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A Critical Analysis

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The Author

Mingyao Chen, born in Ningbo in 1962, was educated at Hangzhou University and at Southampton University, UK, where she studied for MA in English Literature. She is Associate Professor of English Language and Literature at Ningbo University and Deputy Dean of the Foreign Languages Faculty. She is the author of *Newspaper English* (Chongqing Publishing House, 1998), as well as many articles in journalistic English studies and literature studies.

Preface

I started to be keen on English newspapers and broadcasting during my university years. At the end of the 70s, there were many "Chinglish" expressions in English textbooks. I was not quite clear about what was native English. I went to the library for English newspapers and magazines, or listened to VOA and BBC. Newspapers and broadcast helped me to learn the native English.

In the summer of 1997, I had a chance to visit VOA, News Museum and the *Baltimore Sun* in the US. Learning the news-making process in broadcasting and editorial departments, I got to know that news selection and news making are carried out with a certain purpose. Even on-the-spot reporting is clipped and arranged carefully to suit the need. News cannot be absolutely objective.

English newspaper readers are generally native people or second language learners and researchers. With the opening and reforming of China, news-reading material in class can be obtained directly from western news publications, which include not only *Reader's Digest*, but also government papers, party papers, and local papers. The teacher helps the students with the reading comprehension and the familiarity of different news styles, such as news report, news in brief, feature, opinion, and advertisement. In some of the university, satellite TV news is available to students. Many students think that western news, fast in speed, and with a lot of spot scenes (or pictures), should be real and objective.

However, from my recent teaching and research in news English, excluding the scene, the typography, and the illustrations (very important, but not discussed in this book,) I find that news English is not an absolutely reflex mirror. It is a refracted lens adjusted and manipulated by man. In Whitewater news reports, the Democrats like to use the expression "Whitewater Event", while the Republicans preferred "Whitewater Scandal". In *New York Times* building, there is a poster for their objective news making: All the News That's Fit to

Print. Yet, on second thoughts, this "Fit" is worth studying. News is not a natural phenomenon from the reality. It is a special product manufactured by the mass media. It has complicated relationships with politics, economy, history and culture. The world is multi-dimensional. News is its product. News English is its carrier. Critical linguistics can be utilized as a very good tool in analyzing this special discourse. This book discusses the news value, comments on genre, power, government, law, social order, and reveals readers' ideological views, the instructive role of editorials, and the reciprocal relationship between the reader and the writer, and so on. This book cites news report samples familiar to Chinese readers, such as Clinton Sexgate, madcow disease, and NATO bombing in Yugoslavia. Through detailed analysis with critical linguistic theory, newspaper readers will realize that language can manipulate. We do not get real information, we are led or conducted to believe so and so. News discourse inspires imagination, reforms viewpoints, and rebuilds beliefs. It is not neutral, but a powerfully constructive mediator. News workers should utilize it scientifically, and language researchers should analyze it rationally. Of course this book is not to deny the objectivity of all the English news. This is intended to arouse more attention from the readers to this special discourse.

I have been teaching news English for six years. It is a very interesting course, introducing background knowledge, explaining language points, and analyzing stylistic features. I remember an old newspaper English teacher once said proudly, "When this course starts, there are more students looking for English papers in the library reading room. This is my success in teaching!" Here, I sincerely hope, this book will arouse more discussion among readers, and lead me to academic success!

This book is indebted to the help and support of the editors in Chongqing Publishing House.

The Author

1999/11/30 in Ningbo

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Chapter 1

Introduction

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. The media pour out daily millions of words of that primary media genre, news, through newspapers, newscast carried by radio stations and television networks. For example, 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 genre.

This book attempts to prove that language mediates reality in

news reporting. (News is a practice, a product of the social and political world on which it reports, rather than an unbiased recording of 'hard facts', as is supposed by the majority. Language can mirror the world, and more importantly, can shape the world.) Language used in newspapers is to form ideas and beliefs. Language is not neutral. It is a highly constructive mediator. However, 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 about the matter. Some may assert 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 the other pages, is factual and unbiased.

However, the professional journalist's self-image on this question of impartiality has now come under strong challenge. In the various research publications social linguists have elaborated an alternative picture of news practices. News is socially constructed. What events are reported is not a reflection of the inherent importance of those events, but reveals the operation of a complex and artificial set of criteria for selection. 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 'NATO bombing in Yugoslavia is peace-keeping'.

dominated the television presentation of international news in 1999. It is further claimed that such propositions tend to be in agreement with the ideas of the controlling groups in a super power country, because news is an industry with its own self-interest. Thus news is a practice: a discourse which, far from neutrally reflecting social reality and empirical facts, is closely related to what Berger and Luckmann call the social construction of reality'.

Here I refer to Berger and Luckmann's book to show that this argument is not peculiar to media studies, but has its counterparts in the sociology of knowledge, 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 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. 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 that 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 Ronald Barthes in his book *Mythologies* are very suggestive of the power of coding in such areas as fashion, architecture, cuisine and sport. Codes endow the world with meaning or significance by organising 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 opposite 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 organised 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.

(This book attempts to give a full exposition of the linguistic model that supports this theory and analysis.)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 organisation 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. [2] 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 defenders 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.

The social dimension of this theory is more secure, because it is easy to see correlation between 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 socio-

economically. Presumably, this linguistic and social co-variation is significant. Many aspects of the correlation between linguistic form and social setting have been studied by socialinguistics, and here again Halliday is extremely helpful. He draws attention to the tremendous range of sociolinguistic variety to be found within a language, and he inquires into the functions of this variety both in delimiting social groups and also in encoding the different ideologies of those groups.

News is a representation of the world in language. Since 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 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 that work subconsciously in the newspapers' ideological practice of representation.

Today the popular understanding 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 inquiries. But I see no reason why there should not be branches of linguistics with different goals and procedures. Since values are so thoroughly implicated in linguistic usage, it seems justifiable to practice a kind of linguistics directed towards understanding such values, and this is the branch which has become known as critical linguistics. That is the method followed in this book. Now, the word 'critical' could be intended to denote negative evaluation, but this negativity is not necessarily the aim of critical linguistics. Critical linguistics simply means an inquiry 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. This activity requires a very specific model of linguistics. The model has not only to identify, and to label reliably, certain key linguistic construction; it has to relate them to context in a special way. The familiar transformational-generative linguistics invented by Noam Chomsky[3] provides my eclectic model with some descriptive terminology. However, it 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. 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.

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. 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 provide critical readers with insights. I wanted to clarify the general theory, which is abstract and controversial. But my enthusiasm was not only a matter of technical interest in the model. It was the political factors in newspapers that seemed to me to have important and analyzable implications for a reader's experience of newspaper language.

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 meager treatment, when it comes to analysis. *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 insufficiently 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 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 extremely long or methodologically over-complex.

My intention in this book 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. My contention that all discourse is better understood if subjected to critical linguistic analysis, will 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 analyzed as a particularly important example of the power of *all* language in the social construction of reality. I am not aiming at the western Press, but looking at the linguistics of representation in newspaper discourse. That said, it remains true I have chosen to analyze in this book Press treatments of matters which are of intense concern in contemporary life: inequality, discrimination, inhumanity, war. Readers are often angered and distressed by what the papers say. I hope this book will give them, especially foreign language readers, some practical help in decoding newspaper discourse.

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[1] P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

[2] E. Sapir, *Language* (New York: Harvest Books, 1949 [first published 1921]); B. L. Whorf, ed. J. B. Carroll, *Language, Thought and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956); M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978). See also G. R. Kress and R. Hodge, *Language as Ideology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

[3] See N. Chomsky, Language and Mind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2nd edn, 1972); N. Smith and D. Wilson, Modern Linguistics; The results of Chomsky's Revolution (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

Chapter 2

News-Making in Society

1 News - Unmediated Truth

On the question of partiality in news presentation there is a sort of 'standard position' in recent media studies. One generally accepted opinion of this standard position might be that 'all news is biased': that is how journalists and lay people have understood 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 significance that derives from the respective positions within society of the publishing or broadcasting organizations.

Actually 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 twisting and 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 molding a representation of the world in news text. The standard

account, though acknowledging that language has a role in mediation, can hardly explain the specifics of how the process works.

Usually people assume that the TV news or the front page of the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*, consists of faithful reports of events that happened 'out there', in the world beyond their 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 motorway, 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 people a partial view of the world. Readers know also that different newspapers report differently, in both content and presentation. The lottery win is more likely to be reported in the *Mirror* than in *The Times*, whereas a crop failure caused by the Yangtse Flood in 1998 in China 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; the *Guardian* is generous in its reporting of the affairs of the Serbian War. Such disaffection 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.

Bias does exist. Then 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 in a free country, with an