A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPROACH TO THE LANGUAGE OF NEWSPAPER REPORTING

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is the identification of some specific linguistic elements of English newspaper reporting by means of a dual approach. On the one hand, we based our research on a theoretical approach that relies on a contrastive linguistic study of two authentic newspaper articles presenting two distinct legal cases.

In the analysis of the two texts we have had in view their graphic, grammatical, syntactic and stylistic peculiarities. The comparative theoretical analysis focuses on the overall structure of the texts, but also on a more detailed lexical structure. The articles are compared in terms of their headlining, paragraphing, type of sentence syntax, vocabulary and stylistics. The comparative approach to these texts reveals lexical and stylistic similarities, as well as significant differences between them. Our discussion on several stylistic aspects in the two articles is meant to underline their general impact on the reader.

On the other hand, since the two texts have a similar thematic structure - information on two legal cases - we have also had in view a practical approach to them. This has been done in a brief presentation of the use of the language material during our legal English seminars.

Keywords:

'journalese', headlining, sentence syntax, intra-sentence co-ordination, inter-paragraph co-ordination, pre-modified nouns, post-modified nouns.

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'Journalese' is a label which seems to have a clear-cut sense until we begin to look closely at the way it tends to be used. Most often it is a pejorative criticism of a way of writing that people feel it is in some way typical of the press, or of a particular paper. The question raised is then: to what extent is it possible to define this kind of English more precisely? Obviously, everything that happens to be printed in a newspaper or magazine is not going to be linguistically homogeneous. Besides news-items, we find within its pages articles, reviews, imaginative writing of various kinds, advertising, and much more. We have therefore restricted our attention to what is generally considered to be the central function of a newspaper, to inform, and consequently to the notion of newspaper reporting.

One question you may ask yourself is: what linguistic characteristics can be associated with this? While it is possible to make a few generalizations about the way language is used in this situation, it is impossible to be comprehensive. It results that the concept of 'the language of newspaper reporting' is not as meaningful as it is generally assumed. There is not one, but a number of 'journaleses' that can be found between the pages of daily and weekly press. (Crystal, Davis, (1976), : 123).

The theoretical approach involves an introspective and analytical reading and discussion of the language in two specific articles, with the intention of defending the above mentioned opinion. In order to prove this, we have chosen two newspaper extracts that seem to us to represent two extremes of journalistic writing. In discussing them, we cover a number of devices used in newspaper reporting. We are focusing on both linguistic differences and similarities, in an attempt of trying to clarify the idea that 'journalese' is not a definite thing, but rather a blend of what is characteristic of a number of different kinds of journalistic material.

The practical approach to the topic concerns briefings on the English class use of the language material in these articles. The aims as well as the type of tasks involved in the class activities are being mentioned at this stage.

The two texts (:7-8) share important linguistic features that are not generally found outside newspaper reporting. One point that the two articles clearly share is that their writers' underlying aims are identical:

1) concern for the presentation of a certain number of facts, in as interesting a manner as possible, to make it appeal to the public's interest;

2) need for compression of the information into a limited space, the need for clarity and avoidance of ambiguities.

Our concern here is for the different 'paths' which the two writers follow in order to reach their aims. We shall be referring to some characteristic aspects of great importance in defining the distinctiveness of this kind of specialized English: graphics, punctuation, grammar, vocabulary and stylistics.

As regards the first aspect, the most noticeable device is the graphic highlighting of the headline. The function of headlining in newspaper reporting

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is complex: headlines have to contain a clear, succinct and possibly intriguing message, to kindle a spark of interest in the reader. Usually, this is made possible through the use of graphic contrasts. Both articles contain not only a full-sentence headline in bold, unusually high letters that immediately catches the reader's attention, but also challenging associations of strong terms (*curse* and *scared*) that raise one's interest right away.

Apart from the headlining, the most obvious feature of the extracts is the paragraphing. The use of subheadings in the centre of the column print is obviously the main distinctive feature shared by all newspaper reports. Apart from this, texts **I** and **II** are very different. Article **I** breaks up the text into very short paragraphs (one or two sentences at most) which makes it easy to read, while the dramatic tension of the narrative is being preserved, as it always happens in a detective story. Article **II** tends to keep the paragraphs long. We shall be discussing the grammatical and semantic consequences of this later on.

Clearly, the differences identified so far lead us to the conclusion that text **I** is much more easy to read than **II**. The latter is relatively monotonous; there are few resting-places for the eye. An additional aid to readability in **I** and **II** is the variation in type-size used throughout the text: the initial word appears in capitals in both articles: in **I** the first paragraph is printed in a noticeable larger type than the rest; the second is slightly smaller than the first, while the remainder is in the smallest size of all. There is only one such difference in size in article **II**, the first paragraph being printed in a relatively larger size than the rest of it. The most likely reason for this procedure is that it facilitates reading at the beginning of the article.

Another small formal detail, yet a psychologically important feature in article **II,** is the 'reverse' use of the indent option: each paragraph is lined a little outwards rather than inward. Whatever the function this graphic variation has, it is clear that it is similar to that of type variation in text **I**: it catches the reader's eye.

In terms of punctuation, the scarcity of commas in text **I** is due to the use of short sentences. This gives a quick tempo to the reading. The dots used in the first part of article **I** challenge the reader's interest in the story and motivate him to go on reading. The use of dashes is also interesting and characteristic for newspaper writing. The informal use of dashes in text **I** (to mark a parenthesis) is meant to link expansions of thought with the main part of the sentence. There is an immediate effect of informality and chattiness obtained, that is otherwise a characteristic of the oral style.

Possibly, there is a further reason for the use of dashes here, justified by the semantics of the paragraph: the parenthesis has a mediating role between the first sentence (*I was pretty skeptical about the curse*) and the second one (*I'm convinced it had its effect*), since they are quite opposite in meaning. The use of parenthesis seems to justify the speaker's arguments for the sake of his credibility. Article **II**

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contains a similar parenthetic phrase, which introduces an air of informality, right in the introductory paragraph.

On a grammatical level, we shall refer to the structure of both the headlines and the paragraph, as well as to sentence and phrase structure, in general. The headline in text **I** is typical for English newspaper reporting: from the point of view of the grammatical structure, it contains the omission of the definite article, and semantically speaking, it raises the reader's interest in the story, which is one pre-requisite of the reporting language. Article omission has a 'catalytic' function, since it focuses the reader's attention on the informational content of a particular word, thus increasing the level of reading expectancy in the reader.

As for the study of the paragraph structure, we can note certain contrasts between article **I** and **II**. In terms of the length of the paragraphs, we may take the simple measure of the number of sentences in each paragraph. Article **I** has 16 paragraphs, of which one is composed of one sentence, seven of two sentences, two of three, three of four and three of five sentences. **II**, on the other hand, has 12 paragraphs, of which one is made up of one sentence, five of two sentences, three of three, one of five, and one of eight and nine, respectively.

In the case of text **I**, there are no paragraphs of more than five sentences, and the distribution of paragraphs is quite varied. The alternation of short and medium-length paragraphs gives an alert and brisk rhythm to the text. Another functional advantage of this structure is that it facilitates reading. The predominant paragraph structure in **II** is that of two-sentence paragraphs, four of which are distributed right at the beginning, while in the latter section of the article three-sentence paragraphs are recurrent. There are two extensive paragraphs at the end of each section in **II**, as pointed above.

A quick glance at the two articles reveals a great difference in organization between them. Of course, length by itself is not very relevant, linguistically speaking. What is linguistically much more interesting is the type of sentence used, defined by reference to its internal structure, and the ways in which sentences link up with each other within and between paragraphs. In text **I** there are predominantly statement sentences that build up the narrative, there is one reported sentence at the middle of the article *(He said that anyone who stole it*…) and five direct speech statements right at the end. The final paragraph contains an indirect question addressed by the writer to the protagonist in the story. The lack of inverted commas may be justified by the writer's wish to turn the reader's attention to the answer. This comes in two direct speech sentences, of which the latter has an open ending marked by the dots. The strategy behind this formal artifice, as well as the one resulting from the positioning of the direct speech sentences in the last five paragraphs of article **I,** are quite effective: they seek to imprint a tone of authenticity and credibility to the text.

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The sentence-types in **II** are largely reported speech, apart from three direct speech statements at the end of each section. The pace of the reporting language is quite slow, as compared to the one in article **I**. To this contributes also the lack of variation in paragraph length. The overall impression is that the whole narrative structure in text **II** comes closer to that of oral news rather than to newspaper reporting. The language in **II** misses the vividness and the air of authenticity that is to be found in **I**.

In terms of sentence syntax, we may say that text **I** has a simple syntactic structure: most paragraphs are made up of (one or two) short independent sentences. There is a lot more coordination at sentence level in article **I** than in **II**:

'He cupped it in his hands, closed his eyes, ***and*** *made a low chanting noise.'* Or *'Mr. Bonallo laughed off the episode.* ***And*** *shortly afterwards he and his wife ... .'*

There are also three instances of adversative coordination in text **I**:

'*Yet Mr. Bonallo is convinced why it has been returned …,* ***But*** *if the thieves read of it nothing was heard about the ring for two years […]', '****But*** *now – it might sound silly to some people - I'm convinced […].'*

In article **II,** there is one instance of contextual coordination at the beginning of the second paragraph *(And it was all done […])*, in which case the conjunction makes a direct semantic correlation with the introductory paragraph. The split between the coordinated paragraphs has certain stylistic effects. The omission of *And* would have considerably diminished the emphasis placed on the information in this paragraph (that concerning the mother's innocence). The union of the two paragraphs, by running the two sentences together, would have affected the pace of the narrative, as well as much of the dramatic tone. The main effect, created by such short, loosely coordinated sentences of this kind, is the reproduction of the rhythms of colloquial speech.

There are also three other cases of 'and' coordination between main clauses, and two cases of adversative coordination within and between paragraphs respectively. In article **II,** the writer uses another coordinating device such as the apposition *(Her natural mother, Tammy Hagge, a 20-year-old unmarried special education teacher, said…),* which is a typical device for the newspaper reporting language. There are not many features of grammatical subordination in **II**, except for a couple of attributive sentences introduced by the relative pronoun 'who'.

To summarize so far, we may say that both writers have used a fairly simple grammatical structure to pack a relatively large amount of information. They have both chosen a straightforward narrative, without using grammatical artifices typical for newspaper reporting such as the introduction of a phrase or clause into a larger sentence. In article **I** there is only one such instance of a fairly short parenthetic sentence marked between dashes: *But now – it might sound silly to some people – I'm convinced it had its effect.*

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Another common syntactic aspect between text **I** and **II** is the alternation of short and complex sentences, which aids both readability and comprehension.

There is also a further reason for the overall clarity of these two extracts, namely that the discourse is well organized and clearly defined. Particularly in **I**, it is important that the story, once begun, should carry the reader through to the end. And while the text has been split up into units, one can note that these units are tightly bound together, so that the whole text forms a closely knit passage, which reads extremely smoothly. In article **I** there is a temporal connection between the units, while in **II** the linking phrase *(in fact*) has a similar role.

We have already noted the lack of intra-sentence coordination in article **I**, which results from a tendency to split the text up into short paragraphs; the balance is restored by the presence of inter-sentence coordination. The inter-paragraph coordination is recurrent in article **II**, otherwise a particular characteristic of this style. A similar analysis of article **I** reveals the recurrent use of copulative coordination at sentence level; this feature gives the text a story-telling aspect, much more than the inter-paragraph coordination does for article **II**. It goes without saying that text **II** preserves much more of the characteristics of newspaper reporting language than article **I** does.

There are other techniques of backward-reference between sentences employed in **II**, such as the use of the definite article, of the demonstratives and of personal pronouns, although there is less repetition involved in article **II** than in **I**. This is the normal use of the structural features in newspaper reporting - as a means of backward-reference to something which has just been mentioned.

In article **I** there are five instances in which the personal pronoun *he* is used at the beginning of several successive paragraphs as back-reference to the protagonist. By doing so, the writer puts himself in an intimate relationship with the readers, and this accounts for the tone of familiarity which we feel in the opening sentences. It is this tone that prompts us to read on and determines our involvement in the story.

A similar case of backward-reference in article **II** is to be found in the introductory paragraph of the second unit. This makes a direct reference to the initial paragraph at the beginning of the article under two aspects: lexical and semantic. The use of the verb *claim* in passive forms *(it has been claimed* and *it is claimed*) is one connecting bridge between the two units, while the second link is the reiteration of the sums of money transferred for the baby's transaction. In the latter unit there is an extension of meaning, through the use of more informative details as regards both the victims and the criminals.

Apart from the features operating at sentence level, we have noted certain distinctive characteristics operating within the noun phrase and verb phrase. As regards the former, the most noteworthy feature in article **I** there is the presence of adjective-plus-noun phrases (*tiny parcel, gold ring, bad luck, ill health,*

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lost ring) which rely on pre-modification. In addition, there are a few pre- and post-modified nouns making up complex noun phrases, such as *several items of jewellery* and *tribal seal of protection*. In article **II,** we have noticed a larger variety of noun phrases:

1. simple pre-modified nouns such as *major investigation, tiny girl, legal adoption, cancelled cheques*; 2. complex pre-modified nouns such as *illegal baby sales, apparently legal documents, simple adoption procedure, unmarried special education teacher*;

3**.** pre- and post-modified nouns such as *at the centre of the baby-for-sale uproar* and *better standard of living*. This lexical diversity contributes to the descriptive precision of the narrative, which is in keeping with the theme of the story (legal case), since minuteness and precision are pre-requisites of any legal investigation.

As regards the verb phrase, there is an expected bias towards the use of certain tense forms, normal for this kind of English: the simple past tense (*returned, undid, bought, offered*, etc.) and past passive voice (*was given, was heard*, etc.) but also other tense forms such as the future (*shall never know*), the present simple and continuous (*I'm amazed and delighted*, *I'm not revealing that* and *is stolen*). The predominant past forms are typical for the newspaper reporting style, as for the other tense forms mentioned above, these occur in quotations only, but are fairly reduced in number as compared to the past forms. In article **II,** there are much more past passive forms, as it is required by the reported speech (pretty much used in official police/legal investigations) such as *was sold, was done, were discovered, was gone*. There are also other passive forms: present perfect *(has been claimed*), present simple *(is alleged, it is claimed*) and infinitive (*to have handled up*).

All in all, there is a wider variety of tenses in **II** than in **I**: future, present and past perfect, present simple and continuous: *will travel, would give, would do, haven't adopted, has sparked, had won, it's a sad story, is living, don't see how*. As regards the last form, this is quite colloquial, and so is *could see* in *could see it as a normal adoption,* meaning 'could consider it'.

The tendency in the popular press is to use the active voice rather than the passive. Article **II** uses about eight passives, the effect being to give the impression of neutral, objective reporting as it occurs in legal (or scientific) language.

Turning now to the vocabulary of the two passages, we have noticed a distinctive difference between them: article **I** uses everyday vocabulary or reiterations of certain words such as *ring* - 8 times, *thieves* - 3 times, *curse* - 3 times, *code phrase* - 3 times. Article **II** uses a variety of specialized terms/phrases, a lexical feature characteristic of the legal English: *claim, investigation, lawyer, illegal, legal documents, win the right in court, to threaten to jail, contempt of court, to give evidence, adoption procedure.* Such specialized terms are noticeably lacking in article **I**. The nearest we get to specialized legal usage is *burglary* and *police inquiries*. This relates to the very important differences of status between the two passages. There is a

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certain amount of informality in article **II** *(I don't see how, has sparked a major investigation into a lawyer, at the centre of the baby-for-sale uproar*), but in text **I** this is the tone throughout the whole article. We have noticed here:

1. idioms such as: *was pleased with, laughed off, was worth trying*;
2. colloquialisms: *got the shock of my life* and *pretty skeptical.*

The last two are actually part of quoted conversations that retain the informal characteristics of colloquial speech. Then there is the overall jocular tone of the article, which again fosters greater informality as in the case of the past participle *convinced* in first and third person singular (*is convinced* and *I'm convinced*) with direct reference to the protagonist in the story.

In article **II**, on the other hand, the tone is much more formal and restrained, as the use of such 'careful' terms as *has been claimed, is alleged, handled up, uproar* shows. For all of these terms less formal equivalents could have been used. Phrases like *standard of living, contempt of court, consent or knowledge* and legal adoption have an official ring about them. The formality is also marked in the grammar by careful phraseology such as: *has sparked a major investigation, charges are now under way, had to threaten to jail.*

The comments above have really to do with the *stylistics* of the two passages. The basic aim of the two articles, to report the facts, may be the same, but their style is different. They use a different kind of language, as well as a different type of information. In article **I** we are given the human, personal angle: we are told about Mr. Bonallo, about his profession, and we are given details about the incident in Australia; we are told about the cost of the ring and about the protagonist's feelings concerning the efficiency of the curse. A subject, that might have been dull for many readers, has become interesting through the addition of these human details. In **II** there is none of this at all. Instead of human details, we get objective, legal details. There is greater precision and concern for accuracy via the use of legal terms, which add to the seriousness and credibility of the story, while the tone is restrained, as adapted to routine reporting. When text **I** does get down to factual detail, its language is quite simple and matter-of-factly. The language in text **II** is more complex and perfectly fit for the subject matter. There are clear topic sentences in paragraphs here, while in article **I** the story progresses in jumps, with very little development in individual points being made.

This contrastive study between the two extracts proves how different these two types of reporting language are. On this basis, we may say that 'the language of newspaper reporting' is clearly a very general label, which needs to be used with great care. We may rather consider it as a range of usage that allows certain overlap with other varieties of English.

In terms of the applicative function of these two texts, we can say that since there is a legal content involved in both of them, we have used them as a linguistic class material with the first year students of law. The activity work was

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centered on the grammatical aspects, the paragraph structure, with a particular focus on the lexical aspect (legal terms).

Following the basic lines of the theoretical approach, the practical one involved a similarly comparative analysis. The language tasks were adapted to the level of English of the students.

The aims of the activity were:

- to make the students aware of the functional use of grammar in authentic texts;
- to familiarize them with the content (vocabulary) and structure (paragraphing etc.), as well as with the specificity of 'journalese' style;
- to help them identify and practice the rules of English language in a particular context (newspaper reporting).

The students were assigned reading, grammar traps and vocabulary tasks. Successful class management was achieved by using group work. Students' motivation was enhanced by the peculiarities of the legal cases presented in the texts, as well as by the language authenticity in them.

The benefits of these activities for the students were evident in their legal vocabulary acquisition, grammar practice and learning of specific stylistic features of 'journalese'.

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APPENDIX
Text I
Curse That Scared a Thief

Graham BELL

WHEN Hector Bonallo returned home after walking his dog he found a tiny parcel on the porch mat.

He undid it, and a gold ring crowned with a large black opal rolled into his palm.

He recognised it as one of several items of jewellery burgled from his home more than two years ago.

The ring was worth £400, and the thieves were never traced. Yet Mr. Bonallo is convinced he knows why it has been returned.

He bought the ring for his wife Margaret while working in Australia 16 years ago.

Bar

On the same day he walked into a bar in Sydney and fell into conversation with two Aborigines. He was pleased with his purchase and showed it to them.

One of the strangers offered to give the ring his tribal seal of protection. He cupped it in his hands, closed his eyes, and made a low chanting noise.

He said that anyone who stole it would be struck with bad luck and ill health. To invoke the curse, Mr. Bonallo was given a code phrase.

Mr. Bonallo laughed off the episode. And shortly afterwards he and his wife returned to Southport, Lancashire.

Then came the burglary, and Mr. Bonallo recalled the curse. Police inquiries were getting nowhere, and with his wife upset about the lost ring he decided anything was worth trying.

He uttered the code phrase, and his local newspaper published the story of the curse. But if the thieves read of it nothing was heard about the ring for two years, when that parcel arrived.

"I got the shock of my life," said Mr. Bonallo, a delivery driver, of Leyland Road. Southport.

"I was pretty skeptical about the curse. But now - it might sound silly to some people - I'm convinced it had its effect.

"I shall probably never know what happened to the thieves to make them do it."

His wife said: "I'm amazed and delighted to have the ring back after all this time."

What was the code phrase Mr. Bonallo used to invoke the curse? "I'm not revealing that," he said. "In case the ring is stolen again."

'The Sunday Express'

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Text II
Scandal of the baby girl who was sold twice

Peter WRIGHT

A BABY girl was sold twice in America - once tor £ 1,000 and then for £ 10,000, it has been claimed.

'And it was all done without the consent or knowledge of the baby's natural mother,' she says.

Now the case has sparked a major investigation into a lawyer who is alleged to have handled up to 20 illegal baby sales.

The tiny girl at the centre of the babies-for-sale uproar is blonde, blue-eyed Rachel Marie Hagge, who is just nine months old.

Her natural mother, Tammy Hagge, a 20-year-old unmarried special education teacher, says she gave Rachel up to friends, Larry and Donna Blanton, because she believed they would give her a better standard of living than she could provide.

Her lawyer said: 'She believed they were going to adopt Rachel and they even presented her with apparently legal documents saying they would do it.' But when Miss Hagge went to visit Rachel she was gone. And the Blantons told her a couple in Long Island, New York, had won the right to have her in court.

Threaten

In fact, it is claimed, the Blantons had sold Rachel to a Dallas lawyer, Robert Kingsley, for just under £1.000 and he sold her again to the Long Island couple, a 53-year-old university professor and his schoolteacher wife, for £10,000.

Charges are now under way involving both the Blantons and the lawyer.

When the sales were discovered, a judge in Dallas had to threaten to jail the Blantons for contempt of court before they disclosed the baby's whereabouts.

Rachel is still living with the professor and his wife and next week they will travel to Dallas to give evidence.

A lawyer appointed by the court to find the baby, said: 'It's a very sad case. I feel sorry for this couple. They thought it was a simple adoption procedure.'

But the natural mother's lawyer said: 'They bought the child. They haven't adopted her. All they have is cancelled cheques showing that they purchased her. I don't see how they could see it as a normal adoption.'

' The Daily Mail'

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