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# Language in the News

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Discourse and Ideology  
in the Press

ROGER FOWLER

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London and New York

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Newspaper coverage of world events is presented as the unbiased recording of 'hard facts'. In an incisive study of both the quality and the popular Press, Roger Fowler challenges this perception, arguing that news is a practice, a product of the social and political world on which it reports. Writing from the perspective of a critical linguistics, Fowler examines the crucial role of language in mediating reality.

Starting with a general account of news values and the processes of selection and transformation which go to make up the news, Fowler goes on to consider newspaper representations of gender, power, authority and law and order. He discusses stereotyping, terms of abuse and endearment, the editorial voice and the formation of consensus. Fowler's analysis takes in some of the major news stories of the Thatcher decade – the American bombing of Libya in 1986, the salmonella-in-eggs affair, the problems of the National Health Service and the controversy over contraception and the young.

Laying bare the ideologies at work in newspaper language, Fowler challenges both readers and students of the media and journalists involved in producing the news to become aware of how language can shape, rather than mirror, the world.

Roger Fowler is Professor of English and Linguistics at the University of East Anglia. He is the author of a number of books, including *Linguistics and the Novel* and *Linguistic Criticism*, and has edited *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*.

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That's a load of old squit.  
Norfolk saying

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## Chapter 1

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### Introduction: the importance of language in the news

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This is a study of how language is used in newspapers to form ideas and beliefs. I take the view that the 'content' of newspapers is not facts about the world, but in a very general sense 'ideas'. I will use other terms as appropriate: 'beliefs', 'values', 'theories', 'propositions', 'ideology'. My major concern is with the role of linguistic structure in the construction of ideas in the Press; I will show that language is not neutral, but a highly constructive mediator.

The journalist takes a different view. He or she collects facts, reports them objectively, and the newspaper presents them fairly and without bias, in language which is designed to be unambiguous, undistorting and agreeable to readers. This professional ethos is common to all the news media, Press, radio and television, and it is certainly what the journalist claims in any general statement on the matter. For example, the following statement by Andrew Neil, the editor of the *Sunday Times*, introducing a book on the 1984-5 miners' strike written by that paper's journalists, asserts that though a newspaper may have a clear editorial position on some topic reported, that is reserved for the leader column, while the news reporting itself, on other pages, is factual and unbiased:

From the start, *The Sunday Times* took a firm editorial line: for the sake of liberal democracy, economic recovery and the rolling back of union power, and for the sake of the sensible voices in the Labour Party and the TUC, Scargill and his forces had to be defeated, and would be. It was a position from which we never wavered throughout this long, brutal dispute. Our views, however, were kept to where they belong

in a quality newspaper: the editorial column. For us the miners' strike was above all a massive reporting and analysing task to give our readers an impartial and well-informed picture of what was really happening.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the professional journalist's self-image on this question of impartiality has come under strong challenge from students of the media. Notably the Glasgow University Media Group, and the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, have in their various research publications elaborated an alternative picture of news practices; a picture which is current generally among sociologists and other students of the media.<sup>2</sup> On this model, news is socially constructed. What events are reported is not a reflection of the intrinsic importance of those events, but reveals the operation of a complex and artificial set of criteria for selection.) Then, the news that has been thus selected is subject to processes of transformation as it is encoded for publication; the technical properties of the medium – television or newsprint, for example – and the ways in which they are used, are strongly effective in this transformation. Both 'selection' and 'transformation' are guided by reference, generally unconscious, to ideas and beliefs. Analysis of output can reveal abstract propositions which are not necessarily stated, and are usually unquestioned, and which dominate the structure of presentation. One such was the proposition 'wage increases cause inflation' which the Glasgow Group discovered dominated the television presentation of industrial news in the first half of 1975. It is further claimed by students of the media that such propositions tend to be consonant with the ideas of the controlling groups in an industrial-capitalist society, because news is an industry with its own commercial self-interest. Thus news is a *practice*: a discourse which, far from neutrally reflecting social reality and empirical facts, intervenes in what Berger and Luckmann call 'the social construction of reality'.<sup>3</sup> (I hasten to assure readers that one can believe that news is a practice without also believing that news is a conspiracy.)

This argument – which I will report in more detail in chapter 2 – is not peculiar to media studies, but has its counterparts in the sociology of knowledge (hence my reference to Berger and Luckmann's book), semiotics and linguistics, the major branch of semiotics. In his book *Understanding News*, John Hartley very

constructively places the usual contemporary account of news as a social and ideological produce within the framework of general semiotic theory, and this seems to me the proper intellectual context for the analysis of media.<sup>4</sup> The foundations of semiotics were laid by the early-twentieth-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In the form of their contemporary acceptance, these principles are roughly as follows. Between human beings and the world they experience, there exist systems of signs which are the product of society. Signs acquire meaning through being structured into codes, the principal code being language. Other codes abound; they are language-like in their structural properties, but more transient, less stable. The analyses offered by Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* are very suggestive of the power of coding in such areas as fashion, architecture, cuisine and sport.<sup>5</sup> Codes endow the world with meaning or significance by organizing it into categories and relationships which are not there 'naturally', but which represent the interests, values and behaviours of human communities. So, for example, the distinction between 'plants' and 'weeds' is a semiotic, not botanical, difference: it stems from the tastes and fashions of a gardening culture, and is coded in the vocabulary of their language. The existence of these two words, with their conventionally opposed meanings, allows us to communicate about the objects concerned. But communication between people is not the only function of the language code. Language and other codes, most importantly language, have a cognitive role: they provide an organized mental representation for our experience. Whatever the 'natural' structure of the world, whether indeterminate flux, as Saussure seems to have believed, or some other structure (from a semiotic point of view it does not matter), we handle it mentally, and in discourse, in terms of the conventional meaning-categories embodied in our society's codes.

In chapters 3 to 5 I will give a fuller exposition of the linguistic model which supports this theory and analysis, but here I will just anticipate, briefly, the further linguistic apparatus that will be brought into play. It is clear that the argument needs greater *psychological* and *social* refinement than is found in Saussure and in the more recent French semioticians. We need, first, to say something more about the relationship between the semantic (meaning) structure of the language code, and the mental organization of experience. On this question, I will refer to the ideas of



the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, and of the British linguist M. A. K. Halliday.<sup>6</sup> These theoreticians maintain that there is a causal relationship between semantic structure and cognition: that language influences thought, in the sense that its structure channels our mental experience of the world. This claim, which is expressed by its proponents in various terms and with varying degrees of force, is impossible of empirical proof, and has to be handled cautiously, treated as a working hypothesis rather than a finding. There is, however, some relevant psycholinguistic research.<sup>7</sup>

The social dimension of this theory is more secure, because it is easy to see correlations between differences of code and differences of social setting. The style of the *Sun* newspaper is very different from that of the *Independent*, and the readerships of the two papers are very distinct socioeconomically. Presumably, this linguistic and social co-variation is significant. Many aspects of the correlation between linguistic form and social setting have been studied by sociolinguists,<sup>8</sup> and here again Halliday is extremely helpful. He draws attention to the tremendous range of sociolinguistic variety to be found within a single whole language such as English, and he enquires into the functions of this variety both in delimiting social groups and also in encoding the different ideologies of those groups.

My accounts of language in newspapers, and, I believe, the analyses of news media offered by the authorities I have cited, can be regarded as merely specific instances of the general principles I have just sketched. News is a representation of the world in language; because language is a semiotic code, it imposes a structure of values, social and economic in origin, on whatever is represented; and so inevitably news, like every discourse, constructively patterns that of which it speaks. News is a representation in this sense of construction; it is not a value-free reflection of 'facts'. The final theoretical point to make here is that I assume as a working principle that each particular form of linguistic expression in a text – wording, syntactic option, etc. – has its reason. There are always different ways of saying the same thing, and they are not random, accidental alternatives. Differences in expression carry ideological distinctions (and thus differences in representation). The point is sometimes obvious: clearly it is significant whether a political leader is referred to as 'Gorby' or 'Mr Gorbachev', whether the opening of the borders in Eastern

Europe is headlined 'REDS HEAD WEST' or 'Thousands cross border into West Germany'. But these grossly visible alternatives, their meanings on open display, are only a small part of the ideological working of linguistic expression. Many other aspects of language, less dramatic but equally forceful in shaping representation, can be brought to the surface for observation. This book is concerned primarily with the analysis of those linguistic features which work subliminally in the newspapers' ideological practice of representation.

The prevailing orthodoxy of linguistics is that it is a *descriptive* discipline which has no business passing comments on materials which it analyses; neither *prescribing* usage nor negatively evaluating the substance of its enquiries. But I see no reason why there should not be branches of linguistics with different goals and procedures, and since values are so thoroughly implicated in linguistic usage, it seems justifiable to practise a kind of linguistics directed towards understanding such values, and this is the branch which has become known as critical linguistics.<sup>9</sup> That is the method followed in this book. Now, the word 'critical' could be intended, or taken to be intended, to denote negative evaluation, but this negativity is not necessarily the aim of critical linguistics. As far as I am concerned, critical linguistics simply means an enquiry into the relations between signs, meanings and the social and historical conditions which govern the semiotic structure of discourse, using a particular kind of linguistic analysis.<sup>10</sup> This activity requires a very specific model of linguistics. The model has not only to identify, and to label reliably, certain key linguistic constructions; it has to relate them to context in a special way. The familiar transformational-generative linguistics invented by Noam Chomsky<sup>11</sup> provides my eclectic model with some descriptive terminology, but is in general terms unsuitable, because its aim is to refer linguistic structures to the set of structural possibilities that are available to human language as a universal phenomenon, presumably genetically programmed in the human brain; Chomsky is not interested in the role of language in real use (and indeed will not allow such matters to be a valid concern of linguistics). Halliday's *systemic-functional linguistics*, on the other hand, is specifically geared to relating structure to communicative function, and this model provides most of my descriptive apparatus. Chapters 3 to 5 elaborate the detail.

Several lines of interest converged to cause me to write this

book. I was keen to develop the critical linguistics model, first sketched in Fowler, Hodge, Kress and Trew, *Language and Control* (1979) and then used in a scatter of studies by the original authors and by other colleagues. I wanted more experience of this analysis, in order to improve the technical details, and to discover what kinds of construction could be relied on to reward critical readers with insights; and I wanted to clarify the general theory, which was, and is, abstract and controversial. But my enthusiasm was not only a matter of technical interest in the model. I reflected that my work in the early 1980s, in a series of occasional lectures and articles, had become increasingly focused on the British Press – which was not my field in *Language and Control*, but a topic brilliantly explored by Tony Trew in two pioneering chapters. The newspapers became compulsive reading in this period of major and distressing events and processes: the Falklands War, escalating unemployment, disorder and violence, bombings, the miners' strike, the deployment of cruise missiles, nuclear accidents culminating in the Chernobyl disaster, the American bombing of Libya, the privatization of basic services such as water, the reduction of public funding for health and education, and so on. A number of political factors in this period seemed to me to have important and analysable implications for a reader's experience of newspaper language. I will just refer to three major problems by way of brief examples.

First, the paradoxical ideology of conflict and consensus. As has been pointed out by many political commentators, the Conservative government under Mrs Thatcher from 1979 to 1990 theorized social and international relationships in terms of conflict: striking versus non-striking miners; metropolitan councils versus central government; 'state-sponsored terrorism' versus 'self-defence'; 'appeasement' (and its advocates, such as CND) versus 'peace through defence'; and so on. I felt that public discourse, both political and media utterances, played a powerful role in establishing the categories which were sorted into these conflictual oppositions, and that the sorting could be directly observed in the details of linguistic construction (see chapters 6 to 8). But while the practice was to segregate and marginalize threatening and undesirable elements, the official discourse of government and media spoke of national unity of interest and common purpose: consensus. In a hypocritical attempt to resolve contradiction, the division between 'us' and 'them' was discursively reprocessed as

'we': 'just about every person in the land' as the *Sun* expressed it.

A second change, and problem, in the 1980s was the centralization and monetarization of power and authority. People in the best position to manage public affairs were stripped of their authority to do so. For example, local councils, and professionals such as doctors and teachers, were deprived of the ability to practise properly, and to work in the interests of the people, by a combination of strategies: legislative changes which withdrew local powers in favour of the authority of Westminster; reductions of public funding in many spheres, far below the levels needed to run a university, say, or a hospital; and discursive strategies working to reorganize conventional expectations of authority towards new, rigid and impractical hierarchies. In chapter 6, pp. 105–9, I analyse one set of newspaper materials which works in part to establish doctors as very low down in the medical ladder of power.

The third change of the 1980s is related to the second, but it was managed primarily discursively. This was the propaganda of individual responsibility or self-reliance. The government systematically depleted the resources and protections available for those in need: unemployed, sick in mind or body, elderly, abused or deprived in whatever way. Psychiatric hospitals and wards were closed down, and their clients pushed out to 'community care'; old-age pensions were allowed to fall in value, while tax concessions were offered to pensioners who were willing to work or to insure for their own medical treatment; food research was deprived of funding, at a time of an alleged food poisoning 'epidemic', on the grounds that the food industry should pay for research which benefits it. In every case, the saving of central funds resulting from these moves was justified in terms of people's wish to look after themselves, not to be 'nannied'. The media played a major role in promulgating the argument of individual responsibility: see, for example, the attempt to shift the food poisoning scare from the industry to 'the housewife', chapter 10.

I end this Introduction with a simple point about method. The 'standard position' of current students of the media is that news is a construct which is to be understood in social and semiotic terms; and everyone acknowledges the importance of language in this process of construction. But in practice, language gets

relatively meagre treatment, when it comes to analysis: the Glasgow Group, and Hartley, for example, are more interested in, and better equipped technically to analyse, visual techniques in television. *More Bad News* does devote three chapters to language, but the analysis is anecdotal and lacking in detail (from a linguist's point of view). In the present study, language is given fundamental importance, not only as an analytic instrument, but also as the way of expressing a general theory of representation which is entirely congruent with the theory assumed by other, non-linguistic researchers.

This book, then, offers a dimension of analysis which is skimpily or unsystematically treated in current media studies, the linguistic dimension; I approach it using the tools of one specific linguistic model, 'critical linguistics'. In order to give a full treatment of one level, I have of course had to pay little attention to other dimensions of analysis. For example, I have largely ignored the graphic format of the page, a dimension which is crucially important to the organization of newspaper text. I am well aware that typographical choices (style and size of print), composition and the deployment of photographs, drawings, cartoons, tables, maps, captions, etc., are of immense significance in newspaper representation, and that these factors interact dynamically with language proper, the words considered as linguistic structures. Newspaper discourse is so complex that concentration on one aspect inevitably leads to neglect of others, if one wants a book of this kind to remain readable – not inordinately long or methodologically over-complex.

I would like to make it clear that my intention is not simply to expose 'bias', certainly not to maintain that newspapers are especially 'biased'. My reliance on a general linguistic theory which maintains that (nearly) all meanings are socially constructed, that all discourse is a social product and a social practice – and my contention that all discourse is better understood if subjected to critical linguistic analysis – will, I hope, help to forestall a misunderstanding similar to that which marred the reception of *Bad News*. News has not been singled out as a unique instance of deliberate or negligent partiality; it is analysed as a particularly important example of the power of *all* language in the social construction of reality. I am not gunning for the Press, but looking at the linguistics of representation in newspaper dis-

course, which is a major element in our daily experience of language.

That said, it remains true that I have chosen to analyse in this book Press treatments of matters which are of intense concern in contemporary life: inequality, discrimination, inhumanity, war. I am often angered and distressed by what the papers say. I hope this book will give other concerned readers some practical help in decoding newspaper discourse, and in thinking about and discussing life issues and their representation.

## The social construction of news

### BIAS OR REPRESENTATION

In this chapter, I want to outline, quite briefly, what has emerged in recent media studies, for example the Glasgow and the Birmingham research,<sup>1</sup> as a sort of 'standard position' on the question of partiality in news presentation. A vulgar synopsis of this standard position might be that 'all news is biased': that is how journalists and lay people have construed what the media theorists have claimed. But in fact the standard media analysis aims to be descriptive, not destructive. What is being said is that, because the institutions of news reporting and presentation are socially, economically and politically situated, all news is always reported from some particular angle. The structure of the medium encodes significances which derive from the respective positions within society of the publishing or broadcasting organizations.

In fact, what is being claimed about news can equally be claimed about *any* representational discourse. Anything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological position: language is not a clear window but a refracting, structuring medium. If we can acknowledge this as a positive, productive principle, we can go on to show by analysis how it operates in texts. My interest is in the contribution of detailed linguistic structure – syntax, vocabulary structure, and so on – to moulding a representation of the world in news text. The standard account, though acknowledging that language has a role in mediation, has little to say about the specifics of how the process works.

As readers of newspapers, and viewers of television, we readily assume that the *Nine O'Clock News*, or the front page of the *Daily Express* or the *Guardian*, consists of faithful reports of events

that happened 'out there', in the world beyond our immediate experience. At a certain level, that is of course a realistic assumption: real events do occur and are reported – a coach crashes on the autobahn, a postman wins the pools, a cabinet minister resigns. But real events are subject to conventional processes of selection: they are not intrinsically newsworthy, but only become 'news' when selected for inclusion in news reports. The vast majority of events are not mentioned, and so selection immediately gives us a partial view of the world. We know also that different newspapers report differently, in both content and presentation. The pools win is more likely to be reported in the *Mirror* than in *The Times*, whereas a crop failure in Meghalaya may be reported in *The Times* but almost certainly not in the *Mirror*. Selection is accompanied by transformation, differential treatment in presentation according to numerous political, economic and social factors. As far as differences in presentation are concerned, most people would admit the possibility of 'bias': the *Sun* is known to be consistently hostile in its treatment of trades unions, and of what it calls 'the loony Left'; the *Guardian* is generous in its reporting of the affairs of CND. Such disaffections and affiliations are obvious when one starts reading carefully, and discussing the news media with other people. The world of the Press is not the real world, but a world skewed and judged.

Now, what attitude might one take towards the 'bias'? A number of possibilities are evident. There might be, for example, an optimistic response, based on the ideology of democracy and individual responsibility: biases exist because this is a free country, with an elected, representative government, and we have a free Press putting forward various points of views, so the individual has to read carefully and comparatively in order to discount the biases and see through to the truth. Such a view would be reasonable if as much money were spent on education as on the show of parliamentary conduct, but people are not in general trained to see through the veils of media representation, and massive educational advances would be necessary in order to produce significant numbers of critical readers who could discount the bias. On the Left, by contrast, there is an even more Utopian view, which says that bias is endemic because of the ties between media production and industrial-speculative capitalism, and can be countered only by radical changes in the financing and procedures of news production, and by the provision of alternative

news sources: I take it that this is the message of the important article 'Bias in the media' by Greg Philo, a member of the Glasgow team.<sup>2</sup> Whilst I sympathize with the analysis, it seems obvious to me that bias, on this theory, could not be eliminated by tinkering with the media, but only by altering the economic base on which the media are grounded; thus, this point of view merely reflects the spirit of revolutionary idealism. Third, there is an argument to the effect that biases do exist as a matter of fact, but not everywhere. The *Daily Express* is biased, the *Socialist Worker* not (or the other way round). In a good world, all newspapers and television channels would report the unmediated truth. This view seems to me to be drastically and dangerously false. It allows a person to believe, and to assert, complacently, that *their* newspaper is unbiased, whereas all the others are in the pocket of the Tories or the Trotskyites; or that newspapers are biased, while TV news is not (because 'the camera cannot lie'). The danger with this position is that it assumes the possibility of genuine neutrality, of *some* news medium being a clear undistorting window. And that can never be.

I think we will make progress if we follow the current standard academic account of news mediation, but dispense with the word 'bias' as a central theoretical term. 'Mediation' or 'representation' will less provocatively cover the processes which lead to 'skewing' and 'judgement'. ('Bias' could, if required, serve in a much more restricted sense of deliberate distortion for some ulterior motive. In this book I am not much concerned with cynical distortion, but would not of course wish to rule it out.)

## NEWS VALUES

There are two excellent succinct accounts, by Stuart Hall and by Greg Philo, of the processes of selection and transformation which are the causes of news mediation; this is essentially the theory which underpins the larger research projects which have been reported in the last ten years. Hall begins as follows:

The media do not simply and transparently report events which are 'naturally' newsworthy *in themselves*. 'News' is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories.<sup>3</sup>

And Philo puts it this way: "News" on television and in the Press is not self-defining. News is not "found" or even "gathered" so much as made. It is a *creation* of a journalistic process, an artifact, a commodity even."<sup>4</sup>

The news media select events for reporting according to a complex set of criteria of newsworthiness; (so news is not simply that which happens, but that which can be regarded and presented as newsworthy. These criteria, which are probably more or less unconscious in editorial practice, are referred to by students of the media as 'news values'; and they are said to perform a 'gate-keeping' role, filtering and restricting news input. The more newsworthiness criteria an event satisfies, the more likely it is to be reported. Catastrophically negative events such as the assassination of Mrs Gandhi, the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the sinking of the ferry '*Herald of Free Enterprise*' and the destruction by a bomb of the Pan Am airliner near Lockerbie in Scotland in December 1988, score high on most criteria, so receive massive newspaper and television coverage. The origins of news values are complex and diverse: they include general values about society such as 'consensus' and 'hierarchy'; journalistic conventions; nature of sources; publication frequency and schedule; and so on.

A widely accepted analysis of news values is the following list of criterial factors (referred to as  $F_1 - F_{12}$  below) formulated by Johann Galtung and Mari Ruge; they are worth studying in detail, and in particular it is worth reflecting on the great extent to which the factors are 'cultural' rather than 'natural':

- ( $F_1$ ) frequency
- ( $F_2$ ) threshold
  - ( $F_{2.1}$ ) absolute intensity
  - ( $F_{2.2}$ ) intensity increase
- ( $F_3$ ) unambiguity
- ( $F_4$ ) meaningfulness
  - ( $F_{4.1}$ ) cultural proximity
  - ( $F_{4.2}$ ) relevance
- ( $F_5$ ) consonance
  - ( $F_{5.1}$ ) predictability
  - ( $F_{5.2}$ ) demand
- ( $F_6$ ) unexpectedness
  - ( $F_{6.1}$ ) unpredictability
  - ( $F_{6.2}$ ) scarcity

- (F<sub>7</sub>) continuity
- (F<sub>8</sub>) composition
- (F<sub>9</sub>) reference to elite nations
- (F<sub>10</sub>) reference to elite people
- (F<sub>11</sub>) reference to persons
- (F<sub>12</sub>) reference to something negative<sup>5</sup>

F<sub>1</sub> says that an event is more likely to be reported if its duration is close to the publication frequency of the news medium. Because newspapers are generally published once a day, a single event is more likely to be reported than a long process: for example, the publication of unemployment figures on a certain day is more newsworthy than the long-term phenomenon of unemployment itself. F<sub>2</sub> 'threshold', refers to the 'size' or 'volume' needed for an event to become newsworthy: a car crash involving ten vehicles will get more attention than one involving two. F<sub>3</sub> – F<sub>5</sub> relate to the reader's or viewer's facility in making sense of an event. 'Unambiguity' is self-explanatory (though it must be added that mysterious events, as well as clear ones, are newsworthy if they can be related to cultural stereotypes, as in the mass hysteria incidents of the 'Mattoon anaesthetic prowler' and the 'Seattle windscreen pitting').<sup>6</sup> 'Cultural proximity' means, for example, that in Great Britain news items concerning France are more commonly reported than items concerning Albania; but 'relevance' can override this – the accident at the Union Carbide chemical plant at Bhopal, India, though geographically and culturally far away, is relevant to us because similar risks exist in our own industrialized country; and the fire at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in Russia on 26 April 1986, already very newsworthy on criteria such as F<sub>2</sub>, increased in newsworthiness after its initial reporting, because it became more *relevant* to Britain as radioactive clouds moved west. The two subsections of factor F<sub>5</sub>, 'consonance', refer to categories of events which people either expect to happen (e.g. violence at football matches) or want to happen (royal weddings and births). Criterion F<sub>6</sub> says that an event is even more newsworthy if it happens without warning and/or is unusual (such as the sudden and unexpected capsizing of the car ferry *Herald of Free Enterprise* as it was leaving Zeebrugge harbour on a routine crossing in calm weather on 6 March 1987). Of F<sub>7</sub>, 'continuity', Galtung and Ruge state that 'once something has hit the headlines and has been defined as "news",

then it will *continue* to be defined as news for some time even if the amplitude is drastically reduced'.<sup>7</sup> This persistence can be observed not only in respect of major events of great amplitude, such as the Chernobyl explosion, which stayed in the news for weeks or even months in 1986; stories which touch public or personal daily life can be sustained for months, as we will see when examining the 'salmonella-in-eggs affair' of 1988–9 (chapters 9 and 10). The next factor, F<sub>8</sub>, 'composition', refers to the balance or make-up of a paper or radio/television news bulletin: an item will be more or less newsworthy depending on what else is available for inclusion – it is possible to have a surplus of even bank raids or train crashes on one day, given that newspapers are committed to including a range of other kinds of item.

I hope it is becoming evident to what extent the selection criteria for newsworthiness are, in Hall's words, 'socially constructed'. If we now turn to Galtung and Ruge's last four factors, the dependence on cultural artifice is very obvious; indeed, Galtung and Ruge stress that F<sub>9</sub>–F<sub>12</sub> are 'culture-bound factors influencing the transition from events to news'. F<sub>9</sub>, 'reference to elite nations', encodes a 'superpowers' ideology of the dominating status of North America, Japan, Europe and Russia in world political and cultural affairs. As for elite persons (F<sub>10</sub>), the media's infatuation with the Princess of Wales illustrates perfectly this preoccupation with notable paradigms (in fact the media could be said to have *semiotically produced* 'Princess Diana' out of the materials provided by an obscure aristocratic teenager). F<sub>11</sub>, 'reference to persons', or 'personalization', is also a socially constructed value. Its application varies a good deal from paper to paper (thus underlining its artificiality), being most striking in the popular Press. Presumably, its functions are to promote straightforward feelings of identification, empathy or disapproval; to effect a metonymic simplification of complex historical and institutional processes (Arthur Scargill 'stands for' a whole set of alleged negative values in trades unionism; WPC Yvonne Fletcher, shot dead from a window of the Libyan Embassy while policing a demonstration, is made to stand for 'Britain's moral superiority over Libya'); and to facilitate the editing of a lengthy narrative to suit the 'frequency' (F<sub>1</sub>) of newspapers and television bulletins ('the latest news on the miners' strike' is more likely to be a report of an incident involving picketing individuals than an explanation of issues and principles). Most commentators on the media, including



myself, regard personalization as dangerous. The obsession with persons, and the media's use of them as symbols, avoids serious discussion and explanation of underlying social and economic factors: the brick-throwing rioter is imaged over and over again, but unemployment and the poverty of social services are rarely documented – and then only in low-circulation newspapers like the *Guardian*, and late-night minority television programmes like BBC-2's *Newsnight*. It is clear that personalization is an aspect of ideology, and a very creative one, too.

It is also obvious that the final one of the four factors which Galtung and Ruge identify as 'culture-bound', negativity, is a value rather than anything more natural: there is no natural reason why disasters should be more newsworthy than triumphs. What is not so clear, on the surface, is that most of the first eight factors in the list are cultural, too. Let us revisit one of them,  $F_4$ , 'meaningfulness'. 'Meaningfulness', with its subsections 'cultural proximity' and 'relevance', is founded on an ideology of ethnocentrism, or what I would prefer to call, more inclusively, homocentrism: a preoccupation with countries, societies and individuals perceived to be like oneself; with boundaries; with defining 'groups' felt to be unlike oneself, alien, threatening. Presupposed is what several media specialists have helpfully identified as a consensual model of society.<sup>8</sup> This is the theory that a society shares all its interests in common, without division or variation. Consensus is the affirmation and the plea of all political parties, expressed in appeals for 'one nation', for people to 'pull together', and so on. In the Press, this ideology is the source of the 'consensual "we"' pronoun which is used often in editorials that claim to speak for 'the people'. How 'we' are supposed to behave is exemplified by the regular news reports of stories which illustrate such qualities as fortitude, patriotism, sentiment, industry. But although consensus sounds like a liberal, humane and generous theory of social action and attitudes, in practice it breeds divisive and alienating attitudes, a dichotomous vision of 'us' and 'them'. In order to place a fence around 'us,' the popular papers of the Right are obsessed with stories which cast 'them' in a bad light: trades unionists, socialist council leaders, teachers, blacks, social workers, rapists, homosexuals, etc., all become stigmatized 'groups', and are then somehow all lumped together and cast beyond the pale. 'Group' is a central ideological concept today, in the domain of 'them'; opposed to 'people' in the domain of

'us'. I will examine the working of language in these discriminatory practices in chapters 6 and 8. The point to note at this stage is that Galtung and Ruge's factor  $F_4$ , 'meaningfulness', can be re-analysed as the effect of a prejudicial cultural stereotype.

## STEREOTYPES

News values, then, are to be regarded as intersubjective mental categories. In determining the significance of events, the papers and their readers make reference, explicit or more usually implicit, to what are variously called, in cognitive psychology and in semantics, 'frames', 'paradigms', 'stereotypes', 'schemata' and 'general propositions'.<sup>9</sup> In loose terms, this principle means that people work with tacit mental categories for the sorting of experience: let us just call these stereotypes for the moment. A stereotype is a socially-constructed mental pigeon-hole into which events and individuals can be sorted, thereby making such events and individuals comprehensible: 'mother', 'patriot', 'businessman', 'neighbour', on the one hand, versus 'hooligan', 'terrorist', 'foreigner', 'wet [Tory]', on the other, are some specific instances of stereotypical categories which give substance to the homocentric  $F_4$  as I have just interpreted it. Now, it is of fundamental importance to realize that stereotypes are *creative*: they are categories which we project on to the world in order to make sense of it. We construct the world in this way. And our relationship with newspapers makes a major contribution to this process of construction.

The formation of news events, and the formation of news values, is in fact a reciprocal, dialectical process in which stereotypes are the currency of negotiation. The occurrence of a striking event will reinforce a stereotype, and, reciprocally, the firmer the stereotype, the more likely are relevant events to become news. An excellent example of this process was revealed while I was writing the first draft of this chapter, in May 1986. A fortnight before, on 26 April, a catastrophic accident had destroyed the Chernobyl nuclear power station in the Soviet Union, releasing a radiocative cloud over northern and western Europe, which killed and contaminated livestock and vegetation on a wide scale. In itself this event scored high on most of Galtung and Ruge's criteria, or in my terms, it satisfied many news stereotypes: an extremely negative sudden event of great intensity, unusual yet

in a sense 'expected' despite official assurances, involving an elite nation, highly relevant to Great Britain on two counts – that it poisoned our food, and that it increased our anxiety about our own nuclear industries. Of course, Chernobyl was highly newsworthy, but the point to note here is that it consolidated the stereotype 'nuclear accident' in public consciousness, thus increasing the number of relevant events which were to figure in the news. The Chernobyl disaster became known to a British public which had for several years been increasingly aware of nuclear issues. In 1983, following months of argument and protest, American cruise missiles were installed (or 'deployed', in the jargon) in Britain, while at the same time renewal of Britain's nuclear submarines force was a widely debated political issue.<sup>10</sup> Other 'nuclear issues' in the air included the Central Electricity Generating Board's plan to build a new reactor, Sizewell B, to a design alleged to be unsafe on American experience; a review of sites for the dumping of 'low-level' nuclear waste; the possible connection between the nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield (tastefully renamed from the grimly evocative 'Windscale') and the high incidence of cancers such as childhood leukaemias in neighbouring communities; and the suspicion that such plants were responsible for radioactive spillages.

The Chernobyl accident confirmed worst fears about the dangers associated with nuclear arms and nuclear power, and quickly became the paradigm for the category 'nuclear accident.' The paradigm then quickly collected other instances, and generated a heightened perception of danger. Diverse events such as leakages, fires, explosions, temperature increases and excess waste disposals at various nuclear locations started to be reported, because they fell under a newly sharpened stereotype: 'nuclear accident'. The following report from the *Guardian*, 15 May 1986, shows the stereotype in action:

(1) **'Routine' and 'bodge' faults in N-plants**

One of the two reactors at the Sizewell A nuclear power station in Suffolk had to be shut down yesterday when a fuel can failed, releasing radioactivity into the gas cooling circuit.

The Central Electricity Generating Board said that although it was only a small, routine incident which did not have to be reported to government departments under

existing procedures it felt obliged to make an announcement because of heightened public interest after the Chernobyl disaster.

At Hinckley Point near Bristol, the board's officials were meanwhile under fire for not publishing all the evidence its inquiry team gathered about the accidental release of slightly radioactive cooling gas from the B station on November 29 last year.

This is a particularly clear example of the productive interaction between the news media, the public, and official agencies in the formation and application of stereotypes. A comparable productive stereotype is 'food poisoning' as examined in chapters 9 and 10.

If at first the set of news values was thought of as a check-list of features of events which is referred to (consciously or not) in order to decide whether or not to report an event, my discussion of stereotypes now makes it clear that this is not the whole story. News values are rather to be seen as 'qualities of (potential) reports. That is to say, they are not simply features of selection but, more importantly, features of representation; and so the distinction between 'selection' and 'transformation' ceases to be absolute: an item can only be selected if it can be seen in a certain light of representation, and so selection involves an ideological act of interpretation.

## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS IN NEWS SELECTION

So far, my explication of the notion of 'socially constructed' news has been by way of a *cognitive* commentary on Galtung and Ruge's selection factors. This commentary proposes that news stories are constructed on the basis of mental categories which are present in readers and built on by the media. This cognitive account suits the purpose of the present book, because it fits with the linguistic concern of the later chapters: to present the formation of ideas as governed by choices of language. However, it says little about the social, economic and historical determinants of the stereotypes in terms of which the news is to be understood. Other dimensions need to be added. Since they are not my main business, and anyway have been dealt with often by other writers, I will just

briefly list some of them, but that is not to undervalue their overwhelming importance in an overall account of the media.<sup>11</sup>

If we turn back to the quotation from Philo's article (p. 13), we find that he stresses the manufactured nature of news; cf. the title of Cohen and Young's book, *The Manufacture of News*. There is the question, of course, of what exactly is the product: arguably the product, in a commercial sense, is not news or newspapers (though both are clearly *made*), but rather *readers* – the profit, if any, coming from advertising revenue – or even *votes*, if the aim of the owners of newspapers is to maintain a government which will favour their other commercial ventures. It seems reasonable to assume that newspapers are involved in both of those productive aims, but, in any case, it is immaterial to my argument what exactly is the correct answer. What is overwhelmingly important is the fact that newspaper publication is an industry and a business, with a definite place in the nation's and the world's economic affairs. It is to be expected, then, that the activities and the output of the Press will be partially determined by considerations related to this fact: by the need to make a profit; by the economic organization of the industry; by its external relations with other industries, with financial institutions and with official agencies; by conventional journalistic practices; by production schedules; by relations with labour, dramatically illustrated by the troubled dealings of News International and the printers' unions over (ostensibly) the introduction of new technology and revision of printing practices. All of these commercial and industrial structures and relationships are bound to have an effect on what is published as news, and on how it is presented. For example, the Press is bound to be preoccupied with money, hence the prominence of financial pages even in the popular papers, even though stocks and shares and exchange rates cannot be of much interest to the bulk of the population. The newspapers are bound to be interested in royalty, because the Royals symbolize hierarchy and privilege, and because emphasizing the 'naturalness' of hierarchy and privilege serves the interests of capitalism, in which the newspaper industry participates. The Press is bound to be preoccupied with the ogres of socialism and trades unionism, and to condemn them, because the interests of socialism and of organized labour are experienced as antagonistic to the business of making money. It is not surprising that the British Press is almost without exception strongly Tory in its political views, and that there is no

successful socialist newspaper: the latter would be a contradiction in terms.

Stuart Hall and others have shown how production schedules, and conventions for access to sources, affect the content and presentation of news stories.<sup>12</sup> Because newspapers have to be written and produced very quickly, steps are taken in advance, as a matter of routine, to ensure a regular and plentiful supply of daily copy. News cannot be relied upon to come in spontaneously, but has to be 'gathered': by paying professional news agencies to send in stories, and by employing journalists to regularly monitor proven sources of news. Functionally speaking, these news-gathering strategies ensure economy of time and effort. But they are also very selective, in that only certain kinds of sources are worth tapping consistently. Brian Whitaker offers the following handy list of the kinds of institutions and events which are constantly attended to by journalists:

1. Sources monitored routinely
  - a. Parliament
  - b. Councils
  - c. Police (and the Army in Northern Ireland)
  - d. Other emergency services
  - e. Courts (including inquests and tribunals)
  - f. Royalty
  - g. 'Diary' events (e.g. annual events like Ascot or conferences known about in advance)
  - h. Airports
  - i. Other news media
2. Organizations issuing statements and holding Press conferences
  - a. Government departments
  - b. Local authority departments
  - c. Public services (transport authorities, electricity boards, etc.)
  - d. Companies
  - e. Trade unions
  - f. Non-commercial organizations (pressure groups, charities, etc.)
  - g. Political parties
  - h. Army, Navy, Air Force
3. Individuals making statements, seeking publicity, etc.