

The discourse of British newspaper editorials

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1. Introduction

Editorials have been my concern for some time¹ because they have the special function of evaluating current events as seen or perceived by important groups in society. They carry the voice of an editor or an editorial group, and represent those who have a more powerful voice versus those who do not. This is probably the reason why critical linguists² have analysed them from an ideological point of view as the culmination of a process of perception and evaluation of social matters. In my view, editorials are particularly interesting because of all the types of written texts they are perhaps the ones that reflect more and exploit more the resemblance with spoken discourse in order to present beliefs and values. In fact, this is one of the aspects that is often described³ when it comes to discussing discourse practices that we are often unaware of but which are fundamental for the understanding and creation of discourses.

By convention, the aim of an editorial is to produce evaluations of current events and advice to the government and influential people. I claim that this aim is reached by means of a discourse strategy that appeals to the reader's knowledge and use of conversational practice. I believe that consciously or not newspaper readers are assumed to know how people talk and how conversations are structured. This is why I look at editorials as if they represented a type of conversation in which one person takes all the turns in an exchange.⁴ The interaction, though, because it does not happen as in face-to-face interaction, is seen through linguistic changes, mainly mood, modality, tense and lexical anticipation, in successive typographical sentences that make up *turns* in *triads*. The *triad* is the name of the unit I use to describe interaction in written text. This unit can be defined as a coherent piece of text which is used by the one who writes to negotiate information and evaluations. The triad consists of turns of three classes: the *Lead* whose function is to initiate a topic with a kind of posture; the *follow* whose function is to respond to the initiation, and the *valuate* which closes the interaction with an evaluation. These turns occur in succession, not necessarily three, because there could be five or seven depending on how long the last turn is delayed, and are identified through the linguistic changes just mentioned. The triads can combine and form a unit at a higher rank called *movement*. There are similarities with the *exchange* of spoken discourse but the difference is that in written text turn change is controlled by the writer and expressed by means of changes in language only.

In this paper I shall briefly show how value judgments are expressed in British editorials, and I will do so in two steps: first, I shall summarize the communicative framework set up by Steel and Addison in the XVIIIth century, and then I will focus on some aspects of the editorial dialogue with examples from 1981 and 1995, with particular reference to *The Guardian* and *The Times*, although other quality papers have been considered. The questions I pose are: have editorials kept the initial communicative framework, how do they make use of conversational structure schema, what changes can we observe between 1981 and 1995, what are the patterns of evaluation like today?

2. Methodology

For this minipaper I started with an analysis of the first *The Tatler* (April 12, 1709) and the first *The Spectator* (March 1, 1711) in order to find out how editorials were conceived at the moment of their institutionalization. Then, I examined a corpus of 30 editorials from *The Guardian* and *The Times* between January and March 1981, and compared the results with those from a corpus of 59 editorials from *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Independent*, and *The Daily Telegraph*, collected between 15 and 21 August 1995. In the analysis I looked specially at intratextual as well as intertextual features of the "conversation" between writer and reader. The intratextual features are seen in linguistic changes within each editorial and several types of triads are identified. The intertextual features are observed in the links between front page headlines and the titles of the editorials, mainly to discover discourse practices concerning the initial presentation of events and their evaluation in the editorials.

3. The first British editorials

The communicative framework of British editorials was established by *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. These two papers marked an important boundary in the history of the British Press, as "they imposed an order on literary history, turning early periodicals into forerunners and later papers into successors".⁵ The features of the discourse they initiated can be summarized as follows:

1. The editorial text is given an outstanding position in the front page of the paper. Although this feature has not been kept today, the position given to the editorial text at the time of its institutionalization indicates an awareness of the value and effect this piece of communication has for the readers of papers.
2. The editor addresses the reader directly. He identifies his readership and makes assumptions about the kind of reader he will be writing for. This is not always explicitly indicated today but it is easy to infer.
3. The aim of the Paper is stated. While the paper as a whole may inform and entertain, there is the conviction that the editor must present the views of the Paper in order to make people "think". In other words, the editorial is a most important text to carry the editor's voice and introduce the views that may produce changes in the people's minds and their actions.
4. While the reader is identified ("the good people of England"), there is explicit reference to the Government. It is stated that the "reflections" and "thoughts" presented by the writer aim at changes in thought and action. This action depends on the attitude adopted by the "superiors" and for the benefit of "All Persons".

These two papers were also the initiators of the "letters to the editor" section. They answered reader's questions, whether real or invented, and involved the 'silent' reader. Also, the 'club motif' served as inspiration for bringing into the written mode important features of spoken interaction.

These major features, and others, were kept in the British Press along the XVIIIth and XIXth century. As more newspapers were born, editorials acquired the unique role of evaluators of current events and carriers of opinion with the final aim of promoting the values and beliefs of the various sectors of society.

4. The dialogical features.

The analysis of the 1981 showed that editorials resemble conversation in their structure in that triads share similarities with exchanges. It was shown that triads varied depending on the type of initiating turn. For example, an *informing triad* would look like the following:

- (1) L Last year, according to the recent report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, health authorities underspent by L 76 million on a revenue budget of L 5.3 billion, and capital programmes were underspent by L 15 million on a budget of L 421 million.
- F This year, health authorities which have been budgeting for the high inflation rates of a few months ago, and which were fearing massive overspends now face the politically embarrassing fact that too much money is washing around.
- V As a result, they will have to find projects to spend it on by the end of March.
(*The Guardian*, 20/2/1981)

As we can see, the first turn (L) informs about a situation in the past, the second (F) adds information about the present, and the third (V) concludes with a prediction. The changes are noticeable through the linguistic signals (i.e. Last year – underspent/This year-face/As a result – will have to). The following example illustrates an *eliciting triad*, which starts with a question, made up of two sentences in the first turn. Here, we find a question, followed by an answer, and a directive in the closing turn:

- (2) L Is Benelux a model?
Is the Nordic Union?
- F Probably not, because nothing elsewhere quite simulates the petulance and lopsidedness of the partners in Iona, the Islands of the North Atlantic.
- V Whatever emerges, though, has to make irrelevant for all time both the ruthlessness of the Republicans, even when it is directed against themselves, and the grand delusions of embittered loyalists.
(*The Guardian*, 3/3/1981)

While triads of this type, with eliciting questions, were found in *The Guardian*, they were not frequent in *The Times*. This was taken as an indicator of more interactive attempts on the side of *The Guardian* and a more confident attitude from *The Times*, which also appeared closer to the government as shown by the far more frequent use of the word "government" in valuate turns.

The analysis of this corpus also led us to discover the use of what I called organizing triads, with no obligatory third turn, whose main function is to invite the reader to discuss certain topics and to give him/her indications about the state of the discourse. It was observed that there were differences in this respect between *The Guardian* and *The Times*. The former seemed to assume its readers needed this type of guidance while *The Times* did not make use of them. Other elements were found which indicated these papers assumed different readers so they adjusted the discourse to the set of pre-suppositions they made.

It was also found that evaluations in the third turn (V) were realized as logical conclusions, temporal results, predictions, and direct or indirect directives. The differences between *The Guardian* and *The Times* were noticeable.

It was inferred that editors make assumptions about their readers' state of knowledge of events and value systems. This is reflected in the degree of information about the event, in the position allocated to the leader in the editorial column and in the type of evaluative turns.

An interesting observation was that in *The Guardian* and *The Times* of 1981 there appeared a connection between the headline that reported the event in the front page and the title of the editorial, similar in manner to the relationship between turns within each editorial. Examples 3 and 4 below illustrate the case for an international event and for a domestic one:

- (3) Pre-headline: Carter robbed a chance to announce release. New President makes economy changes his first target.
 Headline : SECOND BILLING FOR REAGAN AS HOSTAGES FLY TO FREEDOM
 Editorial : Exemplars of a true freedom
 (*The Guardian*, 21/1/1981)
- (4) Headline : RECESSION GLOOM DEEPENS AS 10 PC ARE OUT OF WORK
 Editorial : Another 103,000 on the dole
 (*The Guardian*, 28/1/1981)

In *The Guardian* corpus of 1981, 15 out of 23 editorials show a explicit relation with the front page event. Of the 15, 6 are triadic, 5 occupy first position in the editorial column, and only 1 is in second position. While *The Times* presented 71% of dyadic relations, that is, between headline and editorial without a pre-headline.

In the 1995 corpus, the first thing we noticed was that editorials are also structured in triads of different types and that they still imitate conversational features. They still keep the original framework of the XVIIIth century, and occupy an important place in the paper; they are not signed, with the exception of *The Independent* that introduced an "Another view" practice to make way for the opinion of others. The major differences have to do with how the evaluations in the valuate turns are negotiated and expressed and with the types of triads used. There are also differences as far as the intertextual relations between headlines and editorial titles.

It was observed that all the newspapers in the 1995 corpus made reference to the front page events, mainly through dyadic links between the headline and the titles, but with some interesting changes for *The Guardian* and *The Times*. Although different in the past, these papers share similarities in that both introduce a post title in the editorial title. In this way, the headline functions as the initiator in an intertextual triad, the title of the editorial makes an evaluation of the first turn in the front page, and the post title of the editorial summarizes the position of the paper as seen in the examples below.

- (5) Headline: FEARS OVER RAILTRACK SAFETY RAISE PRIVATISATION DOUBTS
 Editorial Title: The red light
 Post Title : Only a safe private railway is politically safe (*The Times* 18/08/1995)
- (6) Headline : FEARS GROW FOR HOSTAGES AS KASHMIRI MILITANTS THREATEN MORE KILLINGS TODAY
 Editorial title: Hostages of misfortune
 Post Title : A degree of autonomy for Kashmir would help
 (*The Guardian* 15/08/1995)

In 1981 the triadic relation was mainly between pre-headline, headline and editorial title.

In 1995 it is between headline, editorial title and post title. This is obviously the result of a major interest in making sure that the evaluation gets through. The fact that papers that evaluated so differently in the past now tend to look and sound similar is an indication of social changes reflected in the discourse.⁵ Although important differences were noticed between these two papers in 1981, apparently in 1995 they tend to display similar evaluations in the texts. As a commentator said in *Newsnight* (BBC2 16/11/1995), perhaps "The Guardian is turning right".

4. Conclusions

This short paper has presented an overview of how British editorials have kept their original communicative framework, with attention to how structural features of conversation are used by editors in order to highlight their views. What is learned from this is that although a major cultural pattern may be well established in a society, there are changes in the discourse and in the texts which depend on changes in the social dynamics that give the interaction between writers and readers very particular linguistic features.

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