to find the characteristics that can make the dissemination of economic knowledge simpler or more complex and state proposals of improvement in the training of economic journalists to contribute to improve the transmission of this information.

KEY WORDS: economic journalism - applied linguistics – journalistic specialization – specialized language – syntax - finances - dissemination.

**LAS INFORMACIONES ECONÓMICAS EN LA PRENSA
GENERALISTA DIGITAL: UNA PROPUESTA DE MEJORA Y
SIMPLIFICACIÓN DE LAS ESTRUCTURAS**

RESUMEN:

La economía y las finanzas están insertas en el día a día de los ciudadanos a pesar de que en numerosas ocasiones, las informaciones de este área les resulten ajenas y

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abstractas. El conocimiento que la opinión pública, en líneas generales, presenta acerca de los temas relacionados con la economía y las finanzas dista mucho de ser satisfactorio como han demostrado estudios recientes. A través de este estudio, queremos conocer las características lingüísticas de los textos informativos del área de la economía y las finanzas publicados en diarios digitales generalistas. El objetivo final es encontrar cuáles son las características que pueden hacer más sencilla o más compleja la divulgación de los conocimientos económicos y plantear propuestas de mejora en la formación de los periodistas económicos para contribuir a una mejora en la transmisión de estas informaciones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: periodismo económico - lingüística aplicada - especialización periodística - lenguaje especializado – sintaxis – finanzas - divulgación.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, economic journalism has gained ground due largely to the global crisis. Other factors that have contributed to the financial information to occupy more space in both traditional and new media creation are the growing interest of citizens on this subject and the implications in their daily lives. For example, unknown elements until a few years ago as mortgage rates or reference-related taxes are increasingly common in all kinds of news media. However, for many citizens, the economy remains the area of information that is more complex, less pleasant and with more difficulty to be understood.

Through this study, we intend to approach the message, study its code from a linguistic perspective of its complexity and check if the effort of understanding required by macroeconomic and financial information published in general journals is too high. If this is so, the linguistic complexity can be one of the factors that make readers shy away from this kind of information, because as Schramm stated (1954) "The success or effectiveness of communication is in inverse proportion to the effort required".

Ultimately, it comes to research in this line to see if it is one of the "new ways" to which Casero-Ripollés refers (2014) that must be explored to "recover the value of journalistic information on the digital stage" in what is known as specialized journalism.

2. Objectives

With the completion of this study, we intend to know in detail how the texts of economic and financial dissemination are linguistically structured. Overall, we can highlight the following as the main objectives of this study:

- Conducting a thorough study about the internal linguistic structure of disseminating texts, specializing in macroeconomics and finances, published in the online media of a general nature.
- Characterization, from a standpoint of functional linguistics, this type of texts, at syntactic, semantic and morphological levels.
- Assessment of their structural complexity, carrying out a study
- Knowledge of the degree of adaptation of the studied texts to the public targeted by the media in which they are published.

All this with a final prescriptive purpose, to develop some improvements that enable professionals of economic information to be aware of the structures commonly used in writing this type of information and adapt them to the environment and therefore the type of readers who are targeted in order to achieve adapted dissemination that gets to be better accepted and decoded by receivers.

3. METHODOLOGY

Through linguistic analysis of journalistic texts specialized in economics and finances, we intend to make a description of their characteristics in order to later see if the recommendations proposed in the mentioned literature are followed.

To do this, we selected a corpus of 20 texts published in Spanish digital mainstream media (El País, El Mundo and ABC), from 2013 to 2015, all of them being of a macroeconomic and financial nature. In total, 11,576 words and 346 sentences, both simple and compound.

All texts have at least 500 words and we have ignored the texts of opinion, as well as those of topics alien to macroeconomics and finances but traditionally included in the area of economic specialization; labor, energy, housing, etc. Their thematic peculiarities make them able to be treated sometimes as information more characteristic of the social field than of the economic field and they could mislead into error.

The analysis is a first approach to know how the texts produced by economic journalists are linguistically structured and it includes observation and counting of 30 variables; syntactic, lexical-semantic, morphological, etc. To do this, we used the classic description of categories included, among others, by Vera and Blanco, Downing and Locke, etc.

Once their characteristics have been analyzed and recorded, data that have been obtained have been related to the general texts to objectively describe their characteristics and compare them.

Moreover, within the scope of lexical semantics, those terms classified as specialized have been compared with their frequency of use in the oral language as a way to check their use in everyday language and, therefore, be able to determine their familiarity for all readers. The tool selected for this comparison has been the Royal Academy Corpus (CREA) in its selection of oral texts.

CREA is the largest bank of this type that we can find for the Spanish language. It also makes it possible to select, in addition to the way of presentation of text, whether oral or written, its origin. Consistent with our study, we selected oral texts of the Spanish language, excluding American variants. Out of the 125 million forms that CREA brings as a whole, the number of forms with which the specialized terms of the selected texts are finally compared is 6.5 millions of forms, approximately.

Moreover, we have also taken into account some other features, such as the proportion of numerical elements existing in the texts, since precisely the reduction of numbers is one of the traditional recommendations of specialized writing.

4. DISCUSIÓN

4.1 More information but not more knowledge

In the last decade, increased economic information and its prevalence in setting the news agenda is undeniable. An increase that has also been reflected on research about economic journalism and the work of journalists dedicated to this area of expertise.

However, recent studies such as the one published in 2013 by the Media Observatory of UNITE show that society is not familiar with the concepts of the economy, not even when they have been widely discussed in various media.

Specifically, this study based on a telephone survey of 2,500 people shows that: more than six out of every ten citizens cannot define the term "risk premium" and one out of two is unable to distinguish between the powers of the ministries of Economy and Finance as well as between the holders having, for several years, the functions of Ministers in both.

Therefore, we can conclude that, despite being a social science whose influence on citizens is easily observable and its largest presence in both general and specialized

media, recipients are still not familiar with the terms and economic information. Economic and financial information remains the "salmon ogre" of readers.

Angel Saiz, deputy director in 2001 of the newspaper Expansion, aware of the "instinctive suspicion" that economic information awakened in the average reader, suggested that, apart from traditional studies on the metaphors of financial journalism or the repeated attempts to eliminate anglicisms from the texts in financial newspapers, the concern of specialized editors passed through "reconciling the rigor required by specialized information, in this case the economic one, with the disseminating effort required by a media with a potentially massive audience of readers." It is an affirmation that, despite being made by an official of a specialized edition, is perfectly applicable to specialized texts published in mainstream media.

This effort in favor of dissemination, which is dealt with by some authors, happens to know how language is being used in the communication process, what the characteristics of the language used in news reports devoted to this subject are and see if there really is a linguistic complexity that hinders access to information or, on the contrary, a language accessible to most users is being used.

4.2 The language of economic information

The study of the code used by journalists specialized in financial information has been always relegated to the background. The language used in this area of knowledge has traditionally been attributed the characteristics defining jargons proper to specialized communication of any other field, such as medicine, biology or philosophy. Rarely has the need for a proper linguistic description for this discipline been taken into account, given its particularities.

García Rayego and Martínez Victorio (1991) made one of the most comprehensive approaches as to the characteristics of the economic disseminating language, it is an approach from the perspective of pedagogy based on the study of educational texts and its approach is reduced to texts in English.

When observing the language of informational texts specialized in economics and finance, the semantic features related to the use of terms from other areas of knowledge, in the form of metaphors, have been considered. In this sense, the studies conducted by Alice Stender (2015) about the health metaphors used in a corpus of texts of economic press specialized in German and Spanish are noteworthy.

Angel Arrese has devoted much of his research to general issues related to economic journalism and he repeatedly makes emphasis on language from different perspectives. First (2000), he recognizes the difficulty of disseminating this information, citing Keynes who warned that "the economy is a difficult and technical

issue, though no one believes it" and insists on the fact that "it is desirable that, through this disseminating activity, the economic culture of the population could be improved."

Also the style books of different national mainstream media such as El País, ABC and El Mundo daily refer to the language that should be used so that readers can approach the information and content and understand them more easily, although they do not seem to always be strictly observed.

4.3 Accessible language, a traditional recommendation

Bernard Kilgore, editor of the Wall Street Journal in the 1940s, recommended to his editors not to write thinking of bankers but of customers, who were much more numerous and would make it possible to keep the newspaper afloat, while the style book of the Economist (2015) maintains that its editors have to avoid expressions that prove to be too didactic to keep the number of subscribers.

In the main Spanish mainstream newspapers, style books generically mention language as a "facilitator". In the case of the newspaper El País, no attention is paid to linguistic issues, this issue is addressed from the perspective of grammatical correctness, and includes generic recommendations applicable to economic information but not specific for it.

The purpose in drafting any news is to communicate facts and ideas to a diverse audience. Therefore, the writing style should be clear, concise, precise, fluid and easily understandable to capture the reader's interest. (El País, 2014)

Journalists have to write in the style of journalists, not in the style of politicians, economists or lawyers. Journalists have an obligation to communicate technical or specialized information and make it accessible to the general public. The presence of unexplained erudite words reflects the inability of the writer to understand and convey a complex reality. The use of technicalities does not necessarily show vast knowledge but, in many cases, tremendous ignorance. (El País, 2014)

The stylebook of the newspaper El Mundo sums up the idea of clarity in the words of Montaigne: Simplicity in what regards the syntactic structure of the text is the recommendation of this manual:

The general rule is to use simple sentences, separated by a period or by a period, new paragraph. The subordinate clauses are the exception. We should also keep to a minimum the use of annotations between dashes or

parentheses. Every two sentences or, at most, three, a period, new paragraph will be placed.

(El Mundo, 1996)

The newspaper ABC devotes most of its extension to spelling and grammar correction that is required for the journalists of the newspaper and concentrates on three pages the recommendations about style in writing. As we have already seen in some others, clarity is recommended in the presentation, short but varied phrases, doing without paragraphs and parentheses and without making excessive use of the passive voice or denial.

Moreover, this manual requires the author to be precise when presenting information, fluidity and harmony in the text and it makes a clear reference to the vocabulary to be used, which it says "must be accessible to all readers."

These recommendations do not seem to be always followed by the editors specialized in this area and we often perceive a more structurally complex wording and a very high burden of specialized lexicon.

5. RESULTS

After the linguistic analysis, we have been developed tables of data enabling description of each of the aspects we have taken as categories to draw conclusions about the linguistic structure of information specialized in economics and finance and published in national mainstream media.

5.1. General characterization of the studied texts

| Number of texts | Total Number of words | Total number of sentences | Number of sentences | Number of words per sentenceSource |
|-----------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| 20 | 11576 | 346 | 682 | 33.45 |

Table 1: General characteristics of the sample.
self made.

Overall, the analyzed texts contain 11,576 words, divided into 346 phrases, considering as such those found between two pauses or periods. If we take coordinated and subordinate clauses as a reference, the total amounts to 682.

5.2 Syntactical characterization

According to the syntactic analysis carried out, the distribution of the structures used in the analyzed texts is as follows:

| Simple | Coordinated | Yuxtaposed | Subordinated |
|-------------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| 69 (10.11%) | 92 (13.50%) | 29 (4.25%) | 492 (72.14 %) |

Table 2: Syntactical features.

Source: self made.

Both in absolute and relative terms, the figures show the preference of the drafters for compound sentences, both coordinated and subordinated, instead than simple sentences.

5.3 Lexical-semantic characterization

The total of analyzed lexical words, ie those that have semantic content: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs is 4,450.

Lexical variety refers to those terms with a semantic value that can be found in the text. A text therefore will be richer but also more complex when this index sheds high data. In the case of this study, the average lexical variety of analyzed texts is 64%.

Of the total of analyzed words, 4,450 are words with a lexical content and, out of them, we studied those with one or more meanings of the field of specialization in economics and finance.

| Rep monosemic | Rep polysemic | Rep specialized names | numerical elements |
|---------------|---------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 528 (11.9%) | 411 (9.2%) | 186 (4.1%) | 269 (6%) |

Table 3: Lexical-semantic features.

Source: self made.

In summary, out of the total of words with meaning, about 12% are terms with a single meaning within the scope of economics, just over 9% are classified as

polysemous, ie, terms with several meanings but of which, at least one, the one used in the selected text, is limited to the studied field of specialization and there are more than 4% of proper names embedded in the area of specialization; organizations, experts, etc.

Finally, for every hundred analyzed words, six figures or numerical data are inserted.

As for the presence of monosemic terms used in general spoken language, the tendency is to use uncommon terms for all speakers, as is clear from the information in the Corpus of the Royal Academy. We take as reference the single elements because they show the evident tendency to use underused terms.

| Unique monosemic | frequency of appearance in the corpus of spoken language | | | |
|------------------|--|------------|------------|----------|
| | 0- 4 | 5- 49 | 50- 499 | 500 + |
| 308 (100%) | 147 (47.7%) | 90 (29.2%) | 66 (21.4%) | 5 (1.6%) |

Table 4: Frequency of occurrence of monosemic terms in the CREA.

Source: self made.

As can be seen, almost half of monosemic terms used in the analyzed articles are in the oral language with a frequency of less than five times, ie, it is a very infrequent use in the spoken language. If we add those terms appearing in the CREA with a frequency of less than 50 occasions, we can see that 3 out of every four monosemic terms appear in less than 50 occasions in the spoken language and are highly uncommon, therefore.

5.4 Morphological description

Regarding morphological distribution, we highlight the main categories:

| Nouns | Adjectives | Verbs | Adverbs |
|--------------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| 2148 (48.2%) | 694 (15.5%) | 1320 (29.6%) | 288 (6.4%) |

Table 5: Morphological characteristics.

Source: self made.

The proportion of nouns found in the selected texts is the highest - almost half of lexical words are nouns-, and there is a considerable difference on the percentage of verbs and adjectives.

6. CONCLUSIONS

- Within the scope of macroeconomic and financial information, in digital mainstream media, there is a tendency to use linguistic structures that can be complex when decrypting the message.
- With regard to the organization of the text, sentences are too long and this implies that the reader has to decode various statements and the relationships established between them, which does not favor the understanding of the text.
- The syntax used very clearly tends to composition and subordination as formulas to expand the information about a particular fact or event, which means more complexity for the message to be spread.
- The shortage of simple sentences, the percentage of which is clearly lower than that of compound sentences, also entails a reflection of how the editor perceives the information he elaborates; complex and incomprehensible in simple statements.
- As for the vocabulary used, there is a high tendency to use terms related to the area of specialization; one out of every four words used by the drafters has economic significance. This use of specialized terms contrasts with the proposal of their "translation" proposed by certain authors, such as Rosa del Rio, and it does not seem appropriate in the case of texts of generalist journals whose target audience are lay persons in that matter. In this case, the use of these terms may be appropriate in the case of media specialized in economics and finance, with an audience that has more advanced knowledge of the studied subject.
- In addition, the terms used are far away from the oral language which implies that they are very unfamiliar to the reader and their interest wanes due to the remoteness with which this information is transmitted.
- The use of the numerical elements, figures, percentages, etc. although necessary, is excessive, too. If we find that, on average, more than 6% of lexical words of a text are in this category, we can deduce that in an average-length article we find more than twenty figures. This, far from helping to understand the text, produces a feeling of excess in the data that does not favor its reading.
- The morphology used has the characteristics of descriptive texts rather than narrative ones. There is a tendency to preference for nouns and adjectives, as compared to verbs and adverbs. This predominance causes the texts to be too technical and even with a certain didactic trend, leaving aside the narrative aspect that is closer to the reader.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- In general, sentences must be simple and brief. Traditionally, in media such as radio that have a great transience and speed, it has been proposed that every idea be expressed in a single sentence separated from the next by a period or a period, new paragraph. This applies to specialized texts, since this type of information, tailored to a general media reader, requires use of less extensive sentences.
- The complexity of the message is given not only by the extent of propositions but by the need to relate the meanings of the different messages included in each of them. Therefore, the proposal to simplify the message goes through a reduction of complexity in favor of simple sentences.
- The expansion of meaning will be carried out by using, when deemed necessary, brief explanatory appositions serving to enter information that contextualizes the main proposition, without recourse to a higher level of composition of the sentence.
- Regarding the field of lexical semantics, it is considered that there may be two possibilities for better understanding of the message. First, the use of synonymy; provided that it is done in order to provide more understandable synonyms to the listener with terms proper to the colloquial level. Second, to opt for the repetition of the same term when it has been previously introduced, as a thread of continuity of meaning within the redacted information.
- It is necessary to focus on the reader, listener or TV viewer and, especially, when it comes to specialized media, to try to know how any of the people in our environment would perceive the information that we will tell, in order to adapt it to them without losing its thoroughness. In the case of specialized terms, it is recommended to re-read our own texts and see if, through processes such as synonymy, we can find ways to avoid such high terms such as those we currently employ. For this, the double reading of texts, using a companion of another informative section, can also be a good choice.
- Entering numerical elements that sometimes are unnecessary and only contribute to shed complexity on the message must be revised. Thus, we can dispense with those numerical elements that have been mentioned before in the information, for example, in the headline. Also, those data that can be deduced by the reader and are complementary are superfluous. For example; "The Spanish GDP grew 2.3% this quarter, representing two tenths more than the forecast by the Bank of Spain, which

placed the expected progress to be 2.1%." As can be seen, the last data is completely unnecessary and yet extremely difficult for the reader.

- With respect to morphology, the descriptive trend of macroeconomic data, statistics and reports becomes dry and away from everyday reality. Opting for structures with more narrative content, where you prefer to "count" than describe, using more frequency of verbal elements and less substantivizing.
- Do not forget something already recommended by Bloomberg in his style guide, the humanization of the economic information. Although, in the case of Bloomberg, we refer to a specialized environment, the authors of his stylebook insist on looking for human stories that support the economic news for the interest they arouse in the reader. This also applies to the texts of the mainstream media and, although not strictly being a linguistic matter, it is a major stylistic shift that can help provide proximity to such information.
- Finally, all these issues and others related to specialized texts published in mainstream media must have a predominant space in journalistic writing manuals. Currently, most of these manuals, see for example Cantavella and Serrano, dedicate brief annotations to specialized journalism and recommend avoiding superspecialization, but they do not provide recommendations on wording itself. There are also manuals, as in the case of that of Rosa del Río or of Arrese and Vara, intended to the training of editors expert on economics, but they do not stop too much on linguistic issues and focus mostly on the topic and on general stylistic features.

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