The Language of News Media

Allan Bell

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ALLAN BELL

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The Language of News Media

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Editor's Preface

A series editor should be careful to avoid exaggeration when introducing volumes in the series, and I am conscious that Allan Bell is not the first author to write for the Language and Society series for whom I have made the claim that he or she is uniquely qualified to write on their given topic. It is difficult, however, to avoid observing that Allan Bell is the only scholar I have ever come across who is both an experienced and practising journalist and an academic sociolinguist with an international reputation. As a New Zealand-based journalist, Allan Bell is a writer who is familiar with both the electronic media and print journalism in many parts of the (particularly English-speaking) world; and, within academic sociolinguistics and linguistic variation theory, he is very well known indeed as a scholar who has produced solidly empirically-based work of very considerable theoretical importance. In particular, his 1984 media-based theoretical paper 'Language style as audience design' is widely regarded as a sociolinguistic classic.

The use of language in the presentation of news, and elsewhere in the media, represents a form of interaction between language and society which affects us all. His surely unique combination of knowledge and expertise has now enabled Allan Bell to produce a book which provides original and exciting insights into this area which will be of great importance for students and researchers in communications and media studies, as well as in sociolinguistics.

Peter Trudgill

For the Memory of
my Mother and Father

Introduction and Acknowledgements

It is my belief — and one of the themes of this book — that audiences are an important influence on media content. The book is addressed to an audience of all those who are interested in how media work, how language works, and particularly how the two interact. Its contents should be accessible to people who have a lay interest in these issues as well as to people who study such matters. I hope it will also be of interest to journalists and others in the news media to learn something about the nature of the linguistic work they do.

The book's disciplinary background is in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, but it draws on a wide range of mass communications theory and research. The book should serve to introduce the study of mass media to students of sociolinguistics. It is less appropriate as an introduction to linguistics for communications researchers, although I have generally avoided technical linguistic terminology.

What is media discourse like? What can it tell us about media? What can it tell us about language? These are important questions for both sociolinguistics and mass communication research. They are also important for society at large. It is my belief that true, responsive communication among people and between peoples is worth striving for. The language of news media is prominent and pervasive in society, and it is worth understanding how that language works, how it affects our perceptions of others and ourselves, how it is produced, how it is shaped by values. This book addresses central issues in the nature of media language and discourse, its production and its reception. It does not, however, enter into the debate over what effect media may have on the use of language in society, for instance whether media language is debasing everyday language. 'The media and language' is the subject for another look.

To explain the background to this book: I have been both studying

and making media language for nearly 20 years. I began research on media language in 1972, and several years later moved to work in journalism. For a decade I alternated employment as an editor and journalist with semi-employment as a researcher in sociolinguistics and mass communications. In that time I worked in monthly magazines, a weekly newspaper and a daily news service, covering especially environmental, scientific and agricultural issues.

Daily journalism leaves no time or mental space for reflection let alone research, but I am now able to combine rather than alternate the two strands of practice and theory. For this my thanks go to the Head Office of the New Zealand Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, where I work half-time as a journalist and media consultant, and particularly to Kevin Sloan for allowing me several months away to write full-time and so complete this book. My other working life is spent as a freelance researcher, and I am grateful to the Department of Linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington, which has adopted me as an honorary research fellow.

Participant observation is a method which has produced insights into the nature of news and its production. Much of what I write here is the fruit of a converse approach — observant participation. I have drawn many examples and observations from my own experience and news stories I have written, or from stories by journalists who worked with or for me.

The content of this book has been, as I say, a long time brewing. Some of the work (on style in news language) originates in doctoral study of 15 years ago, some (especially on discourse analysis of news stories, and news comprehension) I have come to quite recently. Calling up all one's intellectual debts over such a period is difficult. But first credit goes to my principal research colleague, Janet Holmes of Victoria University's Department of Linguistics. She has been a continuing co-worker and encourager in a number of projects, and has commented helpfully on most of this manuscript.

I thank other individuals who have contributed insights and encouragement on aspects of my work: William Labov, Walt Wolfram, Ralph Fasold, Joy Kreeft Peyton, Nikolas Coupland, Howard Giles and Gerhard Leitner. And I remember the late Werner Droescher, who started me off in linguistics at the University of Auckland, and the late Colin Bowley, who saw me through a doctorate there.

As well as presenting my own work, this book incorporates a wide range of other people's research and findings on media language. For this I am indebted to a score of scholars, whose published work I have drawn on freely but most of whom I do not (or did not) know personally: Oliver Boyd-Barrett, Harald Burger, Jack Cappon, Howard

Davis, Teun van Dijk, Mark Fishman, Johan Galtung, Herbert Gans, the Glasgow University Media Group, Erving Goffman, Barrie Gunter, Andreas Jucker, Hannes Kniffka, Denis McQuail, Marie Holmboe Ruge, Philip Schlesinger, Michael Schudson, Gaye Tuchman, Paul Walton and Ruth Wodak. They have all produced insightful work, and I hope my presentation does them justice.

To those hosts who have over the years taken in this 'freelance academic nomad' (I owe the title to Walt Wolfram), I am grateful: the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC, where I was a Visiting Research Associate in 1981; University of Reading, where I was Leverhulme Visiting Fellow in 1982; Victoria University's Stout Research Centre, for its hospitality on a couple of occasions; and Linguistics Departments at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, University of Pennsylvania, University College, London, and the University of Stuttgart.

Several chapters of this book report findings from a project on media coverage and public understanding of the climate change issue in New Zealand. I acknowledge funding contributed to this project by the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research and Ministry for the Environment. I am also indebted to Jenny Neale, Andrew Matthews and Peter Clare for their professional inputs to the project.

And an appropriately brief 'par' — 'graf' to the Americans — to thank those journalists and editors with whom I have worked. I have learnt most from those I had the most trouble with.

Other journalists have also taken time out to talk to me as a researcher about their work, especially Radio New Zealand's staff, and Lindsay Clark, formerly of Wellington's *Dominion* newspaper. Philip Carpenter has been a most patient publisher awaiting a work which has had the gestation period of several elephants. And Ann Bone's editing skills have helped to clarify the end product. I am indebted to Peter Trudgill, both for his general contribution to my work and in his role as editor of the Language in Society series.

The book is dedicated to my mother, who died just before it was finished, and my father, who died 30 years earlier. Finally, I thank Susan Jordan — companion for precisely as long as I have been working on media language — for her constant encouragement and support, and occasional insight and research assistance. She has been ably seconded by Sonny and Thorcas.

One point of writing style in this book: in using generic pronouns, my policy is roughly to alternate *she* and *he*, giving precedence to *she* in most contexts.

Allan Bell, Wellington

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1

Media and Language

People in Western countries probably hear more language from the media than they do directly from the lips of their fellow humans in conversation. Society is pervaded by media language. Even in a nation as small as New Zealand, the media pour out daily almost two million words of that primary media genre, news, through some 35 newspapers, newscasts carried by a hundred radio stations and three television networks. In larger countries, the production multiplies. The American blockbuster Sunday newspapers print close to a million words each. The production of media language is huge, although only a fraction of all the face-to-face talk individuals produce. But media language is heard not just by one or two people but by mass audiences. It is the few talking to the many. Media are dominating presenters of language in our society at large.

Within the media, news is the primary language genre. It fills pages of the daily newspaper and hours of radio and television time. Even in broadcasting, where it occupies a small minority of airtime, news is seen by both media organizations and audiences as the focus of media content. Also common to all three daily media is the other dominant genre, advertising, which bulks larger than the news in many daily papers. Some of our data and examples in this book will be drawn from advertising, but most will come from the news since this is the most researched and arguably the most central (cf. McQuail 1987) genre.

News was not always so dominant. The year 1930 was early days for radio. The youthful British Broadcasting Corporation sometimes found there was a shortage of news deemed worthy to be broadcast. If this happened, no attempt was made to fill the gap. The announcer just said: 'There is no news tonight'. At that time, the BBC had a total

news staff of four. It carried news only after six o'clock at night, by agreement with news agencies and the press, who feared for their monopoly. It was allowed to broadcast no more than 400 eye-witness accounts of events per year (quoted in Schlesinger 1987: 20). In this later generation, the declaration that there is 'no news tonight' comes as a shock, a challenge to convention, even to the shape of reality itself. Now there is always news – unless a strike makes us do without.

In the news are carried the stories and images of our day. News is determined by values, and the kind of language in which that news is told reflects and expresses those values. Audiences feel that the way in which language is used must affect the content of what we receive from the media. We will touch on some but not all of the questions which concern people about the media and their language. One question which we will not address here is this: whether, in a world saturated in media language, the way the media use language is changing language itself. In this book we examine the characteristics of news language not its effect on other language.

Mass communication has several characteristics which distinguish it from face-to-face communication and offer advantages to the linguist: multiple originators, a mass simultaneous audience, a fragmented audience, absence of feedback, and general accessibility to the public. We shall see that these characteristics have a profound effect on the shape of media language, on how it is produced, on audiences' ability to understand media content, and on communicators' ability to make themselves understood.

This book deals mainly with language as it is used in the mainline, daily news media – press, television and radio. A wider definition of printed media could call in magazines, books, posters, record covers, bumper stickers, T-shirts – each getting further from the core media. We could include records, cassettes, videos, films. We might cover newer media such as teletext – but it tends to reproduce press-style content and style in broadcast format. But I will confine myself to those media which have a mass audience, and a continuous or daily production cycle. The massness of the core media is characterized by their general availability to all people within a given geographical area. Anyone with a radio or television set or spare change to spend can receive the mainline mass media.

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