INVESTIGATING THE LEXIS OF NEWS REPORTS

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1. Introduction

There is a justified and obsessive topic, challenging not only media researchers but everyone taking a general interest in the mass media phenomenon, with regard to the manner in which the press and media reflect reality objectively. While journalists and media people acknowledge, in principle, as their supreme value their commitment to the faithful, unbiased representation of events, sociologists, language analysts and media researchers draw attention to the 'flexibility and suppleness' of the press and media in reflecting reality.

News discourse is regarded as informative discourse in principle and intention. Of all news genres, the news report, either general or special-topic, is viewed as the most objective, hence, as the most informative text, because it displays the lowest degree of author intervention. Its informational content, controlled from top to bottom, is organized according to the relevance principle generating the well-known "inverted pyramid" structure.

Its comprehensiveness and communicative efficiency is ensured by the organization and the functioning of superstructures. First the reader deals with the Headline, introducing the gist or essence of the news content, then with the Lead providing the summary of the news story, and subsequently with details such as actors, actions, locations, circumstances and consequences which are provided in the categories of Main Events, Background (Context and History), Consequences, Verbal Reactions and Comments.

The paper aims at investigating the lexis of news reports and pays special attention to the deployment of lexico-semantic devices that support and ensure the informative dimension of this journalistic genre.

Given the ultimate goal of informative news discourse, i.e. to communicate information effectively, the language it makes use of must be easily comprehended and must make objects, relationships, reality readily and effortlessly recognizable. This prerequisite influences news writers' choice in terms of lexical items.

2. Lexical tendencies

The following lexical tendencies have been identified:

An uneven distribution of basic-level and low-level terms

Linguists (Halliday 1978, Leech 1981, Fowler 1991) have pointed to the taxonomic organization of the vocabulary and have distinguished between basic-level terms and low-level terms (Fowler, 1991: 55) or between folk taxonomies and technical taxonomies (Leech, 1981: 111).

Basic-level terms or folk taxonomies are characteristic of mainstream English and include lexical units which are frequently used and easily understood by the average people and provide speakers with the basic instruments for encoding reality, experience, behaviour etc. (e.g. *water, country, animal, bird, go*).

Low-level terms or technical taxonomies comprise more complex lexical items which have a less wide usage, e.g. within a professional community, or even a limited usage, their meanings being familiar to a reduced number of speakers and unknown to the majority. Examples of such low-level terms are terms characteristic of different jobs or professions (bankers' terms, lawyers' terms, doctors' terms, bricklayers' terms, etc.).

The distribution of basic-level and low-level terms is uneven in general-topic news or hard news. Text informativeness is ensured by the high prevalence of basic-level terms, which allow effortless and quick comprehension of the news item through cognitive clarity and intelligibility, thus ruling out miscomprehension, misinterpretation and, ultimately, miscommunication. Basic-level term predominance is the direct consequence of the two basic pragmatic constraints of news discourse – message accessibility and readers' fast, selective reading practices. The journalist is forced to write in a simple, clear, yet attractive manner, which must be intelligible and challenging for the average readership in order to maintain their interest throughout the news story.

Technical/low-level terms are not completely absent from general-topic news reports, yet they are less frequent and, when they occur, they are either explained or inferred from the co-text and made accessible to the average reader. Their occurrence is strategically informative. On the one hand, their function is to impart knowledge, while, on the other hand, they point out the news writer's expertise and in-depth knowledge of the topic under discussion, which reinforces text truthfulness and authorial credibility and authority.

It is likewise true that variation across speaker's expertise makes the presence of technical/low-level terms compulsory in special-topic news, otherwise the report is felt unprofessional, wrongly-documented and, most likely, uninformative.

Neologisms vs. nonce formations

The high prevalence of neologisms (new lexemes) is a defining characteristic of news reports. Language analysts (Roşca, 2004; Bauer, 1983) have emphasized the influential role of newspapers in generating neologisms by popularizing new lexical items. Michael Quinion (1996a) argues that newspapers are 'a melting pot of language in action' and 'the first draft of the next edition of the Oxford English Dictionary'.

One may distinguish between two categories of neologisms characteristic of news discourse. First there is the category of new lexemes which are unquestionably regarded as neologisms since they encode and name new objects, situations, realities that have recently occurred and are usually related to the progress of science, technology, medicine, arts, etc. Generally, these neologisms occur in the news text between inverted commas and are introduced by expressions such as "usually called, named, termed, known as". The news writer also offers a brief definition of these new words, so that the reader may proceed with his/her reading without having comprehension difficulties.

The second category includes nonce formations which represent new words 'that are coined by a speaker/writer on the spur of the moment to cover an immediate need' (Bauer, 1983: 45). Some of the nonce words may occur only once in language and then disappear, while others are gradually institutionalised and finally lexicalized. Commonly, such neologisms are generated by political/social events or by ideologies prevailing at a certain moment in society.

The political scandal known as Watergate generated a series of new lexemes all connoting the idea of leaked information, corruption, bugging, embarrassment, etc: Camillagate (the case of the sneaked recordings of telephone conversations between Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles), bastardgate (when the Prime Minister was overheard telling John Snow of ITN after an interview that he had a number of "awkward

bastards" in the Cabinet), and nuttergate (when the former Secretary of State for Education called the Birmingham Director of Education a "nutter" in a speech) (Quinion: 1996a).

One can speak of a genuine word invention in the case of newspapers, explained by the news writer's compulsion to draw attention, to be ground-breaking and precise. Notice, for example, how productive the suffix "- ee" is in news discourse: *arrestee, assaultee, auditee, auditionee, awardee, biographee, callee, contactee, contractee, counsellee, dedicatee, defrostee, detachee, electee, explodee, extraditee, fixee, flirtee, floggee, forgee, hittee, interactee, introducee, investee, lapsee, mentee, murderee, outee, ownee, phonee, pickee, rapee, releasee, rescuee, sackee, shortlistee, slippee, spinee, staree, tagee, ticklee, trampolee.* (Quinion: 1996b).

The word *economics* has generated quite an impressive collection of new lexemes, all related to political or business issues. For instance, words like *Nixonomics, Clintonomics, Thatchernomics* function as umbrella terms to designate the economic policies implemented in the time of politicians such as Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton or Margaret Thatcher. *Burgernomics* refers to the globalisation of a business area (fast-food business), *Cybernomics* deals with the impact of digital economy whereas *Enronomics* designates the unfair accounting practices which eventually triggered the collapse of a leading American energy company – Enron – and its ties with the Bush administration (Quinion: 2002)

Some of these words have an ephemeral existence. They appear once or several times in the press and afterwards they are forgotten, while others come into existence, and gain a permanent place in the language.

A distinct category of neologisms is represented by borrowings designating a social/political reality related to a specific point in time in the history of a country. Such borrowings include *perestroika, glasnost, securitate.*

> Gorbachev, who is marking 20 years since he came to power and introduced the liberalising policies of perestroika and glasnost to the Soviet Union, claims Russia has more dollar millionaires than any country except America and that much of this money has flowed abroad, with a large share going to Britain.
> (Gorbachev calls for Russian millionaires to repay money, *The Times,* 5.06.2005)

> Ceausescu's former spy chief, Nicolae Plesita, confirmed that the release of the Romanian hostages had been helped along by "an old spy who was set to work again". "The work we used to do still has some use. The people who gave information about the journalists were agents recruited by the Securitate," he said.
> (Ceausescu spies 'helped free French hostage', *The Times,* 15.06. 2005)

Their status of new words is assigned by newspapers and journalists rather than by dictionaries and language planners. The lexical items mentioned above are a case in point. Both *perestroika* and *glasnost* have appeared in language dictionaries (*glasnost –* an attempt to introduce a more open and democratic political system, especially in the 1980s in the Soviet Union *(Macmillan English Dictionary - 2002); perestroika –* the policy of political and economic change that President Mikhail Gorbachev introduced in the Soviet Union in the 1980s *(Macmillan English Dictionary - 2002); glasnost -* a Soviet policy permitting open discussion of political and social issues and freer dissemination of news and information *(Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary); perestroika -* the policy of economic and governmental reform instituted by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union during the mid-1980s *(Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary),* whereas the term *securitate* has not. However, it was found in newspapers, books and encyclopaedias, which proves

that the term circulates in the English language and people are familiarized with its meaning.

Lexical choice –indicative of (un)biased reporting

The lexical material employed to convert real life events into newsworthy events is the most striking marker of the bias embedded in a news story. Highly informative news reports rely extensively on denotative, explicit meanings of words, providing readers with factual, non-involving reporting, whereas biased news reports speculate the implicit, emotional meanings of connotative lexical items, and in doing so, they impart information and intended interpretations, as well.

Emotive meaning conveying words are bias prone, since they involve a priori evaluations, which are ratified easily, without or with little examination by addressees. They become markers of the value-systems and ideologies supported and defended by the news writer/ newspaper organization. The stylistic differences between the following headlines attached to two news stories reporting the same event – the French president's refusal to continue an interview because he was infuriated by a question related to his ex-wife – support this claim.

1. *Sarkozy Walks Out on '60 Minutes'* (The New York Times, 29.10.2007)
2. *Sour Sarkozy storms out of TV interview* (The Times, 29.10.2007)

The degree of neutrality is definitely scaled by the choice of the predicating verb where the neutral *walk out* just designates somebody's leaving a place because s/he disapproves of something, while the evaluative *storm out* highlights somebody's irascible behaviour. Moreover, the neutrality of the second headline is perverted by the presence of the pre-modifying adjective *sour* used with its evaluative dimension. Apparently, it would seem fair to apply the *neutral* label to the former headline and the *biased* label to the latter.

Surprisingly, assessed in terms of pragmatic factors such as the issuer's background and the socio-political context of discourse production, both headlines feature various degrees of bias, which, ironically, are achieved by opposite means.

The identity of the original issuer of the first headline, reproduced by the New York Times, clearly sheds light on the reasons of using 'neutral' language to report the event. The originator is Agence France-Press, the world's oldest established news agency, founded in France, in 1835, having its main headquarters in Paris and, as expected, a French leadership. The headline is biased in downplaying a tempestuous presidential behaviour, incompatible with the diplomacy and self-control entailed by the presidential status, by rendering the event in a rather forced economizing, expediting language meant to give the impression of a normal-like behavioural reaction. It sides with the ideology of the empowered whose main concern is to avoid disclosure of new unfavourable information that would only bring more bad publicity to a president, who set a historic precedent, being the first French president in office to divorce, and who drew hard criticism from trade unions and the Socialist opposition because of the newly-proposed retirement law.

Simultaneously, the headline sides with the ideology supporting France's pre-eminence in the world, de-emphasizing the inappropriateness of the president's behaviour, whose international ambassador-like status significantly shapes and affect the country's prestige around the world.

In the context of an ever-lasting French-English rivalry, the second headline, originated by the internationally recognized British broadsheet *The Times*, stands out as an instrument serving the British supremacy-supporting ideology, by emphasizing the

negative behaviour of the Other in accordance with the ideological principle 'Maximize your enemies' weaknesses, while minimizing their strengths'.

The British newspaper headline is felt tendentious and manipulative because of the lexical choices (*sour* and *storm out*) made by the addressor, which annihilate impartial, non-involving reporting and betray a subjective interpretation of the event and portray a petulant French president.

Preference for unmarked terms to maintain neutrality and formality

The current tendency in news reports published by quality and tabloid press is to deploy neutral alternatives to gender-specific titles in order to avoid being gender-biased and preserve a neutral, non-discriminating and non-involving attitude. Thus, terms such as *business man, chairman, spokesman* are replaced with their neutral equivalents *business executive, chairperson* or *spokesperson*, whereas terms like *Miss* or *Mrs* are avoided and instead the American import *Ms* is used:

> ... it is sending its own team of scientists to the region with the help of a Russian nuclear ice breaker. **A spokesperson** for the Canadian Privy Council Office said yesterday that "shared stewardship" over the region would be discussed at a North...
> (US team to gather data for Arctic claim, *Financial Times*, 17.08.2007)

> In a bizarre twist, a hospital **spokesperson** said: "Any trust staff who are eligible for redeployment under the current savings plan are welcome to apply."
> (Fury over new roles as 500 face axe, *The Sun*, 25.03.2006)

The naming strategy acts as a formality-controlling tool

The level of (in)formality of the naming pattern is indicative of the authorial involvement in the news report. Obviously, one may notice a clear distinction in terms of authorial intervention between the naming patterns characteristic of serious press news reports and tabloid news reports, respectively. While serious press features patterns of the type formal title/profession/trade + first name + last name or simply title+ last name (e.g. *former British Chancellor Keneth Clarke, Her Royal Highness, Mr. Blair, President Bush*) to preserve a formal, sober, official, neutral style, tabloid press makes extensive use of informal appellations, most commonly, accompanied by premodifying evaluative structures (e.g. *an unrepentant Chirac, furious Tony, brave Di, luscious Liz, sexy Beyonce, Gord, Maggie*), which, in addition to information, convey sympathy, irony, cynicism, sarcasm, mockery, i.e. authorial subjective assessments.

Formal terms as markers of authorial detachment

The degree of (in)formality betrays various degrees of authorial involvement. The higher the degree of formality is, the higher the authorial detachment becomes.

The news reports of serious, quality press are characterized by a formal, sober, impersonal style maintained first and foremost through the presence of formal lexis. Thus, in broadsheets, terms such as *dearth, reprobate, loath, obdurate, to impugn, to exonerate, to espouse* will be preferred instead of their less formal equivalents *lack, wicked man, unwilling, determined, to doubt ,to clear from accusation, to support*.

Furthermore, the degree of formality is controlled by topics. News reports about dramatic events or events with a great impact on the entire nation are characterized by a higher degree of formality in comparison with those providing information about show business events.

3. Conclusions

The present article puts forward several points of interest related to the lexis of news reports. First, one may notice an uneven distribution of basic-level and low-level terms in general-topic news. The high prevalence of the basic-level terms ensures news text informativeness, while the infrequent use of the low-level terms is strategically informative reinforcing authorial expertise and credibility.

Second, newspapers, in general terms, and news reports, in particular, exert an influential role in popularizing neologisms and institutionalizing and lexicalizing nonce formations.

Third, lexical choice is the most striking marker of the degree of bias embedded in a news story. Detached, non-involving reporting relies extensively on the denotative, explicit meanings of words, whereas biased news reports speculate the implicit, emotional meanings of connotative lexical items, imparting information and evaluations.

Furthermore, it is essential to point out that maintenance of authorial detachment and neutrality in news reports is facilitated through deployment of linguistic devices which include unmarked terms, formal lexis and formal naming patterns.

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