

### Media contents

# The interdisciplinary study of news as discourse

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a discourse-analytical approach to the media. Discourse analysis emphasizes the obvious, but as yet not fully explored fact that media “messages” are specific types of text and talk. The theories and methods of the new interdisciplinary field of discourse analysis may be brought to bear in a more systematic and explicit account of the structures of media messages. Since discourse analysis is a multi-disciplinary enterprise, it is also able to relate this structural account to various properties of the cognitive and sociocultural context. Because the other chapters of this book pay detailed attention to the production, reception, uses, and socio-cultural functions of media discourse, the present chapter only briefly deals with such a broader study of those aspects of mass communication.

Discourse analysis emerged as a new transdisciplinary field of study between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s in such disciplines as anthropology, ethnography, microsociology, cognitive and social psychology, poetics, rhetoric, stylistics, linguistics, semiotics, and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences interested in the systematic study of the structures, functions, and processing of text and talk (for details, see the contributions in van Dijk, 1985b; also Chapter 1 in this volume and Chapter 6 on earlier and related forms of textual analysis of media discourses). In order to limit discussion of the vast domain of discourse-analytical media research, I shall focus on the study of news in the press. For further theoretical details, and for extensive applications in the study of various cases of press coverage, the reader is referred to van Dijk (1985b; 1988a; 1988b).

## THE DISCOURSE APPROACH IN MEDIA RESEARCH: A BRIEF REVIEW

Although the discourse approach in mass media research has now become more or less accepted as an alternative or addition to classical content analyses (Krippendorff, 1980), the number of systematic discourse studies of mass media messages is still limited. The applications of discourse analysis in media research are as varied as the very fields of discourse studies and mass communication themselves. Much work has a linguistic orientation, such as the early stylistic studies of Leech (1966) and Crystal and Davy (1969), and the later critical linguistics approach of Fowler *et al.* (1979), Fowler (1991), Kress (1985), and Chilton (1985; 1988), among others. Much of this work, as well as recent work on social semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988) has been influenced by Halliday's systemic grammar (Halliday, 1978; 1985).

Better known in mass communication research, and equally diverse in orientation, is the critical work of the Glasgow University Media Group (1976; 1980) on the media representation of industrial disputes, the contributions in Davis and Walton (1983), and the cultural studies approach of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Hall *et al.*, 1980). While also dealing with language, discourse, and images, these approaches are not part of linguistics proper, but pay special attention to ideological and political dimensions of media messages. Despite the theoretical and ideological diversity of these and other current approaches, we witness increasing integration of linguistic, semiotic, and discourse-analytical approaches (van Dijk, 1985a; Hartley, 1982).

It is striking that most of this work has been done in the UK (and now also in Australia). Until recently, there was little linguistic or discourse-analytical work on the media in the USA, where most media studies were either anecdotal or focused on sociopolitical issues (see, however, Geis, 1987). The same holds for France, despite its early semiotic studies of some genres of media discourse (Barthes, 1973). Research in Germany is generally inspired by various approaches in text linguistics (Luger, 1983; Strassner, 1975; 1982) and its later developments across the boundaries with other disciplines, including semiotics and psychology (Bentele, 1981; Schmitz, 1990). In Austria, critical media research from an interdisciplinary discourse-analytical perspective is carried out

especially by Ruth Wodak and her associates (see her study of the anti-Semitic discourse, also in the press, accompanying the election of Waldheim: Wodak *et al.*, 1990).

## THE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF NEWS IN THE PRESS

The study of news reports in the press is one of the major tasks of discourse-analytical media research. Indeed, as the works reviewed above suggest, apart from advertising probably no media genre has received so much scholarly interest from mass communication researchers, semioticians, linguists, and discourse analysts. This attention is justified when we realize how important news is in our everyday lives. Most of our social and political knowledge and beliefs about the world derive from the dozens of news reports we read or see every day. There is probably no other discursive practice, besides everyday conversation, that is engaged in so frequently and by so many people as news in the press and on television. Let us therefore examine the structures of this genre in more detail.

To enhance the practical usefulness of this chapter, I discuss the various levels and dimensions of news discourse through a *partial and informal* analysis of a concrete example taken from a British newspaper. Further, I briefly indicate which structures of news discourse have particular social, political, or ideological implications, so that they may be focused on in a more critical analysis of news.

One of the characteristics of discourse analysis is that it describes text and talk in terms of theories developed for the several levels or dimensions of discourse. Thus, whereas classical linguistics and semiotics made an overall distinction between the form (*signifiants*) and meaning (*signifiés*) of signs, current discourse analysis recognizes that text and talk are vastly more complex, and require separate though interrelated accounts of phonetic, graphical, phonological, morphological, syntactic, micro- and macro-semantic, stylistic, superstructural, rhetorical, pragmatic, conversational, interactional, and other structures and strategies. Each of these levels has its characteristic structures, which may be interpreted or function at other levels, both within and outside the traditional linguistic boundaries of the sentence, as well as in the broader context of use and communication.

Note that such a complex analysis of discourse is not limited to

“textual” analysis, but also accounts for the relations between structures of text and talk, on the one hand, and of their cognitive, social, cultural, or historical “contexts,” on the other hand. Also textual production and comprehension processes, interactions among language users, and the societal or cultural functions of discourse are important objects of research in such a transdisciplinary approach. In this analysis of a news report, however, I shall focus on textual structures.

### **Example**

As the example of analysis, I use a news report that appeared in the British *Daily Mail* of 21 January 1989 (see the appendix to this chapter). It deals with the last act of a dramatic episode that had angered Conservatives, and hence the right-wing press, for a long time: the sanctuary sought by a Sri Lankan refugee, Viraj Mendis, in a Manchester church. After having lived for more than two years in the sacristy of the church, Mendis was finally arrested during a massive police raid on the church, which led to protests not only from church officials, but also from many antiracists and other groups defending the rights of immigrants and refugees. When a last recourse to the courts failed, Mendis was finally put on a plane to Sri Lanka, and it is this event which our news report is about.

This news item is part of a corpus of news reports, background articles, and editorials in the press about ethnic affairs which I studied as part of a project on racism in the press (van Dijk, 1991). This media project is itself part of a larger research program about the reproduction of racism in discourse, including not only media discourse, but also everyday conversations and textbooks (van Dijk, 1987a; 1987b). As will become clear from our analysis of this particular news report, the Western press, and especially the right-wing press, (re)produces and further emphasizes a negative image of minorities, immigrants, and refugees, and thereby contributes to increasing forms of intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination against Third World peoples in Europe and North America.

## **TEXT SEMANTICS**

### **Local and global coherence**

Both discourse analysts and ordinary language users are primarily interested in meaning: what is this text or talk about, what does it

mean, and what implications does it have for language users? Part of the answer to such questions is given in text semantics, which formulates interpretation rules for words, sentences, paragraphs, or whole discourses. One important semantic notion used to describe meaning is that of proposition, which may be roughly defined as the conceptual meaning structure of a clause (van Dijk, 1977).

One of the important notions studied in text semantics is that of the *local coherence* of the text: how are the subsequent propositions of the text bound together? One of the major conditions of such local coherence of texts is that their propositions refer to facts that are related, for instance, by relations of time, condition, cause, and consequence. In the *Mail* report we see that the first sentence of the lead paragraph expresses two propositions (“Mendis is flying to Sri Lanka,” and “There was a bid to release him”), which are both temporally (“after”) and (indirectly) causally related (he was deported because the attempt to get him released failed). Note that two expressions in these propositions also refer to the same person, Viraj Mendis, participating in the two events that are thus related.

The propositions are also conceptually related (“flying” and “airport,” “illegal” and “release”). Indeed, as we shall see below, these concepts are part of the so-called scripts of air travel and arrest. Our shared, social knowledge of such scripts provides the numerous “missing links” between the concepts and propositions of the text, which is, so to speak, a semantic iceberg of which only the tip is actually expressed, whereas the other information is presupposed to be known by the readers. This dependence on world knowledge and beliefs also may make coherence subjective and ideological: what is coherent for the journalist may not be so for all readers.

Besides this kind of referential local coherence, propositions may also be functionally coherent: for instance, when the second proposition has the function of a Specification, Paraphrase, Contrast, or Example, relative to the first proposition. Propositions in news reports are often connected by a relation of Specification: more general propositions are followed by more specific ones that give further details. We see in the next sentence what the “dramatic bid” consisted of: who did what, where, and how. Similarly, later sentences may feature paraphrases (“demand,” “plea”) of previous ones, and they may have ideological functions when they carry specific evaluative implications, as is clearly the case in the *Mail* report.

It is a crucial property of discourse that it is not only locally but

also globally coherent. Beyond meaning relations between subsequent sentences, a text also has overall semantic unity. This global coherence is described by what we all intuitively know as themes or topics. Topics conceptually, summarize the text, and specify its most important information. In theoretical terms such topics can be described as semantic macro-propositions, that is, as propositions that are derived from sequences of propositions in the text: for instance, by macro-rules such as selection, abstraction, and other operations which reduce complex information. The hierarchical set of topics or macro-propositions forms the thematic or topical structure of the text. Language users employ such *macro-structures* in order to understand globally and to summarize a text. In news discourse, the top of this macro-structure is conventionally expressed in the headline and the lead paragraph.

The report in the *Mail* may be represented as a list of propositions, subsequently reduced to a shorter list of macro-propositions or main topics. Through repeated applications of the macro-rules (macro-rules are recursive) we arrive at a list of main topics such as:

Viraj Mendis was deported to Sri Lanka;  
an attempt by a priest to have him released in Zurich failed;  
at Gatwick airport many groups protested against his  
deportation;  
Mendis was arrested after having sought sanctuary in a Manches-  
ter church.

In order to derive such topics (macro-propositions), we again need vast amounts of world knowledge: for example, that expulsion may involve (air) transport as well as police officers, and that it may lead to protests, which involves demonstrators and, sometimes, police officers. Special emphasis on specific topics may have ideological implications. Thus, the *Mail* pays much attention to the topic of the demonstration, unlike, for instance, the report in the *Guardian* (21 January 1989) on the same event, which focuses on the expulsion and its political implications.

## Implications

One of the most powerful semantic notions in a critical news analysis is that of implication. We saw earlier that much of the

information of a text is not explicitly expressed, but left implicit. Words, clauses, and other textual expressions may imply concepts or propositions which may be inferred on the basis of background knowledge. This feature of discourse and communication has important ideological dimensions. The analysis of the “unsaid” is sometimes more revealing than the study of what is actually expressed in the text.

There are various types of implication: entailments, presuppositions, and weaker forms, such as suggestion and association. In our example as well as generally in discourse about minorities and refugees, especially in right-wing news reports about minorities, the use of the word “illegal” not only means that Mendis has broken the law, but also associates him and other immigrants or refugees with crime (van Dijk, 1991). Similarly, the use of “Marxist” has negative implications, and makes Mendis a less credible refugee. Doubts about credibility are also raised by the description of demonstrators „who arrive in luxury coaches.” Thus, the whole article uses many descriptions of demonstrators and Labour which imply or suggest that they are wasting taxpayers’ money and that their protests are not serious (“they make a living out of complaining”).

Many ideological implications follow not only because too little is being said, but also because too many, irrelevant things are being said about news actors. The well-known example in news reports about minorities is the use of irrelevant ethnic or racial labels in crime stories. We find this strategic use of *irrelevance* here when Mendis is called a Marxist, and when the demonstrators are associated with revolutionaries, blacks, lesbians, and gays, associations that are hardly positive for most *Mail* readers. Mentioning an irrelevant detail like the cost of the coaches used by the demonstrators further suggests that they and the “loony Left” are wasting taxpayers’ money, a suggestion that likely has a powerful persuasive impact on many taxpayers/readers.

## **SUPERSTRUCTURES: THE NEWS SCHEMA**

Topics are usually organized by an abstract schema, consisting of conventional categories that specify what the overall function is of the topics of the text. Such a schema is called a superstructure (van Dijk, 1980). Just like stories or argumentations, news reports follow a hierarchical schema, consisting of such conventional categories as Headline, Lead (together forming the Summary), Main Events, Context, History (together forming the Background category),

Verbal Reactions, and Comments. Typical for news stories is that these categories, as well as their global semantic content, are expressed discontinuously, as “installments,” throughout the text: of each category the most important information is expressed first, a top-down strategy which assigns a so-called relevance structure to the text.

The assignment of importance or relevance may have ideological implications. The Headline, “**Mendis flown out as police face ‘rent-amob’ fury,**” expresses two macro-propositions (topics): namely, that Mendis is deported (by plane) and that (at the same time) the police are confronted with the angry reactions of protesters. These two propositions summarize the main information of the text and thereby signal that for the *Mail* both events are important. Other newspapers may only highlight the event of the expulsion. The Lead and the subsequent sentences provide further details of these topics, in the Main Event category (featuring information about the expulsion and demonstration) as well as in other categories such as a brief History (Mendis having been in Britain for thirteen years) and some general Context (the policies of the Church regarding sanctuary).

It is characteristic of a right-wing tabloid like the *Mail* that little attention is paid to the social or political background of the events, whereas relatively many details are given about the demonstrators and their Labour supporters. Information in the Verbal Reactions category is limited to the negative opinions of a policeman about the “great unwashed.” These opinions are consistent with those of the *Mail*. This also shows that news gathering and quotation in news are often biased through the choice of sources and the uses of source texts. Demonstrators and Mendis are not allowed to speak, as I have generally found for the role of minority speakers in ethnic affairs coverage (van Dijk, 1991). Finally, the Comment category is expressed discontinuously throughout the text by the various negative descriptions of the demonstrators and their Labour supporters. In other words, also the organization of the schematic superstructure of this news report is consistent with the ideological position of the *Mail*.

## STYLE AND RHETORIC

Style is the textual result of choices between alternative ways of saying more or less the same thing by using different words or a



different syntactic structure. Such stylistic choices also have clear social and ideological implications, because they often signal the opinions of the reporter about news actors and news events as well as properties of the social and communicative situation (their use in a tabloid) and the group memberships of the speakers, for instance that a specific journalist is white, male, or middle-class. Thus, the use of “mob” and “rentamob,” instead of “crowd” and “demonstrators,” may be interpreted as signaling the ideological position of the reporter about left-wing demonstrators, while at the same time discrediting them for the readers. The same is true of the use of “howling,” “screaming,” and “fury,” instead of “vigorously protesting.” Besides expressing negative attitudes and manufacturing the consent of the readers (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), the use of such words also shows a cultural dimension of news language: the everyday, popular style of tabloids.

Another aspect of style is the syntax of sentences: for instance, when agents of negative actions, typically those of the authorities, are left out. In the headline clause, “*Mendis flown out*,” it is not said *who* flew him out, or *who* put him on the plane (for details, see Fowler *et al.*, 1979). The rhetoric of this report mainly resides in the hyperboles used to describe the demonstrators, as we have seen above, and in typical tabloid alliterations such as “howling their hatred,” both emphasizing the negative properties of the demonstrators.

In sum, at various levels of analysis, those of local and global semantics, news schemata, and style, we find a consistent pattern of discursive features that imply or signal the ideological position of the *Mail* in the account of this event. In addition, the relevance structure of this report favors attention to those aspects of the situation that are important for the *Mail*, while leaving out important information and evaluations about the immigration and refugee policies of the Thatcher government, the courts, the police, and other white authorities.

### **SOCIAL COGNITION AND SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTS**

Discourse analysis of news is not limited to textual structures. We have seen that these structures express or signal various “underlying” meanings, opinions, and ideologies. In order to show how these underlying meanings are related to the text, we need an analysis of the cognitive, social, political, and cultural context. The cognitive approach is premised on the fact that texts do not “have” meanings, but are assigned meanings by language users, or, to be

precise, by the mental processes of language users. In other words, we need to spell out the cognitive representations and strategies of journalists in the production of the news report and those of the reader when understanding and memorizing it (van Dijk, 1988a; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983).

A few theoretical notions are necessary to explain what mental structures and processes are involved here. First, in textual understanding, the meaning of the text itself is gradually and strategically constructed and represented in memory as a *text representation*. Second, language users, and hence journalists and readers, have a unique, personal representation of the news events referred to by the text, in our case the expulsion and demonstration. This knowledge representation in memory is called a (situation or event) *model*. A model represents what a language user has understood of the event that the text is about, and we have understood a text if we have been able to build a mental model of that event.

This model not only features the information which is expressed through the text representation; it also contains much other information about this event, such as details about flying, expulsion, demonstrations, and Labour, possibly including personal associations and evaluations of readers. This information is not expressed in the text, because it is assumed to be known by the readers, or because it is found irrelevant by the reporter. Some of this presupposed information is derived from the *scripts*, as mentioned above, about expulsions and demonstrations. Such scripts are culturally shared, conventional knowledge representations about well-known episodes of social life. Thus, whereas models may feature personal and biographically unique information, scripts are general and social.

Similarly, people also have a specific mental model of the present communicative context, a so-called context *model*, which features information about the goals of the discourse, its communicative acts, and the properties of the audience. It is this context model that controls what information from the event model will be found communicatively relevant for inclusion in the text. For instance, in discourse about minorities, both in the press and in everyday conversations, prejudiced language users usually not only express negative opinions about minorities, as represented in their models of ethnic events; in addition, they will add disclaimers such as, "I have nothing against Blacks (Turks, refugees), but . . ." These disclaimers are designed to avoid a bad impression ("He is a racist");

they “save face” for the speaker (for details about such strategic moves in racist discourse, see van Dijk, 1987a). It is the context model that manages this interactional, communicative aspect of discourse and which relates discourse with social situations and structures.

We have seen, then, that event models in memory not only feature knowledge, but also opinions or evaluative beliefs about events and their participants, as has been more than clear in the *Mail* report. The many evaluative implications of the text we have encountered above may now be explained by spelling them out in a description of the mental models of the journalist. If a news report is “biased,” this is usually because the mental model of the journalist features structures and opinions which favor a specific ideological perspective on an event. Hence, critical analysis of the meaning of discourse in fact often involves the tentative reproduction of the beliefs in the underlying models of the speaker/writer.

In the same way that models feature instantiated (specified) knowledge from scripts, they embody specific opinions that are derived from general, socially shared opinion structures such as attitudes. More generally, then, we say that models are based on *social representations* or *social cognitions*, for instance about immigrants, refugees, or demonstrators (Farr and Moscovici, 1984; Fiske and Taylor, 1984). Unlike specific opinions, which may be personal, such social cognitions are characteristic of groups, such as the group of tabloid journalists, or the larger group of right-wing people in Britain (Gordon and Klug, 1986).

If social cognitions about different social groups and social events are similar, we say that they are being monitored by the same fundamental interpretation framework, that is, by the same *ideology*. Such an ideology features the basic norms, values, and other principles which are geared towards the realization of the interests and goals of the group, as well as towards the reproduction and legitimation of its power.

Thus, if we say that the news report of the *Mail* is “ideological,” we thereby mean that the structures and meanings expressed in it, first, reflect the structures and contents of the specific mental model of this individual reporter about this specific event, but that this model, second, may be based on general social-cognitive schemata (prejudices) about demonstrators or refugees, and that such schemata are finally monitored by underlying group-based ideologies. Hence, an ideological analysis requires a complex description not

only of the text, but also of the intricate cognitive representations and strategies used in the production and comprehension of the text.

Unfortunately, in critical semiotics, in linguistics, and discourse analysis, and in mass communication research, such a cognitive analysis is often neglected, or given only in very superficial and intuitive terms, such as “consciousness” or “meaning production.” However, it is precisely through a detailed account of social cognitions that we are able to relate discourse and speakers with social structure and culture, that is, through the representations that language users have *about* social structures. These social cognitions also allow us to relate the micro-structures of discursive action and communication with the societal macro-structures of groups (journalists, demonstrators, refugees, minorities) and institutions (newspapers, governments, courts). In a theoretical framework that is vastly more complex than that of traditional “effects” research, we are thus able to describe and explain in detail how this news report in the *Mail* may contribute to the legitimation and reproduction of anti-immigration ideologies and racism in British society.

In other words, models and social cognitions are, so to speak, the interface between text and context. This is how and where white male journalists have represented their group and class membership, and it is this general representation of ingroups and outgroups that is used strategically in the formation of models about a specific news event, models which in turn govern the news-gathering routines, the interpretation of sources and source texts by the reporter, as well as the ways in which the news event is described in the news report. In our opinion, it is in this way that the analysis of discourse as presented in this chapter should be related to the work presented elsewhere in this book.

## APPENDIX

CLASHES ON STREETS AND AT AIRPORTS AS REBEL IS DEPORTED

# Mendis flown out as police face “rentamob” fury

By BOB GRAHAM and DANNY BUCKLAND

ILLEGAL immigrant Viraj Mendis was flying home to Sri Lanka last night after a final dramatic bid for his release at Zurich Airport.

As his plane touched down en route to Sri Lanka, a supporter accompanying him demanded that Mendis be allowed off.

The plea came from the curate of the Manchester church where Mendis claimed sanctuary. The two British policemen sitting either side of Mendis re-handcuffed him and refused to budge and Swiss police were called in. After a bitter argument on the tarmac, it appeared the Swiss were about to agree to let him go, but their senior officer intervened and the plane took off for Colombo.

Mendis, a 32-year-old Marxist and Tamil supporter, said: “I’m going home to almost certain death.” It was as if Home Secretary Douglas Hurd was “holding a pistol to my head himself and pulling the trigger,” he said.

He had left Gatwick amid screaming protests from the “great unwashed”. Passengers were jostled as Left-wingers surged into viewing areas, howling their hatred of the Government. Four women and a man rushed barriers leading to the tarmac where his Air Lanka plane flight waited. Police, security staff and an airline crew dashed to stop them, scuffles broke out, and the five were arrested.

## Dirty

As the plane left Britain the West German Embassy said the state of Bremen might accept him and discussions were taking place with the federal government.

Three luxury coaches had taken many of the demonstrators to Pentonville Prison,

where Mendis had been held, then on to Gatwick. They were paid for with £1,700 of ratepayers’ money, allocated by leaders of Manchester’s Labour-run city council.

The council’s Tory group leader, John Kershaw, protested last night that the money, meant for genuine cases of hardship, had been spent without any committee authorisation.

At Pentonville, the “rentamob” protesters who had gathered outside the walls included the Revolutionary Communist Group, the Black Women for Wages for Housework group, the North West Campaign for Lesbian and Gay Equality and the King’s Cross Women’s Centre. Last night, bottles were thrown at police vans after a rally in support of Mendis in Manchester, at which Labour MP Anthony Wedgwood Bern spoke. Five hundred demonstrators marched through the city vowing vengeance against Margaret Thatcher and the Home Secretary, and responding to anti-police slogans shouted through loudspeakers from a truck supplied by the council cleansing department.

The column included the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Manchester University students and trade unions.

One senior police officer who monitors Left-wing protest groups said: “The same faces reappear all the time at demos. We know them as the great unwashed, because they all seem to wear the same dirty mode of dress. They make a living out of complaining.”

Mendis, who spent 13 years illegally in Britain, was seized by police on Wednesday from the Church of Ascension in Hulme, where he had claimed sanctuary for more than two years. The Home Secretary later warned churchmen to be cautious about sheltering people defying the law and yesterday the Archbishop of Canterbury reminded clergy that sanctuary was abolished 350 years ago and told them that they must obey the law.

*Daily Mail*, Saturday, 21 January 1989.



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