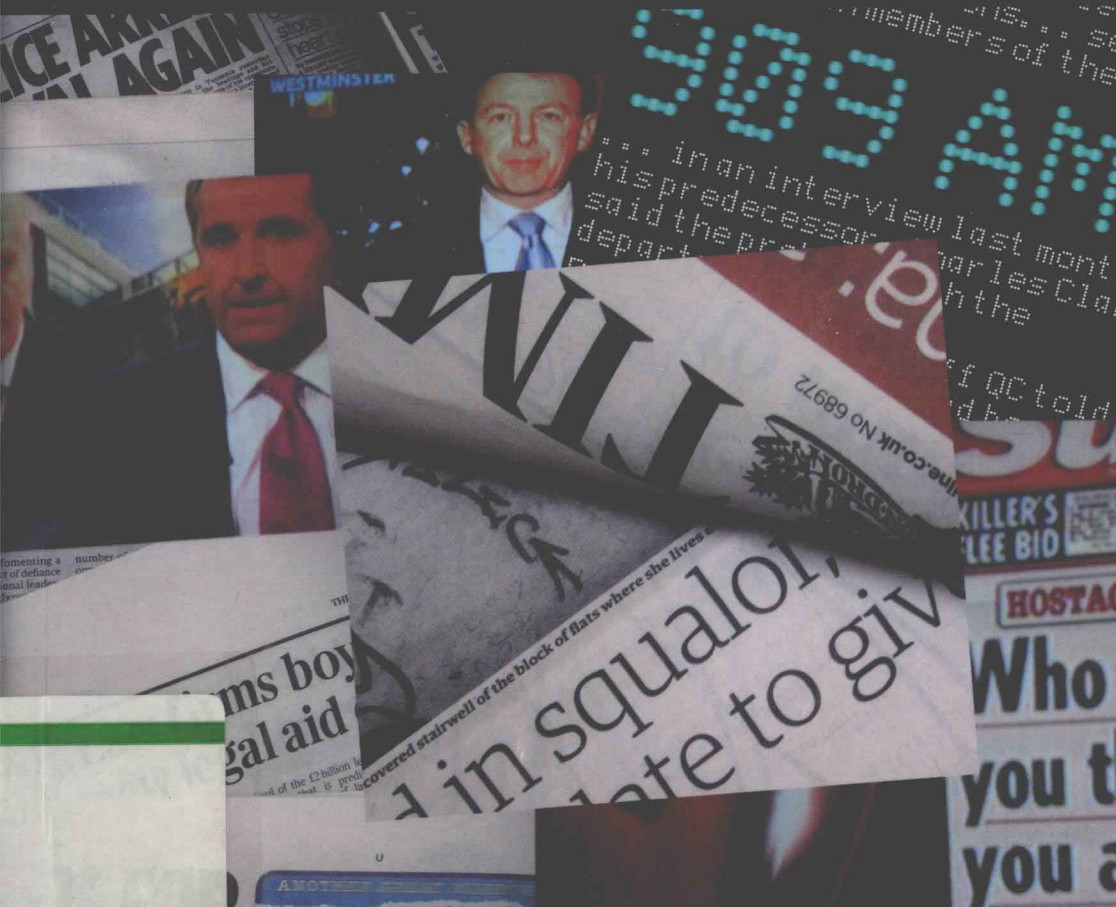


THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEWS

MARTIN CONBOY



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Martin Conboy

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Für Simone

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Sheffield, January 2007

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1 Language and conventional communities

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Introduction

One of the main aims of this chapter is to emphasize that the study of the language of the news media is not an exercise in exposing the hidden tricks or deceptions of journalists, editors or owners. Rather it seeks to do something which none of these people has time nor often inclination to do: to attempt a systematic study of the patterning of language on various themes across the news in order to further our understanding of the social implications of this language. This approach allows a critical perspective to emerge while respecting the integrity of the work that people do in journalism. Journalists do not have the time to explore such perspectives on a regular basis. Students and consumers of journalism, on the other hand, may allow themselves the time to better understand the ways in which language acts at the heart of this process of public communication. This opening chapter will emphasize that language is a profoundly social activity. It will argue that the success of news as a form of communication over time has been linked to its ability to integrate itself within the social aspects of language. It will look briefly at how language styles specific to a range of news media have become stylized and have shifted over time to become the variety of practices they are today. The overall book will concentrate mainly on the language of newspapers as they have usually provided the template for the development of the language of news but it will also concern itself with exploring how other news media have adapted or altered this language to better match their own specific demands.

Language and society

Language is of a public nature. The self which we conveniently inhabit is to a large extent a social construct and it is constructed within a community of language. Our name, our gender, our ethnicity, our work, all identify us and they do this through a language which we hold in common with others in society. Because of its social nature, we can say that the language through which we make our way in the world, precedes us. Language has always been rooted in social activity. As well as communicating ideas and issuing instructions, it has the potential to signal the social positioning of speaker and listener or writer and reader. The very production of meaning itself in everyday life rests heavily upon linguistic activity (Montgomery, 1986: 42). Language is central to many debates in contemporary society and it is the medium in which those debates are embedded. This is of double significance for a practice such as journalism which reports upon and therefore records the world in which we live. The implications of this social positioning for the study of language is made clear in the following:

language is a social practice which is one amongst many *social practices of representation and signification*. From this it follows that the study

of language is irreducibly dual, drawing on social and semiotic theories, theories of social forces and relationships, and theories of systems of representation and signification.

(Hodge and Kress, 1993: 202–203)

This study of the news therefore obliges us to consider the style and structure of its language as well as the social and historical networks in which it is located.



Activity 1.1

Consider the following list and discuss with a partner. In small groups, order the list according to how important you find each of the uses. Compose your own lists of the nine uses of language.

The nine uses of language

- i) to dissipate superfluous and obstructive nerve-force
- ii) for the direction of motion in others, both men and animals
- iii) for the communication of ideas
- iv) as a means of expression
- v) for purposes of record
- vi) to set matter in motion (magic)
- vii) as an instrument of thinking
- viii) to give delight merely as sound
- ix) to provide an occupation for philologists

(Ogden and Richards, 1985: 46)

Discussion of the social nature of language is nothing new. In ancient Greece, the writings of Plato and Aristotle triggered intense debate between naturalist and conventionalist interpretations of language. Plato considered that words had originally had a natural relationship with the world they represented while Aristotle believed that words gained their meaning through the conventions of society over time. This debate ensured that the study of grammar and vocabulary developed momentum in learned society particularly with regard to whether language influenced society or whether society influenced language. Nowadays we would tend to conclude that it is a combination of both influences, depending on time and situation. One consequence of the heightened interest in language in ancient Greece was the rise of the Sophists who worked as language teachers

and interpreters. As the Greek language spread geographically there was a need to be aware of the different linguistic customs and expressions, legal terminology and manners of polite address which were diversifying over this large expanse of the Greek-speaking world. The Sophists were widely travelled and as students of linguistic variety within Greek, they could help people to select the right words to have the right effect on the right occasion, fitting in with local language use and social conventions and customs. What they taught became known as rhetoric – the art of appropriate communication. This became an essential part of anybody's education who wanted to become active in either politics or the law.

In the contemporary world, we can build on the insights of the ancient Greek philosophers to consider the social implications of the language of news which is, at the same time, didactic and informational, teaching us about the world as well as our own socially constructed place in that world. Analysis of this language can move us beyond sophistry and towards an involvement which may enable us to become better informed actors in our social world, confirming the view that: 'consciousness is the first step towards emancipation' (Fairclough, 1989: 1).

As will become clear throughout this book, language does not merely reflect the world as it is, it interprets, organizes and classifies that world. It therefore embodies theories of how that world is arranged from an ideological perspective (Fowler, 1986: 27). Understanding that helps us to become more active participants in the world.

The news, in both its elite and popular forms, is extremely important in helping us to build up a normative view of the world and set parameters for how we interact with that world. This means that this language has an enormous influence on the ways in which we perceive the world in which we live. This has political implications beyond the narrow confines of party politics. Although this book will touch occasionally on traditional political topics, it will take the broader view that to analyse and to get inside the dynamics of this language is in itself implicitly a political act.

The title of this chapter signals an important element of the above approach. It will insist that in taking a linguistic view of journalism and its social and political roles, we are not subscribing to some form of conspiracy theory. On the contrary, we are claiming that in working with language as a shared social and cultural resource, we are part of a set of communicative patterns which exist outside ourselves as individuals. These patterns help to build a series of communities. Language is part of the process by which we become social participants, understanding and integrating within the wider circle of these communities. We may claim that language is a manifestation of such social integration. This is a functionalist view of language: one which considers how language functions to integrate individual actors within a network of social experience. However, not everyone is happy with the state of society, particularly those who perceive its power relationships to be unjust or unequal. To them a functionalist view of language is merely proof of the attempts which some institutions make to

exercise control of social reality through language. In the news media, which act as some of the most influential channels for the definition of reality, this control may not be overt, but it is exercised nevertheless in patterns, habits and structures which have become so commonplace that they no longer are automatically seen as contributing to processes of control but are seen as merely 'reflecting the world as it exists'. The systematic study of language allows us a fresh perspective on some of those patterns of linguistic behaviour and enables us to take a critical look at how the news pursues certain agendas which inevitably contribute to and occasionally challenge patterns of social and political inequality.

The development of newspaper language

The language of the news plays a major part in the construction of what Berger and Luckman have referred to as the 'social construction of reality' (1976). It assists in the creation of a set of public discourses through its selection of narratives and the language it employs to project them. Just as language is a socially constructed form of communication so too is news and its own varieties of language. Just as language continues to vary in its content and structure to adapt to the variety of social and cultural demands made upon it so too has the language of the news.

This language is produced as a set of conventions which carry traces of their historical development. The language of the first newspapers in the seventeenth century was a radical step towards the political involvement of a wider social circle, particularly the rising merchant class. The earliest newspapers gave these readers information, predominantly of the political and economic world which was addressed to them in the local language, the vernacular. This in itself was a departure from the tradition which had seen important communication channelled through the sacred language of Latin and thus restricted to an elite. One crucial factor in the early newspapers' language was their drive to provide factual and reliable information in order to distinguish them from other types of printed matter such as the more controversial broadsides and pamphlets. Lapses in this 'facticity' were what critics of newspapers held against the press, which meant that early newswriters endeavoured to be as accurate as the technologies and communications of the time would allow. Pecke's *Perfect Diurnall of some Passages in Parliament*, published from 1643 to 1649 at the height of the English Civil War, tried strenuously to avoid editorializing for fear of punishment and the diminished reputation of its content. It could be dull fare indeed:

Wednesday, March 8 [1647]

The house of Commons spent the whole time this day in reading and debating of private petitions. They had in debate the wrong sustained by a member of theirs whom rented by lease the Iron-mills in Monmouthshire given to Col. Massie which was referred to a Committee.

They also considered of providing for Reformadoes and widdows of soldiers slain in the war of which there are thousands: They likewise sent a message to the Lords, that they would go on with proceedings against Judge Jenkins.

Newspapers began by assuming that their readership was reasonably homogeneous. This unifying vision helped the rise to power of a middle-class public sphere from the beginning of the eighteenth century across parts of Western Europe (Habermas, 1992). Nevertheless the world that the language of these early papers projected was a bourgeois and a male domain, and both women (McDowell, 1998) and the labouring classes (Harris and Lee, 1978) were excluded from it. Over time it developed a broader variety of register for specifically targeted readerships which came to include almost every social grouping. Their style of language evolved through history because of the constraints of time, space and market.

It is important to remember this great historical diversity in styles as we look at the variety on offer today. Keeble writes that there are 'many journalismisms' (1998: 1) but despite this there are certain features which can be identified as forming part of what most people agree are the rudiments of contemporary news language and style. These rudiments have evolved over time because of the changing nature of technological and economic demands on the production of newspapers, and these in turn have made newspapers more dependent on tight, formulaic and stylistic conventions which have emerged as cost-effective solutions to the financial constraints on newspapers as they fight to retain a market share.

Throughout the eighteenth century, news often comprised the contents of letters received, conveying both opinion and information, and the language reflected the letter-writing style of the time:

WE HAVE a report here, but we hope without foundation, that his Majesty's frigate Minerva was not lost on the back of the Isle of Wight on Friday night last, when it really blew a hurricane.

(London Evening Post, 31 December to 3 January 1764)

Newspapers depended on such reports for their own content, together with letters from readers to fill their pages. Communication and distribution technologies available at the time still meant that maintaining a regular flow of news was a problem. It meant that the language of the reports which were in regular supply could be more elaborate. Crime news reflected this sedate style as well:

ON THURSDAY evening last, about nine o'clock, as Mr Henry Foot, of Durham-yard in the Strand, and Factor for the Scotch ships in the river, was going along Market-lane, St. James-market, a villain came behind him and knocked him down with a bludgeon, but some persons coming up, prevented him being robbed; he received a dangerous wound in his head near five inches in length, and still continues very ill.

(*London Evening Post*, 31 December to 3 January 1764)

Newspapers continued to present all forms of news in such language until a point where news was in such plentiful supply and the competition between profit-driven newspapers became so intense that the language became compacted to allow for the maximum coverage and often, particularly in the emergent mass market press, for maximum impact. Economic pressures have meant that the collection and presentation of news have developed to conform to a predetermined style which has increasingly foregrounded brevity and clarity. A central dynamic in this process was the regularity of the appearance of newspapers which increasingly moulded their language into a style which was best suited to the rapid reproduction of a view of the world and the events in it which was straightforward and easy to assimilate. Schudson (1978) has demonstrated, for instance, that the inverted triangle, summarizing the main points of a story at the beginning of a piece, was developed in the USA from the 1880s and marked journalism's shift from record to interpretation. It was largely determined by the technology of the telegraph and was characterized by a tendency for a more truncated and flattened style. This sort of newspaper language culminated in Britain in the New Journalism of the late 1880s which aimed in its language to hit the reader 'straight between the eyes' as T.P. O'Connor (1889: 434) put it memorably of his *Star*. A characteristic of this new discourse of news (Matheson, 2000) was the way that the reporting of facts and opinions, often from partisan perspectives within newspapers, became replaced by the central component of the story (Smith, 1978). With accelerating speed of information delivery and improving technologies of reproduction and distribution it literally paid to be brief, and so newspapers developed a series of patterns which allowed for their language to be composed in the main of short, condensed sentences which presented the news in the sharpest and at the same time liveliest manner. This style had been fully developed by the intense circulation wars of the 1930s in Britain and can be seen in this brief extract from the *Daily Express* which

demonstrates the compact language and structure of the sensational, celebrity news values of the popular journalism of that era:

**WIDOWED BEAUTY SEEKS AIR SOLACE
MRS HANSON MAY EXPLORE AMAZON
FLYING LESSONS AFTER TRAGEDY**

THE BEAUTIFUL and rich Mrs Ursula Hanson, twenty-one-year-old widow of the City magnate's son who died a tragic death in the Thames at Whitsun is taking to the air – to forget.

(Daily Express, 7 August 1933)

Contemporary newspaper language

What distinguishes the style and content of newspaper language today? Newspapers are 'language-forming institutions' (Bell, 1994: 7) which means that their language informs and is influenced by broader linguistic trends. Much newspaper language is driven as never before by the economic imperative to retain its audience within a densely competitive news media environment. It has to work within an extremely visual popular culture as well as using the attributes of print to their best advantage. The language of other news media also share these challenges and it brings competition to bear on the newspapers themselves.

There are two consequences of these developments. First, newspapers often reduce the complexity of the world and, second, they often lack context because of constraints on space. They provide very much a model of the 'mosaic' culture described by McLuhan (1995). Their language conventions discourage the elaboration of the networks of meanings necessary for a rounded understanding of historical contexts, for example, and the nature of news narratives means that they move on before integration with wider implications can be explored. Peter Preston, himself an experienced newspaper editor, was warning against this reflex of newspaper narratives when he wrote in a recent article on the Madrid bombings: 'It's foolish to try to make instant sense out of senseless events' (*Guardian*, 15 March 2004).

Part of the development of the conventions of news language has been the division of the content of the newspaper into various, not always mutually compatible genres. These can be divided into two main categories. First, the hard news where overt opinion is in general repressed and which includes spot news and the reporting of the routines of politics and public life and, second, those genres such as specialist news, soft news, news features, opinion pieces and editorials where opinion is more or less foregrounded. Van Leeuwen has argued that it is possible that since the social purposes of journalism are contradictory, some being overt such as entertainment, factuality, impartiality

and objectivity, while others are covert such as social control, ideological commitment and legitimation, they do not really mesh easily. He considers this is perhaps the reason why such a rich array of generic strategies has developed within the newspaper (van Leeuwen, 1987: 209). It is in the hard news where the 'facticity' (Tuchman, 1978) of the writing is most apparent. The general tendency to omit overt comment in the hard news makes the writing in these sections of the newspaper most institutionalized and closest to the house style of the paper in question (Cameron, 1996). Readers expect this sort of news to be factual, reliable, well-informed and without overt comment from the journalist: objective in the traditional sense. This does not mean that opinion cannot be transmitted in other, less overt ways. This is not to suggest that the production of hard news is a process of conspiratorial manipulation, merely that under pressures of time and within the constraints of tradition, certain patterns of belief are incorporated into even these styles of objective writing and that they vary from newspaper to newspaper in an identifiable fashion. The news values of individual newspapers, together with their approach to ideals such as objectivity, tell us as much about the aspirations of journalism as an institution as about any verifiable reality in the claims to objectivity themselves.

Within specialist sections of the newspaper, sports, fashion and entertainment for instance, there is more latitude for the language to show traces of opinion and even judgement of taste. The opinion pieces, often by prominent and professionally controversial columnists, exist to provoke reaction and response and to generate debate around issues close to the institutional core of the newspaper's own news values. The editorial tends to be the most institutional of opinions, since it is one of the last bastions of anonymity in newspapers. It is here where the newspaper pronounces its own position on what it considers the central political and cultural matters of the day.

In broadcast media the live interview is often the place where opinions are rehearsed or refuted, politicians probed or provoked by searching or sceptical interrogation such as John Humphrys on the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4 or Jeremy Paxman on BBC 2's *Newsnight*. More populist news programmes, such as *Question Time* or even Five's *The Wright Stuff* or the US-based originator of much audience-based populist current affairs the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, involve the views and questions of the audience itself either in a studio or by e-mail, phone-in or text.



Activity 1.2

List the most common genres within news. What sort of language is used in each of them? Give examples.

Newspapers as interpretative communities

Within the general range of linguistic styles of the news there is a differentiated social target. Each news medium has developed an ideal audience within the language which it uses. Each must look for an opportunity to present its own angle which ties in with a relatively stable identity and lexicon. The language style of each news medium is, in fact, an exercise in audience design (Bell, 1984: 145–204). This style is further differentiated by the division between the two main categories of newspaper, the tabloid and the broadsheet, and their parallels in the broadcast world. We need, however, to revise the categorization of these types of newspaper as ever more broadsheets have changed to a tabloid format while attempting to keep many of their traditional features. Maybe the terms 'elite' and 'popular' may be more accurate for what these still very different styles of newspaper are aiming at. Kitis and Milapedes (1997: 562) claim that the contrast resides in part between the 'neutral' language of the broadsheets and the 'emotionally charged language' of the tabloids. One represents a newspaper of record, the other, a primarily entertainment model. However they both produce ideological perspectives for their audiences. As we will see, any simplistic divisions between the language of these two sorts of newspaper can be misleading. This extract from the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, clearly displays the sort of loaded word selection which critics often assume only occurs in the popular press when dealing with hard news on the front page:

Brown lifts ban on out-of-town stores

GORDON BROWN has sanctioned an assault on the countryside and the vitality of market town high streets by insisting that the ban on out-of-town shopping centres should be relaxed.

(*Daily Telegraph*, 22 March 2004)

Social difference is embedded within our language and therefore inevitably within the language of our news media. Our use of language marks us as communal creatures, *homo loquens*, defined as much by our ability to speak as by the social nature of that activity. We belong to communities of media consumption through the distinctiveness of the language of those media. The communal nature of language means that it depends to a great extent on the power of convention. Individuals have difficulty in creating new words or challenging the conventions of language without a wider social acceptance of the changes they propose. We need largely shared understandings of what words mean if language and society are to function effectively. Certain areas of our life, such as the law