

Language and Media

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Introduction

- The aim of this chapter is to examine how our knowledge about the world is mediated through press and broadcasting institutions, and to suggest ways in which the analysis of language can provide insights into how that mediation can affect the **representation** of people, places and events.
- The mass media have become one of the principal means through which we gain access to a large part of our information about the world, as well as to much of our entertainment. Because of this, they are a powerful site for the production and circulation of social meanings, i.e. to a great extent the media decide the significance of things that happen in the world for any given culture, society or social group.
- The language used by the media to represent particular social and political groups, and to describe newsworthy events, tends to provide the dominant ways available for the rest of us to talk about those groups and events.

The function of the media

- We use the media for many different purposes; for information, for entertainment and for education, through a range of programmes for schools as well as university broadcasts. We listen to the news on radio and television for information about local, national and international events; many people spend hours every week being entertained by a variety of programmes from regular soap operas to weekly quizzes and chat shows.
- Sometimes, the boundaries become blurred between information and entertainment, and a new term has been coined to refer to programmes which serve both functions: 'infotainment'.

- The mass media provide the means of access to much information and represent a potentially powerful force in our society. This is partly due to the fact that the media can select what counts as news, who gets into the papers and on to television and radio and, most importantly for linguists, the way that stories about people and events get told and the frameworks in which people get to appear and talk.
- However, we must be careful when talking about the media as powerful. Any newspaper story goes through several stages before it appears on the page, and many different people can be involved at each stage.

- Rather than seeing the media as being a group of individuals who control and in some way manipulate what we read or watch, we need to think of each medium as a complex institution.
- This institution is characterised by a set of processes, practices and conventions that the people within it have developed within a particular social and cultural context. These practices have an effect both on what we perceive as news and on the forms in which we expect to hear or read about it.

- We should not be too quick to see the media as all-powerful, and the public as mere puppets of media control. The relationship is not a straightforward one. The reading, listening and viewing public can also choose not to buy, listen or watch; they can switch off, change allegiances and in some cases challenge versions of events.
- For example, as a result of the events surrounding the Princess of Wales's death in August 1997, a new set of laws may be passed in Britain restricting the rights of 'paparazzi' journalists to take intrusive photographs, and this is due in some part at least to the public reaction to her death. On the other hand, the same public were always ready to buy the papers and watch the programmes that featured reports of her both when she was alive and after her death, and in that sense, the media were providing, and continue to provide, what sells their product.

Media, language and power

- One of the most important and interesting aspects of the potential power of the media from a linguistic point of view is the way that people and events get reported.
- Since the early 1970s, linguists have been interested in the relationship between how a story gets told, and what that might indicate about the point of view that it gets told from (Lee 1992; Simpson 1993; Montgomery 1996). This level of language use is called linguistic representation, and we will now look at some linguistic structures that can determine how events are represented, and thus lead to different versions, or views, of the same event.

- On Tuesday 7 January 2003, the news broke that the previous Sunday police had raided a flat in north London, where they found a small quantity of a poison called ricin, and that seven people had been arrested, one of whom was later released. (Ricin had previously been used in the 1978 assassination of a Bulgarian dissident, Georgi Markov, on the London Underground. The poison had been smeared on the tip of an umbrella.)
- If we analyse the language used in the articles in The Daily Mail and The Daily Mirror, we find contrasts in how the story was told in each newspaper, and what the implications of this event might be. Looking at the linguistic choices made in the two texts means asking:

- what kinds of words or phrases are being used to refer to people or places or events, what kinds of actions are involved, and who is responsible for them?
- These choices are part of the process of **representation** in discourse. By examining the way events are represented, we can begin to see more clearly how different points of view, or **ideologies**, are constructed linguistically.
- The following are the headlines carried on Wednesday 8 January:

Daily Mail

- POISON GANG ON THE LOOSE
Huge hunt for terrorists armed
with deadly ricin Britain

Daily Mirror

- IT'S HERE
Deadly terror poison found in

Discussion questions

- What is the focus of each headline?
- What differences do you find between the two reports?
- Who is involved?
- What about the sentence structure in both reports?
- How is the kitchen described according to the Mirror?
- What is the effect of these different choices in representation?
- Is there a difference in the two papers' interpretation of what this event means?
- Do these two stories reveal two different ideological stances taken by the two papers?

The Mail

vs.

The Mirror

Britain was on red alert for a bio-terror attack last night as a hunt was launched for a gang of suspected Al Qaeda activists armed *WITH A DEADLY POISON*.

Police who raided an Al Qaeda poison factory in London fear most of *THE DEADLY RICIN* is missing and in the hands of terrorists.

Here is the continuation of the story as it appeared in the next five paragraphs in each paper:

Anti terrorist police arrested seven North Africans after the discovery of traces of ricin, which can send a person into a coma and kill within hours.

One of those held is believed to have worked as a science teacher. Security sources said at least three members of the alleged terror cell were still at large and may be in possession of the chemical.

The amount seized is too small to launch any 'mass casualty' attacks but the real fear is an assassination attack on a major public figure, such as the prime minister, by spraying the toxin in his face or injecting it.

Britain was on alert last night for an attack, possibly by aerosol spray or by smearing the substance on door handles at busy public buildings or shopping centres.

Confined spaces such as a commuter train carriage, a Tube station or a lunchtime restaurant were thought to be possible targets of the original plot.

Six men and one woman were arrested on Sunday in swoops on the ricin 'plant' – a flat in Wood Green, North London – and other addresses in the north and east of the capital.

It could also be ingested through the skin after being smeared on door knobs or handrails. 'People who come into contact with it will die,' said a government source.

Westminster sources revealed that levels of security surrounding Tony Blair have been 'significantly upgraded' over the past few days.

The males – in their late teens, 20s and 30s – are all said to be Algerians linked to Osama bin Laden's network. The woman has been freed.

Up to 30 more confederates are feared to be operating in Britain, most of them living in London.

The following paragraphs appear a little further down in each article.

Scotland Yard swooped at 10am on Sunday in a flat above a pharmacy in Wood Green, North London, after receiving a tip-off over the New Year.

Up to 20 officers wearing white protective suits found equipment covered in chemical traces and began removing items in protective black bags.

Armed special Branch officers in white chemical warfare suits smashed their way into the rented Wood Green property in the early hours.

A small quantity of ricin – used in the 1978 umbrella murder in London of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov – was found amid a kitchen laboratory for making more of it.

Sources of news

- The attribution of a source is important to the level of ‘factuality’ that can be claimed for a story. In the following extract from a story about Princess Diana and British rugby player Will Carling, the ‘facts’ of the case are far from clear. Although sources are given, the original source of the information on which the newspaper bases its report is masked by the way this paragraph is written. A complex series of reporting phrases appears to indicate the source, but effectively succeeds in making it quite difficult to retrieve. These phrases are italicised in the text below:
- The newspaper *claimed* Mr Carling arranged to take former England foot-baller Gary Lineker to lunch with the princess at Kensington Palace earlier this year. A friend of Mr Carling’s *is reported as saying*: ‘He [Mr Carling] *told* me later Gary had bottled out *saying*, “that woman’s trouble”.’

(*The Guardian*, 7 August 1995)

- In this section we have shown how the linguistic choices made in a text can construct different accounts, or linguistic representations, of events in the world.

❖ Activity 1

- Look at two newspapers on the same day and compare two versions of the same story. What differences can you detect in the way language is used? Do these differences influence or affect your interpretation of the event?

Commonsense discourses

- The tendency to represent people, situations and events in regular and predictably similar ways results in the linguistic choices that are used in these representations becoming established in our culture as the most usual, prevailing ways of talking or writing about types of people and events.
- Once something has been represented in a particular way, it becomes more difficult to talk 'around', or outside that representation, to find an alternative way of describing a social group *X*, or a political event *Y*. We call these prevailing choices in representation **commonsense** or **dominant discourses** (see Fairclough 1989).

- An illustration of how one event can become the frame for representing subsequent events is the tendency to refer to any story of American presidential cover-up scandal as some kind of 'gate'.
- Since Nixon and the Watergate scandal, there has been Reagan and 'Irangate', Clinton and 'Whitewatergate', followed by 'Zippergate', and 'Fornigate'. While the history and circumstances of each individual situation may be distinct, the use of the term 'gate' categorises them according to the notion of an American president deliberately setting out to deceive the American public.
- The category has also been taken up by the British press and has been used in the context of the British royal family. 'Camillagate' was the story of the long-standing relationship between Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles, which hit the headlines some years after his marriage to Diana Spencer, when her problems with him and other members of the royal family had entered the public domain.

The power to change?

- If the media are powerful as a site for producing and maintaining dominant discourses, as we have claimed in the previous section, they can also be a possible site for change. One of the most publicly discussed changes in recent years has been the move to use non-sexist language, and to encourage **symmetry** in the representation of men and women. Sometimes the press can be seen to be trying to adopt grammatical forms which are neutral, such as the **third person pronoun** 'they' or 'them' as a non-specified-gender **pronoun**.
- The following extract is from a story about Texan farmers suing the talk show host Oprah Winfrey for damaging their business when she invited people on to her show to talk about the risks involved in eating American beef:
- And this year the average American will chew their way through 631b of Texan beef, compared to only 51lb of chicken and 46.71b of pork. It's an ill-advised man who stands between an *American* and *his* burgers.

(*The Guardian*, 10 February 1998)

- In this section we have introduced the concept of **dominant discourses** within the context of the media, and have suggested that these discourses are produced by recurring similarities in the way information is represented.
- We have looked at some examples of linguistic choice in reporting newsworthy events, and how different newspapers can represent the same event in different ways.
- In the next section we turn to the question of ‘voice’ in the media, looking at whose voices are represented, and who gets to say what.

Media voices: accent and register

❖ Activity 2

When you listen to the news on your local radio station, what **accent** does the newsreader have? Is this the same as those on the national, or more prestigious, radio station? Listen to the television news at different times of the day; do you notice any difference in the accents of the newsreaders at these times?

- In the early days of news broadcasting in Britain, the accent used almost exclusively by presenters was one called advanced **Received Pronunciation** (advanced **RP**). This was the accent of the educated and the wealthy, which gave no indication of what part of the country the speaker came from.
- This accent gave rise to the expression **BBC English**, so strong was the link between this accent and the British Broadcasting Corporation. This has now given way to what is known as ‘mainstream RP’, an accent which sounds less formal than advanced RP and is the one that most people in Britain generally hear when they listen to newsreaders on national television.

Note for me: Voice-over - a piece of narration in a movie or broadcast, not accompanied by an image of the speaker.

- This established use of mainstream RP is linked to the continuing perceived status of RP as an accent of authority.
- In radio and television discourse, the occurrence of marked regional variation in accent in the national news tends to be organised according to a hierarchy within programmes: the main newsreaders in the television studio read in standard English, with a mainstream RP accent, while the accents of specialist reporters outside the studio 'at the scene' are much less constrained and may sometimes be regionally marked.
- Voice-overs in documentaries are also likely to be mainstream RP, while the accents of sports commentators, weather presenters, political commentators and other media 'voices' tend to be more regionally varied.

- At one time this difference was especially noticeable on British television when a particular sports journalist would modify slightly his accent depending on which programme he was reporting for. On the national six o'clock evening news he would give the sports news bulletin in a mainstream RP accent, and half an hour later, on the local London South East news, he would shift into a more marked London accent.
- Allan Bell (1984) uses the term **audience design** for speakers changing their style of speech according to the person or people they are addressing. Bell also suggests that, since radio and television presenters are addressing a distant, unknown audience of viewers and listeners, then they may design their speech according to certain linguistic 'values' or **norms**. In this case, newsreaders may be selecting one **variety** over another according to the conventionally prestigious norms of RP rather than according to the actual audience they are addressing. This is a particular type of audience design that Bell calls 'referee design'.

Variation in register

- **Register** has been defined as **linguistic variation** according to the context of use (Halliday 1972). This means that we expect to find language used in different ways according to the situation it occurs in, and according to different types of media.
- For example, the register of weather forecasting in Britain depends on three features: its topic or **field** (the weather around the country), its **tenor** (the way it is delivered by the presenter) and its communicative **mode** (speech, writing and some visual modes in the form of maps and icons). We expect a weather bulletin to contain technical vocabulary relating to temperature, high and low pressure, etc., but we also expect the presenter, unlike newscasters, to address the audience directly, by saying things like 'look at this rain moving in from the west here'.

- On television weather reports, there is also usually some visual representation of the weather being described, for example a small sun to represent sunshine, arrows for the direction of the wind, and snowflakes for wintry conditions. The register of weather forecasting depends also on the cultural context of the broadcast. The British format has just been described, but the format can vary from country to country.
- The same expectations of linguistic register (language variation according to context) apply to other media **genres**, where there are conventions of appropriate language use for specific types of programme.

Public participation in the media

- Programmes which involve audience participation, such as *Oprah Winfrey* in the United States, have been growing in popularity and number, and achieve very high viewing ratings. There is some disagreement about whether these programmes provide the opportunity for more democratic debate in the media, or whether they in fact depoliticise important issues by presenting them in this format.
- Some theorists (e.g. Livingstone and Lunt 1994) have argued that these programmes open up access to an important public domain for people whose voices and opinions are not usually heard on television, and that talk shows provide a powerful space for the voices of ordinary, lay members of the public to be privileged over the voices of institutional representatives and experts whose opinions and views usually predominate elsewhere in other media genres.

- Others (e.g. Fairclough 1995) have argued against this view, saying that audience participation programmes are structured in such a way that the discourse of the experts and the institution is still the framing, dominant discourse, while the discourse of lay participants is always mediated and constrained within the institutional format.
- An example of this can be found in a study of the interaction between host and callers to a London talk radio show. Ian Hutchby (1996) explores the strategies available to participants in argument sequences, and shows that typically the caller 'goes first', by stating their position in relation to a particular topic, while the host 'goes second', challenging the caller's opinion without necessarily having to produce one of their own.

- The following transcript illustrates this phenomenon:
- 1 Caller: When you look at e:r the childcare facilities in
- 2 this country, .hh we're very very low (.) i-on
- 3 the league table in Europe of (.) you know if
- 4 you try to get a child into a nursery it's
- 5 very difficult in this country. .hh An' in fa:ct it's
- 6 getting wor::se.
- 7 Host: What's that got to do with it.
- 8 Caller: .phh Well I think whu- what 'at's gotta d-do
- 9 with it is . . .

(Hutchby 1996: H:21.11.88:l1.l)

- Another strategy which also contributes to the interactional power of the television host over audience participants is illustrated in the following transcript of a sequence in a British talk show, *Kilroy*. Here, the talk of the lay audience member is directed and to some extent controlled by the host's intervention and questioning:

1 Host: Tell me about this (.) household

2 Alice: erm well both my parents are very loving (.)

3 very accepting of lots of things (.) and (.)

4 therefore that rubs off (.) on my sister and

5 I – erm

6 Host: – how old are you

7 Alice: nineteen

8 Host: how old's your sister

9 Alice: sixteen

10 Host: mmm

11 Alice: and erm (1.0) I've lived with both separately (.)

12 I've lived with Dad for the last couple of years

13 – now

- 14 Host: – does Dad have a lover
- 15 Alice: Yes he does (.) – Paula
- 16 Host: – You live with Dad and lover
- 17 Alice: yes
- 18 Host: How old were you when you lived with Dad and
- 19 lover
- 20 Alice: erm (1.0) I was seventeen when I moved to
- 21 Melbourne
- 22 Host: cause you problems
- 23 Alice: no
- 24 Host: did you find it strange
- 25 Alice: no
- (Thornborrow 1997: Adoption/Kilroy/1994)

Language, society and virtual power

- To conclude this chapter we look briefly at the development of computer-mediated communication (CMC) over the past two decades. This new form of communication can take a variety of forms, from email exchanges to synchronous (real-time) interaction in chat rooms and MUDs (Multi-User Dimensions), to asynchronous (postponed-time) interaction in newsgroups. David Crystal (2001) provides a comprehensive overview of the linguistic features of CMC, and the language we use to communicate on the web.
- This has been given various names including 'netspeak', 'netlish', 'weblish', 'wired-style' and 'cyberspeak', and some of the words and expressions first coined in this context have now become part of the language we use every day. Crystal gives examples of terms such as 'multi-tasking', 'dot.com', and 'he's 404' (2001: 19) which are used 'offline' as well as 'online'.

- But many of the questions we ask in this book about how language can be powerful apply to social relations in virtual realities just as much as they do to social relations in 'real' life. What are some of the issues involved?

1. Social identity

In the early days of CMC it was thought that this new medium would result in more democratic communication, because a person's social identity (their gender, ethnicity, age) can be hidden in the virtual world. In cyberspace, people can also play with identity and present themselves in different personas, so the internet would be a place where social hierarchies become levelled out, and people could encounter each other in a more equal way. However, this has turned out to be not quite so simple. As Nancy Deuel found in her study of virtual sex interactions, stereotypical interpretations of gendered behaviour still prevail:

- Sexual aggression is assumed to be a male trait and one participant notes: 'It seems to me that if a female character shows any bit of intelligence and sexual recognition, people will think she's a male IRL. If she flirts shamelessly and has a smutty description, people will think she's a male IRL.' (1996: 134)
- So while it may be possible to disguise your identity on the Net, the people you interact with will still make assumptions about who you are based on what you say and how you say it.

2. 'Netiquette'

- The internet makes it possible for people who are geographically scattered thousands of miles away from each other to interact either in real time or with a very small time delay. This has led to the concept of cyberspace as a 'global village' (Crystal 2001: 5) where people who use the Net are members of a virtual community.
- As in any other community, rules and codes of behaviour have developed in order to control the way that members of the community behave.
- Entering a chat room as a 'newbie' means having to learn the conventions and rules of interaction in that space.
- Many newsgroups have a FAQ (frequently asked questions) file which sets out what these rules are, some even have moderators or 'wizards': people who are prepared to spend time monitoring the use of a group and making sure that rules are kept.

- Inappropriate behaviour can get you sanctioned, and possibly excluded from, a group. 'Flaming' (aggressive verbal behaviour), 'spamming' (sending unwanted long messages) and 'grandstanding' (posting your opinions widely with no respect for the topic of a newsgroup) are all activities that can lead to sanctions.
- One example of this is using a 'kill file', a kind of shield which can be used to prevent unwanted, offensive messages from getting through to you. Kollock and Smith (1996) describe this kind of shield as a powerful interactional device, one that can 'make invisible any objectionable person' (120).
- However, it works only on an individual, not a community, level, and, even if you banish someone from your screen, other users may not, so you will still see future postings if other participants comment on them. What is particularly interesting about the rules that attempt to control social interaction in cyberspace is that it is the people who use the Net who establish those rules. Cyberspace is a community regulated not yet by a 'top-down' authority but by a 'bottom-up' process developed by internet users.

3. Cyberspace: a socially powerful community?

- In her study of a community protest, Laura Gurak (1996) explains how a database called 'MarketPlace: Households' (listing details about millions of American households and produced by a company called Lotus) was prevented from becoming commercially available.
- The release of this product became the subject of an intense debate about privacy, not just in newspapers but across internet newsgroups and bulletin boards. For two months across the United States, people were posting information about the database, and how to contact Lotus to complain about the violation of their privacy. The speed and efficiency of this medium resulted in a highly effective campaign to stop the database going on sale.

- Gurak makes the point that what she calls ‘rhetorical communities’, diverse groups of people who participate in protests and campaigns via the internet, can be socially and politically powerful. In cases such as this, CMC can provide a public forum for action and protest, as so many participants can become involved very quickly in a campaign.

Activity

- If you regularly use internet sites such as chat rooms, or post to a newsgroup, what are the rules that govern behaviour in these cyberspaces? How do you know what they are, and what happens if you break them?

Summary

- In this chapter we have discussed the power of the media to determine what counts as news, and also how it gets represented.
- We have outlined the conflicting views of the media, on the one hand as organs of democracy, providing essential public information and on the other as powerful monopolies which relentlessly pursue their own interests.
- With the increase of public access to broadcasting space, and particularly with the arrival of the World Wide Web, and its potential for unregulated mass communication, these questions remain central to the debates about the function and power of the mass media. Are they providing an emerging forum for public debate, or are they still closely monitored institutions with hierarchies of discourse and systems of 'gatekeeping' which continue to control who gets to say what, and how? An analysis of the language and discourse used in mediated contexts provides a valuable way of finding evidence to support or counter these claims.

Works Cited

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