

NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS AND COMMENT ARTICLES: A “CINDERELLA” GENRE?

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Abstract

The present article provides an *introduction* to the special issue of *Revista Electrónica de Lingüística Aplicada* (RAEL) which is devoted to the analysis of *newspaper editorials* and *opinion articles* written in English, Spanish and French. My purpose in this paper is to frame the themes tackled in this monograph issue about *newspaper opinion discourse*, to highlight the paradigms and perspectives represented in the work of contributors and to provide a description of the article types included.

1. Introduction

This special issue of *Revista Electrónica de Lingüística Aplicada* (RAEL) is titled *Different approaches to newspaper opinion discourse* and publishes diverse studies on various linguistic features of the newspaper editorials and opinion articles in media discourse analysis. Another volume on the study of newspaper discourse should require no justification as it is probably both the most read of all genres and that about which the greatest volume is printed. Media discourse analysis is already a consolidated research strand (Van Dijk 1988a, 1988b; Fowler 1991; Bell 1991, 1998; Bell and Garret 1998; Fairclough 1995; Ungerer 2000; Bednarek 2006; *inter alia*) and important research journals and publications continue to devote their attention to the analysis of written and oral media content from different perspectives (Halmari and Virtanen 2005; Mateo and Yus 2006; O’Keeffe 2006; Bernardo *et al.* 2007; Lauerbach and Aijmer 2007; *inter alia*). Within this scenario, however, print journalistic opinion discourse has been and still is considered by many a neglected genre, especially if it is compared with the abundant existing work on other newspaper text types such as news writing (see Van Dijk’s bibliography on discourse and the media on line, 2004). Indeed, newspaper editorials have been referred to as an important public “Cinderella” genre (Ansari and Babaii 2005), and there is still less research on signed comment articles, opinion articles and Op-Eds. Fortunately, some interesting studies on the lexico-grammatical and discursal characterization of these text types are being carried out. It is the purpose of this paper to highlight some of the existing and more relevant contributions, including those presented in this special issue, in order to set up a common framework for a genre based characterization of newspaper opinion discourse across languages.

In this monograph number of RAEL the reader will find articles which approach the analysis of newspaper editorials and opinion articles from lexical, grammatical and textual perspectives. All texts analysed respond to Biber’s definition of the newspaper opinion texts as “(...) opinionated genres intended to persuade the reader” (1988:148), they cover different social, economical and political topics, and are published both in internationally quality broadsheets as well as in well known tabloids. Newspaper editorials and comment articles in three different languages - English, French, Spanish -are analysed individually and also comparatively among them. The theoretical framework of the papers presented here is also varied. Approaches from Corpus Linguistics (Sinclair 2004), Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1985/1994), and Cognitive grammar (Langaker 1987, 1991, 2000, 2002; Plungian 2001; Nuyts 2001) are present in this special issue. Also, a coherence analysis of French editorials and an application of Baker’s recent adaptation (2006) of Bruner’s narrative theory

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(1991) to the analysis of British comment articles can be found in this RAEL number. In the following pages I provide a descriptive commentary of these article types.

2. About newspaper editorials and comment articles

Editorials (also called leaders or leading articles in the UK) and comment articles are public, mass communicated types of opinion discourse which play a definitive role in the formation and altering of public opinion, promote social interaction among journalists, readers and the rest of participants in the language event, and influence social debate, decision making and other forms of social and political action (Van Dijk 1996; Le 2004; Murphy 2005).

Some scholars treat both newspaper editorials and comment articles as belonging to the same genre (Biber 1988), while others claim that they are markedly different (Morley and Murphy 2005; Murphy 2005, Virtanen 2005). In any case, their function in newspapers is to comment on recent events and accomplish the reader's agreement or alternatively, to corroborate a pre-existing consensus through a series of meticulously crafted textual strategies (Alonso 2004; Alonso 2006; Alonso and Maddalena 2007; Alonso in press). While editorials elaborate the opinion of the newspaper, comment articles reflect those of the individual authors, usually individual free-lance writers, guest opinion writers, syndicated columnists, or regular columnists of the paper. In this sense, newspapers editorials and, I add, opinion articles, are thus contemplated as genuine examples of written argumentation since "perhaps more than any other type of writing, reflect national styles regarding modes of persuasion" (Connor 1996: 143). Although persuasive in nature, however, relevant literature claims these are texts which do not demand very much the explicit presence of the participants of the language event in the text. In fact, newspaper editorial style, for example, is usually defined as institutional, and therefore, more informational than involved, along Biber's dimension no. 1 (Biber 1988). In the case of opinion articles, there are different ways of addressing the reader, depending on the writers' personal style, their communicative intentions and the topic chosen.

Lately, some substantial insights into the linguistic features of newspaper editorials and comment articles have been provided. A very interesting line of research concerns the analysis of the frequency of certain linguistic features, such as modals, stance adverbials, etc. which usually encode evaluations in multilingual corpora. Murphy's study (2005), for example, analyses first person verbs and impersonal structures with evaluative functions, adverbs of stance and reporting markers before that-clauses in comparable corpora of English and Italian opinion articles on the 1999 Kosovo crisis. Her results indicate that evaluations in the English corpus have a more overtly argumentative slant than their Italian equivalents. Dafouz (2003, 2006, 2008), on her part, analyses metadiscourse markers in a corpus of comment articles in Spanish and in English. Her studies show that there are some cultural differences in the way professional writers use metadiscourse markers in Spanish and in English.

Appraisal Theory (Martin 2000; Martin and Rose 2003; White 2002, 2003), developed within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar, has become a favourite methodological tool to analyse the lexico-grammar in newspaper editorials and comment articles in different languages. Very enlightening results of the application of Appraisal theory to different types of editorials and comment articles in English and other languages were presented at the International Systemic Functional Congress at the University of Sydney

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three years ago (Sano 2005; Höglund 2005; Herriman 2005). In Spain, Marín and Nuñez (2006) elaborated their own version of the category of Engagement on a cognitive basis (Plungian 2001; Nuyts 2001) and applied it to the analysis of a corpus of British and Spanish news reports and opinion columns dealing with the same event. And Alonso and McCabe (2008) are analysing the notions of fact and opinion, on the one hand, and neutrality and chargedness, on the other, in a bilingual corpus of newspaper reports and editorials written about the 2006 military conflict between the Shia Islamist political party Hezbollah and Israel. Although still not very numerous, these contributions seem to counterbalance the tendency shown during the last few years to study evaluation only in news reports, challenging the traditional assumptions of objectivity in news discourse (Bednarek 2006).

Another interesting strand is the different ways in which ideology is contained within discourse in opinion writing. Again, most contributions on the field of Critical Discourse Analysis analyse ideology in news discourse (Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 1996, 1998; Bernardo *et al.* 2007). Fortunately, relevant, albeit few, studies also explore ideology in newspaper editorials and comment articles. That is the case of Saft and Ohara (2006) who examine editorials from four leading Japanese newspapers to explore a connection between language usage in the media and Japan's move towards militarism. Or Le (2007), who analyses cultural identities that *Le Monde* and the *The New York Times* editorials project onto their respective national societies about Russia. Or Izadi and Saghaye-Biria (2007), who employ van Dijk's concept of the ideological square to analyze three elite American newspapers' editorial coverage of Iran's nuclear program. In addition, the reader will find in this special issue of RAEL two articles which analyse ideology in British comment articles and point at the importance of studying print journalist opinion discourse by looking into the social and political context within which it is embedded (see the papers by Valdeon's and González).

Finally, the most common strand within these studies seems to concern structure. Here, again, comment articles have received even less attention than editorials, probably because of the variety of writers, backgrounds, styles, etc. In any case, some attempts to individualise the structure of Op-Eds. have been carried out applying Hoey's cultural patterns of textual organisation (Alonso 2004, Alonso and Maddalena 2007; Alonso in press). Newspaper editorials structure have been described as a triad structure in English and Persian (Bolivar 1994/1998; Riazi and Assar 2001). In 1985, Tirkkonen-Condit developed a method for the analysis of argumentative texts on the basis of the combination of different modes of analysis made mutually compatible: the *problem-solution* pattern, the identification of illocutionary acts, and the identification of rhetorical relations. Subsequently, this method has been applied to editorials both in monolingual and multilingual settings to characterise their structure (Tirkkonen-Condit 1985; Tirkkonen-Condit and Liefländer-Koistinen 1989; Teo 1995; Cho 1998; Alonso 2004; Maddalena 2006). From a systemic functional approach, Ansary and Babaii (2005) propose a generic prototypical pattern of text development for editorials or what Halliday and Hasan (1989) refer to as the *Generic Structure Potential* (GSP) of a genre. Finally, Le (2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007) has also uncovered the hierarchical structure of newspaper editorials by applying a coherence analysis, which is based on a model of processes of text production and interpretation that integrates text linguistics and cognitive psychology. The reader can find out more about this methodological framework in Le's article on *Le Monde*'s editorials published in this special issue of RAEL.

3. About the contributions included in this present issue of RAEL

The first article is titled *Towards the characterisation of a specific text type: the dimension of sentential phraseological units in editorials from El País* and was written within the framework of a research project led by Prof. Hyde aimed at analysing intersentential relations (connectors and alternative means of expression) in the editorials of the Spanish newspaper *El País*. Hyde's article provides an account of the presence and characteristics of the proverbs and other sentential phraseological units (SPUs) in editorials from *El País*. His ultimate objective is to offer a textual characterisation of *El País* editorials. To attain his goal, he uses a corpus which comprises three whole years of editorials from the daily edition of the newspaper (the years 2002, 2003, and 2004), a total of 2932 complete texts and 1,341,875 words. Hyde demonstrates that the occurrence of a SPU as the headline of an editorial has a vital function within each text in global macrostructural and macropropositional terms of discourse processing. Results obtained contribute to those already existing about the discursal characteristics of editorials written in diverse varieties of Spanish (Sook-Pack and Acevedo, 2008).

The second article also deals with newspaper editorials, this time written in French. As already mentioned, Dr. Le's research during the last few years has focused on the coherence analysis of newspaper editorials in French and in Russian. In her paper titled *The power of the French "on" in editorials* she investigates how *ON* is used and to which purpose(s) in media discourse, particularly in 101 *Le Monde*'s editorials from August 1999 to July 2001. Results show how *ON* 'breaks' *Le Monde*'s apparent monolog by involving the voice of others.

The third article is titled *On the interpretation of ideology through comment articles: two views in opinion discourse* and her author, Prof. González, presents a study on the linguistic features used in comment articles from two British national newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Sun*, with the aim of exploring to what extent variations of language use are related to variations of social context. Within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar, Dr. González uses the Hallidayian categories of register, field, tenor and mode, to demonstrate that most of the language choices in the corpus are explained in connection with situational factors of the specific context of situation for each text. Furthermore, when the same selection of meanings occurs in comment pieces from different types of newspapers, their ways of expression present variations. These variations are caused by differences in the range of options of their respective meaning potentials.

The fourth article, *The Armada is coming: editoriales strategies in economic comment columns*, written by Prof. Valdeón, analyses the ideology underlying the economic comment columns of the British electronic versions of *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent* when dealing with the numerous examples of Spanish corporations that have crossed the Channel in order to buy British companies. For this purpose he applies Baker's recent adaptation (2006) of Bruner's narrative theory (1991), which attempts to reflect upon the ways in which various types of conflicts are reflected in the news. Baker's theoretical framework is a critical approach to texts based on previous proposals by Bruner (1991) and Fisher (1984, 1985, 1987). It was originally conceived to be applied to Social and Communication Sciences, and Baker has adapted it for the study and analysis of multimodal texts (that is, verbal, visual or a combination of both). Results show that the four newspapers project a negative view of the arrival of Spanish capital in the UK.

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Finally, the fifth paper is titled *Commitment and Subjectivity in the Discourse of Opinion columns and Leading Articles. A Corpus Study*. Prof. Marín's article presents the results of a case study on the use of linguistic resources for the expression of commitment and subjectivity in newspaper discourse in English. More specifically, she studies markers of epistemic modality and evidential markers of "personal involvement" (Plungian 2001) in a corpus of opinion columns and newspaper editorials randomly selected from *The Guardian* and *The Times*. One of her objectives is see whether there is any difference among opinion columns and leading articles. Results show that both opinion columns and leading articles are characterized by the use of implicit subjectivity, and to a lower degree by markers of opaque intersubjectivity. Leading articles, however, are also characterized by the total lack of explicit subjectivity markers, and very few markers of explicit intersubjectivity.

4. Conclusion

The previous pages aim at showing the interesting research which is being recently carried out on the genre characterization of newspaper editorials and comment articles across languages. Of course, a great deal of work remains to be done to better describe newspaper opinion texts, still far from being fully portrayed. For example, the analysis of cross-linguistic regularities would enable a genre oriented characterization of editorials and/or comment articles, both in terms of its staging structure and of the linguistic and formatting features of the elements which configure it as such. In order to attain this goal, further empirical research is needed on a more extended multilingual corpus of newspaper opinion texts. It could be very useful not only to detect differences and similarities across languages but also to unravel the culturally based rhetorical influences present in these persuasive texts produced by professional writers. The results will be of interest for linguists, discourse analysts, and ultimately to journalists.

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