

BUILDING THE Y2K PROBLEM. TOPIC INTRODUCTION AND EVALUATION IN INTERNET ARTICLES*

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ABSTRACT. *The present paper is concerned with the coverage of the Year 2000 Bug (Y2K) issue by a number of online publications. Our aim is (a) to see how the Y2K topic is initially presented to the audience via headlines and leads, and (b) to reflect upon the possible ideological implications of such a topic introduction. The analysis has been effected upon a sample of online documents including: (1) four titles of feature articles, (2) introductory paragraphs of three articles plus a short editorial, and (3) three cartoons. Our approach draws its basic theoretical insights from critical linguistics and the trend within it known as Critical Discourse Analysis, and takes as key concepts those of intertextuality, cognitive schema, monitoring and evaluation.*

KEYWORDS. *Intertextuality, cognitive schema, monitoring, evaluation.*

RESUMEN. *El tema del presente artículo es el tratamiento que ha recibido el Virus del Año 2000 por parte de ciertas publicaciones electrónicas. Nuestro propósito es (a) ver cómo se introduce el tema a la audiencia mediante titulares e introducciones y (b) hacer una reflexión sobre las implicaciones ideológicas de dicha introducción. Nuestro análisis se centra en una muestra de diferentes documentos electrónicos: (1) cuatro títulos de artículos, (2) las introducciones de tres artículos y una pequeña editorial, y (3) tres viñetas cómicas. Nuestro enfoque está teóricamente relacionado con la tendencia de análisis del discurso conocida como Critical Discourse Analysis y gira en torno a cuatro conceptos clave: intertextualidad, esquema cognitivo, monitorización, y evaluación.*

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Intertextualidad, esquema cognitivo, monitorización, evaluación.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Viruses, bugs, and glitches¹ are some of the common terms in the computing jargon that refers to some of the problems frequently encountered by users and programmers when dealing with computers. Yet, despite their frequent occurrence, some of these

molesters have recently come to the frontline while adopting a disproportionate size due to the extent of the damage presumably caused by them.

Among the most recent glitches there is one that has received considerable attention by both the specialised media focusing on the computing world and other lay journals and magazines –and even amateur writers– dealing with wider issues. We are referring to the problem the change of the century will carry with it, problem known as the Year 2000 Bug (henceforth Y2K).

The problem, stemming from the 20th century programming practice of representing years by their last two digits –with no prevision of what would happen when the first two digits changed, as will be the case in year 2000– will affect most computer-assisted systems in our increasingly computer-governed Western world, from manufacturing control systems and telecommunications to national defence systems and even gas, water, and electrical supplies.

Due to the world-wide effects of Y2K its extensive media coverage is not surprising at all, most of which appears –how should it be otherwise?– in the numerous cybernetic journals and magazines mushrooming the World Wide Web. Furthermore, its importance has given rise to a number of Web pages dealing exclusively with the problem –ran on governmental, personal, and even religious bases. Also, not only Y2K has given rise to such vast cybernetic production, but the ways of tackling the problem differ considerably among the different sites, a fact that has both comprehension and ideological implications as we will see.

In the present paper we are concerned with how the issue has been addressed in a number of texts from different web pages (all of them rendering a picture of “a computer bug-induced societal meltdown” (James 1998) and, therefore, being true representatives of all the doom and gloom surrounding Y2K) as well as the social –ideological– implications of such a display.

In order to do so, we have selected a sample of online texts which is, in fact, a miscellany of: (1) four titles of feature articles from several computer magazines; (2) the introductory paragraphs of three articles plus a short editorial; (3) three cartoons dealing with Y2K (these acting as a sort of reinforcement to the picture drawn by the different written texts). Despite their differences, all of them have in common the consistent use of certain well-known images –usually borrowed from other types of discourse different from that of computing– in order to construct a particular –apocalyptic– image of the Y2K problem.

Our approach draws its basic theoretical insights from critical linguistics and the trend within it known as Critical Discourse Analysis, and takes as key concepts those of *intertextuality*, *cognitive schema*, *monitoring* and *evaluation*. Our aim is twofold: (1) to see how these concepts contribute to the organisation of the thematic structure of the texts under analysis as this is summarised in titles, headlines and introductory paragraphs –leads– in mass-mediated cybernetic texts; (2) to reflect upon the possible ideological implications of such a contribution.

Yet, our scope is narrower than that of those critical researchers dealing with the discourses and genres in the media. We have concentrated only on the ways the issues dealt with in the different articles –topics– are initially presented to the audience *via* headlines –titles– and leads. Our specific interest arises from the fact that, despite the further development of topic, topic shifts, or introduction of other minor topics in a given article/report, it is the first introduction to topic that colours and influences decisively the way readers will react to the subsequent text –as Brown & Yule (1989: 73) remark, “each different way of expressing ‘the topic’ will effectively represent a different judgement of what is being written (or talked) about in a text”.

The role played by headlines and leads is further intensified by the very nature of the cybernetic –hypertextual– medium from which our sample has been taken. Thus, texts appear within a textual network which can be accessed from the different texts –acting as *nodes*– within it and which are usually listed on one of the margins of the text being viewed at that moment, and can be loaded by clicking on them. The information on the texts’ topic(s) comes from their titles –headlines– and, more often than not, from their first introductory paragraph –lead–, this being also the information provided by the different web navigators when you are looking for information on any topic in the net. Furthermore, this is also the information the navigators use as a search tip (tagged conveniently by the different documents) and, in this sense, the role of introductory paragraphs is foregrounded by the needs of the medium itself.

In the following sections we will briefly consider the concept of topic in discourse and several concepts related to it (i. e. intertextuality, cognitive schemas, and evaluation) and their implications for media texts. Then we will see how these issues apply to the texts chosen for analysis.

2. TOPIC IN DISCOURSE

All texts are about something, and this aboutness is usually referred to in general terms as *topic* within discourse analysis: “the notion of ‘topic’ is clearly an intuitively satisfactory way of describing the unifying principle which makes one stretch of discourse ‘about’ something and the next stretch ‘about’ something else” (Brown & Yule 1989: 70). Topic is then further classified with regard to the level at which it operates into sentence topic or discourse topic, the latter being mostly responsible for a coherent view of texts. Thus, as van Dijk (1988: 35) points out, “[t]opics are crucial in the overall understanding of a text, e.g., in the establishment of global coherence; and they act as a semantic, top-down control on local understanding at the microlevel. Topics in a text indeed play a central role.”

This top-down control exercised by topics shows from the very beginning in texts *via* titles which, in this sense, are regarded as *discourse topics* of the first order “whose role is precisely to give access to encyclopaedic information crucial to the comprehension of the accompanying texts” (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 216) and have,

subsequently, been termed as *superordinate topics* by several researchers: “cognitive schemata [...] [that] could be the topic of the whole text” (Downing & Locke 1992: 224).

If this is true for texts in general, it is of key importance in the texts considered in the present paper, which are the cybernetic counterparts of the mass-mediated, public kind of discourse realised in news reports and feature articles. Here main topics are usually signalled straightforwardly in headlines and leads not only to guide and control the reader’s further interpretation of the text they precede, but for information retrieval and navigation’s sake.

Furthermore, the point of view or judgement endowed to the whole text by means of this first instantiation of topic in headlines and leads stems not only from the topic’s lexical –and explicit– signalling (this being the visible part of the iceberg as van Dijk (1988) suggests), but most importantly, from the unsaid: the whole set of presuppositions and inferences triggered by this topic signalling.

Thus, topic, like coherence, has both a textual and cognitive dimension: it is textually cued but it is cognitively assigned by the reader who applies all his/her schematic knowledge –made up by both formal (linguistic or rhetorical knowledge) and content (factual and sociocultural knowledge) schemata– in order to make sense of texts:

Cognitive assignments of topics [...] do not take place when the language user has interpreted all the words and sentences of the whole text. Rather, the reader starts to make expedient guesses about the most probable topic(s) of a text, aided by the thematic signals of the writer [...] Instead of formal rules, then, language users apply effective strategies in the derivation of topics from a text. (van Dijk 1988: 34).

This fact is also pointed out by Fairclough (1989), who prefers the term *point* to topic (as it encapsulates experiential, relational, and expressive dimensions versus content-only aspects of topic), and stresses the role played by cognitive schemata as interpretative procedures together with the ideological implications of this schema activation:

textual cues evoke schemata, frames, or scripts, and these set up expectations which colour the way in which subsequent textual cues are interpreted. [...] In fact, schemata and frames as well as scripts can be regarded as playing a role in the interpretation of point: they act as stereotypical patterns against which we can match endlessly diverse texts, and once we identify a text as an instance of a pattern, we happily dispense with the mass of its detail and reduce it to the skeletal shape of the familiar pattern for purposes of longer-term memory and recall. [...] If it is the point of a text that it has longer-term effects on the interpreter, then it is important to be conscious of the social origins of the cognitive apparatus that the interpreter relies upon to interpret the point. (Fairclough 1989: 159-60)

The ideological implications of the conscious exploitation of certain schemas at the expense of others have also been pointed out by researchers working within the cognitive paradigm pioneered by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987), or Langacker (1987) among others. Their views, although basically centred on the ideological aspects of metaphor, can also apply for other cognitive schemata such as scripts or frames. Thus,

as Lakoff & Johnson (1980: 156) point out, “metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action”. Similarly, Chilton (1996: 74) will further reinforce their view when remarking that

the conceptual and metaphorical resources of a national vocabulary are constantly exploited and reorganized in discourses, often in discourses elaborated by powerful and influential groups. In those discourses, metaphor can play a central role, not simply for persuasive or legitimitative purposes, and not only for the purpose of group solidarity, but also for the purpose of producing new conceptualizations for problematic situations. The important point is that those discourses, along with their concepts and metaphors, can become persistent and spread. [...] Metaphors determine nothing in an absolute sense, and they can be contested and reformulated. But their linguistic embedding in discourse can contribute to a situation where they privilege one understanding of reality over others.

The ideological implications inherent in cognitive schemata and their evaluative role in discourse briefly sketched above start at the very beginning of the reading process. Thus, two of the most effective strategies in titles and openings are the use of metaphor and intertextual references to other well-known textual products –intertextual references bringing into play the kind of formal schemata typical of certain texts and discourses Fairclough alludes to above.

Such a use is not only guided by economy and vividness constraints (Crider & Cirillo 1991), but goes beyond. The use of figurative language and intertextual borrowings with a topical role is also (1) a way to avoid and/or conceal overt evaluation and (2) a way to avoid negotiation of meaning between writer and reader by invoking the whole set of shared cultural schemata, values, and norms underlying the images giving rise to such a language (Fowler 1994; Moon 1994).

Thus, the recurrent use of metaphors and intertextual references draws attention towards the ability of schemas to activate not only areas of stored knowledge pertaining to the extratextual world of facts, but also, and most importantly, to bring into play the readership’s knowledge of formal schemas, that is other kinds of discourse realised through other text types and genres playing an equally important role in text interpretation and carrying with them an equally important number of ideological implications.

To sum up, at the centre of any discursive event we must consider the role played by formal and cognitive schemas ultimately monitoring both textual production and reception processes, and how these are lexically cued and introduced at the early stages of a text. These schemas –both cognitive and formal– add to their cognitive import an indisputable evaluative load that not only affects their monitoring role, but also has a number of ideological implications which affect the whole discourse situation in which the texts insert themselves. How all these issues relate to the texts in our sample will be the subject of the following section.

3. ANALYSIS

Although Y2K has given rise to a number of articles and reports in both the written media and Internet during the last four years, its coverage has dramatically increased since mid-1998 until now to the extent that a big amount of web pages have been created with Y2K as the sole protagonist –Y2K also providing the main excuse for a number of seminars and workshops (directed not only for computer professionals but also for small businesses or housewives). Although the way of dealing with the issue varies according to the guidelines of the different publications devoted to the computing world, there is a such a sense of doom –denounced nevertheless by a number of voices– pervading nearly all of them that we could not help wondering if we were witnessing another case of ‘press hysteria’ like those on food poisoning or AIDS commented by Fowler (1994: 146-169).

In order to see how the subject is generally treated by the cybernetic medium and the possible reasons and consequences of this treatment we have chosen a small sample made up by a miscellany of texts plus several cartoons focusing on Y2K. Of all these, we will concentrate only on the ways the problem is referred to as it appears in the titles and introductions of the articles, and will use the cartoons for further evidence of the issues drawn from the textual analysis.

The four titles in our sample² have the following suggestive names: “Apocalypse When?”, clearly playing with Coppola’s 1979 *Apocalypse Now*, itself intertextually linked to Conrad’s book *Heart of Darkness*; “2000: The Year of Living Dangerously”, directly quoting Peter Weir’s 1983 *The Year of Living Dangerously*; “Exchanging Data: The Bug Bites Back”, referring us to the second part of George Lucas’s *Star Wars* trilogy called *The Empire Strikes Back*; and “Surviving Armageddon”, a name of biblical connotations³ which has inspired sixteen films, the last of which, dated in 1998, deals with heroes –headed by Bruce Willis– racing against time to save Earth before it’s obliterated by a huge asteroid.

The four introductions come from three articles titled: “Y2K: Year 2000 Bug or Problem”, “Y2K Fever: Treating the Millenium Bug”, and “Y2K: The Mother of all Bugs”, and a short editorial piece for a web site titled “Y2K and Cybercrime”.

Finally, all cartoons come from a web site devoted to the Y2K issue and collecting cartoons from different online and written sources.

As we have also pointed out before, all of them have as a common feature that of rendering an apocalyptic picture of the problem –picture that can be well summarised by one of the most popular acronyms in the web: TEOTWAWKI (The End Of The World As We Know It). We will consider the different texts in turn, and then will consider how the Y2K problem is built –evaluated– and the reasons and consequences for such a construction.

3.1. Titles

Our four titles are intertextually linked to four films with a common characteristic: all of them pivot on the topic of war, whether they depict real events as those in Vietnam

or Indonesia (the first two titles) or draw upon science-fiction matters (the last two). Furthermore, two of the films also fall within the genre known as sci-fi action combining science fiction with action thriller and, more often than not, natural disasters of apocalyptic proportion. The combination of these two different but, nevertheless, related schemas (war and science fiction) activates a distinct set of inferences monitoring the way readers will approach the texts thus labelled, a strategy which has a crucial cognitive –in processing terms– and evaluative import.

Thus, on the one hand, we have the activation of a familiar prototypical war script⁴ with (1) well defined *roles* (at least two armies or other kinds of opposed parties), (2) *entry conditions* (some sort of challenge threatening one of the parties' life/territory), (3) *sequence of scenes* (challenge + attack + defence + gain/lose ground + plan strategies, etc.), and (4) *results* (victory or defeat). Finally, wars also imply building a number of contingency plans for the populations involved in the conflict.

The script in sci-fi action films drawing upon the theme of war is basically similar to the one previously depicted, the only key differences lying in the *entry conditions* (future time and outer-space worlds are the norm), the *results* (usually affecting the planet earth at large rather than particular countries/parties), and the extent of the epic events taking place in it.

The use of these generic scripts –intertextually cued– has several implications concerning the way the text is monitored for comprehension. First, they frame in an economic –and expressive– way the kind of problem to be dealt with in the subsequent article (helping thus further processing and accounting for textual cohesion⁵). Thus Y2K is rendered as having apocalyptic proportions and, therefore, representing a world-wide threat, thus calling for immediate action –not only in terms of military mobilisation but also concerning survival plans for the civil population. Also, the apocalyptic overtones of the problem somehow bring into play a number of culturally shared –if not necessarily believed– images of religious nature (e.g. the Flood, the Second Coming) also fully exploited by cartoons dealing with the issue (as we will see below). Finally, as it happens in the very films referred to by the titles, the audience is implicitly told that, come what may, everything will end well.

3.2. *Introductions*⁶

The first article in this group aims at introducing the Y2K problem to the readers in comprehensible terms:

The Year 2000 *issue* is not difficult to understand from the technical point of view. The problem stems from three main issues [...]. Unfortunately, there will be no simple fix to the year 2000 *issue*, no “*silver bullet*”[...]

The general tone in this extract is measured and neutral and, apparently, the problem is not overemphasised -Y2K is referred to as ‘issue’ or ‘problem’ instead of using other kinds of apocalyptic referents. Yet, the use of “silver bullet”⁷ referring to a

possible solution opens up a familiar horror-story script where silver bullets are among the only magical devices capable of vanquishing certain supernatural creatures (e.g. vampires or werewolves), and this fact gives the situation a different colour. Thus, the initial attempts to present Y2K in a casual, non-alarming way (use of neutral 'issue') contrast with the different picture suggested by the non-existence of a silver-bullet solution whereby Y2K is implicitly compared to a number of well-known supernatural horrors pertaining to the realms of folklore and literature.

The second extract jumps from the world of fiction to that of world of facts:

Y2K Fever: Treating the Millennium Bug

The adage that *time heals all wounds* definitely doesn't apply on the network. Here are some hints on how to *achieve year 2000 compliance*.

While *El Niño* was blamed for everything from bad hair days to massive avalanches, its *rep* is nothing compared to that of the year 2000 problem.

Here the ways to refer to the problem draw upon three different discourses: medicine, theatre, and natural disasters. Thus, the article opens up referring to Y2K as an illness or, rather, one of its visible symptoms –fever⁸– for which we must find a solution (treatment or cure), a fact reinforced by the quote of the proverb 'time heals all wounds'. Y2K is also compared to a natural phenomenon of large proportions (El Niño) causing a number of natural disasters, and, like it, is personified by means of considering its effects as 'rep'⁹, a theatrical term that endows, in a metonymic way, both El Niño and Y2K with the qualities of a theatre performer.

In any case, be it a fever or a natural disaster, Y2K's power is magnified, a fact hinted by the need to achieve 'compliance' to it stated in the article, that is yielding to its wishes in the best possible manner (the instructions for which will be displayed in the remaining text).

The third extract opens up with a personal account of an earthquake as a way to introduce Y2K which, in this case, is explicitly compared to that particular natural phenomenon:

I like to think of the much-discussed (many would call it overhyped) millennium bug as akin to an *earthquake*, because it presents an excellent opportunity to prepare for *impending emergency*. As in a *natural disaster*, I know that I'll need to make *contingency plans* for Y2K: to chop wood, to carry water, to make sure I have enough cash on hand to make it through a month or two.

This reference of Y2K as an earthquake is a perfect excuse for an article that rather than merely exposing the problem attempts to give a number of solutions - 'contingency plans'– for a problem hyperbolically called 'the mother of all bugs'.

Our final text is a short editorial opening a web site devoted mostly to the Y2K problem:

Y2K and Cybercrime

When you thought you had the *problem licked*, another *issue looms its ugly head*. The *threat of malicious and criminal viruses*, and *deliberate* disruption of electronic

systems, growing. [...] The technology, and intelligence needed to create these “*strains*” is well beyond that of a private individual. Could *retaliation* for Desert Storm, and Yugoslavia be in the form of cyberwarfare?

Y2K is here addressed in two distinct but related ways. Thus, the initial ‘problem’ or ‘issue’ turns out to be a ‘malicious’ criminal, whose ‘looming ugly head’ somehow reminds us of a monster or nasty creature/animal, who, nevertheless, does not act on his own behalf but, rather, is the agent of an obscure and collective conspiratorial entity (‘beyond that of a private individual’). The scope of this hysterical view is mixed with the xenophobic feelings underlying the hint that the origin of Y2K could be linked with deliberate retaliation against the American intervention in two well-known conflicts (retaliation which could also be understood from religious grounds).

3.3. Cartoons

The three cartoons selected for this paper come from a web site entirely devoted to the Y2K issue. All the cartoons there fall within three distinct but related groups. The first –and majority– group (of which we show an example below) explicitly works upon the Doomsday expression ‘the end is near’, common in certain fundamentalist sects and loaded with religious connotations –a favourite expression of a number of visionaries, it was also a favourite at the end of the year 1000 in Europe. Moreover, some cartoons clearly treat the problem as a curse sent to mankind (in equal terms as The Flood).



Cam/www.syndicom.com. Used with permission
<http://www.cagle.com/Y2K/bug3.asp>

The second group is devoid of religious overtones but, nevertheless, regards Y2K as the end of the world in such absolute terms as the one analysed here¹⁰. In it we find a group of penguins commenting on the possible consequences of the Y2K bug in the following

terms: “If all the computers fail on January 1, 2000 how will they make the sun come up in the morning? How will they keep the gravity turned on? How will they keep the stars from crashing into each other?” A good part of the desperation Y2K entails –but also the irony with which it is regarded by the cartoonist– comes from the ambiguous pronoun ‘they’ which could be referring either to human beings (regarded at the mercy of computers but, nevertheless, giving them orders to run the world) or to computers (in this case exerting an absolute control over the world with no human agency).

The third group graphically depicts Y2K as a real bug of huge proportions in the best King Kong or Godzilla manner. Like them, Y2K is a menace for the world –in this case metonymically represented as a typical Western city:



Cam/www.syndicam.com. Used with permission
<http://www.cagle.com/Y2K/bug1.asp>

As we pointed out in the introduction to this paper, our aim is not an in-depth analysis of cartoons –the convergence of different semiotic systems entailing a complication that falls beyond the scope of the present paper. Yet, they are a good way to illustrate and reinforce the kind of catastrophic rendering of a serious but nevertheless presumably solvable problem as Y2K. Also, as we have seen in the previous texts, cartoons can be regarded as exploiting both images and intertextual references (mostly religious) in the same way as the texts considered above.

Yet, if optimism must prevail at the end, what is the use of such nightmarish and apocalyptic intertexts and images?

3.4. *Evaluating the Y2K Bug*

In order to answer the question formulated above we must consider the kind of texts the titles introduce and their communicative goals.

The texts in our corpus belong to a number of magazines devoted to the world of computing that have their own web sites and pages in Internet. These sites and pages offer a wide range of products, some free (not just problem-solution texts, but shareware programs implementing those solutions) and some involving an economic retribution. The ultimate aim of this kind of Web pages is attracting as much audience as possible, a fact that will result in more companies advertising there, more products being offered, and the possibility of studying the kind of potential market (what, how, and for whom) for products developed by a number of companies and trusts which, more often than not, provide economic support to the Web sites and pages themselves.

The economic constraints of these online magazines are not a feature of their own but, rather, a typical trait of written Press in general –the medium from which online publications have evolved–, a fact that has been pointed out by Fowler (1994) as playing an important role in shaping the ideological import of the Press. Thus, together with selling advertising space, newspapers are also usually owned by companies which have their own economic goals –that is, their own products to sell– and this qualitative factor shows in the way a number of topics are dealt with in the Press. Thus, as Fowler (1994: 121-22) suggests, “[i]t stands to reason that a newspaper is likely to project such beliefs as are conducive to the commercial success of its proprietors generally... the economic and political circumstances of the newspaper industry give it a vested interest in mediating ideas from particular perspectives”.

This is of the outmost importance in those magazines devoted to the fairly new world of computing, all dealing with the same issues and advertising the same kind of products as most written Press but with three major differences: (1) success rates are not measured in terms of sales but, rather, in terms of people accessing the web pages where these magazines appear; (2) the potential readership is larger than that of the written Press (due to the lack of boundaries set on a national basis) and includes both computer-expert and non-expert readers (these being the majority); (3) the products being offered belong to an ever-evolving world where the life span of a product can amount to a bare month or two, and usually demand a certain amount of time for users to be fairly familiar with them (changes adding a certain stress for those users trying to cope with all the novelties in the market). Due to all these specific traits of magazines and the products focused on in them, building an audience is the first and foremost need, and the crucial step in building an audience is gaining its confidence.

As the texts in our sample show, an effective strategy to gain the audience’s confidence is to appeal to well-known shared schemas (be they stereotypes, intertextual borrowings from other cultural products, familiar narrative scripts, and the like) aiming, in the first place, at the creation of a shared space among the author(s) and the readers of the texts creating involvement and, at the same time, helping comprehension.

Yet, this activation of schematic knowledge is also at the service of evaluation and categorisation –both intrinsically ideological processes–, which play a decisive role in colouring the subsequent reading of the text whose topic has been thus introduced. In this sense, the activation of the war script combined with the apocalyptic and global

overtones of science fiction movies, the reference to Y2K as a natural disaster, the hints of conspiracy or retaliation issues, or the Biblical overtones, all monitor effectively the initial picture of an otherwise relatively predictable computing problem, exaggerating the difficulties to be solved and predisposing the audience against that very problem while, at the same time, trusting the sources so wittily offering a solution.

The ultimate reasons for this exaggeration have been denounced by several voices within Internet itself. Thus, as Geoffrey James –writing for an online publication– clearly states,

[d]ozens of computer-industry experts are feeding the apocalyptic frenzy by making all sorts of dire predictions. [...] The doomsaying tendency may also be related to the fact that there's little downside risk to making gloomy predictions. Doomsayers will come out winners whether or not the dreaded Y2K problems actually surface. If problems occur, they look like prophets; if not, they still did a good job of warning the population. [...] Nearly every company in the computer industry has jumped onto the Y2K bandwagon, often using the image of an imminent apocalypse to sell their products. (James 1998)

James's words point at the real economic purpose of most magazines in the Web, goal which is conveniently and expressively hidden to the general public accessing their web sites thanks to the effective rendering –manipulation– of texts that address directly some of the users' basic needs (or problems). Like the overtly economy-ruled advertising discourse supported by most media products, the texts in our corpus contribute to building relations between the participants of the interaction, building images of the objects to be consumed, and building the consumer of those objects (see Fairclough 1989: 202-3). And a good part of this building is the result of how the main topic is first introduced by titles and introductory paragraphs.

Topic introduction plays, then, a key role in discourse and text organisation but also, and most importantly, in text reception and interpretation, and this fact has communicative and ideological implications which cannot be separated from the cognitive strategies that lie at the core of any instance of discourse production and understanding.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our aim in the present paper was to call attention to the importance of topic introduction in the titles and introductory paragraphs or leads of cybernetic media texts and the strategies used in such introduction. The claim was that this introduction would play a key role in monitoring the reading and interpretation processes of the subsequent texts, monitoring that had both cognitive and ideological implications.

The strategies we have considered are deeply related: thus, the use of certain culturally shared images –more often than not *via* intertextual borrowings from other cultural products such as films– acts as a trigger for a number of also shared cognitive

schemas which are activated not only for interpretation's sake but also, and most importantly, as an effective strategy –within the public idiom of news discourse (see Fowler 1994)– to conceal the institutional and economic constraints of certain cybernetic texts such as the ones in our sample.

Thus, the appeal to war, science fiction, religion, natural disasters, or even international politics when describing a computing problem such as Y2K is congruent with a “rhetoric of emotions” (van Dijk 1988) that goes beyond apparently innocent stylistic issues such as the creation of suspense or an involved style to become a true disguising device at the service of long-term economic goals.

Like in those cases dealing with food poisoning and AIDS reported by Fowler (1994), “the discourse is constantly alarming and hyperbolic, but in an obscure way: a problem of considerable proportions is always being alleged; we are bound to be concerned about it, but its outlines are indistinct, like some huge threatening shape on the horizon in a bad horror movie” (Fowler 1994: 169).

APPENDIX 1

Sources of Texts (Internet)

“Apocalypse When?”

http://home.cnet.com/category/topic/0,10000,0-4020,00.html?tag=st.cn..links_gp
(retrieved from online sources 10/03/99)

“2000: The Year of Living Dangerously”

“Exchanging Data: The Bug Bites Back”

“Back to the Future”

http://www.pcworld.com/heres_how/article/0,1400,8838,00.html
(retrieved from online sources 03/03/99)

Y2K Cartoons on the Web

<http://www.cagle.com/Y2K/bug2.asp>

APPENDIX 2

Extract n° 1

Y2K Year 2000 Bug or Problem

The Year 2000 issue is not difficult to understand from the technical point of view. It is the scope of affected systems and business processes that makes this problem so challenging. The problem stems from three main issues: two-digit date storage, leap year calculations, and special meanings for dates. The implications of these three issues need to be addressed by all organizations. Unfortunately, there will be

no simple fix to the year 2000 issue, no “silver bullet,” due to the fact that the use of dates for calculations is pervasive throughout software and that usage is not standardized.

<http://www.netlingo.com/lookup.cfm?term=Y2K>

Extract n° 2

Y2K Fever: Treating the Millennium Bug

The adage that time heals all wounds definitely doesn't apply on the network. Here are some hints on how to achieve year 2000 compliance. By Elizabeth Clark

While El Niño was blamed for everything from bad hair days to massive avalanches, its rep is nothing compared to that of the year 2000 problem. In fact, if you listen to enough Y2K lore, you'll soon be calling your insurance agent to see if you can get your Cuisinart worked into your homeowner's policy.

While some of the more apocalyptic Y2K predictions can be dismissed as over the top, there is cause for concern. In fact, tales ranging from the trivial to the traumatic have already surfaced. And although the Y2K problem is associated more with large computer systems such as mainframes which ostensibly could affect everything from air traffic control to the electrical power grid corporate network managers and administrators shouldn't expect to get off easy.

<http://www.networkmagazine.com/cgi-bin/>

Extract n° 3

Y2K: The mother of all bugs

In the wee hours of the morning on December 29, an old-fashioned, Northern California-style earthquake shook me awake. Shocked and surprised, I lay there listening to glasses rattling and feeling the rolling thunder beneath my house. Jeez, I thought, at least Y2K has given us a warning.

I like to think of the much-discussed (many would call it overhyped) millennium bug as akin to an earthquake, because it presents an excellent opportunity to prepare for impending emergency. As in a natural disaster, I know that I'll need to make contingency plans for Y2K: to chop wood, to carry water, to make sure I have enough cash on hand to make it through a month or two.

<http://www.computers.com/calert/feature/0,9,0-1584-2,00.html>

Extract n° 4

Y2K and Cybercrime. By Alan Simpson.

When you thought you had the problem licked, another issue looms its ugly head. The threat of malicious and criminal viruses, and deliberate disruption of electronic systems, growing. Over 100Y2K viruses have been identified. Most are not destructive, but some are both destructive, and worrying. The technology, and

intelligence needed to create these “strains” is well beyond that of a private individual. Could retaliation for Desert Storm, and Yugoslavia be in the form of cyberwarfare?

<http://www.comlinks.com/>

NOTES

- * Financial support for this research has been provided by the DEGS, grant n° PB97-1502.
- 1. A ‘virus’ is a technical term denoting a program that replicates itself on computer systems by incorporating itself into other programs that are shared among computer systems. A ‘bug’ is a programming error that causes a program or computer system to perform erratically, produce incorrect results, or crash. ‘Glitch’ refers to a hardware problem.
- 2. For more information about our online sources see Appendix 1.
- 3. Armageddon: occurs in Rev. 16:16. “Har-Magedon” designates the place where the “battle of that great day of God Almighty” shall be fought. The word properly means the “mount of Megiddo.” It is the scene of the final conflict between Christ and Antichrist. The idea of such a scene was suggested by the Old Testament great battle-field, the plain of Esdraelon.
- 4. We follow here the definition of scripts proposed by Schank and Abelson (1977).
- 5. The subsequent articles follow most of the basic guidelines introduced via implicature by the titles which, in this sense, are key factors in textual cohesion (realised lexically but sustained by the schematic knowledge instantiated in them).
- 6. The complete texts can be seen in Appendix 2.
- 7. Although it is not very common, the expression can also be found in texts from written press. See the BNC corpus –online– for some examples of occurrence. <http://info.ox.ac.uk/bnc/>
- 8. The title also playfully reminds us of the film called *Saturday Night Fever*.
- 9. ‘Rep’ stands for ‘repertoire’: the collection of plays and other kinds of performance that a performer or theatre company has learned and can perform.
- 10. Due to copyright reasons we cannot provide the picture of the cartoon analysed here. It was accessed on 10/03/99 at [<http://www.glasbergen.com/images/2000e.gif>]

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