

The Study of News: A Discourse Analysis Perspective

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Abstract:

Within the growing research in the field of communication, discourse analysts have given a noticeable interest to news by considering it an autonomous type of discourse. It has been shown in this perspective that news discourse possesses institutional features that distinguish it, given its communicative goal of addressing the public and highlighting events that would otherwise go unnoticed. The aim of this paper is to clarify the salient characteristics of news and to focus on the way discourse analysts approach its linguistic aspects. Particularly, Van Dijk's analytical framework for the study of news discourse is discussed. Generally, it is thought that the multitude of techniques that discourse analysis offers may benefit researchers when examining unexplored contexts and forms of news. This might enhance better news production.

Keywords: discourse analysis; journalism; news; discourse; news values.

Résumé

Dans le cadre de la recherche croissante dans le domaine de la communication, les analystes du discours ont accordé un imprégnant intérêt aux informations tout en les considérant comme étant un type de discours autonome. Dans cette perspective, il a été démontré que le discours de l'information possède et présente à la fois des caractéristiques institutionnelles qui le distinguent, compte tenu de son objectif de communication qui est de s'adresser au public et de mettre en évidence des événements qui, autrement, seraient passés inaperçus. L'objectif de cet article est de tirer au clair les principales caractéristiques de l'information et de mettre en évidence la manière dont les analystes du discours abordent ses aspects linguistiques. En particulier, le cadre analytique de Van Dijk pour l'étude du discours de l'information est discuté. En général, on pense que la multitude de techniques qu'offre l'analyse du discours peut être utile aux chercheurs en examinant des contextes et des formes d'information inexplorés. Cela pourrait améliorer la qualité de l'information.

Mots-clés: analyse du discours; journalisme; informations; discours; valeurs de l'information.

المخلص

ضمن الأبحاث المتنامية في مجال الاتصالات أظهر محللو الخطاب اهتماماً ملحوظاً بالأخبار من خلال اعتبارها نوعاً مستقلاً من الخطاب. وقد بينت هذه الأبحاث أن للخطاب الإخباري سمات مؤسسية تميزه بالنظر إلى هدفه التواصلي وهو مخاطبة الجمهور وتسليط الضوء على الأحداث التي قد تمر دون أن يلاحظها أحد. إن الهدف من هذه الورقة البحثية هو توضيح أبرز خصائص الأخبار والتركيز على الطريقة التي يتعامل بها محللو الخطاب مع جوانبها اللغوية. وعلى وجه الخصوص تم تسليط الضوء على الإطار التحليلي لفان ديك لدراسة الخطاب الإخباري. بشكل عام يُعتقد أن العديد من التقنيات التي يقدمها تحليل الخطاب قد تفيد الباحثين عند دراسة سياقات وأشكال جديدة من الأخبار ومن شأن هذا أن يعزز صناعة الأخبار بشكل أفضل.

كلمات مفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب ؛ الصحافة ؛ الأخبار ؛ الخطاب ؛ قيم الأخبار .

I. Introduction

The study of news is so intricate a pursuit. Trying to prescribe a single pathway to approach this cardinal instrument in the realm of journalism would eliminate some of its essential facets. Given its influential force in information dissemination, news discourse has magnetized the attention of scholars from multiple disciplines, such as communication theory, semiotics, sociology, psychology, media studies, linguistics and others. By and large, researchers have sought to dissect the anatomy of this sort of discourse at various planes by taking dissimilar foci for a better understanding of the workings and use of this information instrument. This paper is meant to describe the special nature of news seen as a core component of journalism and a self-contained type of discourse. By way of introduction, we try to introduce some central concepts and distinctions related to the topic. Essentially, we delineate the term "news" and discuss the factors governing news worthiness. This is followed by an examination of news from a discourse analysis perspective. In the end, through this paper, we put special focus on

Van Dijk's linguistic framework for the study of micro- and macro- structures of news and try to exploit it as a foundation for the examination of coherence in news writing.

II. The Nature of News

News lies at the heart of journalism. Etymologically, the word news dates back to the Old English words "newes" or "niwes" (Zelizer & Allan, 2010). It was first used in 1432 and became common only after 1500 (Claridge, 2010). Literally, the *Oxford Dictionary of English* gives it the sense of "tidings" or "newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent events" (p. 177). As it appears, the word centrally entails the dissemination of information about events. In the field of media, news is delineated as a "report of a current happening or happenings in a newspaper, on television, on radio, or on a web site" (Danesi, 2009, p. 212). This definition links the activity of event reporting to the set of media resources available in every society. Reah (2002) explains that what makes news different from all information one might receive each day is the significance the reported event carries for a sufficiently large group of people and the influence it might exercise on their lives. It follows from these definitions that the functionality of the profession of journalism in every society is thus created through news making because while reporting what is significant, journalists permit the public to consider issues or happenings that would otherwise be disregarded.

News making is regarded as a contextualized process of story making. It is shown that news is not merely a fictional account but also implies elucidation, expansion and most importantly the construction of a narrative, following a set of conventionalized professional practices. Through a form of storytelling, the reporter drags the audience into the story instead of giving them a disinterested record of facts. This is the rationale behind saying "news stories", where emphasis is put on the way the event is presented as a structured account (Reah, 2002).

Another issue about what news is that it might appear as an end-product in itself; however, it should be best regarded as a complex process involving a socially-situated treatment of information. Fowler (1991) stresses the fact that news is shaped according to its social context. In the same vein, Watson and Hill (2012) state that this treatment, or "mediation" of information, involves selection of what to report, edition of the raw happening, placement of emphasis on some of its sections and even manipulation of event representation. Through the use of language and other tools, this construction yields various representations of real experiences through selection of details and their transformation in news reports.

III. News Values

Media researchers foreground prime criteria for the making of pertinent news. These are known as *news values*. Danesi (2009) clarifies that such values are criteria employed by journalists to determine the news stories which merit dissemination and in which order of importance they should emerge. Based on news values, when a happening is considered appealing enough to an audience to be worth reporting, the event is said to be *newsworthy* (Busa, 2014). Several media researchers attempted to capture the principles governing worthy news. Galtung and Ruge, for instance, explain that "[news] favours the immediate, the concrete and the personal rather than the abstract and the complicated process. It needs to be culturally relevant and unambiguous in its import, and it often focuses on powerful or elite persons or groups or blocs (As cited in Montgomery, 2011, p. 2013). Along the same line, Lewis (1996) highlights interest and explains that the information critical to news making ought to be about a subject of public significance, the size of the public being a principal determinant of news worth. Other researchers even produced comprehensive inventories with full accounts on news values. In a more technical account, Van Dijk (1988 a) classifies news values into three categories: economic, social and ideological and suggests a number of constraints determining them.

IV. The Discourse of News

News discourse refers to that type of discourse which reports raw information in a conventionally accepted mode of representation appearing in various media. Van Dijk (1988 a) defines it as "a text or discourse on radio, on TV or in the newspaper, in which new information is given about

recent events” (p. 4). Claridge (2010) shows that there are institutional features which mark news discourse being a form of mass communication. In this connection, she explains that news discourse is publically available and is offered periodically or regularly with the help of technology and media. Also, she demonstrates that it targets a large, diverse and anonymous audience, representing an asymmetric communication process, as news producers do not receive direct feedback on what they report. Expounding on what constitutes news discourse, Bednarek and Caple (2012) make a very useful analytical distinction between the language-focused views and the multimodal views. On the one hand, news discourse is conceived in purely linguistic terms by some researchers, that is, as a piece of language. What matters is only the semiotic system of language as a core substance. On the other hand, the content of news discourse for other analysts is taken as a multimodal or a “multisemiotic” material. In that case, the scope extends to include the semiotic system of images, the way discourse is put to use and the way it contributes to the construction of reality as additional cardinal constituents.

V. Types of News Discourse

When examining news discourse, researchers find themselves before a medley of formats that differ significantly in structure and purpose. Indeed, the transmission of news discourse can be fulfilled in an assortment of configurations. In media studies, these formats are dubbed *publication types* and are delineated by extra-linguistic criteria, encompassing medium, physical appearance, purpose, periodicity and so forth (Claridge, 2010). In the literature, a common division is usually drawn between print and broadcast news. This seems to be a rather simplified division. In a more technical account, based on the medium employed, Bednarek and Caple (2012) suggest four principal categories of news discourse: print, online, radio and televisual (TV). Within each, an array of genres and subgenres are recognized.

The first category, the printed news discourse, dating to the Roman ancient times, is released in paper in several formats. Some are just antique forms which perished, while others still dominate the world of media. Claridge (2010) mentions four types: pamphlet, *Messrelation*, *corantos*, news book and newspapers. The newsmagazine is also a recognized print publication type, but it may have a broadcast version. Among these print configurations, the newspaper obviously remains the most overriding and widely circulating manifestation of printed news discourse. Newspapers appear in three formats: the broadsheet, the middle-range tabloids and tabloids, the main distinction between them being in size, style and news content (Reah, 2002).

Both in radio and televised programmes, news is broadcast. Radio news discourse, which was first used in the 19th century, is transmitted in the sound mode. Until the 1950s, radio was designated as the incontestable sovereign of broadcast media. Televised news discourse is broadcast in picture and sound. With technological advances, televised news came to life in the 1920s; and by the 1960s it dominated the world of news dissemination, producing a pervasive effect on people’s lives (Baranowski, 2013). On radio and television, a variety of news formats are encountered, such as news documentaries, news and current affairs programmes, news interviews and investigative news programmes (Bednarek & Caple, 2012).

Online news discourse, the last category, pervaded the world of media starting from the 1990s. Although at its onset the online method of news dissemination was awfully sophisticated and inefficiently slow, it has become in the twenty-first century the easiest, most convenient and fastest way to obtain fresh news, attracting millions of web visitors (Baranowski, 2013). Online news discourse materializes in several configurations including news blogs, Twitter news, Google news, news feeds, You Tube news videos, and news via dig or news websites. Also, most print newspapers now have online versions or e-newspapers. Because such versions appear in electronic form, their discourse differs from that of print newspapers. Kornetzki (2012) explains that e-newspapers are characterized by relatively similar design to print newspapers (apart from hyper-textuality) and more profound content and archiving possibility, which permits their users to search in databases for earlier articles.

The above mentioned distinctions of news discourse in terms of medium are the most discussed; however, other important distinctions are also available. Media researchers differentiate mainstream news Vs specialist news; community/local, regional, provincial/rural news Vs national news; and paid news Vs free news (Bednarek & Caple, 2012).

VI. Perspectives in the Study of News

VI.1. Early Research

Reviewing research on news discourse, Van Dijk (1988 a) mentions that many early American studies in the 1970s and even in the early 1980s on the subject were anecdotal in perspective, telling rather than analyzing news. He also notes the presence of some research that focuses news production in terms of journalistic routines, values, and constraints. Lacking in profundity, such works remain macro-level, observer-oriented accounts. Added to that, he mentions a number of micro-sociological studies which highlight the institutional constraints influencing news making. Then, Van Dijk points to the marked shift in the study of news discourse from the sociological and ideological perspectives to a more systematic content analysis. This orientation prevailed in Britain and showed influences of Marxist and structuralist thinking. Other significant contributions were also made in other parts of Europe. Here, the first seeds of language-based analyses of news discourse came to life. Referring to research on mass communication in general, Van Dijk (1985) notes the ignorance of current findings of linguistic discourse analysis in media text analyses until the late 1970s. This was mainly due to the nature of the available linguistic theories on the one hand and the original affiliation of media research. Bell (2006) notes that it was only in the 1990s that the main lines of modern research on news language were established within the discipline of "Critical Discourse Analysis".

VI.2. The Discourse Analysis Perspective

With the development of linguistic theory and the expansion of discourse studies, linguistic research on news discourse as a form of media has reached important findings, borrowing analytical tools available for the study of language at large. Bell (2006) attributes this interest of linguists in news discourse to several reasons. He explains that the factors encompass the ease of access to language data from the media, the importance of the media as language-generating institutions, linguistic concern with the ways media exploit language, and the influences of media institutions and their discourses on culture, politics and social life. Discourse analysis, in particular, has become a major contributing resource for the examination of news, providing a number of theoretical and analytical notions for the treatment of news texts. Indeed extensive and elaborate analytical instruments based on discourse analysis lines of inquiry have been developed.

Against the multidisciplinary nature of discourse analysis itself, news as discourse is not approached in the same fashion by discourse analysts. Bednarek and Caple (2012) distinguish seven paradigms of study. *The conversation analytical approach* draws on research in conversation analysis. Focusing on broadcast news, especially the interview publication type, it investigates the use of conversation-linked linguistic features in verbal interaction. *The systemic functional linguistic approach* highlights the functional and structural properties of registers and genres in the study of news discourse, taking notions of authorial voice and subjectivity as core concepts. *The pragmatic/stylistic approach* makes use of pragmatic analyses, discussions of presentation and perspective, genre status, style and register. *The practice focused approach* is more oriented to examining journalistic practices involved in news construction. *The corpus linguistic approach* is more statistical in perspective. It depends on the analysis of word or pattern frequencies in corpora generated by large datasets using computer software. *The diachronic approach* is historically oriented. Its main concern is time-bound changes in news discourse or the study of early news discourse. *The critical approach* is embedded within critical discourse analysis. Discovering power relations and ideologies behind discourse constitutes its core objective, considering institutional and socio-cultural contexts which underlie news discourse production.

The most influential and systematic studies on news as discourse have been conducted by Van Dijk (1985, 1988 a, 1988 b, 1991), Bell (1991) and Fairclough (1995). Following the critical approach,

Van Dijk (1988 a) suggests a broad analytical framework for the description of news language. He adopts the structural levels and dimensions which discourse analysts set for the treatment of various discourse types. These include micro-linguistic dimensions (sounds, words, sentences, meanings), pragmatic dimensions (speech acts), macro-structural dimensions (syntactic and semantic), stylistic dimensions (authorial choices) and rhetorical features (figurative and persuasive). In Van Dijk's (1988 b) seminal work, discourse analysis constitutes a rich discipline that informs media research.

VI.3. Van Dijk's Model

Van Dijk (1988 b) offers a model for news description based on purely discourse analysis notions. His account for the study of news as discourse rests on a systematic description of two ranks of structures: *local structures* and *global structures*. These operate within the constraints of *relevance structures* and *rhetorical structures* (See Figure 1 below).

The local structures, or *microstructures*, include essentially sentences and their relations. The first concern all phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic features within sentence boundaries. Sentence structure analysis has the purpose of revealing the archetypal grammatical structures which distinguish language use in news discourse from other forms of discourse. The preferred sentential structures might indicate the perspectives of journalists and newspapers and might reflect the way information is moderated in relation to its context. The subsequent rank of description in the local structures is the sequential relations, including both superficial sentence connecting devices (such as pronouns, synonyms, conjunctions, etc) and semantic ties between the meanings conveyed in sentences (such as causality, result, apposition, etc), that is, cohesion and coherence in news discourse.

The global structures in Van Dijk's model include *semantic macrostructures* and *formal superstructures*. Macrostructures refer to the general topics or themes. They are about the semantic content of discourse and are governed by macro-rules which show how propositions in it are organized hierarchically from overall to specific ones forming a "thematic structure". Knowing what a piece of discourse is about and perceiving its coherent propositional content is explicable in terms of such macrostructures. Again, this is strongly linked to our knowledge of the world since the latter is the only reference that can determine how a series of propositions is conceived as a given whole. In the context of news discourse, the importance of macrostructures can be seen in all its aspects: its creation, understanding, storage, memorization, and reproduction. Superstructures or schemata, on the other hand, are another global level in which semantic content is realized in syntactic forms. Acting as stored packages, superstructures organize meanings of specific discourse types in a conventionalized, culture-bound way. In more explicit terms, for each discourse type, there are fixed functional categories which contribute to its formal organization. These differentiate it from other discourse types and help as readymade structures both in its production and comprehension. Specific superstructures characterize news discourse and in fact permit both news producers and news readers to present and recognize news reports based on shared culture-bound knowledge. Van Dijk mentions such news schemas and their subcategories (e.g. Summary, Headline, Lead, Main Events, Backgrounds, Context, History, Verbal Reactions, Comments, Evaluation and Expectations). Both macrostructures and superstructures constitute central levels for the scrutiny of news discourse.

In Van Dijk's analytical framework, the grammatical structures and the global ones operate within *relevance* and *rhetorical* choices. Relevance principles indicate information prominence in discourse. As a rule, "important information comes first". This general principle has a bearing on all levels of structure, starting from sentence components to sequences of sentences. The analysis of relevance structures in news discourse is highlighted in view of its contribution to understanding its cognitive, social, and ideological production conditions and its processing, memorization and uses by readerships. Rhetorical structures have to do with the persuasiveness of discourse. Like relevance structures, rhetorical structures are interwoven with the other structures of discourse. Van Dijk refers to linguistic tools at various levels which contribute to its persuasive dimension, for example, rhyme, assonance; parallelism, comparisons or metaphors; hyperboles (overstatements, exaggerations) or understatements, and sentential and lexical instruments used to create contrast or climax in texts.

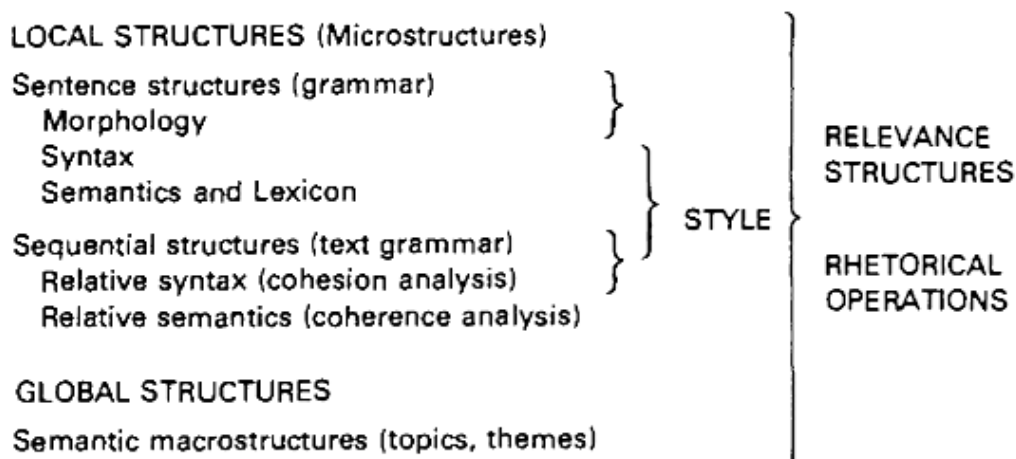


Figure 1: Structures of discourse. Adapted from *News analysis: Case studies of international and national news in the press* (p.17), by T. A. Van Dijk, 1988 b, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Generally speaking, the model proposed by Van Dijk represents an unprecedented attempt to extend the scope of discourse analysis to other uncharted forms of discourse. Permeating the world of media, this multi-sided structural framework is of high convenience for news production purposes, for it involves elements whose knowledge yields well-written, conventionalized and easily recognizable pieces of news discourse.

VII. Coherence in News Discourse

Coherence is a feature of language which makes chunks of language stand as self-contained units distinguished from random collections of utterances; therefore, in the context of news discourse, building coherent messages is a determinant of adept news construction. In essence, coherence builds semantic organization in texts. It has to do with the way its propositional substance is arranged and interpreted within a specific discourse context. Be it spoken or written, when a piece of discourse is said to be “coherent”, this implies that there exists some underpinning logical interconnectedness holding between its constituent ideas (Crystal, 2008). In writing, coherence refers to the way a text makes sense to the readers through the orderliness of its content, and the pertinence and lucidity of its concepts and ideas. News writing is no exception. The construction of consistent news requires that journalists have a good control of the diverse ways to create coherence in discourse.

Deciding upon the coherence or non-coherence of a piece of discourse is based on many factors, important of which is the speakers’ shared knowledge of what is possible in the external world. Such extra-linguistic knowledge assists in making some semantic propositional combinations permissible or not (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). This holds true in the context of news discourse. Van Dijk (1988b), in this connection, shows that our knowledge of the world is clustered in *scripts* which contain all we know about specific events, like war, attack, voting, meeting and the like. The coherent, lucid account of specific events is based on such scripts. Readers’ understanding and perception of news reports as coherent are thus bound to the extent to which they share scripts with news writers. It becomes clear, therefore, that when constructing or interpreting a piece of news discourse, the shared knowledge and beliefs about social and political realities comes into play.

Research on coherence in the various types of discourse takes a range of directions. While some linguists consider sentential propositional connectedness, others focus on semantic or pragmatic relations between discourse units. Also, studies on text macro-structural patterns or given/new configurations offer very productive accounts of coherence (Biber, Connor & Upton, 2007). By and large, according to Carter-Thomas (2008), there are three interrelated possible ways to access text coherence: explicit cohesion, propositional coherence and pragmatic coherence as shown in Figure 2.

These respectively refer to the linguistic devices for sentence connection, the way a text is structured into informational blocks within and between clauses by means of themes and rhemes or framing analysis, and the contextual constraints fixed by means of genre types. Propositional coherence, especially the one created by means of theme/rheme arrangements, has been largely investigated in a vast number of studies which scrutinized the way thematic development in discourse affects information flow within and between sentences. Given such analytical frameworks, discourse analysts can approach news discourse by focusing on the way it hangs together. Interesting accounts can be gained from such applications.

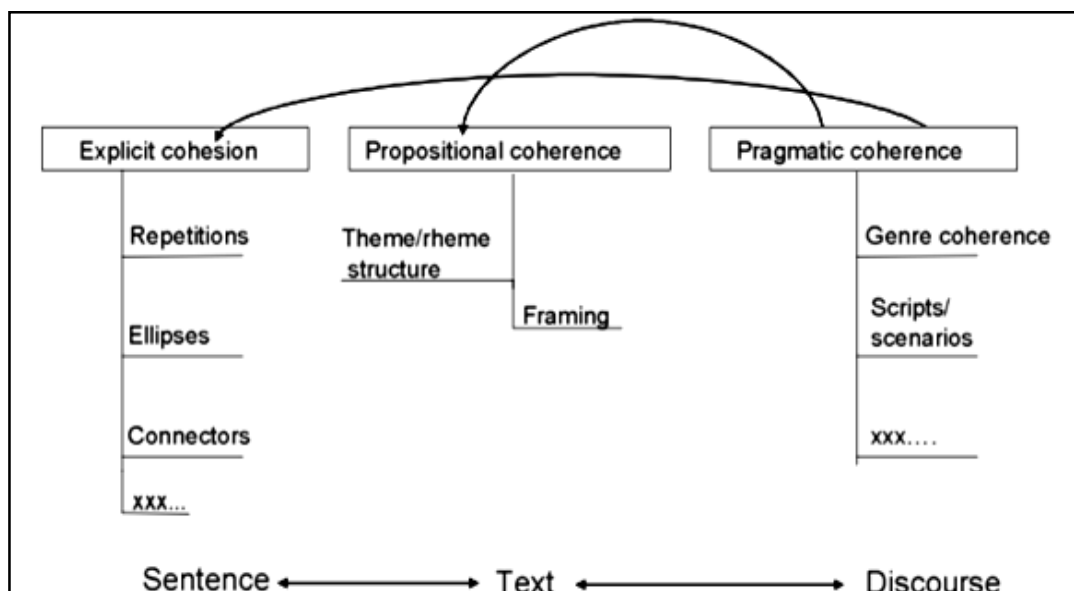


Figure 2. The three “holds” of coherence. Adapted from “Teaching coherence through genre,” by S. Carter-Thomas, 2008, *De la France au Qu’ebec – l’Ecriture dans tous ces états*, p.3.

VIII. Conclusion

Through this brief synopsis of news as an instance of language use and the way it is approached using divergent analytical lenses, it becomes evident that the study of news has gained much systematicness and informativity with the introduction of discourse analysis findings. In fact, through the multitude of analytical instruments and theoretical notions that discourse analysis offers to analyze language, media research is supplied with productive methods for the examination of news discourse in all its forms. Equipped with such novel techniques for the examination of this multifaceted type of language, researchers are confronted now with infinite unexplored contexts and shapes of news discourse, the investigation of which could enlighten media theorists, language specialists, press practitioners and prospective journalists about the peculiarities of news discourse.

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