

# Telling Media Tales: the news story as rhetoric

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# Abstract

The thesis explores the rhetorical properties of the modern news report. In order to account for the distinctive style of news reporting it extends Systemic Functional Linguistic theories of the interpersonal to develop new analyses of the semantics of attitude, evaluation and inter-subjective positioning. It applies these analyses to identify three distinct interpersonal modes of news reporting style which will be termed journalistic ‘voices’. These analyses are used to explicate the rhetorical properties of the voice most typically associated with ‘hard news’ reporting, to be termed ‘reporter voice’.

The thesis also examines the textual structure and genre status of two sub-types of news report, those items grounded in material activity sequences and those in communicative events such as speeches and interviews. Several chapters explore the functional connections between these two media text types and traditional narrative and argument genres. The chapters present the argument that linear, syntagmatic models of text structure of the type developed previously for analysis of, for example, the narrative are unable to account for the functionality of these news reports. An alternative ‘orbital’ model of textuality is presented by which relationships of specification are seen to operate between a central textual nucleus and dependent satellites.

These various textual features are located in a diachronic context by means of a brief examination of the historical evolution of news reporting. The thesis then concludes by exploring how these various features of voice and text structure combine to produce a text type with a distinct rhetorical potential. It is argued that the modern news report has distinctive textual characteristics which equip it to naturalise ideologically informed judgements about social significance and the moral order

# Preface

This thesis is a record of a journey across registers. It is the outcome of a career change by which, after almost ten years as a journalist, I undertook the study of linguistics. The object of the thesis is the language of the mass media news story, the text type upon which I have relied for an income over more than ten years as reporter, correspondent, columnist and sometime editor. The thesis, thus, provides a linguistic account of a functional variety of language, by a participant observer, as it were, of that variety of language.

While this ‘native-speaker’ fluency provides some very significant benefits for a work such as this, it may also pose challenges.

Obviously this background supplies me with a knowledge of the daily routines of the newsroom. It provides me with an intimate understanding of the conventions and institutional practices which condition mass media discourse. As reporter, sub-editor and commissioning editor, I have performed the various roles in the multi-authored process that is media text construction. I have had personal experience of the various political, professional and personal pressures which may be applied to the journalist. Through my training and everyday experiences in the newsroom I, too, have been inscribed with the attitudes, expectations and systems of ‘common sense’ by which journalists operate.

The challenges which this background in journalism provided were twofold. Firstly, it was necessary to avoid extrapolating too widely the general from my own singular experiences when making assumptions about journalistic practices, beliefs and assumptions. Secondly, I needed to stand back from the mindset, the deeply naturalised world view which so thoroughly conditions the way journalists conduct their professional lives and construe the world as news. This mindset is, in fact, a social theory in its own right, though of a practical, pragmatic sort, constituted of rules of thumb and recurrent motifs rather than systematic hypotheses and analytical frameworks. It includes an epistemology by which certain professional practices (the use of eyewitnesses, official spokespersons, multiple sources etc) supply access to the ‘facts’ and certain ‘knowledge’. Its notion of newsworthiness, construed as ‘given’, ‘objective’ and naturally attached to certain subject matter, is, in fact, multiply an aesthetic, a psychology and a sociology. Firstly, it constitutes a theory of what type and form of story has greatest audience appeal. Secondly, it theorises about what *really* concerns, alarms, outrages, intrigues and moves people, despite what they might say to market researchers. And thirdly, it operates with a model of the social order by which the socially significant is sifted from the insignificant, by which social norms and conventions are identified and by which threats to the equilibrium of that order may be discovered. It also includes a linguistic component by which reporters, and especially sub-editors, regard themselves as experts in good style, as the nemesis of jargon, verbosity and undue abstraction, and as keepers of the flame of grammatical rectitude. The linguistic extends to what amounts to a theory of genre, a precise, finely tuned appreciation of how the news text should be structured and how this structure supposedly serves communicative efficiency, clarity and impact.

Mastery of this system is vital for the journalist’s professional survival. It animates every aspect of their professional practice. Not surprisingly, many internalise that

system and come to construe the world in its terms. The potential for a clash with a social theory such as that constituted by functional linguistics is obvious. And herein lies the challenge for the linguistic analyst such as myself who would be his own 'native speaker informant'. The current project has required that I reference my journalistic beliefs and assumptions yet view them with the critical eye of theory. It has meant I had to straddle two modes of thinking with very different assumptions about the nature of language and the social context in which language is located. The systemic functional framework, with its grounding in language as social practice, provided the resources by which such an analysis could be conducted. It has provided the means to manage this bi-registerial exercise. In the final analysis, I am certain the account is the better for having access to an insider's knowledge of what it means to make the news.

## Acknowledgments

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Finally, I wish to put on record the unrepayable debt I owe to my household, both past and present, and to my parents for the assistance, support and encouragement they have provided throughout.

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