

The Use of Trigger Words in the Modern Political Post-Soviet Discourse of the Russian-Speaking and English-Speaking Press (Using the Example of Publications Kommersant, Izvestia, the Guardian, the Independent, the New York Times and the Washington Post)

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Abstract

In the article, the authors dwell on trigger words as special words (usually used by journalists intentionally) that evoke a certain associative chain and evaluation of the object in the reader's mind. In the theoretical part of the study, they consider different interpretations and definitions of this phenomenon by other researchers. In the practical part of the study, the authors analyzed 800 articles from Russian (Kommersant and Izvestia), British (The Guardian and The Independent) and American (The New York Times and The Washington Post) articles, where the authors of the articles use trigger words when covering modern political post-Soviet discourse. The authors analyze the trigger words used, identifying triggers-characters, trigger-symbols and trigger-significant phenomena. As results of the study, the authors of the article provide graphs that clearly show the ratio of certain trigger words in the media of different countries. The study was carried out within the framework of the initiative research work of the Theory and History of Journalism Department of the philological faculty of the RUDN University № 050737-2-000 "Research of media systems and the media industry in Russia and the world: a scientific and educational component".

Keywords: *Trigger Words, Modern Political Post-Soviet, Washington Post.*

Introduction

Media coverage of the event is a complex process, where it is important for journalists not only to be able to present facts, but also to have certain linguistic tools. Without this, their words will not be conveyed to the audience in the proper form. One of these tools is trigger words, since they conform to all the expressiveness requirements.

The term *trigger* came to linguistics from medicine and psychology. It has become popular in communication. Speech techniques that help to hold the audience's attention and maintain indirect communication are what researchers have been interested in for a long time. At the same time, in this area of research, a special place is occupied by techniques for shifting attention and subliminal suggestion of a particular thought to the audience. And ways to force the reader to think the way the author wants.

In English, lexeme *trigger* means "to make something begin to happen" (Cambridge Dictionary), and also has the meaning of "trigger signal or detonator". The word made its way to English from Dutch, where there were the noun *trekker* – "that which draws or pulls" and the verb *trekken* – "to pull".

Having entered the toolkit of language researchers, *trigger* (have already taken the form of a *speech trigger*), acquired a certain provocative character, became a tool deliberately aimed at evoking certain emotions in the audience, forcing it to perform certain actions. That is, in our opinion, the concept took on a meaning opposite to medicine one – a factor that can cause adverse effects in the body.

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The term *trigger word* was introduced into science by the American linguist John Grinder within the framework of neurolinguistic programming. According to his definition, trigger words can evoke certain experiences in our consciousness. Trigger word is a word that provokes a person to certain thoughts and actions. Usually these “provocations” relate to a person's previous life experience, they refer to a reader's background (perhaps not his personal one, but the background of his nation, and more often – even the whole of humanity). Thus, using this reference when describing some event, a journalist can create in the reader's mind a subconscious connection of this event with the past one that already has an assessment in society. And this “assessment” is transferred to a new event. Or, for example, a journalist can use trigger words that name important phenomena for the nation, due to which he touches on phenomena that are near and dear to the people.

Thus, with the help of such words it is possible to direct the reader's thoughts, giving him an impetus in the direction of thinking that the author of the article has chosen, and even giving him a certain attitude to the phenomenon being described. Now speech triggers are quite often used in covering political conflicts precisely because of this feature. In covering a crisis situation, they can be used for different purposes: both with the desire to remind the nation of the values it defends, and as an attempt to further escalate the conflict.

The post-Soviet political discourse is by its nature filled with contradictions, many of which emerged during its inception (i.e. the USSR collapse), some long before that. However, almost all contradictions and conflicts remain unresolved to this day. And their coverage in the media is still a pressing issue. And due to the acuteness of such discourse, journalists are forced to use various techniques to attract and distract the audience's attention. The use of trigger words in the conflict situation of the post-Soviet space will be considered in this study.

Literature Review

Despite the fact that triggers have recently appeared in linguistics and journalism (in comparison with other concepts), many researchers have already managed to examine them from different aspects. In our opinion, one of the most comprehensive studies of trigger words in mass communication belongs to Kurushkin S.V. (2017). He considers the use of trigger words in a socio-political context. Describing the action of trigger words, Kurushkin says that everyone in society has “his own model of value-political discourse”, which consists of semantic and interpretative cells based on his experience and the connections between them. “An individual forms a definition of each sign in his consciousness and when confronted with a polysemic sign, he is inclined to discard meanings that do not relate to his mental model”. In other words, triggers cause evaluative mental bonds between two objects in the minds of the audience. The researcher also considers trigger words in the author's text as a type of the manifestation of the journalist's own value system.

Researchers of triggers Ruzhentseva N.B., Koshkarova N.N., Chudinov A.P. (2020) emphasize that in psychology, a trigger is “any object, phenomenon, event or action that causes an emotional response. In this case, the cause of the reaction is not the stimulus itself, but the attitude to it. Triggers can be:

objects and events related to a past period of life or associated with a strong emotional experience;

words and phrases heard or said during a period of emotional shock or otherwise related to the personality;

smells and other sensory stimuli that also evoke memories”.

Kurushkin talks about trigger analysis. In his understanding, it is “a specific form of content analysis, which consists in identifying value triggers in media texts and analyzing them”. The researcher notes that this method consists of “unfolding” the chain of value associations (trigger analysis is an attempt by a researcher to act in two directions at once: on the one hand, to understand what the author was trying to convey and what reaction he expected, on the other hand, what reaction may ultimately follow or has already followed). In the context of political discourse (which is, in our case, conflict), Kurushkin notes that the introduction

of triggers is necessary to expand the boundaries of discourse “thanks to events that are not directly related to politics but can be interpreted in a political key”.

Zbrodina A.N. and Kopnina G.A. (2023) talk about “trigger decoding”. They understand it as “analysis of a holistic dialogue aimed at identifying meaningful statements and determining the expression that has the intention of causing certain experiences in the interlocutor, aimed at changing the value worldview and influencing his behavior”. They note that such analysis techniques include different types of analysis: conceptual (consideration of larger context), compositional, analysis of tone (to determine communicative intentions), linguoideological analysis (identification and interpretation of ideologemes) and emotive analysis.

Kurushkin also notes important features of the value-political trigger, including the tendency to repeat. “It is regularly encountered in the text, which contributes to its fixation in individual's consciousness and activation of the subsequent scenario”. And also, the limit of perception that occurs in the audience when faced with a trigger. It, as we have noted earlier, “pushes the individual to interpret a political event in a special way”. And finally, in this context, the author of the study notes the manipulative potential of the trigger, the ability to use it to distract attention from the problem.

Researchers of triggers Ruzhentseva N.B., Koshkarova N.N., Chudinov A.P. emphasize that in the political discourse, triggers have the following characteristics: the presence of an addresser and an addressee, the presence of negative-evaluative judgments that cause an acute reaction, have an axiological mode, etc.

Kurushkin also identifies the basis for the typology of triggers – the nature of the meaning. He identifies triggers-symbols (for example, the flag of a country), triggers-characters (politicians), geographical triggers (places), triggers-events, etc.

The researcher talks about meta-triggers, which are triggers-themes, both more general (science, politics, sports), and more specific, for example, a specific event.

Researchers Oleshkova A.M. and Batakov K.R. (2022) note another typology of triggers: depending on the intention, they distinguish opinion triggers, suggestion triggers, and reaction triggers. And as another basis for the typology – the genre and degree of aggression of the triggers.

Methodology

In our study, we have analyzed 800 materials from Russian newspapers *Izvestia* and *Kommersant*, British *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, and American *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* for the use of trigger words that could cause an emotional reaction in the audience. We used both content analysis in general and trigger analysis as a type of it (as an attempt to understand why the author included the trigger word in his text, what reaction he wanted to achieve, and what actually followed). The principle of selecting materials is their subject – the conflict in the post-Soviet space.

We also divided the research results by year. Our period included 5 years: from 2020 to 2024. Thus, we got five periods for each newspaper, in which we track the frequency of use of trigger words.

Discussion and Results

Based on the typology of trigger words in mass communication, given by Kurushkin, we will talk about triggers-characters, triggers-symbols and triggers-significant phenomena (which we identified during our research). By triggers-phenomena we mean the use of words with a strong connotative meaning, which causes an emotional reaction in the audience and becomes an impetus for the emergence of an associative chain. We also identified as trigger words those that are repeated as often as possible in a particular newspaper.

Trigger-persons and trigger-symbols demonstrate their potential in different rhetoric regarding countries in the media. Most often, this is manifested in the choice of even opposite triggers to form the image of countries. Sometimes, when forming the image of a country in the media, authors use trigger words, indicating in the same sentence what associative series they are pushing the reader towards.

For example, in the following excerpt from an American newspaper article, the author compares Russia's actions to the actions of the Nazis, using the trigger-symbol Nazis. By already providing the reader with an image for comparison, he seems to limit the reader's choice of associative series that the reader can form:

“Russia has launched thousands of cruise and ballistic missiles at peaceful cities (and 100 in just one of the recent daily attacks) — just as the Nazis did” (The Washington Post, 2022).

Also, for example, in the rhetoric directed towards Russia in the British press, there are words that are trigger words for a wide range of people, one might say, for almost all European countries. They are used in phrases regarding Russia in order to form a clear negative assessment of the country's actions in the audience by transferring the value judgment from generalized phenomena condemned in the world.

“Now regime seems bent on punitive destruction – of energy infrastructure, dwellings, historic sites, whole cities – and rape, torture and mass murder. This too is typical of abusers: domestic-violence homicides are often punishment for daring to leave” (The Guardian, 2023).

Here we have a very vivid example of contrasting images of triggers of two countries in one sentence. We can see a clear opposition, the author does not even give the reader the opportunity to build a comparative connection independently, he offers him a ready-made template for judgment.

“a prosperous country buttressed by American support makes an authoritarian country unviable in the long term” (The New York Times, 2021).

Thus, through the words triggers in the media, it is clearly visible what kind of rhetoric the publications adhere to in relation to countries.

Trigger symbols in the materials of three countries are completely different. Among them, there are those with a negative connotation, as well as positive ones, used to evoke a sense of unity and positive emotions.

For example, in the Russian press, swastika or a mention of Nazism becomes a negative trigger-symbol. These descriptions evoke a clear associative series in the Russian reader. One of the points of which is The Great Patriotic War, it has a special place in the minds of the Russian audience. Moreover, the word *Nazism* is quite frequently used in Russian newspapers (this can be seen from the graphs in the Results section).

The American press is characterized by such words are *freedom* and *free world*. These trigger-symbols are most often found in the materials.

Also, during the study, we have identified words that become trigger words due to their frequent repeat in the media. We singled them out into a separate category of triggers-significant phenomena, since they name significant objects.

According to the results of our study, the most used trigger word in the Western press was the word *war*. It is used most often throughout the entire study period. This word always refers to Russia's actions, it begins to be used even before the start of a special military operation, thus the media seem to escalate the situation, prepare readers for war. For example:

“This war on Europe’s edge is rapidly rolling westwards” (The Guardian, 2022).

This trigger word is also often complemented by others that reinforce the negative connotation, for example:

“...*the appetite for war*” (The Independent, 2022).

“...*daily drumbeat of war*” (The Independent, 2022).

Another “synonym” for Russia's actions is also often used in the press and becomes a trigger word in British and English publications – *invasion*. This trigger can be repeated dozens of times in one article, and, in our opinion, the issue is not that the author cannot find another synonym, but that he wants to emphasize once again that he considers Russia's actions to be an “invasion”.

“*Invaders*” (The Guardian, 2024).

“*Illegal invasion*” (The Independent, 2024).

The next most frequently used trigger word is *attack*. During our research, we noticed that all Russian actions in the British and American press are called attacks. This trigger word is used to emphasize the cruelty of Russian troops. For example:

“*But the attack constitutes the first Russian ground assault in the direction of Kharkiv in almost two years*” (The Independent, 2024).

Another frequently used word is *victim*. In Western media, on the one hand, journalists use it to show the suffering of the Ukrainian people, and on the other hand, to make negative descriptions of Russia even more vivid by contrast.

“*The EU's security and defence policy is too weak to match these security guarantees and its mutual defence clause, which offers aid and assistance to member states that are the victims of armed aggression, is untested*” (The Guardian, 2023)

For example, for this purpose, adverbs with a negative meaning are mentioned, for example, *angrily*:

“*Russia has angrily denied the charge*” (The Independent, 2022).

or a Russian diplomat “*angrily rejected*” (The Independent, 2022).

In addition, Western media use the trigger word *propaganda*, most often to demonize the Russian state system:

“*Russian propaganda is trying to sell us a story that all Russia supports this war*” (The Independent, 2024)

Another trigger word with a negative meaning is *kill*. It is used in the British and American press to emphasize the negative image of the opposing side's troops. At the same time, British and American media also use trigger words with a positive connotation to create a brighter emphasis on the suffering of the Ukrainian population and to strengthen the contrast with the negative triggers they use in relation to Russia. For example, *child/children*. *Children* become a trigger in materials because it is perceived by the audience as too personally things.

“*When an invasion launched in February last year, with women and children making up the majority of refugees*” (The Independent, 2023).

In the Russian press, we will also highlight the most frequently used trigger words. Among them are words derived from the word *Nazi*, since it has a very strong influence in Russian culture.

“*It was mined by nationalists at one time*” (Izvestia, 2024)

“*They were taken out from under the shelling that the Nazis are carrying out on civilians*” (Kommersant, 2024)

We will also note the word *intervention*, which is quite often used in the Russian press in relation to the actions of Western countries (in particular, America), which, in the opinion of Russian politicians, are trying to control Ukraine and interfere in its affairs.

“He spoke about the beginning of American interference in Ukrainian affairs since 2004” (Izvestia, 2023).

Also, the word *terrorist* is often found in the Russian press. Many actions of the Ukrainian side are called terrorist acts, often to enhance the negative effect, since the word terrorist already has a deliberately negative connotation.

“Apparently, such a number of victims among the civilian population was not enough for the terrorists” (Izvestia, 2024).

Also, among trigger words in the Russian press, we note the words with the meaning *humanitarian* and *peaceful*. Their authors often use them to emphasize the peaceful aspirations of Russian troops and volunteers, since the word *humanitarian* has a positive connotation in the minds of the audience.

“It is impossible to return to peaceful life” (Izvestia, 2024).

“Terrorist attacks against peaceful Russians” (Izvestia, 2024).

And another trigger that the Russian press uses is *security*. Following political leaders, journalists often use this word in their materials to remind what Russian troops are fighting for. In addition, in the minds of the audience, there is a strong connection between *security* and the understanding of *home*, and Russian media are actively positioning the ideogeme that the country is equal to home.

“Ensuring the safety of local residents” (Izvestia, 2023).

And like in the American and British press, the trigger word in Russian newspapers is the word *children*. It is mentioned in materials to activate in the minds of the audience a connection with their own children or the children who surround them.

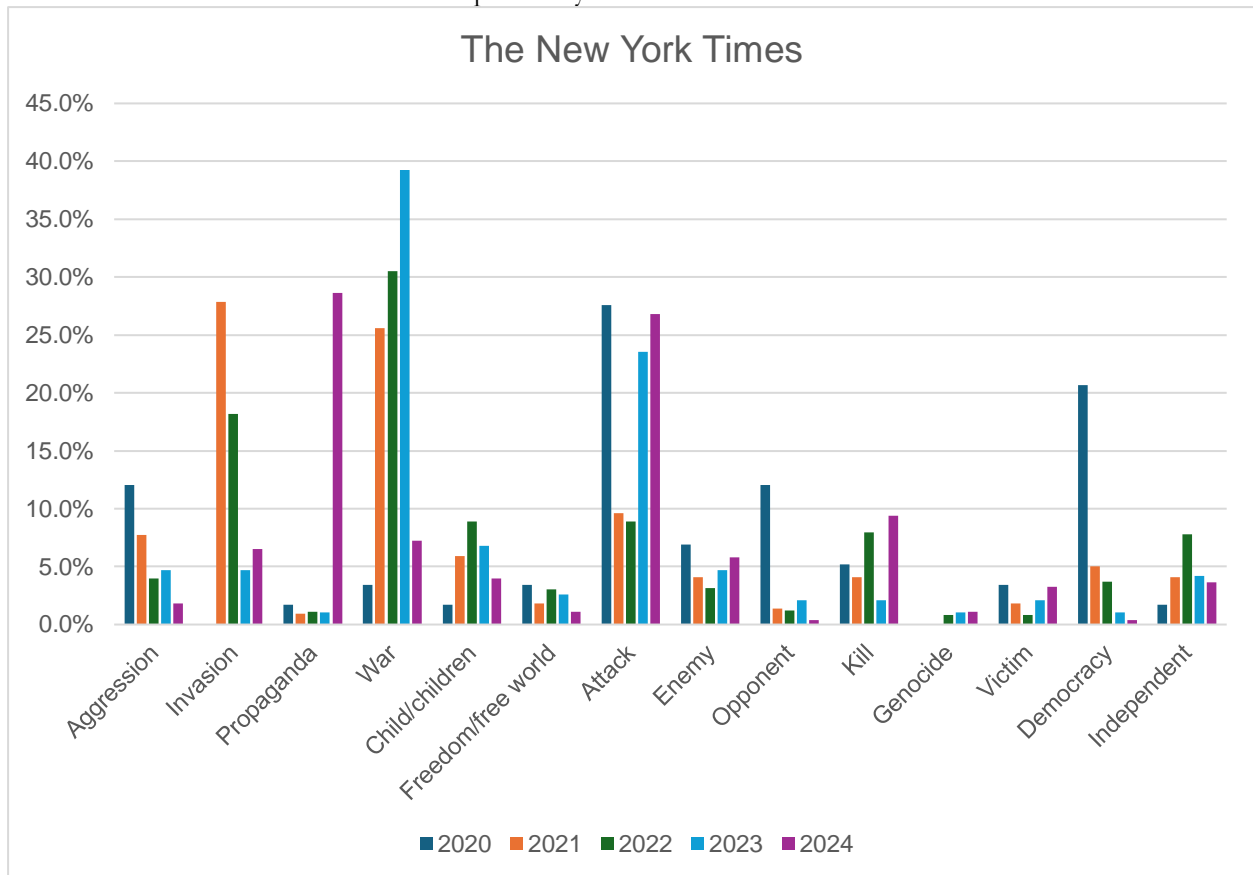
“The children were interested in how they could support the soldiers at the front and what contribution their native republic was making to the victory” (Izvestia, 2024).

“It is quite possible that the children will be abandoned” (Izvestia, 2024).

Results

For each newspaper, we counted the frequency of use of certain triggers-phenomena and symbols to see how the mood of the articles changed, and which words are most often used in the media. In addition, for each newspaper, we identified 1-2 separate trigger words, the constant use of which is characteristic

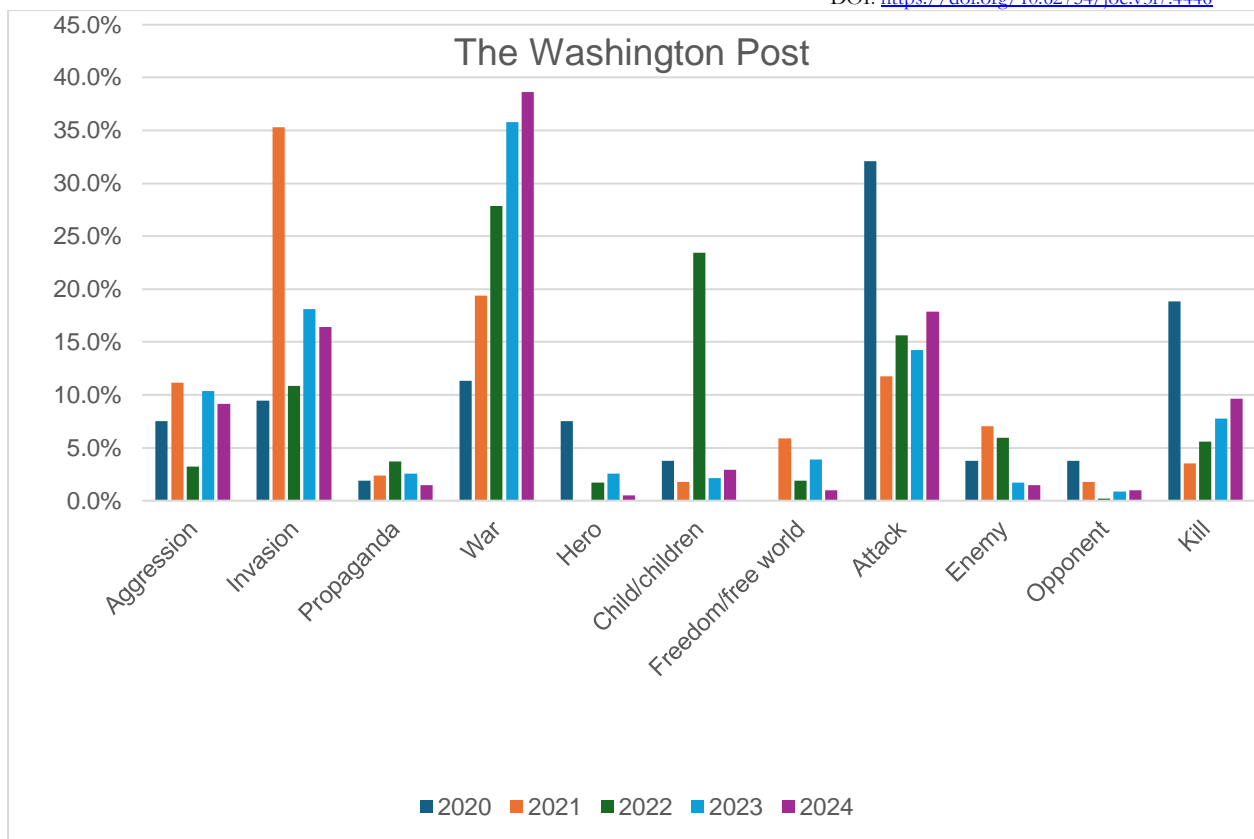
specifically for this media.



Graph 1.

In Graph 1 we can see the ratio of the use of trigger words in the American newspaper The New York Times. In 2020, The New York Times has the highest percentage of use of the word *democracy*, the authors of the articles focus on the actions of Russia. We would like to note that during this period, the percentage of use of the word *aggression* is high. The use of the word *attack* is the highest percentage in 2020 (27.6%), journalists cover issues of cyberattacks by Russian hackers. We would also like to draw attention to the fact that during this period, the most neutral word *opponent* is still frequently used (12.1%), in the following years this percentage decreases (2021–1.4%, 2022–1.2%, 2023 – 2.1%, 2024 – 0.4%). It is replaced by *enemy*, a word with a sharp negative connotation and associated with people from Russia. On the contrary, its use is growing, reaching 6.2% in 2024.

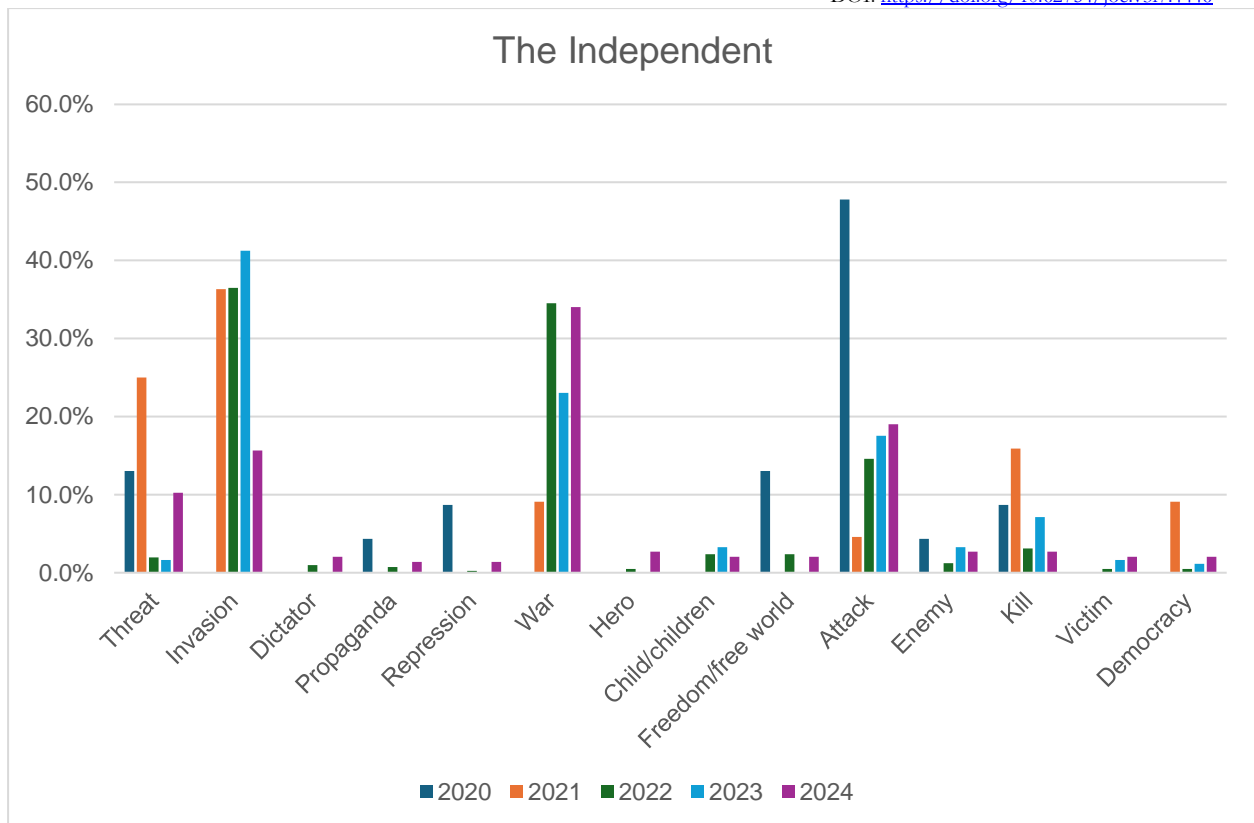
Also, the trigger word *invasion* stands out (27.9% in 2021), Western media are covering the “invasion” of the Russian Federation into the territory of Ukraine and even name specific dates. *Invasion* is replacing *aggression*; its number of uses is significantly reduced (from 12.1% to 1.9%). It should be noted that during this period the percentage of use of the word *war* also grows, long before the start of a Special military operation (which Western media call *war*) the media begin to use this trigger word, which undoubtedly affects the reader's perception, the media seem to “prepare” their readers for the “war” that might not have started. In 2022, the percentage of use of the word *invasion* decreases, the number of uses of the word *war* increases, which further contributes to the tension of the situation. The number of uses of the lexeme *kill* increases (in 2024 - up to 9.4%), newspaper choosing the sharpest possible words to accuse Russia of “atrocities”. We would like to note another feature that we noticed during the analysis; children are always the main victims of military action in Western newspapers. We can see this in Graph 1; in 2022, the use of the lexemes *child / children* increases sharply. In 2024, the most used trigger words in this The New York Times remain *attack* (26.8%), and *propaganda* is added (28.6%).



Graph 2

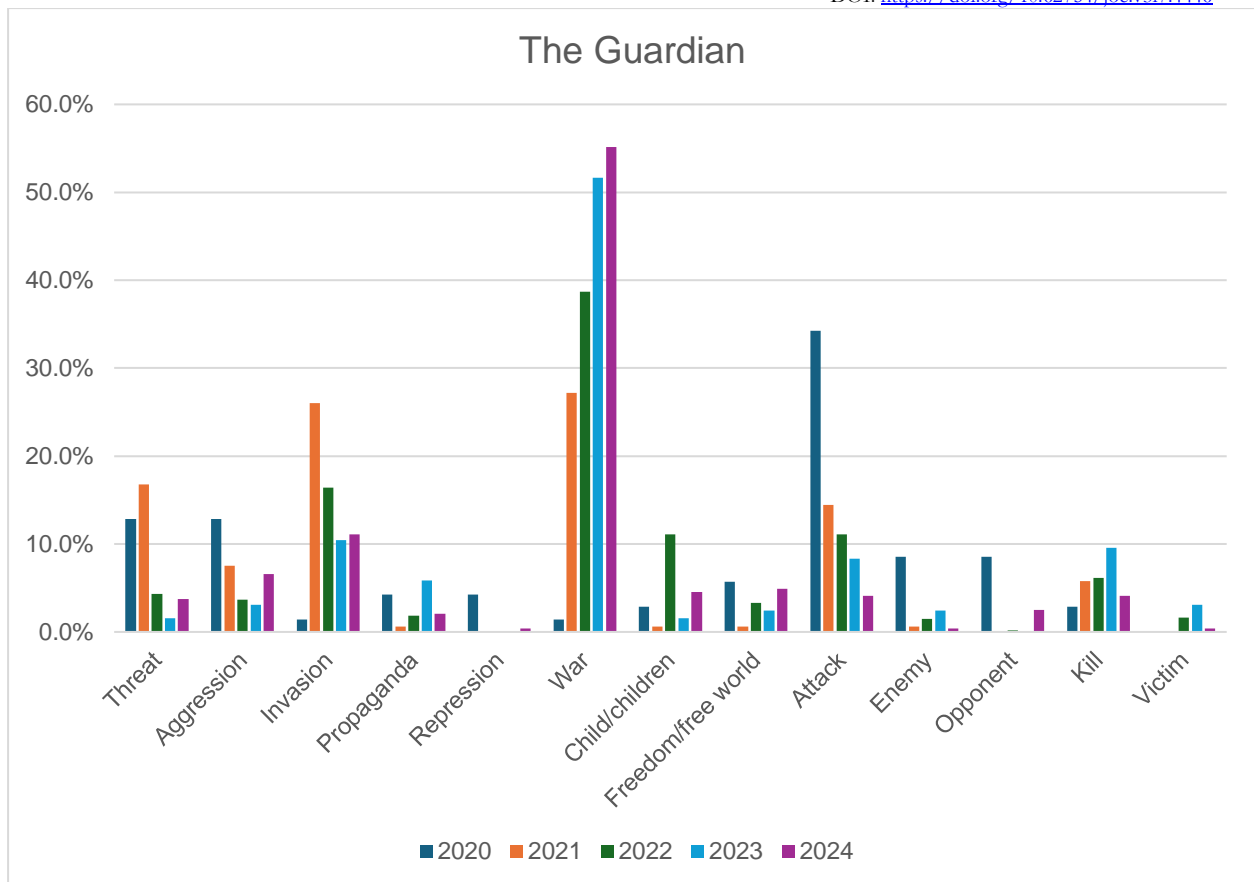
The American newspaper The Washington Post (Graph 2) in 2020 is characterized by the use of the words *attack* (32.1%) and *kill* (18.9%), through these trigger words the journalists show Russia as an aggressor.

We have also noted that during this period, the frequency of use of the word *aggression* begins to increase, but its peak occurs in 2021 (11.2%), when the media begins to talk about “Russia's invasion of Ukraine”. In 2021, there is a rapid increase in the frequency of use of the trigger word *invasion* (30.9%), then the use of this trigger word decreases. In 2022, there is a noticeable jump in the frequency of using lexemes *child/children* (from 3.8% in 2020 to 23.4% in 2022). During 2024, this newspaper is characterized by the use of the lexemes *war* (38.6%), *invasion* (16.4%) and *attack* (17.9%).



Graph 3

The British newspaper The Independent (Graph 3) frequently uses the trigger word *invasion* in 2021 (36.4%). We would like to note the high frequency of use of the word *threat* (in 2020 – 13%, in 2024 – 10.2%), this is typical for this newspaper, the percentage of its use increases sharply in 2021. Also, like American newspapers, the frequency of use of the lexeme *kill* increases in The Independent (up to 15.9% in 2021). During 2022-2023, we would like to note a sharp jump in the use of the lexeme *war* (up to 34.5%). In 2024, we can see the most frequent use of the trigger words *war* (34%), *attack* (19%), *invasion* (15.6%) and *threat* (10.2%).

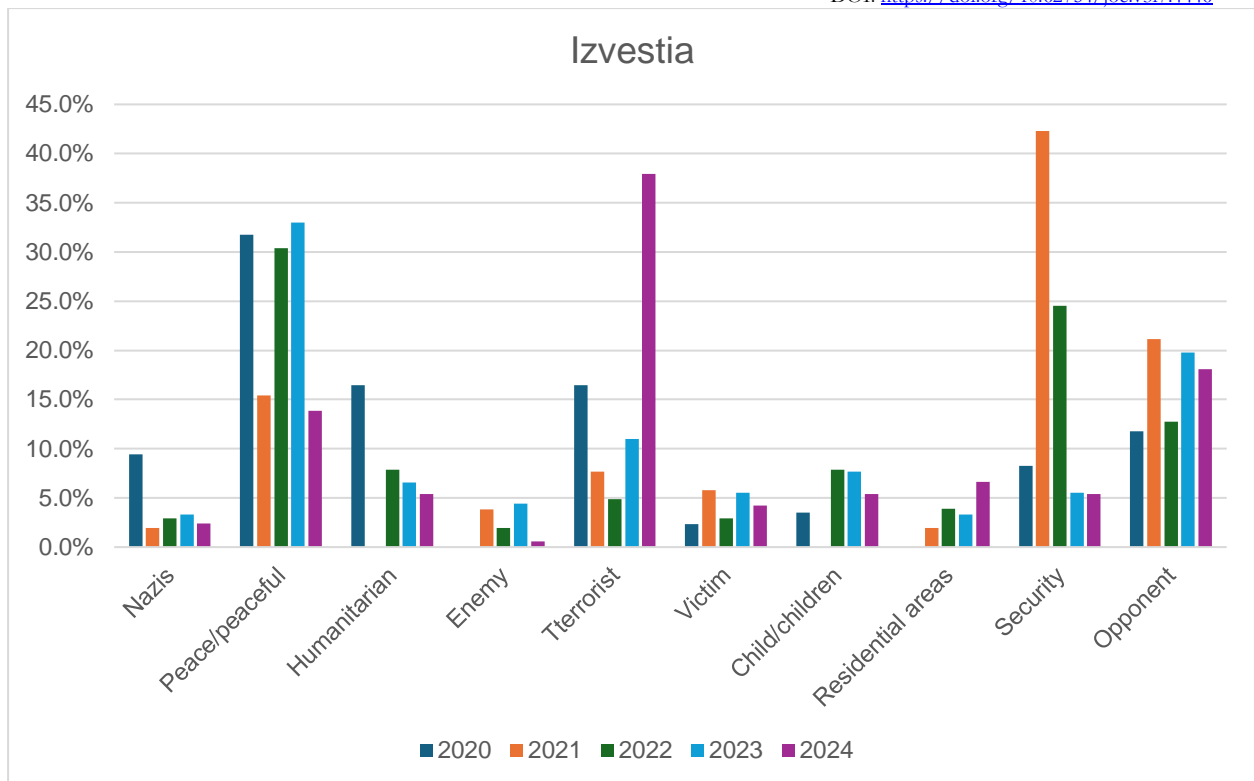


Graph 4

Another British newspaper, The Guardian, (Graph 4) in 2020 also typically uses trigger words *attack* (34.3%) and *threat* (12.9%). The trigger lexeme *aggression* also appears (in 2020 - 12.9%), this is how Western media called Russia's actions. In 2021, there is an increase of using the words *threat* (16.8%), *invasion* (26%), and the trigger *kill* (5.8%).

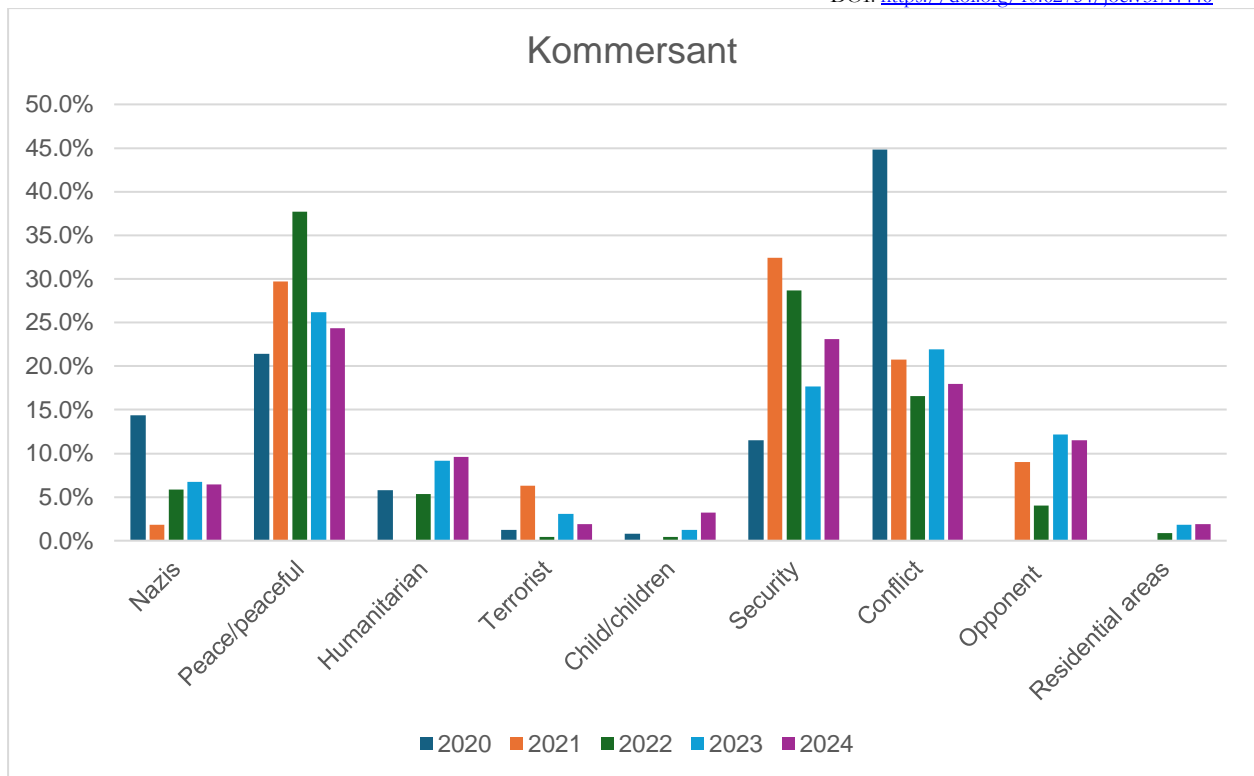
In 2024, The Guardian is characterized by the use of the trigger word *war* (55.1%), as well as *invasion* (11.1%), *threat* (3.7%) and *aggression* (6.6%).

Among Russian newspapers we also conducted a trigger analysis of the articles and identified some patterns in the use of certain lexemes in a particular publication.



Graph 5

The Russian newspaper Izvestia (Graph 5) in 2020 is characterized by the frequent use of the lexemes *peace* (31.8%), during this period Russia talks a lot about peace agreements, about the settlement of the situation in Donbass. The percentage of use of the trigger *terrorist* is also high (16.5%), Russian media during this period talk about the threats of terrorist attacks, in 2024 the share of trigger words with this meaning grows (up to 38%), since in connection with the attacks from Ukraine, the Russian authorities recognize them as terrorist. The percentage of use of the lexeme with a sharp negative connotation *Nazis* (in 2020 - 9.4%) in relation to Ukrainian national formations is quite high, it can be considered as a trigger word, since it refers to the events of the Second World War. We would like to dwell on that Izvestia is characterized by a significant prevalence of the neutral word *opponent* throughout the entire period of our research (2020–11.8%, 2021–21.2%, 2022–12.7%, 2023–19.8%, 2024–18.1%). Also in 2022, there is a jump in the use of the word *security* (up to 24.5%), which indicates that it is an important aspect for Russian media. In 2024, the most frequently used trigger word is *terrorist*, as well as the rather neutral word *opponent* and lexemes with the meaning “*peaceful*” (13.9%).



Graph 6

The Russian newspaper *Kommersant* (Graph 6) in 2020 is characterized by the frequent use of the lexeme *conflict* (44.9%), although neutral, but implying a tough confrontation and intransigence. In 2024, the use of this trigger word decreases slightly – to 17.9%. The newspaper often uses the lexeme *Nazis* (in 2020 - 14.4%, in 2024 - 6.4%), the publication also focuses on a peaceful settlement (the lexeme *peaceful* in 2020 - 21.4%, in 2024 - 24.4%, the number of mentions of the possibility of a peaceful settlement is only growing). In 2021, we would like to note a sharp increase in the use of the word *security* (32.4%), as well as an increase in the frequency of use of the lexeme *terrorist* (6.3%). In addition, there is a gradual increase in the frequency of use of the word *opponent* (up to 11.5% in 2024). In 2024, the most frequently used trigger words in the *Kommersant* edition are: lexemes meaning “peace” (24.4%), *security* (23.1%), *conflict* (17.9%), *opponent* (11.5%).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to note that trigger words are effective tools for influencing the media audience, which journalists also use when covering political discourse (in particular, conflict situations).

Speech triggers are words that are provocative. They touch upon experiences in the reader's mind, creating references to his past, which already has a clear evaluative characteristic. This makes it possible to transfer the assessment of a well-known event to the one being discussed. In this way, the author of the media text can “control” the reader's thoughts.

Modern media use trigger words when covering crisis situations; in the research, the authors were able to identify the most frequent of them. Most often, the media use images of personalities (in political communication – politicians) as triggers. Their images are not simply formed through trigger words, but they themselves become triggers that already have a certain evaluative characteristic, the nature of which depends on the audience to which the media text is addressed. The authors also identified triggers-symbols and triggers-significant phenomena. The study found that the following trigger words are characteristic of the American newspaper *The New York Times*: *war*, *attack*, *invasion*, *democracy* and *aggression*. For *The*

Washington Post – *war, invasion, child/children, kill*. For the British newspaper The Independent – *invasion, war, attack*, for The Guardian – *war, attack, invasion*. For the Russian newspapers Investia – *terrorists, security, enemy*. For the Kommersant – *Nazis, conflict, security, peaceful settlement, enemy*.

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