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TEUN A. VAN DIJK

## Introduction: Discourse Analysis in (Mass) Communication Research

### *1. From Content Analysis to Discourse Analysis of Media Messages*

For outsiders it is surprising to conclude from the vast amount of mass communication research since World War II that comparatively little attention has been paid to the systematic analysis of what mass communication seems to be primarily about, viz. *texts* (messages, discourse, etc.). Indeed, most work deals with various sociological or socio-psychological theories of mass media institutions, of audiences or effects, or the relations between media on the one hand and society and culture on the other hand. The study of the mass mediated messages themselves is usually relegated to a predominantly methodological approach, viz. that of so-called 'content analysis'. Thus, to take just one example, McQuail's recent introduction to mass communication theory (McQuail, 1983), contains one, 25-page, chapter on media content, of which again large part deals with more general properties of news. Systematic discourse analysis of media messages hardly goes beyond modest applications of 'structuralist or semiological approaches inspired by the work of French theorists of more than 15 years ago (cf. e.g. Bentele, ed., 1981; Merten, 1983). Current results from linguistic discourse analysis are as yet ignored in mass communication research (see de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981; and van Dijk, ed., 1985, for many references to that work).

There are several reasons for this notable lack of both classical and modern mass media research. First, linguistics itself simply had little to offer to those interested in the analysis of media discourse. Until the beginning of the 1970s, linguistic grammars were limited to rather abstract descriptions of isolated sentences and did not account for the various levels or dimensions of whole 'texts'. Interest for media discourse, then, was limited to sister-disciplines such as stylistics, rhetorics or semiotics. Unified models for the description of 'text' or 'discourse' only became to be elaborated during the 1970s. But most discourse analysts hardly paid any attention to the texts which, apart from everyday conversation, they are confronted with most frequently, viz. those of the media. Second, mass media research has primarily emerged within the social sciences, such as political science and sociology, and therefore rather focussed on macro-phenomena such as institutions, the audience or public,

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large-scale processes of effects, or overall functions of media in society. Indeed, the influence of the media — and its various modalities (high or low impact) — was reconstructed at a rather high level of abstraction and seldom at the level of the actual texts that would have such influence or the actual recipients and their internal cognitive processing of such texts. Third, the nature of the questions asked in mass communication research was conducive to the analysis of large amounts of message data, for which only rather superficial and mostly quantitative methods were available. A subtle stylistic analysis of, say, many thousands of texts (the output of only a month of news of one average newspaper) is simply not a feasible undertaking.

Although there are certainly other (historical, practical, methodological or theoretical) reasons for the lack of systematic discourse analysis in media research, it should be emphasized at the same time that message analysis was not altogether absent either. Ignoring for a moment the more distant roots of media analysis in and before our century, we witness increasing interest during the 1960s for what is still commonly called 'content analysis'. After Berelson's classical book (1952) and the collection of conference papers edited by Pool (1959), the Annenberg School Conference of 1966 resulted in the highly influential book of papers edited by Gerbner et al. (1969), a book that appeared in the same year as Holsti's (1969) introduction to content analysis in the social sciences and the humanities. Indeed, both the Gerbner et al. book and the Holsti introduction showed that content analysis was not just a theoretical approach of mass communication research, but an interdisciplinary method 'for the objective, replicable and quantitative' description of texts. Besides the media, also poetry, dreams or psychiatric discourse could be analyzed with such a method. And first linguistic, stylistic and even logical foundations were provided for the definition of the crucial 'units' of analysis that must precede quantitative treatment of data. Finally, the important help of computers, both for limited automatic analysis and for statistical treatment of results, was called in, as was exemplified for instance in the General Inquirer project published several years before (Stone, et al., 1966). We had to wait more than 10 years, before the uses of computers in Artificial Intelligence research, e.g. at Yale, on text processing significantly changed these early attempts, and we now witness the first steps in the automatic understanding and summarization of news stories (Cullingford, 1978).

Content analysis as it was elaborated in the 1960 continued in the 1970s, although that decade hardly seemed to provide new orientations or new paradigms. A decade later, Krippendorff's (1980) introduction was a welcome replacement for Holsti's, but its bibliography hardly contained substantial new contributions from the seventies. In other words, the major interests, both theoretically and methodologically, seemed to lie elsewhere in mass communication research, and inspection of a current introduction to the field, such as the one already mentioned by McQuail (1983) can illustrate that point. Or else, content analysis is used as part of necessarily large scale projects

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involving fundamental questions of the media, such as the 'cultural indicators' research directed by George Gerbner, as it is also summarized in this book. Indeed, cultural changes cannot simply be detected only by meticulous micro-analyses of a few media messages. Selected signaling devices, or indicators, are to be described in many (kinds of) media discourse in order to assess such important social phenomena through media analysis. Similarly, other kinds of content analysis will of course provide at least partial insight into properties of media discourse, such as the prevalent themes of the news, the kind of actors in news, advertisements, TV-programs or film, or style in the headlines. That is, content analysis *is* interested in principles of description when it tries to account for the basis of unitization, and in this way also structural properties of media discourse can be attended to, at least from a quantitative point of view.

Yet, the second half of the 1970s also brought suggestions for a more explicit and systematic account of media discourse. Some of this work clearly rejects the principles of 'classical' content analysis and the aims of media research in which it is embedded (often associated with the 'American' approach in mass communication). Much of this new look in media research is based in Britain. Thus, the well-known Glasgow University Media Group published in 1976 its first 'bad news' study about TV-news, followed in 1980 by a book on 'more bad news', in which systematic analysis of both text and film yielded the conclusion that industrial news is biased in favor of the 'dominant' position of government or factory directors. In a somewhat different vein, this critical analysis of the media has also been the characteristic of media research by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, under its earlier direction by Stuart Hall (Hall, et al., eds. 1980). In his review of the media research of the Centre, Hall (1980) formulates the break with the classical (quantitative, American, stimulus-response) approaches as follows: "(our) approach defined the media as a major cultural and ideological force, standing in a dominant position with respect to the way in which social relations and political problems were defined and the production and transformation of popular ideologies in the audience addressed" (p. 118). This concern for the (re-)production of ideologies in and through the media is also manifest in the special interest for discourse analysis in the work of the Centre. Current French thinkers (such as Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Althusser, Laclau, etc.) have been a major inspiration for such approaches. Both this work, and the work of the Glasgow University Media Group are represented in this volume, viz. by the chapters of Connell & Mills, and by Davis, respectively. Details about the theoretical backgrounds and the methodological principles of analysis of these two directions of research can be found in those chapters.

Although this work is becoming more influential only by the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s, it also has its predecessors in earlier research. For instance, Cohen's (1972) book about the Mods and the Rockers extensively

pays attention to the way these youth groups are transformed into 'folk devils' by the media. This analysis is an example of what Hall calls the 'production of popular ideologies'. In fact, Hall and his collaborators (1978) had shown themselves how this process works in crime reporting, such as the media coverage (or rather: construction) of 'mugging' as a pervasive social 'problem'. Although these studies do not (yet) apply systematic discourse analysis, there is explicit attention for the ideological analysis of media messages. Instead of the more manifest units of quantitative content analysis, we thus approach an account of underlying meanings or processes of 'signification'. That classical methods of content analysis can be usefully combined with such a critical, ideological analysis, was already shown by Halloran and his associates (1970) in their study of the media coverage of a Vietnam demonstration in London. In other words, there is no strict distinction between content analysis on the one hand and explicit discourse analysis on the other hand, e. g. along the quantitative-qualitative dimension or according to whether observable or latent categories are studied. Another good example of this integration of methods and critical analysis is the Hartmann & Husband (1974) study about racism in the media.

Whereas most of the work mentioned above has been done by social scientists, some British (and Australian) linguists have recently started to pay attention to the relations between language and ideology in the media (Fowler et al., 1979). They start, so to speak, at the other end, viz. with a close analysis of the grammatical structures of media messages about an event (e. g. the West-Indian carnival) in different newspapers. They are able to show that a syntactic analysis of sentences alone may already reveal biases in the description of facts, e. g. through the deletion of agents/subjects in sentences if these are the agents of negative acts (e. g. 'The mugger was killed' instead of 'The police killed the mugger'). It is obvious that a complete discourse analysis can trace further properties of media messages that go beyond those of syntactic structure of single sentences. It is however important to stress that ideological positions, interests or power, can also be 'signalled' through such apparently 'context-free' language characteristics as sentential syntax (see also Kress & Hodge, 1979).

Several of the papers in part II of this volume can be located in this tradition of critical or ideological analysis of mass media discourse, as it has been developed especially in Britain. The contributions of Schlesinger & Lumley, Downing, Husband & Chouhan, and Hartley & Montgomery, provide such special 'readings' of media messages. Despite their differences, they all deal with the representation or the accounts of 'others' (minority groups, foreigners, or 'terrorists') in the media.

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## *2. From discourse analysis to the analysis of complex communicative events*

We have observed above that various directions of media research in the 1970s have laid the foundations for a discourse analytical approach to mass mediated messages. Discourse is no longer just an 'intervening variable' between media institutions or journalists on the one hand, and an audience on the other hand, but also studied in its own right, and as a central and manifest cultural and social product in and through which meanings and ideologies are expressed or (re-)produced. In other words, we here find the beginnings of a sound theory of media discourses, even if many social scientists will of course take (media) discourse primarily as the basis for an 'inferential framework', that is, as 'expression', 'indicator', 'signifier' or as 'stimulus' for other, 'underlying', phenomena in culture and society, such as ideologies, power, dominance, discrimination, racism and sexism, media access of elites, or the uses and effects of the media with the audience. These relations between 'text' and 'context' are of course crucial, and no full-fledged theory of the media is adequate without such explicit inferences. This does not mean, however, that our insight into the structures of media discourse is more than fragmentary at the moment. On the contrary, most extant work focuses on rather specific features of media discourse, viz. those features which intuitively are found relevant for inferences about important social or cultural factors.

It goes without saying that an adequate analysis of the relations between media texts and contexts requires a more systematic approach to media discourse. All levels and dimensions of analysis need to be attended to, from 'surface' properties of presentation, lay-out, graphical display in printed discourse, or intonation, paraverbal and nonverbal features in spoken media discourse, on the one hand, through an analysis of syntactic structures, lexical style or rhetorical devices, to the 'underlying' meanings, connotations or associations, or the pragmatics of speech acts performed. And such systematic analyses should be made for a large variety of discourse types in the media, not only of news, but also of advertising, film, TV-programs (talk shows, etc.), and so on. Comparison between different media genres may then yield specific properties for different genres but also commonalities, e. g. of style, rhetorical devices, event or actor descriptions, implicit meanings or modes of coherence. Despite the encouraging studies mentioned above, this programmatic enumeration also suggests that most of the work is still ahead of us.

Some of the papers contributed to this book address these various structural features of media discourse. Lindegren-Lerman, for instance, examines the subtle devices journalists may use in the representation of controversial or 'problematic' propositions in Nixon's public declarations about the Watergate affair. On the other hand, van Leeuwen in his contribution deals with a complex 'surface' phenomenon in film and film text, viz. rhythm and

intonation. And also Bentele, in his chapter on TV-news programs, shows what linguistic or grammatical approaches can contribute to media discourse analysis. My own contribution tries to specify some properties of news discourse in the press. Besides the usual distinctions between several levels of analysis, such as the distinction between overall, semantic macrostructures, and local relationships of coherence, this chapter proposes that news has a conventional 'news schema', or superstructure, consisting of a hierarchical organization of news item categories. Similar 'schemata' may be made explicit also for other media discourses, whether written/printed, or spoken, and including non-verbal acts and film (for details about such news structures, see also van Dijk, 1984b, 1986).

#### *The cognitive and social context*

Besides this urgent need for more textual analyses of media discourse, also the well-known features of the context, such as processes of production and reception, as well as the social and cultural situations need of course further attention. We have suggested that most work in mass media research in fact is about these social dimensions of the communicative process. Yet, in accordance with the prevalence of macro-level approaches in sociology, there is also a lack of more detailed, micro-studies of media processes, both in production and in reception. For the production of news, a few recent studies (Tuchman, 1978, Fishman, 1980) have begun to pay attention to the more detailed production and interpretation processes in the everyday activities of journalists. Daily interactions between journalists, or between journalists and other newsmen such as newsactors, sources, witnesses, or representatives of organizations, need to be further analyzed for their strategies, routine acts, commonsense categories, or other principles of understanding. Detailed observation and analysis is necessary of decision making processes in e. g. editorial meetings, also to make explicit the understanding and the uses of the well-known newsvalue criteria in the selection or the (re-)construction of news events as news items. From our discourse analytical point of view, for instance, it is imperative that we come to know how final news items in the press or on TV are the ultimate results of a complex *sequence of text processing stages*. It has not sufficiently been realized that most news items are not directly based upon personal observations or experiences of journalists, but rather the result of a series of textual transformations of various forms of antecedent discourses, such as telex messages, reports, interviews, press conferences, documents, police records, eyewitness testimony, and so on. In other words, most news production is a form of text processing. We should investigate which linguistic, cognitive and social factors impinge on this process. Cognitive models of discourse comprehension, for instance, will be necessary to account for the strategies used by journalists in these respective processing stages (see van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, for detail). At this point, a

cognitive theory of news values can be built into the cognitive (re-)production model to account for the special, socio-cultural and institutional constraints upon news reporting.

Similar remarks hold for the reception process. Theories of media effects abound, but there is no theory that models in detail the processes of media discourse understanding, the formation of knowledge and beliefs, the interaction of personal or social opinions or attitudes on that process of acquisition, and hence upon the 'effects' consisting in the transformation of knowledge, beliefs or attitudes. The 'stages' of media effects as they were proposed by e. g. McGuire (1973) a decade ago are merely rough designations of the various steps of such a process. Detailed memory models, both in experimental psychological terms, and in terms of computer simulations in Artificial Intelligence, will be needed to fill in the required applications in media research. Using a newsreport in an international weekly as our example, we have demonstrated how complex such processing of news discourse in readers (or hearers) may be (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). It goes without saying, however, that earlier insights in the field of persuasion analysis, whether from a socio-political or philosophical and sociological point of view (as is the case in the chapter by Harté), need to be integrated into such highly complex models (Roloff & Miller, eds., 1980).

Next, communicative events such as the production and the consumption of media discourse have their goals and functions. In the light of the previous paragraph, we may therefore expect that again a micro-analysis of the 'uses' of media messages may shed further light on problems that have been studied in more global terms before (Blumler & Katz, eds., 1974). Thus, in our own current research about ethnic attitudes in everyday conversations (e. g. van Dijk, 1984a), we have found how people use media information in the construction of ethnic opinions and attitudes, and how they take media as 'evidence' in conversational strategies of self-presentation and persuasion. Detailed conversational analysis, thus, yields more insights into the actual uses of media discourses in realistic social situations and other communicative events. Both from a cognitive and from a linguistic and social point of view, such insights also allow us to specify what exactly the 'agenda setting' function of the media amounts to. A socio-cognitive model of discourse production indeed may account for the role of such 'topic structures' in the production of new texts and in the participation in talk about media-induced topics and their degree of social relevance.

And finally, a decade of research in sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Bauman & Sherzer, 1974, Saville-Troike, 1982) has shown how practically all features of discourse, as well as those of discourse production and understanding, are systematically related to the many features of the socio-cultural context. This means that we also need detailed ethnographic observations about the production and uses (participation) of communicative events in the media, both for

communicative events (e. g. talkshows) 'in' the media, as well as those 'by' the media, i. e. with media users als participants. Such analyses may shed light upon such issues as the shared cultural basis of common understanding (and hence of cultural presuppositions), the uses of different formal styles in the media, conditions of code switching (e. g. between a dominant media language and a dialect or a minority language), the socio-cultural functions of various media discourses, the ritual nature of specific media discourses or programs, and so on.

At this latter point we also find a link with the important study of international and cross-cultural forms of media discourse, production and uses (see Hamelink's chapter in this volume). Economic and cultural dominance in communication is not only a macro-phenomenon, but also is actualized in the details of media texts and their uses. Explicit comparison of media products across nations and cultures allows us to specify which thematic, stylistic, rhetorical, schematic, or other features of media discourse are imposed (or not) by dominant communication monopolies. In this way not only ideologies may be transmitted (see e. g. Dorfman & Mattelart, 1971; Dorfman, 1980, UNESCO, 1980; Smith, 1980; Richstad & Anderson, eds., 1981, and many other sources), but also the very ways of production, writing, and reading/viewing. In other words, the hypotheses of cultural domination (of the third world by the first world) at the macro-level need to be further strengthened and tested at the micro-level of detailed discourse and communication analysis along the unes briefly sketched above (for details, see van Dijk, 1984b).

These final paragraphs may sound convincing but are of course highly programmatic. Yet, both theoretically and descriptively, we at the moment have the instruments to perform such a task. Linguistic, cognitive and social discourse and communication analysis only needs to be applied in and extended towards the systematic account of media discourse. And conversely, the study of mass communication should only realize that besides their own models of communication, media structures and uses, a micro-level approach, such as the one proposed in discourse analysis, may be fruitful. Fruitful also for a thorough study of typical 'macro-problems', such as cultural and communicative dominance patterns in (the media of) our world. Recent work in both interpersonal and mass communication studies has shown that such new developments in linguistics, discourse analysis, cognitive psychology and micro-sociology are being picked up in the detailed, and explicit account of what communication, whether in production, reception or interaction, will always basically involve: discourse.

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