The Language of Newspapers
Socio-Historical Perspectives

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Acknowledgements

and how you can dispute, therefore, that a newspaper is one huge repertory of the vices which writers should avoid, and so a widely circulating medium of literary demoralization, I fail to see.

'Newspapers and English: A Dialogue'
Macmillan's Magazine, 1886

A book which attempts to make certain connections between the fields of linguistics, history and journalism studies, first needs editorial enthusiasm and support if it is ever going to emerge into the world printed and bound or even shimmering on a screen. These were provided by Gurdeep Mattu as commissioning editor and his editorial assistant, Colleen Coalter, at Continuum together with Sally Johnson and later by Tommaso Milani, as series editors. In the process of bringing the manuscript to completion, Mr P. Muralidharan in Chennai adequately demonstrated the benefits of global cooperation and proved that geographical distance in no hindrance to courtesy. I hope the finished product goes some way towards repaying their collective confidence in the project.

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Simone and Lara – Die Wilden Hühner – as always, take most credit for providing the alternative space which makes it all worthwhile and it is to them that the book is dedicated.

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Introduction: The social nature of newspaper language

Structure and focus of the book

This book will deal with the very stuff of newspapers; their language. It will chart the various ways in which the shape and content of that language has impacted upon social and political debates over four centuries, from the first emergence of periodical publications in the seventeenth century to the present day. In turn, it will also assess the opposite force in this relationship; the influences of political and social changes on newspapers and how these changes have become manifest in their use of language. It hopes to be able to add a much-needed historical perspective to wider contemporary debates about the social implications of the language of the news media (Johnson and Ensslin, 2007). In doing so, it will aim to initiate a critical as well as a productive dialogue between sociolinguistics and journalism studies.

The book will highlight the ways in which newspapers have needed to accommodate social, political and technological changes throughout their history. It will take as its starting point the observation of Bell (1984: 145–204), rooted itself in sociological understanding, that journalism is an 'exercise in audience design'. This perspective emphasizes that the language of newspapers has always encapsulated what would sell to audiences and how information could best be packaged and presented to achieve this commercial end at any particular time. Newspapers have therefore always attempted to fit into the tastes of their readerships and sought ways to echo these within their own idiom, thereby reconstructing the 'original' audience in the process. Despite their underlying commercial imperative, this need to provide a distinctive language in which to give a coherent editorial expression to readers' tastes has had both conservative and radical implications at different moments in the history of the newspaper.

In structural terms, the chronology of the book will provide a long view of the changes in the language of newspapers. In doing so, it will require a certain indulgence from the reader in accepting a broad definition of newspapers to include earlier influential periodical publications which played a role in the formation of what later became identifiable as the newspaper. It will begin by considering the revolutionary implications of the first

periodical publications in England and how their use of language quickly began to fuel a radically changing social and political order. This frenetic period may have come to an end with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 but the precedent of a regular distribution of news in print or manuscript form had been established and enabled the honing of a style of address which was suited to political and economic circumstances, as well as acceptable to a gradually broadening readership. Following a degree of political liberalization after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695, periodical print publications began to experiment once again with form as well as content and subsequently, the eighteenth century saw the consolidation of a bourgeois style of political engagement through the medium of periodical news production. It is this political engagement which Habermas (1992) has termed the bourgeois public sphere. Political interventions in support of popular causes effected a division between the language of the politically respectable bourgeois newspaper and that of radical periodical pamphlets in the first half of the nineteenth century which has been seen as the zenith of the influence of the 'publicists' in print (Chalaby, 1998). This was followed by a period during which newspapers learned how to make increasing profits from addressing broader social audiences in a language that matched the aspirations of those readers (Lee, 1976). The end of the nineteenth century saw the fusion, within the daily popular press in England, of certain populist techniques in newspaper language and layout, which had been developed commercially in the United States (Baldasty, 1992). These techniques, often identified as the New Journalism (Wiener, 1988), were ultimately to spread their influence throughout the entire newspaper industry.

The twentieth-century newspaper's language was shaped by a wave of technologies competing with the newspaper as the prime provider of topical information about the world. First radio, then television, satellite and most recently the internet have all forced newspapers to alter the structure and address of their language as they bid to retain a profitable and influential share of the market for news and entertainment. Out of the patterns of these media interventions over the twentieth century, one form of newspaper language has been developed to such an extent that its influence is to be observed everywhere: the tabloid. It would be no exaggeration to say that it was indeed the tabloid century, as the style of this language has had profound social and political effects upon the wider contemporary media world.

In newspapers today, we are witnessing the latest linguistic accommodation to changing social and commercial pressures. Newspapers have always striven to provide an elaborated form of conversation with their audiences, to be something more than a dry account of the events

of the day. What they are now pressed to do is to provide a version of that daily conversation in an environment that has many other technologies competing to provide that sense of communal voice. The book will complete its survey by considering how newspapers of the present are dealing in their latest struggle to survive and how their language is adapting to the existence of so many other forms of contemporary communication flow. The longer historical perspective of the book will allow the reader to assess the extent to which this adaptation represents a novel departure or a reconfiguration of older social functions of their language.

Language as social activity

One of the common limitations of most books about newspapers within the tradition of media studies (Curran: 2002) is that they tend to stick to accounts of institutional and political contexts, leading them to ignore broader questions about their role as an integral part of social history. One problem associated with this approach is that newspapers are dealt with very much as commercial/political products with very little regard for the social specifics of their language. A second limitation is that by concentrating merely on the commercial or political contexts of newspapers, there is an implication that the language that they employ is a rather static commodity in the service of the dynamics of life outside their pages. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the view of this author, the language of newspapers is the most vital and dynamic aspect of their history. A third limitation is that by neglecting the importance of the language of newspapers as a significant element in their social appeal, society itself is implicitly constructed as something which sits outside language. This book would like to encourage a more energized interpretation of the relationship between language and the social audience implicit in the newspaper's text and layout. The idealized readers, constructed within the language of the newspaper, are very much part of the meaning-making process of the newspaper, as they are of news production generally (Scollon, 1998), not simply passive vessels for information.

Language is a thoroughly social activity and newspapers extend that activity beyond the confines of face-to-face discourse to an extended, imagined community of kinship based on nation (Anderson, 1986; Billig, 1995; De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak, 1999; Conboy, 2006). Newspaper language materializes that identity quite literally onto the page. There has been a burgeoning interest in the specifics of the language of news media and its social implications (Bell, 1991; Van Dijk, 1991; Fairclough, 1995a 1995b; Conboy, 2007a; Richardson, 2007; Montgomery,

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2007) while recent studies of the early history of newspapers have gone a long way to establishing a linguistic emphasis within studies of the emergence of periodical publications in England (Sommerville, 1996; Raymond, 1996 1999). What this project attempts to add is a bridge between the two traditions of journalism studies and discourse analysis and one which can provide a synoptic analysis of the impact of newspaper language over time. Placing language at the forefront of the study of newspapers reinforces the point that:

> . . . a concept of a language cannot stand isolated in an intellectual no-man's land. It is inevitably part of some more intricate complex of views about how certain verbal activities stand in relation to other human activities, and hence, ultimately, about man's [sic] place in society. (Harris, 1980: 54)

Accounts which downgrade the social role of language in the history of newspapers can fall into the trap which Cameron (1990) identifies as the 'language reflects society' model. She articulates the restrictions of such a view:

> The first problem is its dependence on a naïve and simplistic *social* theory . . . Secondly, there is the problem of how to *relate* the social to the linguistic (however we conceive the social). The 'language reflects society' account implies that social structures somehow exist before language, which simply 'reflects' or 'expresses' the more fundamental categories of the social . . . language . . . [is a] *part of* the social, interacting with other modes of behaviour and just as important as any of them. (Cameron, 1990: 81–82)

This restricted view is, of course, a regular cliché within lazy-minded interpretations of the role of the newspaper itself as 'mirroring society'. To counter that view, this book restores language as a centrally important social intervention to the study of the newspaper arguing with Hodge and Kress that language is:

> a key instrument in socialization, and the means whereby society forms and permeates the individual's consciousness . . . signifying social behaviour. (Hodge and Kress, 1993: 1)

Theoretical perspectives

Having asserted that we cannot consider language without its social context, it is appropriate to move on to briefly consider a range of ideas about language and society that this book will draw upon which have direct relevance to a historical study of the language of newspapers. It is to be hoped that by making explicit the theoretical claims of the

argument in the early stages, the rest of the book can concentrate on providing a rich illustration of the varied language of the newspaper within that theoretical context without too much in the way of diversion. The narratives of newspapers place them unmistakenly in their times. In turn, the historical sweep and the specifics of a particular era are formative of the language of newspapers, meaning that the social character of these texts is therefore both thematic and structural. Many contemporary accounts of language and society consider that language is profoundly implicated in power structures in society (Foucault, 1974; Fairclough, 1995a 1995b; Hodge and Kress, 1993). The early destabilization of social hierarchies by periodical publications from the seventeenth century covered in this account is a first and clear testament to this, as well as being an indication of the potential for interaction between social and textual formations. Russian theorist Bakhtin (1996) provides one of the most subtle and persuasive accounts of how language is used as a key site of struggle between conflicting social forces: all of which wish to constrain meaning to their own ends and therefore give direction to communication within their own preferred definitions in order to achieve their own goals.

The key terms which we will borrow from Bakhtin are 'dialogue', and 'heteroglossia' in this introduction and 'carnivalesque' in relation to discussions of tabloid newspapers and the much contested process of 'tabloidization' flowing from these newspapers later in the book. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia fits well with the mapping of the history of newspaper language. It can assist in problematizing the constant power struggles over which features of newspapers have had the greatest impact on the social and political worlds at any given time and through this theoretical lens, newspaper language can be observed as a highly contested dialogic space where the struggle over hierarchies of communicative control has persisted across different historical periods.

Heteroglossia is Bakhtin's conceptualization of the fact that all language transactions take place in the context of potentially alternative expressions. They are structured between the centrifugal potential of the multiplicity of contesting voices of heteroglossia and the centripetal tendencies which allow language to retain a socially shared coherence. Heteroglossia traditionally contests the dominant social-linguistic norms. The concept foregrounds the linguistic nature of our experience of the world as it is narrated to us and through us, drawing on a vast array of voices and modes of communication, all vying in particular times and places for our attention. This has a particular relevance to the role of the newspaper which has evolved with a range of competing and overlapping functions. These include informational, political, entertainment, normative/integrationist creation of social identities,

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agenda-setting and consumerist all within increasingly complex networks of a more integrated and wider mediasphere. Journalism is defined in each era by its particular engagement with politics, technology, economics and culture. Dahlgren is one leading commentator who appreciates this diversity and stresses that the 'cultural discourse' (1988: 51) of journalism is not simply informational but a part of a broader set of symbolic representation. This multiplicity and generic variation has always formed part of newspaper journalism's resilience and vitality and explains much of its ability to realign within different historical and political settings (Conboy, 2004: 224).

One of the tasks of the newspaper is to close down a potentially infinite heteroglossia into a unified editorial voice but one which still may appear to draw on the energies of a multiplicity of voices and attitudes. All the newspaper's appeal as a popular product lies in its successful reconciliation between these two poles of unity and multiplicity. Within the heteroglossia of cultural discourse, however, newspapers' style and content remain determined ultimately by the voice of the political economy because they have always needed to make a profit through their selection of generic variety and political pragmatism.

Newspapers over time have adapted to articulate particular variants of language for particular social groups as Bakhtin may have envisaged. From the aspirations of the emergent bourgeoisie as a dominant economic and political grouping in the eighteenth century, articulating its new-found identity in the periodical press (Eagleton, 1991), through the era of radical engagement with political and social reform in the early nineteenth century, to the commercialization of the voice of the ordinary working classes in the *Daily Mirror* of the period 1934–1969, we can see the sort of social stratifications of language in newspaper form which had attracted the attention of Bakhtin to the work of Rabelais in a literary form at a very different historical juncture. Within their history there has been a constant struggle between differing claims on the functions and aims of newspapers. Accounts of newspapers which prioritize both their commercial concerns as well as their related reputation for scrutiny of the powerful in society (their supposed watchdog function) have predominated in historical assessments of the newspaper through history (Fox-Bourne, 1998; Siebert, 1965; Koss, 1981 and 1984) but accounts of discourses resistant to this politically conservative and economically subservient style of newspaper continue to resonate. Harrison (1974), Atton (2002) Atton and Hamilton (2008) all provide evidence of how the subordinate survives within oppositional discourses as too do the discourses of ethical journalism (Frost, 2007; Harcup, 2006) and accounts which highlight the need for journalism to survive as a counterbalance to the interests of the powerful

despite the decline of the watchdog functions of journalism within the contemporary political economy of newspapers (Lewis et al., 2008a; O'Neill and O'Connor, 2008; Davies, 2008). There continues, therefore, to be a set of variable, social and political claims on the language and function of the newspaper, yet they remain constrained within a set of dominant perspectives and within historically specific social formations. This is what makes the language of newspapers such an important topic from a socio-historical point of view. It can be investigated to see how its dominant patterns fitted into or challenged social and political structures at different points in history. The proliferation of styles of newspaper language to address competing expectations and demands has complex implications:

> . . . it can be seen that the social purposes of journalism are contradictory. Some are overt (entertainment, factuality, impartiality, objectivity) some covert (social control, ideological commitment, legitimation) and the overt and the covert purposes do not mesh easily. It is perhaps not surprising that in a situation of such contradictory generic demands a rich array of generic strategies has developed. (Van Leeuwen, 1987: 209)

The issue of genre has particular importance for this study since, as well as having stylistic characteristics, genre is also a form of social contract between writer and reader. A reader knows what to expect from a particular genre or combination of genres (Swales, 1990) and takes his/her place in the strategic social complexity of these expectations (Fairclough, 2005: 71). These expectations form part of a shared sense of community in reading and are an important contributor to the social aspects of writing. Generic patterns and the expectations of readers of newspapers have always been conditioned within such social parameters. Miller (1994) argues that genre functions as a way of understanding how to participate in the activities of a community. As such, genre is located within a wider set of cultural patterns and in studying the particular features of these patterns over time we can begin to understand more about the ways in which readers shared their social knowledge. Newspaper language can be seen very much as a 'social semiotic' (Halliday, 1978) which, in its generic range, draws particular social groups into particular styles of presentation.

Newspapers have always created readers, not news, as their primary function. They are 'language forming institutions' (Bell, 1991: 7), informing as well as responding to broader linguistic trends and contributing to the 'emergent property of social interaction' (Pennycook, 2004: 7). Yet, even within the informational function of the newspaper, there have always been ideological implications in the transmission of

information for particular audiences. Newspapers function to create public identities for social groups as well as for individuals within those groups though the range of textual strategies identified by Fairclough (2003: 213–221). This view of the language of newspapers complements the 'ritual view of communication' espoused by Carey (1989) who argued that the media, and for our purposes this can be applied to the more specific medium of the newspaper, are far more concerned with the re-creation and reconfirmation of social groups than they are with the transmission of information *per se*. Language is a fundamental aspect of this ritualization, each group recognizing its own vernacular and each newspaper trying its best to maintain a particular brand of language to hold together its own social, geographical, demographic and political readership.

Another perspective from linguistics which can be deployed to understand the social history of the language of the newspaper comes from Ferdinand de Saussure (1966). Semiology encourages us to create a distance from the everyday routines of linguistic performance, to see language in a denaturalized way. It does this by creating a series of binary oppositions some of which have implications for our study of the language of the news media. One of the most useful of these for our analytical purposes is that of *langue/parole*. For de Saussure, *langue* [the structure of language] and *parole* [the more malleable performance of everyday speech] play an essential role in the function of language. These poles have a special relevance to the language of newspapers. *Langue* can be interpreted as the systematic structuring of language as news within institutional norms of news value (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001) or house style (Cameron, 1996); *parole* as the vernacular echoes of a socially targeted, idealized audience. This binary dynamic is a point which is endorsed in the interplay between the individual and the institutional in the interpretation of journalism by Bourdieu: '. . . even if the actors have an effect as individuals, it is the *structure* of the journalistic field that determines the intensity and orientation of its mechanisms, as well as their effects on other fields' (Bourdieu, 1998: 73). Although he was thinking more of the journalist as actor rather than the reader at this point of his argument, the oppositional dynamic between individual and structure and the effect of this dynamic on the production of the newspaper's language remains valid. Newspapers have always provided a constant negotiation between these perspectives as they attempt to maintain a grip on that language of the quotidian par excellence, the news. Moreover, the 'essential relatedness of language and history' (Crowley, 1990: 29–37) is clarified according to Crowley through de Saussure's analytical framing, ensuring that the relationship is not an 'external' factor to the main business of linguistic study.

This inter-relatedness explains how a relatively stable worldview retains coherence for an audience over time. Newspaper language can only function in a way which accepts the historical rooting of that language as an essential part of its context. An obvious example would be the way that the anniversaries of war are commemorated, where the past is the central point of the contemporary story (Conboy, 2007a) and where the reader is expected to make the connection for themselves from within the accepted cultural framework of the newspaper's language (Conboy, 2007a: 97).

A first definition of discourse is in terms of the coexistence of text and context and the impossibility of understanding one without the other or prioritizing one as more important than the other. Both text and context are complex, as is their inter-relationship. Broadly speaking, linguists choose to use the term discourse as describing the coexistence of text and context, and the regularities present in any stretch of language longer than a sentence (Crystal, 1991: 106). This implies that there can be, from the perspective of a discursive analysis, no utterance which can be divorced from the circumstances of its production and reception, beyond the utterance itself in its interconnections with other linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena, without losing an essential part of its meaning: its context. The relevance of this to the language of newspaper journalism is clear. It means that we must always keep in mind the multiple relationships of journalism with society, within the economy, with politics and also as a relatively autonomous cultural practice in its own right with its own traditions. Journalism can be viewed as an intersection of many conflicting interests, some of which, at some points in history, have clearer priority than others.

Discourse, in the second sense in which it is often used in contemporary debates around language and culture, is a term influenced by the writing of Michel Foucault (1974). This definition too has a direct relevance to newspapers as it is predominantly concerned with the social function of language. This view of discourse claims that the language used about a particular practice in turn constructs the object of which it speaks meaning that this journalistic medium is therefore made up of the claims and counter-claims of a variety of speakers on its behalf. What journalists say about their work, what critics and political commentators say about journalism, the perceived effects of the language of journalism on society, the patterns of popularity among readers and viewers of journalism all take their place in defining the discourse of journalism. Discourses, according to Foucault, are also intrinsically bound up with questions of power since they give expression to the meanings and values of institutions or practices and, in doing so, claim authority for themselves. The discourse of journalism defines, describes

and limits what it is possible to say with respect to journalism, whether at its margins or at its institutional core. It describes the ways in which it is possible to think about and criticize the characteristic practices of journalism. One advantage of considering journalism in this way is to once again denaturalize certain common-sense assumptions made about it and enable us to criticize them and question their logic. Furthermore, this approach also assists in assessing how the dominant opinions in debates over journalism's power and value have altered over time. Certainly, over time, many aspects of journalism can be regarded discursively such as the freedom of the press, the news media as a 'Fourth Estate', the objectivity of journalism, the normative political functions of journalism or what journalism should and should not do and the often obscured economic imperative of journalism – its political economy.

Another advantage of considering newspaper language as a discourse is that it enables us to view news production and dissemination as creating new forms of power as well as new forms of access to representation. Journalism has never simply contested a sort of political power which lay outside its own sphere of influence. It has always been deeply involved in the creation of power structures – particularly those involved in public communication. One of the most widespread fallacies, the Whig account of journalism (cf Curran and Seaton, 2003) sees journalism as the triumphant march of the political emancipation of Western societies as enacted through the news media (Siebert, 1965). Journalism has contributed itself to this account and draws upon it as a way of legitimating its relationship with the political status quo. Considering journalism as a discourse disrupts this account and highlights its contested nature as well as encouraging us to see it as the sum of the variety of practices which it has incorporated over the centuries. Much of journalism's resilience and vitality come, in fact, from its ability to adapt to changes in cultural and economic imperatives. Writing specifically about newspapers, Black sees their history as being profoundly informed by the changes necessary within a competitive market:

> Change is therefore a central theme in newspaper history, not only because of its occurrence, and the speed of its occurrence, but also as the awareness of change creates a sense of transience and opportunity. Each period of English newspaper history can be presented as one of transformation, shifts in content, production, distribution, the nature of competition, and the social context. (Black, 2001: 1)

Foucault's view of language as playing a central role in maintaining social control and delimiting social and political change through the

operation of discourse is one which has been influential in developing theories of critical discourse analysis which have been applied to newspaper language most notably by (Fowler, 1991; Van Dijk, 1991; Wodak, 2001; Jäger, 2001; Cameron, 1996; Billig, 1995; Fairclough, 1995 a and b and 2003). Within this discursive environment, readers can be 'manipulated and informed, preferably manipulated while they suppose they are being informed' (Hodge and Kress, 1993: 6). Voluntarist and institutionalist concepts of language (Joseph and Taylor, 1990: 11) are involved in the power struggle over the identity of newspaper discourse since it invites deliberation on whether it is constructed predominantly by individuals (printers, politically engaged citizens, royalty, political authority) or by an institutionalized set of norms which act, even at the birth of the newspaper acted to constrain in order to meet social and political expectations. The struggle over the resolution of these questions is what forms the discourse of the newspaper. What Said has expressed more generally in connection with writing has resonance for the formation of the discourse of the newspaper more specifically:

> writing is no private exercise of a free scriptive will but rather the activation of an immensely complex tissue of forces for which a text is a place among other places where the strategies of control in society are conducted. (Said, 1978: 673–714)

Historical perspectives on the operation of these discourses through the language of newspapers can demonstrate how these are not static but attempt to manoeuvre to maintain maximum control in changing political and economic circumstances. This approach is, in fact, most productive when considering the shifts in newspaper language over time and the social and political implications of these shifts (Jucker, 2005).

Conclusion

The book will provide an outline of the changes in the language of newspapers in the context of the sociolinguistic debates briefly sketched above and the importance of those changes to the societies they were produced for and which they structured in the process of reporting them. Changes in language/format could be prompted by political changes in control or in experimentation due to a weakening of direct control; they could also be triggered by the need to differentiate for particular markets or to accommodate changes in technology. Particular phases of the development of the language of newspapers have encompassed particular engagements between language and the social and political structures dominant at those times. The book will endeavour