Considerations on TV Discourse

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Abstract: Media has become a very powerful cultural institution in the last past decades of the 20th century and inspired many critical studies in disciplines such as linguistics, semiotics, pragmatics, discourse studies and not least, in the field of mass communication itself. The first studies of media language focused on easily observable surface structures, such as the biased or partisan use of words in the description of Us and Them, especially along political and social lines, for instance in the representations of communists. The traditional approach on the analysis of the biased, stereotypical – sexist or racist images in the media, has taken into account both texts, as well as illustrations of photos. Semiotics found its way into media studies quite early, and thus brought some basic structural notions to the study of media discourse and a necessary component of a broader study of media images.
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1. News as a type of discourse

Studies of discourse have roots in a range of theoretical traditions that investigate the relations between *language*, *structure* and *agency*. Discourse compares the use of spoken, written and signed language, as well as multimedia forms of communication and is not restricted to "non-fractional" or verbal (e.g. gesture and visual) material. Although linguistic approaches judged the unit of discourse to be larger than the sentence, phenomena of interest can range from silence or a simple utterance, to a novel, a set of newspaper articles or a conversation.

Discourse was given more theoretical definitions formulated from various disciplinary standpoints, such as critical theory, sociology, linguistics, and philosophy. Crystal, for instance, has defined discourse as "a continuous stretch of (especially) spoken language, larger than a sentence, often constituting a coherent unit, such as a sermon, argument, joke or narrative".

Cook, on the other hand, has seen discourse as "stretches of language perceived to be meaningful, unified and purposive" (Cook, 1989, 156).

In order to establish a "common sense definition" of discourse, I appealed to the help of Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, where I found three different understandings of this term: 1. A serious speech, a piece of writing on a particular subject; 2. Serious conversation between people; 3. The language used in particular kinds of speech or writing.

Hartley has defined discourse: this impersonal and unavoidable social force, as I have defined *language*. He continues by saying that "following the numberless opportunities offered by language (including both values and a system of structuring through which we can order our perceptions on the world and our own sensations) we understand ourselves and our lives, acting creatively in society. But with every word, language speaks of ourselves" (Hartley, p. 12).

Every culture has its own specific language, therefore our acceptance of its system brings, in its train, our "deepest identification" with the culture we are likely to belong. Still, our identity can be considered to some extent, the result of both the selection and involvement to which we have been exposed or to the one we choose.

There are many types of discourse belonging to each social institution, to mention only the medical discourse, the religious discourse, and the juridical discourse.

The news discourse belongs to the big class of media discourse.

It is made up of words and images, meaning a subsystem specific, different from the range of language occupying a very important position in our cultural hierarchy (Hartley, 1999, p.14).

In order to be able to relate to it we have to learn its particular language systems which will happen as a consequence of the knowledge of the usual language. News can be considered as a preexistent discourse of an impersonal social institution which is at the same time an industry. We become more aware of what is *news* as soon as we get familiarized with its codes and conventions, being able not only to watch them but also to interpret the world through it. We can do so both individually and as a community.

According to John Hartley, one must draw a line between what he calls *language system and discourse*. *A system*, as he puts it, "constitutes a structure of elements being in relationships governed by rules. In order to understand it, we must be capable of identifying a different element and to show how they are selected and combined after rules and conventions proper to the system. In the case of language, for example, the system represents the generative structure which enables us to produce proper speech with the condition of «creativity governed by rules»" (consequently, the system does not impose on us the obligation of what to say, but determines the way we produce statement is comprehended and has a meaning to us and to others".

Discourses are considered as "different ways of using the language". We cannot comprehend a discourse without taking into consideration the conditions: social, political, historical, in which it was produced.

One can distinguish between formal and informal discourses. Among the formal ones, we can include the juridical discourse, and in the category of informal discourses, we can introduce the family discourse.

We cannot say for certain whether or not TV news forms in itself an autonomous *language* or is just alternative of the large television discourse, itself dependant on the general language system. (Hartley, 1999, p. 17)

Something that we can be totally positive about is that TV news is a discourse, which is partly constructed by the medium of television, and partly by journalistic conventions.

News can be considered as a consequence of structuring the News Discourse, and *reality*, on the other hand, is produced, more or less, by news.

But we can say that it is autonomous up to a point and that is in the specific way it has evolved and it has been used during the time.

Journalists distinguish between *news* and what is not *news* by virtue of the fact that today's news is guided by the way yesterday's news was made and, by implication, tomorrow's will be made. Or as Stuart Hall puts it (cited in Fiske) the "stories or rather the ways of telling those stories write the journalists" (cited from Television News: Lecture Notes, 2001, p. 2).

News is not something created by the journalists but it is rather a piece of information already existing in the world becoming acknowledged only with the help of the human touch.

Many studies of the language of the news have addressed the extent to which the news meets expectations of impartiality, objectivity and a balanced representation of reality, the scales being rather tipped towards subjectivity than towards impartiality.

2. Analysing TV Discourse

In his study, <u>Analysing Verbal Data</u>, <u>Principles</u>, <u>Methods</u> and <u>Problems</u>, J. L. Lemke considers that "the language people speak or write becomes research data only when we transpose it from the activity it originally functioned to the activity in which we

are analysing it"(Lemke, 1). Therefore, we cannot build up the meaning of a particular stretch of language without taking into consideration the context of its production, presentation and recontextualisation. People use language not only to transmit factual or propositional information, but also to establish and maintain social relationships. It is generally felt that spoken language successfully illustrates both interactional and transactional purposes, written language being associated with transactional purposes. Lemke argues that spoken language is always analysed from written transcriptions of audio or visual recordings, passing over some relevant features, such as hesitations, repetitions, false starts, re-starts, changes of grammatical construction in mid-utterance, non-standard forms, compressions and elisions. Even though in transcriptions information is preserved, at the level of word, what really counts is the way in which words are tied together, not to mention intonation, which is also very important.

This procedure, that is the transcription, at the level of word, often omits information about "emphasis, value-orientation, degree of certainty or doubt, attitude of surprise or expectability, irony, humour, emotional force, speaker identity and speaker dialect or language background (…), timing of speech (length of pauses, simultaneous speech, sudden breaking off of fluency, overlaps)" (Lemke, 2).

Written texts, on the other hand, bring in their train, a great amount of visual information: handwriting forms page layout, topography, accompanying drawing and information which plays an important role in interpreting the meaning of verbal texts. The analysis of verbal data should also focus on both video tapes and field notes, which help to reconstruct the social situation or cultural activity type within which some meanings of the verbal language are very much more likely than others.

John Hartley makes a clear distinction between the elements used in narrating news.

The first one he distinguishes is that when "the announcer presents the subject, even from the beginning, constructing the relationships with other elements, completing it at the end". (Hartley, 114).

In this case, language in use creates what Lemke calls *presentational meaning*, that is the kind of meaning referred to as "representational, propositional, ideational, experiential or thematic content", which presents "states of affairs, processes, activities and relationships". (Lemke, 3)

The *orientational meaning* is best correlated with the second and the third elements of news narrative, when the commentator or the reporter integrates the subject in the

context and explains its significance" and in the case when "the recorder material presents images and the actuality from the field, from the level of the street experience". (Hartley, 114 – 115).

Organisational meaning, the last in Lemke's vision, is not really perceived as a clear-cut category, but is the one which enables us to see which word goes with other ones, which phrases and sentence with which other, and the way we can distinguish a coherent text from a sequence of sentences, phrases and words. We can achieve this in two ways: one is that we employ language rules of the type studies by grammarians, and that these rules operate between sentences as well as within them; the other one is that we employ "knowledge" – of the words, of the speaker, of social convention, of what is going on around us as we read and listen, in order to make sense of the language we are encountering.

We can apply all these rules to our issue, that is TV news, since we cannot create a unified meaning of the news story presented without taking into consideration our general knowledge of the world, or as Teun van Dijk put it, "there is no news without knowledge", in his study, "Knowledge and News", 2001.

2.1. Analysing news on Euronews

If we take a good look at Euronews we may notice some specific features that detach it from the wide realm of news producing *enterprises*.

First of all, we can observe the ways of presenting news on stages, according to their degree of importance.

Therefore, priority has today's news story, which is given top interest along a whole day's time, and becomes the top headline of all the newsreels during twenty-four hours.

As a second characteristic, we can mention the fact that after the detailed presentation of the most important news, we enter the intricate domain of *Economy*, which includes also various other stages. *European Affairs* is the title of another news section, itself made up of different other components. *Sport* is not left out, being given the deserved attention and neither is the *Weather Forecast*, which comes at the end and presents the temperatures of the major European cities, for 24 hours. *Publicité* is another title that can be seen on the screen when watching Euronews, publicity constituting the main financial source for national news channels.

Another particular feature that must be taken into consideration when making the difference between this channel and others, such as CNN, for instance, is the *invisibility* of the human presence behind the screen.

This *invisibility* makes the audience feel as if they were left alone in what Hartley calls "the fundamental opposition", that is *us them*, a good parallel between fact and fiction, between real and unreal, between true and false. In this opposition constructed by Hartley, *us* stays for "the news institution, the culture, the nation, the audience" and they is represented by "the foreign countries, the faith, the voice-over". (Hartley, Understanding news, 123).

Throughout this opposition, the public not only remains alone on the side of *us*, but also enters in opposition with the journalists, which are the hidden voices.

There are several voices that can be heard presenting the news stories on Euronews. First of all, there is a male voice that utters the major headlines of all the pieces of news, and not only does he state the news headlines, but also the titles of the section to come and also that of the sub-sections, never forgetting to mention the channel's motto. As he puts it, "Euronews is a national channel", or "Euronews is the channel with the news on the hour".

Nevertheless, there are preserved the same elements of news narrative realized by Hartley: "*the announcer*, who presents the subject, *the reporter* or *the commentator*, who places the subject in the right context, and the recorded material, presenting images and the field *actuality*, from the level of the street experience". (Hartley, 115).

Given all these elements, the news stories are presented by two different "unseen" voices, one taking the role of *the announcer*, and the other one that of *the reporter.*

From the visual elements of the news narrative emphasized by Hartley, *graphics* is still retained, occupying the entire screen, and being followed by a recorded commentary (voice-over) (Hartley, 115). I consider this element the fundamental characteristic of Euronews stories, along with *photography* which is another important visual feature, being a sub-category of *graphics*.

Another visual element is represented by *The names specification*, including titles generics or verbal introductions presenting the persons outside the news, and at last, but not least, *the rough material*, which in our case includes only the *voice-over*, where the reporter does not appear on the screen.

All these characteristics I have pointed out (and not only) made of Euronews one of the most famous and trustworthy news channels, placing itself not very far off from CNN, BBC on the level of audience and respectability they enjoy from the part of the public.

2.2. Television Narrative Analysis

This kind of analysis consists of three different types of analyses. First of all, I must apply the syntagmatic analysis, which is based on the ideas of Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist who wrote a book, in 1928, entitled <u>Morphology of the Folktale</u>. He considers the basic narrative unit in his study as a *function*, giving for each of them an abbreviated definition and a conventional sign of designation. Some of these functions are rather complicated and have numerous subcategories, all of which fulfil the same task. When analysing his functions, one can observe the degree to which many of contemporary stories contain many of Propp's functions. He gives the following definition of the hero: "that character who either directly suffers from the action of the villain … or who agrees to liquidate the misfortune or lack of another person". (Vladimir Propp, <u>Morphology of the Folktale</u>, 1928, taken from A. Asa Berger)

I will now apply Propp's functions to a piece of news presenting Queen's Elisabeth II 50th anniversary, taken from Euronews. The news story begins with the presentation of the royal family, all the members being present at the ceremony, except for Her Majesty Elisabeth the Queen Mother and her daughter, Princess Marguerite, who both died very recently. It went on by saying that the morning when the ceremony began, a fire blew up in one of the wings from Buckingham Palace, a minor incident that couldn't undermine the importance and the grandeur of the big event.

When applying Propp's morphology to the text, I have found four of his functions that are reflected in the piece of news selected:

Table 1. Proppian Functions in the news story presenting the ceremony of Queen Elisabeth II 50th Anniversary of her accession to the throne taken from Euronews

Propp's Functions	Symbol	Events
Initial situation	α	Heroine shown at her 50th anniversary
Absentation	β	Two of the members of the family were absent, that is Her Majesty Elisabeth the Queen Mother and her daughter, Princess Marguerite, who both died very recently
Mediation	B	A fire broke out at Buckingham Palace before the ceremony
Liquidation	K	The fire was extinguished

The syntagmatic analysis has a double importance. First, narratives, regardless of their genre, are composed of certain functions (or elements) that are essential for the creation of a story. Second, the order in which events take place in a narrative is of a great importance. Since there is a logic to narrative texts, the arrangements of elements in a story can greatly affect our perception of what *anything* means.

Secondly, I should make a paradigmatic analysis of the text, that is, list a series of paired up positions that I found in the news story. All the terms in the left side relate to one another and are opposite to all the words in the right side of the list.

Table 2. Polar oppositions in the news story presenting the Queen's anniversary

Stateliness	Pettiness
The Ruler	The people
The individual	The community
Formality	Casualness

In order to explain the use of paradigmatic analysis, Arthur Asa Berger has uttered:

"We search for binary or polar oppositions because meaning is based on the establishment of relationships, and the most important kind of relationship in the production of meaning in language is that of opposition".

The third way that helps us to realize this kind of analysis is by thinking of the news story as being the kind of "public dream". Therefore, one must analyse the piece of news in terms the symbolic significance of the events presented and what they might reflect about the psyche, politics, society and culture.

Dreams express unfulfilled desires. They are made up of images, generally have a narrative structure and that is why we can make a comparison between them and television.

Therefore, the Queen can be seen as the symbol of power, fame, elegance and not at least, richness, as someone's desire to become powerful, famous, elegant and rich. Politics is also represented in this dream since the Queen represents the Monarchy or the success of this type of rulership as opposed to the Republican one. The fire that broke out at the palace can be understood as the breaking out of the so-long oppressed desires and its extinction as a sign that nothing of what he or she had dreamt of about was real and therefore could not ever come true.

In conducting this kind of analysis, one must always keep in mind the fact that certain effects are created through the use of color camera angles and shots, sound effects, music, dialogue and action.

1. Conclusions

In this study on the analysis of news discourse, I have tried to approach some of the most important aspects regarding this topic.

While trying to define news as a category of media genres, I have seen that the phenomenon of mass media analysis is much richer and more varied than I have ever imagined.

After integrating news in the large realm of media discourse, I have shown the way in which people process the information they receive from the media channels. This study has outlined the fact that people or *news readers* understand TV news differently, depending on their age, sex or degree of education and they do so by going beyond its specific codes or conventions. In order to put into practice all the critical assumptions explained previously, I have analysed the methods used by Euronews in presenting news, ending by a television narrative analysis on a piece of news selected from "News at eight".

After delivering this research, I have reached the conclusion that you don't need to be a professional to understand news. Even though many of us don't pay much attention to it, much less before we become graduates, the institution of news has earned a privileged status, in the hierarchy of value of our cultural society.

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