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HERBERT VON HALEM VERLAG

Research Paper

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On common words and uncommon things

An analysis of the comprehensibility of German television news

***Abstract*: How easy is TV news to understand? This paper analyzes thirty news items broadcast between November 2022 and December 2022. The items and presenting analyzed come from the following news programs: The 8 p.m. edition of *tagesschau* on ARD, *Sat.1 Abendnachrichten* (renamed *:newstime* in June 2023 (cf. WEIS 2023)), RTL *Aktuell*, *logo!* on the KiKa children's channel and *heute* at 7 p.m. on ZDF. As well as investigating the programs using three models of comprehensibility, the speaking rate and other language parameters were also analyzed and compared with one another in detail. The analyses show *logo!* and *heute* to be the two easiest programs to understand, followed by *Sat.1 Nachrichten* and RTL *Aktuell*. *tagesschau* was the most difficult to understand on average within the period observed.**

This paper is based on an unpublished master's thesis in the Language and Communication program at TU Berlin.

Keywords: TV news, news reception, news language, comprehensibility, anchorage

Translation: Sophie Costella

Introduction

News keeps people up to date with the latest developments in the knowledge and information society. Citizens can only take full part in political debate if they have access to a diverse range of information.

According to the online survey ARD/ZDF Mass Communication Trends [Massenkommunikation Trends] 2023, 79% of the population consume linear television at least once a week (ARD/ZDF-FORSCHUNGSKOMMISSION 2023). Given its large reach, it can safely be assumed that news has an influence on language use.

The question of how easy television news in Germany is to understand has long been the subject of discussion. Various articles have looked at the language of news in recent years, some of them taking a critical view. »TV news incomprehensible?« wrote *Der Spiegel* as far back as 1976, referencing an investigation by the University of Tübingen (DER SPIEGEL 1976). »Viewers no longer understand *tagesschau*,« wrote *Welt* in 2007 (WELT 2007). »Language in *tagesschau*. The incomprehensible ritual« was a title in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2008 (STOLZENBERG 2008). *Die Zeit* wrote in 2023: »*tagesschau* is a very poor program, that is why it needs to be much longer,« criticizing it for a high information density and incomprehensible language (MAYR 2023).

Academic publications have also investigated the language of news. In 1971, linguist and media studies expert Straßner analyzed the language structures of the news on five radio channels (Bayerischer Rundfunk, Deutschlandfunk, Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Südwestfunk and Deutschlandsender on DDR-Rundfunk), finding that »The radio news in its current [1971] linguistic form as developed historically does not do justice to its role of informing a broad public on the latest issues« (BÖHM et al. 1972: 169). News should not only reach the »upper and middle classes,« but also be accessible to the ›lower classes‹ in colloquial or everyday language (BÖHM et al. 1972: 170). In his 1980 study, Werner Früh found that »readers who have to mobilize all their cognitive abilities just to recognize the fundamental context« do not have any energy left to help them understand the text (Früh 1980: 216). He used this finding as a basis for three categories that determine how much of news is remembered: comprehensible – incomprehensible, interesting – uninteresting, difficult – easy. A text containing numerous specialist terms is thus highly likely to be poorly understood (cf. FRÜH 1980: 216ff.).

To this day, the debate continues over how easy news is to understand and what makes comprehensibility. A survey conducted in Germany in 2003 showed that 88% of viewers do not understand every word of *tagesschau* (cf. PRESSEPORTAL.DE 2003). In a similar survey published in 2007 by TNS Emnid on behalf of the television magazine *TV Digital*:, the respondents did know the terms from *tagesschau* presented to them, but were unable to explain them in any more detail (cf. PRESSEPORTAL.DE 2007). Among other findings, Steffen-Peter Ballstaedt found that deeper understanding comes not from a text being as comprehensible as possible, but is the result of motivation and cognitive resources on the part of the recipient. Because the recipient side cannot be influenced by those creating the news, however, they must pay particular attention to ensuring that texts are consistent, clearly structured, and easy to understand right away (cf. BALLSTAEDT

2019: 162f.). A year later, Alexandra Hofstätter investigated the language level of *tagesschau*, *heute*, RTL *Aktuell*, *Sat.1 Nachrichten* and RTL II *News*. She found that the language level of *heute* is between that of *tagesschau* and that of the news programs on Sat.1 and RTL. The commercial broadcasters often used affective language techniques and intensifiers, and were more likely to design their texts in a storytelling style (cf. HOFSTÄTTER 2020: CCLXXXIX).

News editorial offices are aware of the need to provide linguistic comprehensibility, and regularly address and discuss it in the final revision of news items and presenting. However, few editorial offices have standardized or scientific processes for evaluating comprehensibility. Mitri Sirin, presenter of the program *heute*, also gives this impression in an interview conducted in advance for this paper:

> »All I see is, the entire system is under extreme stress, for a huge range of reasons, and the comprehensibility of news is right at the bottom of the list, I think. [Comprehensibility] plays a less important role here, and that is wrong actually, because you first have to fulfill your real objective or target mandate – namely to deliver truly comprehensible news.« (interviewed on November 20, 2022)

Investigations show that understanding media messages such as news is an active action. The recipient must engage with the topic and interact with the media statement in order for a mental action model to be formed (cf. BONFADELLI/FRIEMEL 2017: 112). As well as features of the text, interpretation of spoken texts must not neglect prosodic features. The speakers can positively influence the reception of information by arranging the intonation and pauses in such a way that syntactic limits and associated information are marked and made clear. Accentuation and varying the speaking rate can help to differentiate new information from less important earlier information. A lively variation between moderately short and moderately long sentences appears ideal (cf. SCHNEIDER 2001: 141). Texts that are written to be listened to should be formulated differently from those for reading (cf. DÜRSCHEID/SENDLMEIER 2005: 1f.): They need to be written in such a way that they are understood immediately. After all, unlike when reading a text, the audience cannot easily listen to the sentence again. In addition, the presenters simply continue speaking – viewers cannot pause to think about what has been said (cf. LA ROCHE 2017: 12f.).

Another factor that makes a text easier to understand is semantic redundancy – repeating text statements, new information and terms with different wording. However, this only applies if the overarching message is not lost (cf. MAASS/RINK 2018: 131) Comprehensibility can also be boosted by creating coherence relations between sentences and clauses, i.e., linking cause and effect, problem and solution (cf. MAASS/RINK 2018: 134). Referential and causal relations allow texts to be understood more quickly and new information retained more easily.

Yet there is not a single, uniform optimum that works for all recipients. After all, how easy a text is to understand always depends on the various factors of individuals, such as previous knowledge and cognitive resources. Sensitivity for designing comprehensible texts – language awareness – should be a matter of course in news editorial offices and never neglected (MAASS/RINK 2018: 155).

Conversely, there are numerous factors that can make understanding more difficult. Poorly formulated item and presenting texts combined with inappropriate or confusing images impair understanding, as do learning difficulties, poor reading, poor German skills, acoustic hearing difficulties, dementia, and other impairments (cf. KÖHLER 2020: 300). That is why simplified versions of language exist: *Leichte Sprache* [easy language] and *Einfache Sprache* [simple language]. *Leichte Sprache* has the lowest level of difficulty and is intended predominantly for people with learning difficulties, dementia, intellectual disabilities, or poor knowledge of German (cf. GFDS 2022; KLEIN 2024). Texts in *Leichte Sprache* use simple and descriptive words; specialist and foreign words are used rarely and explained where necessary. Rare terms are repeated, synonyms and uncommon abbreviations avoided. The nominal form is avoided and the active form preferred to the passive form; positive formulations replace negations (cf. BUNDESARBEITSMINISTERIUM 2018: 32). Sentences consist of four to six words and contain just a single statement, such as »Peter is well« (cf. KLEIN 2024). *Einfache Sprache* is intended for everyone, but especially for people with more cognitive resources or better knowledge of German. It uses a larger permissible vocabulary and allows more complex sentences that may contain more than one statement, such as »Peter is well because he was able to sleep in« (cf. GFDS 2022; cf. KLEIN 2024).

There are various legal standards regarding accessibility for people with impairments. The State Media Treaty stipulates that public service broadcasters must constantly reassess their accessible services (cf. MEDIENSTAATSVERTRAG 2020, § 7 (1); STEIN 2021: 9). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities specifies in Article 21, Paragraph d) that signatory states must »[encourage] the mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities« (UN-Behindertenrechtskonvention 2008). Approximating this requirement, Deutschlandfunk for example provides the format *Nachrichtenleicht* [simple news] (cf. NACHRICHTENLEICHT.DE 2024). ARD has broadcast a version of *tagesschau* in *Einfache Sprache* since June 2024. In addition, the ARD-Mediathek offers the option to show subtitles, while selected formats, including *tagesschau*, are available with signing. The ProSiebenSat.1 Group offers selected programs with subtitles, signing, or audio description, and in *Leichte Sprache* (cf. BARRIEREFREIHEIT IN SAT.1 2022). ZDF also provides content with subtitles and signing. In addition, ZDF and ARD offer the

sound service *Klare Sprache*, in which an audio track is provided with increased acoustic language comprehensibility (cf. BARRIEREFREIE ANGEBOTE ZDF 2024). RTL offers some programs with subtitles or audio description (cf. RTL GROUP 2023).

Method

This paper looks at the question: How easy to understand is the content of selected German evening television news programs? The following sub-questions were also examined:

- To what extent do various parameters in text composition affect the comprehensibility of the texts?
- How easy to understand are the selected news items and presenting in comparison?
- How do the programs analyzed differ from one another linguistically?

Linguistic analyses and three text comprehensibility models were used to determine which factors create comprehensibility.

The empirical and qualitative research for this paper is based on 30 news items broadcast between November 11, 2022 and December 11, 2022. When selecting the items for analysis, care was taken to ensure that they were composed by different reporters and presented by different presenters as far as possible. The programs were selected to be similar in four aspects: broadcast time, format, program length, and content standard. The following news programs were selected:

- *logo!* at 7:50 p.m. on KiKA
- RTL *Aktuell* at 6:45 p.m. on RTL
- *Sat.1 Nachrichten* at 7:55 p.m. on Sat.1
- *tagesschau* at 8:00 p.m. on ARD
- *heute* at 7:00 p.m. on ZDF

The following six topics were covered on all the programs and therefore selected for the analysis:

- News item 1: Possible removal of the quarantine mandate for Covid-19, November 11, 2022
- News item 2: Conclusion of the climate conference in Sharm El Sheikh, November 18, 2022 (exception: *logo!*, November 17, 2022)
- News item 3: Earthquake in Indonesia, November 21, 2022
- News item 4: Oliver Bierhoff leaves DFB, December 6, 2022
- News item 5: Razzia: Reichsbürger plan to overthrow government, December 7, 2022
- News item 6: Practice alarm – national warning day, December 8, 2022

All transcribed texts were copied four times for the following analyses:

1. The first copy of the transcripts was used to record the speaking rate. To do this, all numbers that arose in the items and presenting were written out and divided into syllables.
2. The second copy was used to calculate the comprehensibility index. All direct quotes recorded in interviews with passers-by, eye-witnesses and conference visitors were removed. Because everyday language frequently uses long and incomplete sentences, their language could appear incomprehensible to comprehensibility calculation programs. Direct quotes from interviews with politicians were also removed on the grounds that they may have deliberately formulated their speeches and statements to be difficult to understand. Interviews with correspondents and prerecorded statements from reporters, on the other hand, were retained unedited in the text for analysis, because they were formulated by trained deskmen and generally aim to convey a topic in a comprehensible way.
3. The third copy was used to determine the average word length in syllables, in order to calculate the Flesch reading ease index. To do this, like for the second copy, the direct quotes not written by the editorial office were removed. The text was then divided into syllables. Again, all figures were translated into words.
4. The fourth copy does not contain any direct quotes not written by the editorial office, either. The word class as per the Stuttgart-Tübingen Tagset was added to all words by the TagAnt software. The tagged version of the text is used to find adjectives or participial constructions, for example.
5. Finally, the original transcription without amendments made it possible to count the words and record the average sentence length, which could then be used as a basis for calculating the Flesch reading ease index.

The Flesch reading ease index was calculated for each news item, including presenting. It uses the average sentence length (ASL) in words and the average number of syllables per word (ASW) to estimate the readability and comprehensibility of a text. The result is on a scale from 0 to 100. The higher the result, the easier the text is to understand (cf. FLESCH-INDEX.DE 2023). The Flesch reading ease index was calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Flesch reading ease index} = 180 - \text{ASL} - (58.5 \times \text{ASW})$$

The Hamburg Model of Comprehensibility and the Hohenheim Comprehensibility Index (HIX) were calculated based on the second copy of the transcribed text (without direct quotes). The online program Wortliga was used for analysis in line with the Hamburg Model of Comprehensibility. The more points a text achieves, up to a maximum of 100, the easier it is to understand. Texts with 70 points or more fulfill the criteria for *Leichte Sprache*. Scores of less than 30 denote

a text that is difficult to understand (cf. wortliga.de 2023). The Hohenheim Comprehensibility Index was determined using the web tool TextLab and brings together the Flesch reading ease index, the first new Vienna formula [Wiener Sachtext-Formel], the SMOG index,[1] and the LIX (readability index). A value of 20 on the HIX scale represents a text that is easy to understand (HOHENHEIM 2022). Online text was selected as the reference text type in TextLab, as this is the most similar to a news text of the four text types provided. The target HIX value for an online text is 16. Furthermore, TextLab also analyzes other text features, such as sentences in the passive, sentences in nominal style, word and sentence lengths, the percentage of long words and sentences, foreign words, abstract and rare words, lexical density, and word frequency (cf. KLARTEXT-SOFTWARE 2022).

The programs AntConc and TagAnt were used, among other functions, for linguistic analysis and concordance analysis. The second copy of the news transcripts was used for all analyses in TagAnt and AntConc.

Results of the analyses

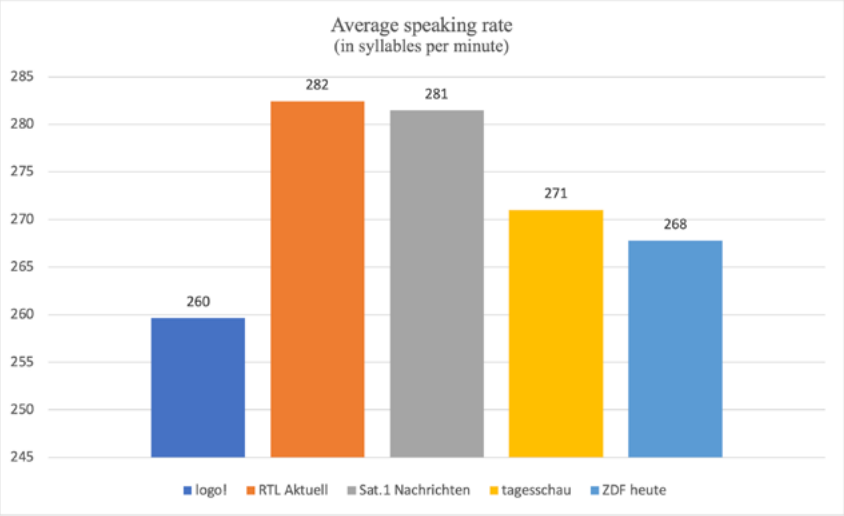
All in all, *logo!* worked with graphics more frequently in its items and presenting than any other program in this study. *tagesschau* was the only program to use no graphics or maps in the news analyzed. RTL *Aktuell*, *heute* and *Sat.1 Nachrichten* repeatedly used live interviews; *tagesschau* rarely did so.

Speaking rate:

Figure 1 shows clear differences between the programs. *logo!* has the slowest speaking rate, at 260 syllables per minute. The programs on the commercial broadcasters have the fastest speaking rate – RTL *Aktuell* with 282 syllables per minute and *Sat.1 Nachrichten* with 281 syllables per minute.

1 It is not entirely clear what the acronym stands for (cf. Scott 2023).

Figure 1
Average speaking rate

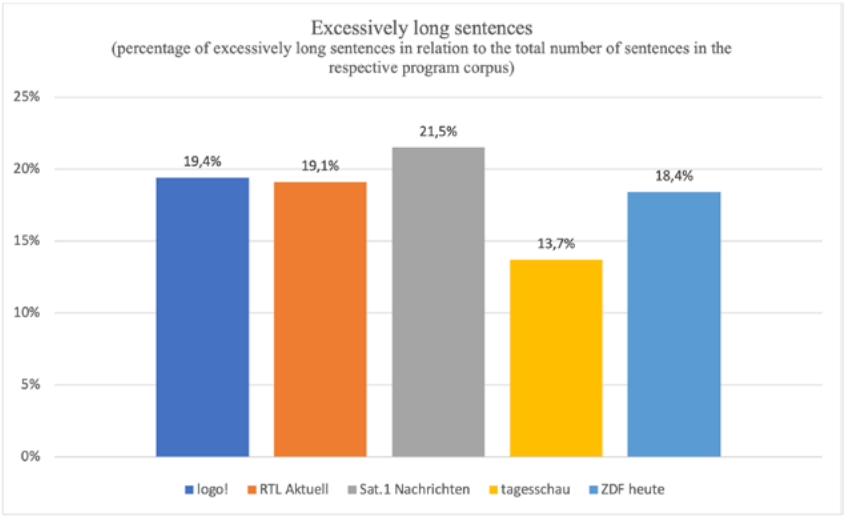


Source: author's own

Sentence length:

Long sentences, a large number of subordinate clauses, and long lists can make an item difficult to understand (cf. Klartext-Software 2022). TextLab determines the percentage of excessively long sentences in the corpus under analysis. In HIX, sentences with more than 20 words are considered excessively long sentences. Figure 2 shows the percentage of sentences with more than 20 words. Although *tagesschau* has the fewest excessively long sentences, it has the highest average number of words per sentence (Fig. 3). This means that *tagesschau* uses many long but few excessively long sentences.

Figure 2
Excessively long sentences

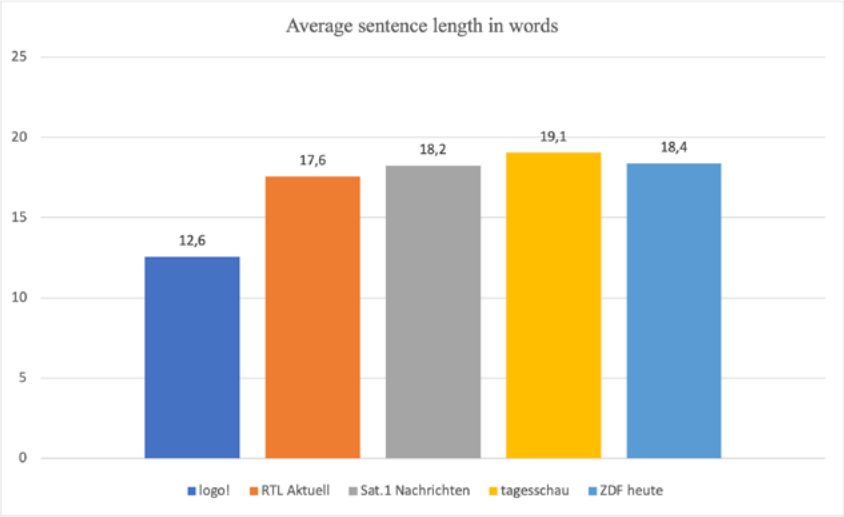


Source: author's own

Adjectives:

Attributive, adverbial and predicative adjectives are relevant indicators of comprehensibility. Excessive adjectives can overload a text with subjective information and block out the important content. Adjectives only add to the sense of a text when they are used to differentiate or actually increase the expressive value

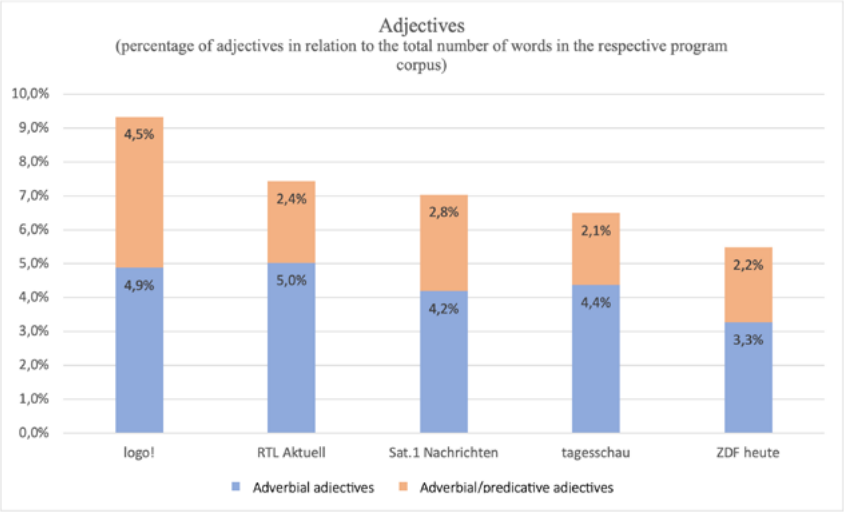
Figure 3
Average sentence length in words



Source: author's own

RTL Aktuell has the highest percentage of attributive adjectives, at 5.0% (Fig. 5). The corpus contains the following examples: »far-reaching decisions,« »high risk,« »strict mask mandate,« and »severe winter wave.« When it comes to adverbial and predicative adjectives, *RTL Aktuell* is in the center of the field with 2.4%. The highest proportion of adjectives is seen on *logo!*. This result supports the previous observation that *logo!* tends to use more emotional, everyday, and child-friendly language: »good example,« »severe consequences,« »hard hit,« and »to be honest.« *Sat.1 Nachrichten* also uses a high percentage of adjectives, such as »transfer fee in the millions,« »high level of armament,« »big name,« and »stayed silent.« Within the framework analyzed, *heute* used the three adjective forms described more sparingly: »absolutely everything,« »early end,« and »call absurd.« *tagesschau* uses the lowest percentage of adverbial and predicative adjectives of all the programs: »to be completely rejected,« »largely successful,« and »wide ranging.«

Figure 4
Adjectives



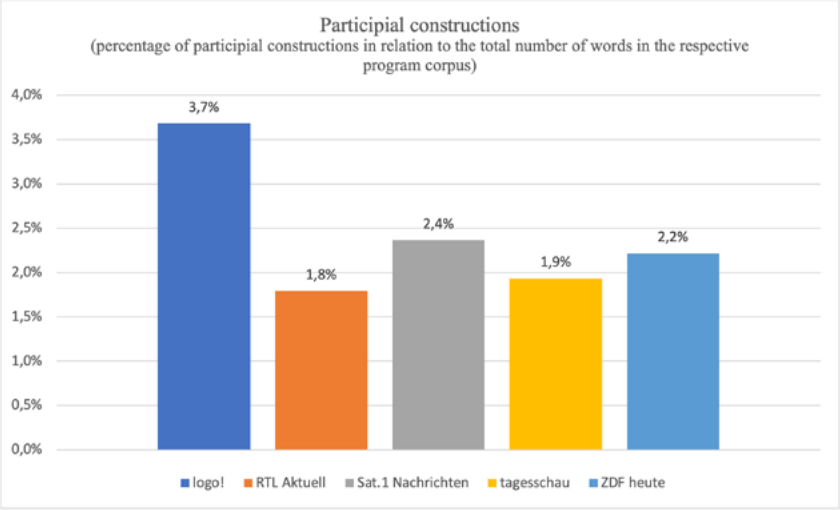
Source: author's own

Participial constructions:

Participial constructions are part of everyday language, making texts more varied. But they can also increase linguistic complexity.

logo! contains the most participial constructions of all the programs, and *RTL Aktuell* the fewest (Fig. 5). *tagesschau* contains only a few more. Examples from the *logo!* programs include: »excused,« »missed,« and »died.« *Sat.1 Nachrichten* follows with participial constructions like »have been,« »announced,« and »prepared.«

Figure 5
Participial constructions



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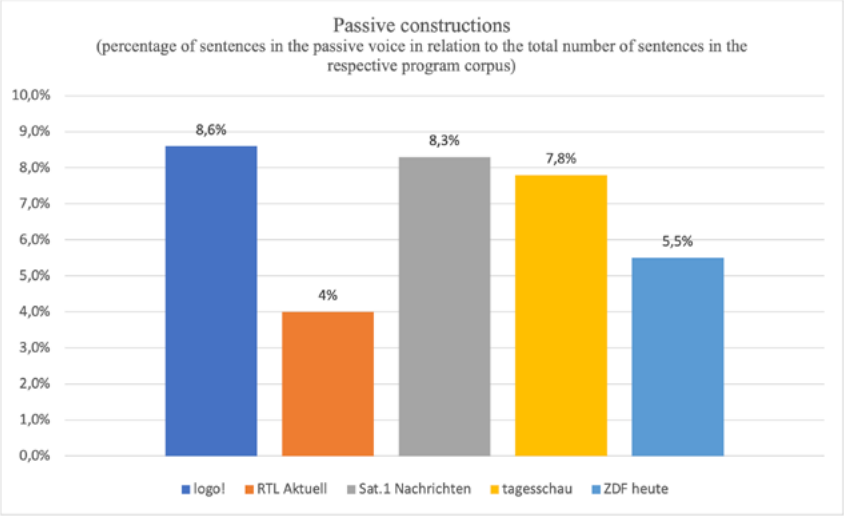
Passive constructions:

Some passive constructions hide who the person behind the action is. They have an abstract, distanced effect. It is only appropriate to use the passive where something is suffered and where the person behind the action is to remain hidden. TextLab specifies an upper limit of 10% passive constructions per text if an online text is to be comprehensible. All the programs analyzed are under this 10% maximum.

Figure 6
Passive constructions



Source: author's own

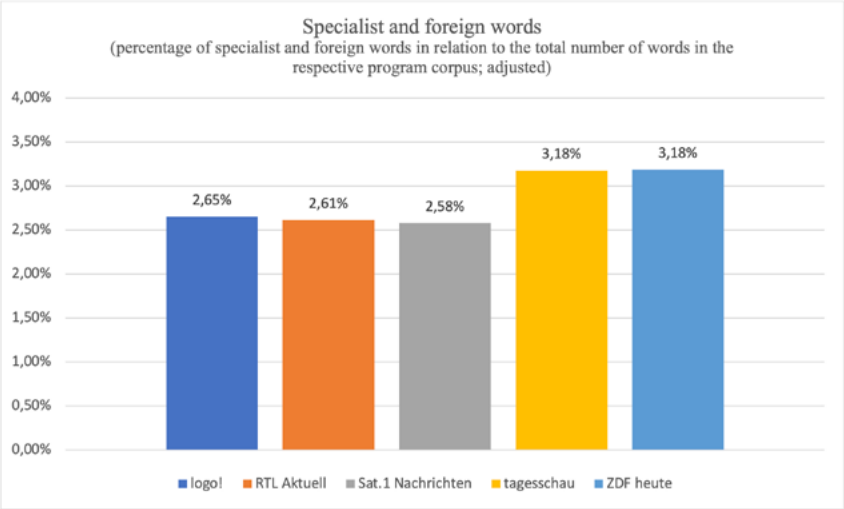
Figure 7 shows that *logo!* uses the most passive constructions, such as: »that something now urgently needs to be done« and »with the results, the system is to be further improved.« *Sat.1 Nachrichten* uses a similarly large number of passive constructions, such as: »if a minimum distance [...] can be maintained.« *heute* uses the following passive construction, for example: »was put into operation today.« In the example, »now it must be clarified,« responsibility is passed on to an unknown actor. This kind of formulation removes any specificity from the topic; in some cases, the audience may not retain the information. *RTL Aktuell* also uses avoidable passive constructions: »Among the things fought about are,« »Many are dealt with.«

Specialist and foreign words:

Foreign and specialist words should not disappear from news language – in fact they expand the audience's vocabulary. If they are not appropriately explained, however, they can impair comprehensibility (cf. ELITZ, 2000: 145; HOFSTÄTTER 2020: CII; WEISCHENBERG/SCHOLL 1998: 144; BARTON 1985: 34; LEONHARDT 1981: 14). Overall, all the news programs contain few, if any, foreign words. As the context of the specialist words was not further analyzed for this paper, it is

impossible to say whether the terms found in the news texts were appropriately explained.

Figure 7
Specialist and foreign words



Source: author's own

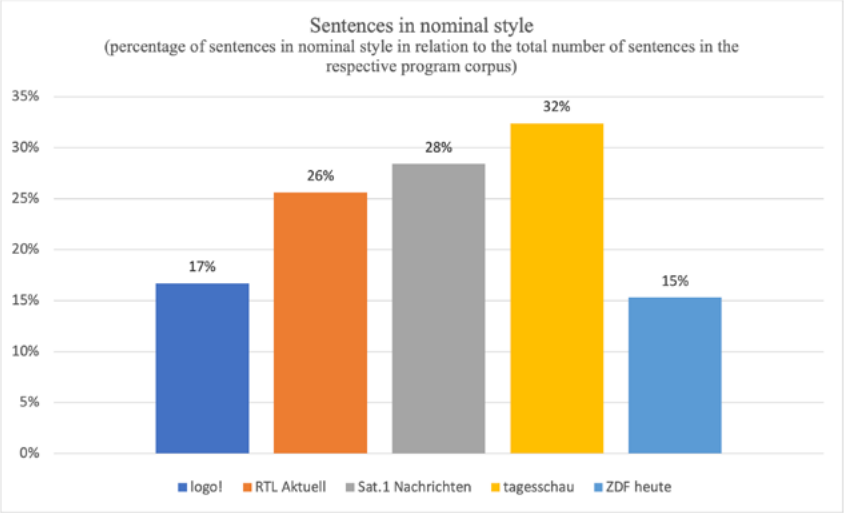
Figure 7 shows that *tagesschau* and *heute* use the most specialist and foreign words. For example, the *tagesschau* corpus is the only one to contain the term »investigating magistrate,« while the *heute* corpus contains the terms »immune competency« and »fund« [in German the foreign word »Fonds«]. *logo!* also uses specialist words, such as »epicenter.« *Sat.1 Nachrichten* contains the fewest specialist and foreign words.

Sentences in nominal style:

Sentences with a large number of nouns often appear stiff, sober, somewhat awkward and impersonal. In some cases, they are difficult to understand. They also contain a high density of information per sentence (cf. KURZ et al. 2010: 58). Sentences in nominal style can usually be reworded to turn the nominalized verb back into an active verb (cf. TEXTLAB 2023). Nominalization does provide benefits from a language economy point of view (cf. BRANDT 2000: 2164). Because, when nominalization is applied, the predicative verb becomes a noun, a function verb

(such as »execute,« »take place,« etc.) must take on the function of the predicate. The sentence becomes less interesting and more difficult to understand. Nominalized verbs, lists of nouns and other forms of noun accumulation are attributed to the nominal style. The comprehensibility analysis software TextLab recommends a maximum of 18% of sentences in nominal style in order for online texts to be easy to understand.

Figure 8
Sentences in nominal style



Source: author's own

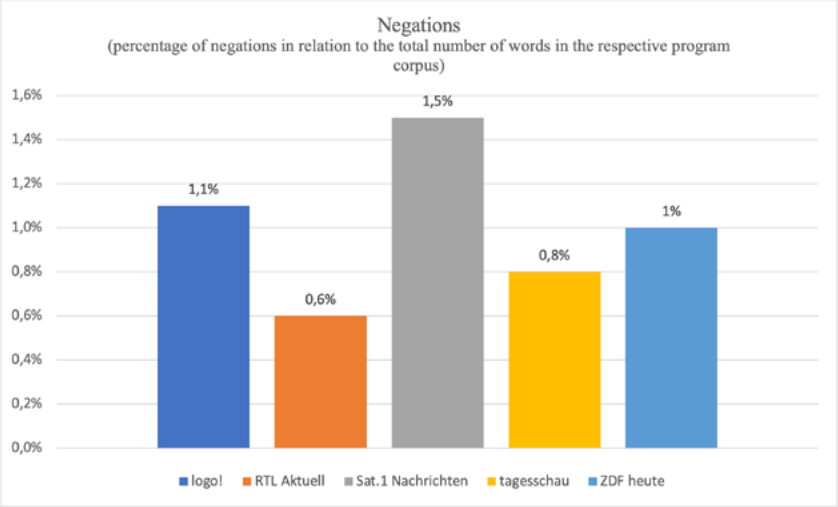
tagesschau is far above this target value (Fig. 8), using noun accumulations like »as well as sirens and display boards, warnings also come from warning apps, radio and television or the fire service.« The *Sat.1 Nachrichten* corpus also contains a lot of sentences in nominal style, such as: »This time, money that industrial nations as compensation for damage caused by global extreme weather events [...].« *RTL Aktuell* is also above the maximum percentage recommended by TextLab, at 26%: »Categorized as a risk to public safety, the aristocrat from Thuringia, according to investigations [...].« *logo!* uses far fewer sentences in nominal style, remaining below the recommended maximum of 18%: »He sees the decision by the four federal states as a mistake.« Although *heute* uses the fewest sentences in nominal style, the following phrases, for example, could have been avoided: »The reversal

of the self-isolation obligation presents employers with new challenges« and »The meeting thus [...] goes into extra time.«

Negations

Because negations can appear in many different forms, TextLab's automatic detection is used with a target value of max. 1% negating terms.

Figure 9
Negations



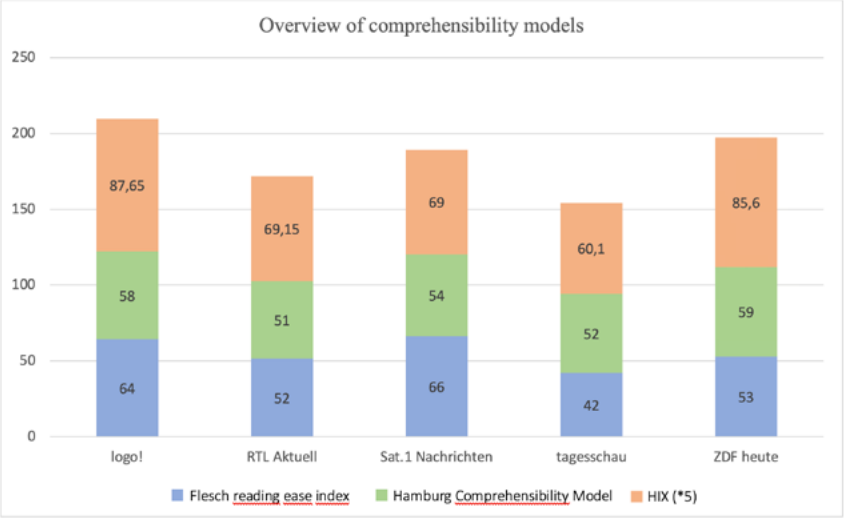
Source: author's own

Sat.1 Nachrichten is above the recommended value (Fig. 9): »no symptoms at all,« »no problem,« and »no-one wants to see another humiliation.« The same goes for *logo!*: »absolutely not discuss it anymore,« »that won't come to anything,« and »no country in the world.« *heute* contains 1%. Some negations are presumably used to bring variety to a text: »take nothing from it,« »not easy to see the big picture,« and »not the only problem.« Most of the negations used in *tagesschau* are necessary. *RTL Aktuell* also mostly uses negations that are almost impossible to avoid: »no longer at home« and »non-independent state.« Formulations like »no hesitation in applying them« and »originate not only from one,« on the other hand, could by expressed in a more comprehensible way.

Comprehensibility models:

Figure 10 shows an overview that incorporates all three models (Hamburg Comprehensibility Model, Hohenheim Comprehensibility Index and Flesch reading ease index). Because the HIX only uses a scale from 0 to 20, while the other two models use a scale from 0 to 100, the HIX was multiplied by five to ensure even weighting. The vertical axis shows the total of the three index values. The figures in the blocks show the results for each index. The higher the result, the easier the text is to understand.

Figure 10
Overview of comprehensibility models



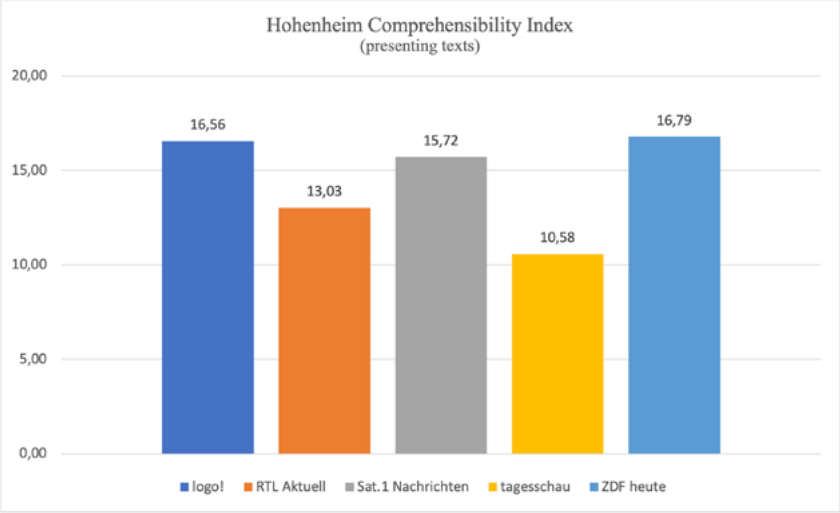
Source: author's own

logo! is the most comprehensible program according to HIX, and the second most comprehensible according to the Flesch reading ease index and the Hamburg Comprehensibility Model. It also achieved the highest total value. *heute* is the most comprehensible when calculated using the Hamburg Comprehensibility Model; the combination with the other two models makes it the second easiest program to understand. *Sat.1 Nachrichten* achieved the highest value in the Flesch reading ease index, and was found to be the third easiest program to understand overall. According to HIX, *RTL Aktuell* is easier to understand than *Sat.1 Nachrichten*. Overall, however, *RTL Aktuell* was found to be less comprehensible in this

analysis. *tagesschau* gained the lowest values in both the Flesch reading ease index and the HIX. Only the Hamburg Comprehensibility Model showed *RTL Aktuell* as a little less comprehensible. All in all, *tagesschau* is still the least comprehensible program in this analysis.

In addition to the analysis of the full corpus, the presenting texts were also compared in a separate analysis using the Hohenheim Comprehensibility Index (Fig. 11). This showed that *heute* writes the most comprehensible presenting texts overall. The presenting texts on *logo!* are almost as easy to understand as those on *heute*. *tagesschau* has the least comprehensible presenting texts.

Figure 11
Hohenheim Comprehensibility Index



Source: author's own

Discussion and conclusion

logo! was found in the analyses to be the easiest program to understand. Its high percentage of adjectives and participial and passive constructions reflects its desire to use child-friendly language. At the same time, however, this can also have a negative impact on the comprehensibility values. Yet the low average sentence length in words and the low number of sentences in nominal style clearly have enough of a positive effect to see *logo!* end the analysis as the most

comprehensible program, according to the three comprehensibility models. Its low rate of speaking also aids understanding.

tagesschau at 8:00 p.m. appears to be guided less by spoken language. One reason for this may be that the texts for *tagesschau* are still written by deskmen and exclusively presented by newsreaders. The texts on *tagesschau* give the impression of being well considered and precisely formulated, as seen, for example, in the low number of participial constructions and negations. Although there are many long sentences on *tagesschau*, few are excessively long. A greater variance in sentence length could improve comprehensibility. In addition, *tagesschau* uses the largest number of nominalizations. It uses a strikingly low number of graphics and maps, which could make it easier to understand. However, there were multiple live interviews with experts during the period of observations. These can convey background information and personal impressions in a similar way to maps and graphics, thus aiding comprehensibility – as long as the interviews are easy to understand in terms of both language and content. *tagesschau*, like the other two programs on public service broadcasters (*logo!* and *heute*), was spoken noticeably more slowly than the programs on the commercial channels (RTL *Aktuell* and *Sat.1 Nachrichten*).

heute frequently uses graphics, maps, and live interviews. Furthermore, in terms of the language it uses, it appears to have found a good middle ground between spoken and written language. The Hohenheim Comprehensibility Index in particular classes *heute* as very easy to understand. The presenting alone achieved the highest HIX of any program examined. All in all, *heute* ends the study as the most comprehensible program for an adult audience.

Sat.1 Nachrichten is mid-table when it comes to the comprehensibility values, with the analysis of the individual parameters reinforcing this mixed picture. *Sat.1 Nachrichten* contains a high percentage of negations, yet the lowest proportion of specialist and foreign words. According to the comprehensibility models used, the comprehensibility level is that of a medium-difficult text.

RTL *Aktuell* uses the lowest percentage of negations and participial and passive constructions. All the comprehensibility models assess RTL *Aktuell* as difficult to medium-difficult to understand. Another factor that could further reduce comprehensibility is the fact that RTL *Aktuell* has the highest speaking rate of any program.

Researchers in previous studies have not always been able to agree on the appropriate speaking rate for news. An excessively slow speaking rate could have the undesirable effect of making news language appear sluggish and uninteresting. But there is one assertion on which previous studies agree: As the information density in the text increases, the speaking rate should decrease (cf. BÖHM et al. 1972: 169; DÜRSCHEID/SENDLMEIER 2005: 18). The results of this study show that the speech in all the news programs analyzed is fast to very fast.

Dürscheid and Sendlmeier recommend alternating between short sentences of eight to ten words and long sentences with a maximum of 23 words as an appropriate sentence length (cf. DÜRSCHEID/SENDLMEIER 2005: 19). None of the programs analyzed exceeds this figure (Fig. 3). The HIX considers sentences with more than 20 words too long. Accordingly, *Sat.1 Nachrichten* contains the highest number and *tagesschau* the lowest number of excessively long sentences.

The results of the Flesch reading ease index are similar to those of the work of Udo Michael Krüger. Applying the Flesch reading ease index in his research on »age-appropriate news for children,« he finds a value of 39 for *tagesschau* and 65 for *logo!* (cf. KRÜGER 2009: 587). These values are similar to the results of this study: 42 for *tagesschau* and 64 for *logo!*

One limiting aspect in this study is the process of transcription. Decisions on the position of punctuation, for example, may influence later results. In addition, when considering comprehensibility analyses with TextLab, the Flesch reading ease index and Wortliga, it is important to remember that these are designed for analyzing not spoken texts, but written ones. Although maps and graphics used during presenting were registered for this study, the interplay between the image and sound in the image material in news items was not taken into account. The size of the corpora also limits this investigation. The average length of the corpora is 1927 words. Larger corpora, a longer observation period, and a larger number of items from different authors and presenters would provide a more comprehensive picture of the current news language in Germany.

The claim that *tagesschau* demonstrates the standard German language appeared in the research again and again. However, according to the results, this standard language is difficult to understand. Should the standard be linguistically demanding, or easily comprehensible? By using new, less common terms, news has the chance to expand its audience's vocabulary: What proportion should be teaching and educating, and which proportion providing information? A mandate to educate and inform can only be successfully fulfilled if the information is processed and understood. Does an attempt to learn something new necessarily involve incomprehensibility? Or is it easier and better to learn from news when it is provided in a comprehensible form?

The comprehensibility of the spoken language should be made an even higher priority in news editorial offices. Regular scientific examinations commissioned by the broadcasters could analyze how easy the language used is to understand and where there is potential for improvement. This would allow deskmen and presenters to formulate their texts in a more targeted way in this regard. Furthermore, it is important not to forget the audience when writing the texts. Comprehensibility is just as important as correct information and precise wording. Achieving this often takes the courage to simplify, especially in the case of complicated topics that demand a lot of previous knowledge. Easily comprehensible

language in the media would allow them to reach more viewers. This in turn would encourage stimulus for political participation and societal discourse, and boost individual opinion-forming and thus democracy.

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