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VERBAL REPRESENTATION OF BLIND PEOPLE IN ENGLISH NEWS TEXTS: A  
CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH

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**Abstract**

In this study, *blindness*-constructions are understood as patterns consisting of two or more words referring to people with decreasing ability to see, all forms of blindness or sight impairment and the situations of vision loss. The results show that in BBC news texts *blindness*-constructions are used in the immediate, modified and extended forms. The immediate *blindness*-constructions identify blind people as participants of situations, differentiate them from fully- and partially-sighted persons and describe their stable attributes without reference to any specific situation. These immediate constructions are mostly used in a fixed form and include combinations of words with the nouns *impairment*, *sight/vision*, *diagnose*, *condition* and the adjective *blind*. The modified *blindness*-constructions enriched with one or two words provide additional information about the degree of vision loss and specific forms of sight impairment. The modifying elements can either broaden the meaning of immediate constructions adding extra information or narrow it indicating specific details and restricting the constructions' usage to particular contexts. The extended *blindness*-constructions made up of two immediate or modified ones represent the generalized models of situations depicted in the news texts: internal and external. The former describe inner states of blind people, their abilities, actions and experiences; the latter refer to the relations between different participants of events including blind, partially- and fully-sighted persons. The extended *blindness*-constructions referring to internal situations describe impairment in one eye or both, indicate the person's age, quality of blind people's life and their adapting to the circumstances. The constructions referring to external situations describe low expectations of what blind people can do and the challenges they face.

KEYWORDS: news text, disability, blind, blindness-constructions, immediate construction, modified construction, extended construction.

**1. Introduction.**

The beginning of the XXI century has clearly shaped a disability-friendly – or disability-inclusive – discourse in every sphere of human life<sup>2 3</sup>. Starting originally in the UK and the USA, the disability movement spread worldwide aiming to redefine impairment from

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<sup>2</sup> Grue 2011, 532-546

<sup>3</sup> Haegele 2016, 193-206

the so-called *medical* model focusing primarily on the deficiencies of disabled people<sup>4</sup> to the *social* view treating every individual as unique, worth and socially important.<sup>5</sup> Mass media have traditionally highlighted disability from the medical perspective, representing people with disorders as «abject and abhorrent»<sup>6</sup>, different to the socialized «norm» and less worthy due to their medical differences.<sup>7</sup> Such attitudes result in verbal representations of disabled people in the media as «other» and any form of «otherness», according to Roland Barthes, needed to be reduced.<sup>8</sup> Language plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards the disabled who were found to be often depicted in terms of polar extremes which continuously drew on disability as evidence of «difference». Contemporary media have adopted a disability-inclusive stance suggesting «authentic and distinctive» representation of people with impairments.<sup>9</sup> So far, verbal representation of disabled people in the media was studied in view of maintaining political correctness suggesting inclusive vocabulary, i.e. words referring to people with impairment, e.g. *differently abled*, and syntactic patterns such as postmodified nouns, e.g. *people with disabilities*, instead of the premodified ones, e.g. *disabled people*.<sup>10</sup> However, verbal representation of people with disabilities in media texts requires analysing words in their syntagmatic relations, i.e. constructions, because news discourse represents participants of different events/situations and constructions can show how people are variously described. Therefore, the *object* of this research is the peculiarities of verbal representation of blind people in news texts. The *subject* is constructions referring to blind people. The *purpose* of the research is explaining the use of immediate, modified and extended constructions describing the blind in news texts.

## 2. Methodology.

Constructions are patterns consisting of two or more words integrating form and meaning in a conventionalized way.<sup>11</sup> Studying the peculiarities of verbal representation of blind people in media discourse, differentiation between immediate and extended constructions<sup>12</sup> is important, since immediate constructions belonging to language system are mostly used in a fixed form, e.g. *losing sight*, *visually impaired*, modified constructions are enriched with the words suggesting additional information or the authors interpretations of that condition, e.g. *blind University of Glasgow student*, *young blind people*, and extended constructions made up of two immediate or modified constructions representing the generalized relations between the participants of events, e.g. *low expectations of what blind people can do*. In the example the immediate construction *blind people* is included into the construction *expectations of what X can do*.

The methodology of the research consists of three stages – identifying, amplifying and generalizing.

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<sup>4</sup> Darke 1998, 187

<sup>5</sup> Degener 2017, 49

<sup>6</sup> Hughes 2009, 402

<sup>7</sup> Cettl 2019, 6

<sup>8</sup> Barthes 1991, 152

<sup>9</sup> bbc.com

<sup>10</sup> Halmari 2011, 828

<sup>11</sup> Goldberg 2006, 5

<sup>12</sup> Potapenko 2017, 173

At the first – **identifying** – stage, I single out the immediate constructions such as *losing sight, visual impairment*. They consist of two words and refer to the situations of vision loss in a general way out of context. At this stage, I classify the immediate *blindness*-constructions and differentiate their media functions: identifying participants and pointing out the impairment.

The second – **amplifying** – stage presupposes the analysis of modified constructions, e.g. *losing all sight, severe visual impairment*. In these examples, the construction *losing sight* is enriched with the quantifier *all* indicating completeness of sight loss, while *visual impairment* is specified with the adjective *severe* referring to the intensity of the state described. In other words, modifying elements can either broaden the meaning of immediate constructions adding extra information or narrow it indicating specific details restricting the constructions' usage to particular contexts.

At the third – **generalizing** – stage, I single out extended constructions which are generalized models of situations depicted in news texts. For example, the extended construction *low expectations of what blind people can do* is generalized as *low expectations of what X can do* to refer to the situations where blind people need assistance.

The language corpus for this study is represented by 60 articles about people with sight impairments published in 2009-2019 on BBC news site ([www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com)).

### 3. Results and Discussion.

In this study, *blindness*-constructions are understood as word chunks referring to people with a decreasing ability to see, all forms of blindness and sight impairment and situations of vision loss. The results show that in BBC news texts *blindness*-constructions are used in immediate, modified and extended forms which are discussed in the subsequent sections.

**3.1. The immediate *blindness*-constructions** include combinations of words with the nouns *impairment, sight / vision, diagnose, condition* and with the adjective *blind* to refer to situations of vision loss in a general way.

The decreasing ability to see is most generally designated by the construction *visual impairment* not specifying any of its forms, e.g. *I don't think people know about **visual impairment** anyway* ([bbc.com](http://bbc.com) 02 Nov. 2019). This example represents visual impairment as a fact, an existing condition people are aware of or not. Multiple forms the impairment can take are indicated by the noun in the plural form: *A woman from Carlisle who has **visual impairments** says she was made to feel excluded by a guest house owner who refused to allow her to stay there with her guide dog* ([bbc.com](http://bbc.com) 02 Oct. 2019).

In *sight / vision*- immediate constructions, the key words combine with the verb *lose* or the participles *failing* and *deteriorating*. The predicative construction *is losing sight* or *is losing vision* imply the process or resultant state of a decreasing ability to see, e.g. *EastEnders' actress June Brown **is losing her sight*** ([bbc.com](http://bbc.com) 06 Apr. 2019). In the nominal constructions *failing sight* and *deteriorating vision*, the attributes describe a stable process without reference to any specific situation, e.g. *She began with four A-levels but her **failing sight** led to her only managing to complete two* ([bbc.com](http://bbc.com) 02 Nov. 2019).

The construction *sight loss* is more rarely used than *is losing sight*, e.g. *Don't feel sorry for my **sight loss*** (bbc.com 06 Sep. 2019), while *failing sight* and *deteriorating sight* are occasionally replaced by *sight fails* and *sight deteriorated* where attributive relations give way to predicative. The next two sentences demonstrate that predicative constructions *sight fails* and *sight deteriorated* are used in temporal clauses at the end of the sentences to refer to the situations of vision loss which are previously described and are known to the reader: *Councils needed to invest in the service to help people keep their independence when their **sight deteriorated*** (bbc.com 02 Jul. 2019). *Charities say not everyone is so lucky and some are waiting much longer to get an initial assessment when their **sight fails*** (bbc.com 02 Jul. 2019).

The *diagnose*-constructions state a cause of person's blindness, e.g. *diagnosed with neuromyelitis optica/ macular degeneration*. Diagnoses may be given in the original Latin form, e.g. *keratoconus*, or in their Anglicized variant, e.g. *diabetic retinopathy*. While the original Latin terms typical of scientific and medical discourses provide guidelines for the professionals, the use of Latin terminology in media texts contributes to the rigour of the narration, because being internationally adopted these terms provide concise and accurate descriptions. The peculiarity of *diagnose*-constructions in media discourse is that they are usually followed by the *condition*-constructions explaining the diagnoses in plain words, e.g. *Stewart, now 30, was eventually **diagnosed with keratoconus** – a condition that causes the cornea to weaken, impairing the ability of the eye to focus properly* (bbc.com 18 Sep. 2018). *In hospital she was **diagnosed with «neuromyelitis optica», a rare condition which affects the spinal column and optic nerves*** (bbc.com 02 Nov. 2019). In these examples, the noun *condition* is followed by an attributive clause with the predicate expressed by causative verbs *affect* and *cause*.

The immediate *blind*-constructions include *going blind*, *blind people / person* and *the blind*. *Going blind* implies ingressive action, i.e. becoming unable to see, e.g. *A Londonderry woman on a cataract surgery waiting list has said she fears she will **go blind** before getting treatment* (bbc.com 14 Nov. 2019). In the construction *blind people* the adjective *blind* distinguishes this cohort from fully- and partially-sighted persons, e.g. *There is a great deal of information sharing between the young people, swapping apps and technology to assist **blind people*** (bbc.com 12 Oct. 2019).

**3.2. The modified blindness-constructions** provide additional information about the degree of vision loss and specific forms of sight impairments. They identify particular participants in specific situations; describe their dynamic attributes and changing states. The modifying elements can either broaden the meaning of immediate constructions adding extra information or narrow it indicating specific details restricting the constructions' usage to particular contexts.

The degree of vision loss is indicated by two types of modified constructions: those based on the part-whole relations and those indicating various positions on a scale.

The part-whole relations underlie the meaning of the constructions *losing part of sight* and *losing sight completely* modified by the quantifier *part of* and adverb of degree *completely*, e.g. *Elliot Stewart is on his battle to practise judo again after losing part of sight*.

An operation stopped him from losing his sight completely, but the condition has had a significant effect on his life (bbc.com 18 Sep. 2018).

The varying degree of low vision on the scale is marked by the construction *losing vision* modified by the quantifiers *the amount* and *a lot*<sup>13</sup>, e.g. *Three months later the amount of vision I'd lost was quite a lot* (bbc.com 18 Sep. 2018).

The progression of sight loss is indicated by the constructions marking the initial point on the scale, the movement along it and the ultimate point on it. The initial point on the scale is designated by the modified construction *start losing sight*, e.g. *Imagine you are 28, with a wife and three kids, then you suddenly start losing your sight* (18 Sep 2018). In this sentence, the construction *start losing your sight* is used with the adverb *suddenly* emphasizing that the starting point of sight loss is marked by unexpectedness, abruptness.

Movement along the scale is variously described by the modified nominal constructions *progressive sight loss*, *continual loss of sight* and the predicative ones *sight is getting worse/ continues to worsen*. The most general meaning is conveyed by the construction *progressive sight loss* which implies movement with no specific time span, speed or manner, e.g. *Three years later, he was taken to the Bristol Eye Hospital because of progressive sight loss*, 'Annals of Internal Medicine journal' reports (bbc.com 03 Sep 2019). Specific temporal meaning is indicated by the construction *the continual loss of sight*, since it is modified by the adverbial *over the years* which means limited time continuum, e.g. *I have found the continual loss of my sight over the years very difficult* (bbc.com 08 Mar 2018).

Movement along the scale may be slow or quick. The former is designated by the modified construction *sight is gradually getting worse* in the sentence *Ms Thomas, said her sight is gradually getting worse and daily tasks are increasingly complex* (14 Nov 2019). Along with the continuous verb-form *is getting* implying progression, the sentence contains the adverb *gradually* emphasizing slow advancement. Description of rapid motion is exemplified by the construction *sight deteriorated dramatically* in the following sentence: *Her sight deteriorated dramatically just before her wedding* (bbc.com 02 July 2019).

The change of speed is reflected in the meaning of the modified construction *sight started to significantly deteriorate* indicating an acceleration of previously evolving movement, e.g. *Born with a retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic degenerative eye condition, her sight started to significantly deteriorate when she was in her early twenties – just as she was planning her wedding* (bbc.com 02 July 2019). In this sentence, a degenerative eye condition started to accelerate at some point indicated by the temporal clause *when she was in her early twenties*. The slowing of a previously evolving movement is designated by the construction *slow down sight loss*, e.g. *A treatment is available on the NHS that may help slow down their sight loss* (04 Sep 2019). Stability of motion is illustrated in the following sentence by the construction *sight continued to worsen*: *As her sight continued to worsen Rachel had to give up her job and felt like she lost her independence* (bbc.com 02 July 2019).

The ultimate point on the scale is marked by three modified constructions: *no vision at all*, *permanent sight loss* and *deteriorating to the point*. The first construction – *no vision at all* – implies total blindness whereby any change of state is impossible, e.g. *Speaking to the Daily Mirror, Brown said she has no central vision at all and can no longer respond to fan*

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<sup>13</sup> Radden 2007, 120

mail (bbc.com 06 Apr. 2019). The other two constructions – *permanent sight loss* and *deteriorating sight to the point* – presuppose that the terminal point on the scale indicated by the words *permanent* and *to the point when* are preceded by the movement along the scale, e.g. *Experts are warning about the risks of extreme fussy eating after a teenager developed permanent sight loss after living on a diet of chips and crisps* (bbc.com 03 Sep 2019). *Rhiannon did this while raising two children, Will and Non, with her husband Paul, and coping with deteriorating sight to the point when, aged 32, she was registered blind* (08 Mar. 2018).

Various forms of visual impairments are specified by the modified constructions *trouble with their sight*, *inability of the eye to focus*, e.g. *Stewart, now 30, was eventually diagnosed with keratoconus – a condition that causes the cornea to weaken, **impairing the ability of the eye to focus properly*** (bbc.com 18 Sep. 2018).

The *condition*-construction is modified by the attributes *rare*, *sight-losing*, *sight-threatening*, e.g. *The sight-losing condition is common and can first affect people in their 50s and 60s* (bbc.com 06 Apr. 2019). *Smoking increases the risk of sight-threatening conditions, such as age-related macular degeneration, which is an important reason why smokers should consider quitting* (bbc.com 02 July 2019).

Vision is interpreted in the commodity sense [Evans 2006], i.e. sight is a thing we possess, use and value, e.g. *They knew I had this disorder that would rob me of my vision, stealing my sight fraction by fraction, year on year* (bbc.com 08 Mar 2018). In this example the verbs *rob* and *steal* meaning to take the property of another person<sup>14</sup> are used transitively with the complements *vision* and *sight*, suggesting a conceptual metaphor SIGHT IS A THING.

**3.3. The extended blindness-constructions** made up of two immediate or modified ones represent generalized models of situations depicted in news texts. The results of the analysis show that in BBC news there are two types of situations designated by extended *blindness*-constructions: internal and external. The former describe inner states of blind people, their abilities, actions and experiences; the latter refer to the relations between different participants of events including blind, partially- and fully-sighted persons.

Extended *blindness*-constructions referring to internal situations describe impairment in one eye or both; indicate a person's age, quality of blind people's life and their adapting to the circumstances.

Blindness in one or both eyes is expressed by the constructions *losing sight*, *having deteriorating vision*, *going blind* extended by the phrases *in one eye* and *in the other*, or *in one of his/ her eyes*, e.g. *The idea of losing sight in one eye and having deteriorating vision in the other was not something she wanted to accept* (bbc.com 02 Nov. 2019). *She had gone blind in one eye and was losing vision in the other* (bbc.com 02 Nov. 2019). *Theo Campbell, who appeared on Love Island in 2017, lost sight in one of his eyes after it was hit with a champagne cork at a party in Ibiza* (bbc.com 06 Sep 2019).

Construction *X lost their sight* is often extended by the phrases indicating a person's age in various ways: (1) as an exact number of years, e.g. *Ms Gonzales lost her sight when*

<sup>14</sup> Merriam-Webster dictionary online

*she was two years old through retinal cancer* (bbc.com 28 Sep. 2019); (2) as a particular period in someone's life, e.g. *I have seen people who have lost their sight in their teens and have virtually no mobility or independence, they are completely dependent on their parents* (bbc.com 08 Mar 2018); (3) as a stage of life such as *young/ old*, e.g. *If a young person lost their sight, you might think it would be straightforward enough to get special needs funding* (bbc.com 02 Nov. 2019).

Sight is metaphorically interpreted as a thing which people possess in the extended constructions *X won't get his/ her sight back* and *X could do without sight*. The idea of recovery once a person loses sight is often represented as impossible by negation *not* in the construction *X won't get his/ her sight back*. Here, sight is interpreted as an entity which is inherently valuable and it is natural to avoid losing it. The following sentence shows a person unwilling to accept his improbability to recover again: *But although doctors have said he won't get his sight back, he's staying positive – and believes he can heal* (bbc.com 06 Sep 2019). The implicature of value appears in this construction due to the fact that our everyday activities are next to impossible after losing vision and the quality of blind people's life is poor. Therefore, construction *X could do without sight* depicts a person deprived of this valuable possession and getting used to such condition: *She needed to be trained for a job that she could do without sight* (bbc.com 02 Nov. 2019).

Similarly to the metaphor SIGHT IS A THING, construction *X with / having visual impairment* interprets blindness as a thing or an entity as well, but unlike sight which is a valuable entity, IMPAIRMENT IS A THING one should try to avoid having. The following two sentences describe people with visual impairments: *I felt like I was the only person with visual impairment* (bbc.com 12 Oct. 2019). *Three people with visual impairments have spoken to the BBC about when they have been targeted for using technology* (bbc.com 29 Jan. 2019).

The extended construction *X's failing sight led her/ him to V-ing* conveys a causative meaning where deteriorating sight forces the person to adapt and change their activity, e.g. *She began with four A-levels but her failing sight led to her only managing to complete two* (bbc.com 02 Nov. 2019).

The extended *blindness*-constructions referring to external situations are represented twice in the analysed corpus: by the construction *low expectations of what X can do* in the sentence *But people still have low expectations of what blind people can do and don't use their imaginations about the possibilities – until they are hit with the fire hose of info from the likes of us, after which they get it* (bbc.com 28 Sep. 2019) and the construction *challenges for X* in the sentence *But even when digital accessibility is achieved, challenges remain for blind people that are familiar to all* (bbc.com 28 Sep. 2019) and *As our everyday world moves increasingly online, the digital landscape presents new challenges for ensuring accessibility for the blind* (bbc.com 28 Sep. 2019). They refer to the situations where blind people need assistance.

The reason why so few *blindness*-constructions are used in the external situation contexts is explained by the fact that the relations between blind, partially- and fully-sighted participants of events are expressed by the *assistance*-constructions based on the words *support, need, help, provide* etc. or *obstacle*-constructions with the keywords *barrier, no way,*

no access etc., e.g. *There is **no way forward to resolve** the numerous issues* (bbc.com 28 Aug. 2019).

#### 4. Conclusions.

In this study, *blindness*-constructions are understood as mental patterns consisting of two or more words referring to people with a decreasing ability to see, all forms of blindness or sight impairment and situations of vision loss. The results show that in BBC news texts *blindness*-constructions are used in the immediate, modified and extended forms.

Immediate constructions identify blind people as participants of situations, differentiate them from fully- and partially-sighted and describe their stable attributes without reference to any specific situation. They are mostly used in a fixed form and include combinations of words with the nouns *impairment*, *sight / vision*, *diagnose*, *condition* and the adjective *blind*.

Modified *blindness*-constructions enriched with one or two words provide additional information about the degree of vision loss and specific forms of sight impairment. The modified constructions identify particular participants in specific situations; describe their dynamic attributes and changing states. The modifying elements can either broaden the meaning of immediate constructions adding extra information or narrow it indicating specific details and restricting the constructions' usage to particular contexts.

The extended *blindness*-constructions made up of two immediate or modified ones represent the generalized models of situations depicted in the news texts: internal and external. The former describe inner states of blind people, their abilities, actions and experiences; the latter refer to the relations between different participants of events including blind, partially- and fully-sighted persons. The extended *blindness*-constructions referring to internal situations describe impairment in one eye or both; indicate the person's age, quality of blind people's life and their adapting to the circumstances. The constructions referring to external situations describe low expectations of what blind people can do and the challenges they face.

*The prospects of future research* are seen in explaining the use of *assistance*- and *obstacle*-constructions representing relations between blind, partially- and fully-sighted participants of events.

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## ВЕРБАЛЬНА РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦІЯ НЕЗРЯЧИХ ЛЮДЕЙ В АНГЛОМОВНОМУ ДИСКУРСІ НОВИН: КОНСТРУКЦІЙНИЙ АСПЕКТ

Ірина Данильченко

### Анотація.

Статтю присвячено вивченню вербальної репрезентації незрячих людей в англomовному дискурсі новин у конструкційному аспекті. Пропоноване дослідження визначає конструкції на позначення незрячих людей як сполуки з двох чи більше слів, що іменують осіб зі зниженою здатністю бачити, різні форми незрячості й порушення зору та ситуації, в яких задіяні осліплі. Результати доводять, що в новинних текстах бі-бі-сі аналізовані конструкції вживаються у безпосередній, модифікованій та розширеній формі. Безпосередні конструкції ідентифікують незрячих людей як учасників подій у новинах, диференціюють їх від зрячих та тих, що частково бачать, і описують їхні постійні, надситуативні, ознаки. Названі конструкції вживаються здебільшого у фіксованій формі і включають сполучення слів з опорами-

іменниками *impairment, sight / vision, diagnose, condition* та прикметником *blind*. Модифіковані конструкції, збагачені одним чи двома словами, подають додаткову інформацію про ступінь втрати зору та різновиди зорових порушень. Компоненти, що модифікують конструкцію, можуть розширяти значення безпосередніх конструкцій за рахунок додаткової інформації, або звужувати їхню семантику, уточнюючи окремі деталі зображеної ситуації та обмеживши використання цих конструкцій певними контекстами. Розширені конструкції, утворені шляхом поєднання двох безпосередніх чи модифікованих, репрезентують узагальнені моделі ситуацій у новинних текстах у внутрішній та зовнішній перспективах. У першому випадку вони описують внутрішні стани незрячих людей, їхні здібності, відчуття, дії та досвід; у другому – позначають відносини між різними учасниками подій: сліпими, зрячими та тими, що частково бачать. Розширені конструкції на позначення внутрішньої перспективи зображують порушення зору на одне око чи обидва; вказують вік незрячої людини, якість життя сліпих людей та їхню пристосованість до різних обставин. Конструкції, задіяні для зображення ситуацій у зовнішній перспективі, позначають низькі очікування стосовно того, що незрячі люди можуть робити, та проблеми, з якими вони стикаються.

**Ключові слова:** дискурс новин, інвалідність, конструкції на позначення незрячих людей, безпосередні конструкції, модифіковані конструкції, розширені конструкції.

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