MEASURING READABILITY: A MESSAGE ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS

Executive Summary

Communication is the process of creating, transmitting, receiving and interpreting messages between a source and a receiver. A successful communication process depends upon the capability of the sender to create a message and the receiver to interpret it appropriately. All efforts of making a successful communication are centred on the ‘communication message’. When the intended meaning of the message is successfully comprehended by the receiver, the communication process becomes effective. In written communication, the way a message is framed to suit its readers is the ultimate way to predict the efficacy of the written material. The concept of readability is an important factor in determining the efficacy of the written messages.

Readability indicates the degree of ease of understanding a particular written text. The concept is different from the term ‘legibility’, which is concerned with the ease of recognising letters and words. The semantic and the syntactic factors within the written text such as word length, sentence length, word familiarity, etc., are considered as predictors of textual readability. The degree of readability of a text can be easily measured by applying readability formulae on the text. Such forms of quantitative readability test contribute to text-specific objective testing of a given text taking into consideration the specific textual variables such as length of the sentence, number of syllables in a word, word familiarity, etc. The formula, when applied to a particular text gives a numerical value which denotes the readability score of the given text. The score depicts how ‘difficult’ or ‘easy’ the text is.

In the contemporary society, the daily newspapers provide various updates on public news or comments on public news. Amongst the variety of newspaper content, editorials occupy a position of responsibility and play a pivotal role in the society as they inform readers, stimulate thinking, raise questions, mould opinion and encourage people to take decisions and actions. In brief, an editorial, or sometimes known as a ‘leader’ is an opinionated news article that influence its readers. Owing to the importance of the newspaper editorials, it is very essential that the
messages depicted in the newspaper editorials should be easily understandable by its readers. Thus, the present study is aimed at addressing the issue of the comprehensibility of the newspapers editorials by focusing on the structure of the editorials and its readability.

The main objective of the study is to do an in-depth analysis of the readability of the newspaper editorials in order to explore the suitability of the editorials for its readers. The first five largest circulating English national dailies of India - The Times of India, The Hindu, Deccan Chronicle, Hindustan Times and The Telegraph are selected for the study. Circulation figures are purposively taken into consideration because it is often assumed that a highly circulating newspaper is highly readable. The measurement of readability of the editorials of these highly circulating newspapers will prove or disprove this assumption. For selecting the newspaper editorials, based on the sampling technique determined by Stempel (1952), a monthly stratified sample of 12 issues (one issue per month) for a single newspaper for one entire year is taken.

The methodology of the study consisted of two parts. In the first part, content analysis is conducted in order to study the in-depth structure of newspaper editorials. The content analysis enabled the researcher to categorise each newspaper editorials into three layer components – code, content and treatment based on David Berlo’s ‘message structure’ (depicted in his SMCR Model). The ‘message’ as defined by David Berlo, in regard to the present study is the newspaper editorial. The writing style based on the language structure of the newspaper editorial depicts the code in the entire study. Content is the information that relates to the subject theme of the message (editorial). The way the message is presented in view of its tone is the treatment of the newspaper editorial.

In the second part, measurement of the readability of the different categories of newspaper editorials is conducted by using Flesch Reading Ease Formula. Flesch Reading Ease Formula is the most popular and widely used readability formula for measuring the readability of concerned texts. It uses two variables – word length (based on the number of syllables) and sentence length (based on the number of words). The formula produces a numerical score known as Reading Ease (RE), ranging from 0 to 100. A score of 100 depicts the highest readability (easiest) and a score of 0, the lowest readability (most difficult). Flesch considers a score between ‘60 to 70’ as a standard score which means highly acceptable and readable by all the
people (adult of average reading ability). Each score has its corresponding educational reading grade level.

Based on the findings and interpretations of the study, the main conclusions of the study are:

- The newspaper editorials of English national dailies of India are ‘difficult to read’ depicting that they are not suitable to read for its readers. Shorter editorials are found to have better readability than longer editorials.
- Highly circulating newspapers do not necessarily possess highly readable editorials.
- Newspaper editorials can be categorised into various types on the basis of its writing style such as descriptive, interpretative and persuasive editorials, subject theme such as business & economy, crime/police/law & order, entertainment, politics, science & technology, social development, sports and miscellaneous editorials and tone of presentation such as argumentative, didactic, joy/appreciation/praise, satirical, sorrow/sadness/disappointment and suggestive editorials.
- Newspaper editorials with descriptive style of writing are the most readable editorials based on the writing style.
- Newspaper editorials based on lighter subject themes and issues are more readable than editorials based on serious issues.
- Newspaper editorials with satirical tone are the most readable editorials based on the tone of presentation.
- Descriptive editorials with politics subject theme and satirical tone are the most readable newspaper editorials with specific combination of writing style, subject theme and tone.