Expression of Subjectivity in Media Genres: Linguistic and Semiotic Analysis of Media Texts on the Example of the English and Georgian Language Quality Newspapers

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Abstract

The study explores linguistic and media genre characteristics of the British, U.S. and Georgian print media. Theoretical apparatus of media studies and other interdisciplinary linguistic fields were employed for comparative analysis of genre characteristics. The paper is part of a longitudinal study of print media genres over the period of 2002-2010. The aim of the research is to (a) define and compare genre characteristics of the British, U.S. and Georgian print media, (b) examine and define structural and linguistic (semantic, pragmatic, semiotic) characteristics of the British, U.S. and Georgian quality newspaper genres, (c) define deictic composition of newspaper articles and (d) study expression of coded meanings in media texts. In this paper, I will focus on two major genres of quality print media: news and features. The media genres are analysed within the theoretical framework of pragmatics, semantics, semiotics and media studies.

Keywords: media text, news, features, discourse analysis, pragmatics, semiotics
1. Introduction

Fast pace of development of the modern world and globalization processes have given significant power to mass media. In the age of information, common journalistic standards have been established in the global community. Best practices of American journalism have become the basis of mass media production in other countries. Despite this trend, English language media is not homogenous. This shall be explained by the fact that the print media and in general, media, is socially and culturally preconditioned. The language of press has a pivotal influence on human communication. Personal opinion of a writer/author or expression of subjectivity in newspaper articles shall be achieved through linguistic means (units). Selection of a specific linguistic unit during a written or speech act is always determined by a pragmatic intention of addressee.

It is argued that “to the sociologist of language, media are one of the main language forming institutions in society, along with education and government” (Bell, 1999, p. 7). Growing interest in media language is explained by a number of reasons: accessibility, interest in media language (e.g. headline language), adoption of the features of ordinary speech into media language, language manipulation in media communication (e.g. news copy editing), media’s role in society, media language describing the society’s culture, media structure and values, and the impact of media language on society’s attitudes and opinions (Bell, 1999, p. 4).

The research offers a typological classification of compositional-structural elements of media texts. Quality newspaper articles are explored from the point of semantics, pragmatics (deixis, pragmatic intention of speech acts) and development of semiotic icons. The literature on media genre characteristics defines four major genres; however, in this study, I will explore the characteristics of news and features.

2. Literature Review

Prior to discussion of coded meanings and expression of subjectivity in media genres, I would like to specify the definition of a media text and application of semiotic
icons in impersonal print media genres (news, features). The term “media text” shall explain all types of journalistic products such as a TV or radio report, photograph or article (Rayner et al., 2001). In this research, I will refer to media text to describe main features of print media: article and photographs. Media text consists of codes and signs. It is considered that a code is “anything that is used to create messages in a socially meaningful way” (Danesi, 2010, p. 138). This paper relies on Saussure’s definition of a sign as a dichotomy of signifier and signified (Saussure, 1965). The research considers Pierce’s classification of signs into symbols, icons and index (Rayner et al., 2001; Atkin, 2010) and draws upon a perspective that a media text consists of symbols, icons (e.g. photographs) and index. Indexical signs (e.g. graphic images) describe non-arbitrary connection between a signifier and signified (Rayner et al., 2001). An example of index shall be smoke, which is a sign of fire (Rayner et al., 2001). Media texts are usually polysemantic. Decoding the signs and codes of media texts is within the realm of knowledge and perception of the audience.

In communication studies, the study of media language is crucial to understanding the messages the media construct. The field of semiotics and cultural analysis, and communication studies in general, has long concentrated itself with the language in which such messages are framed as a clue to the underlying structures of meanings, often in a search for bias and stereotyping. Such analysis benefits from close application of linguistic analysis. (Bell, 1999, p. 7)

Multiplicity of codes is typical of narration, which gives a possibility to multiple interpretations and adds to a connotative meaning (Barthes, 1984). Barthes (1984) defines five codes in general: hermeneutic (when narration consists of enigma), proaretic (narration requires further action), semantic (indicates at an element in the text that has an additional, specific connotation), symbolic (deeper structural element, which organizes semantic meanings) and cultural codes (any element in the narrative regarding sciences or a source of knowledge). The literature defines three general features characteristic of codes: representability, interpretability and contextualization (Danese, 2010). This approach becomes particularly important when codes are studied
in relation to media and how the media content and visual media are presented, interpreted in a context and thus, affect the human perception (Danesi, 2010).

Roman Jakobson (1987) defines six factors of speech acts and verbal communication, which in my opinion, are typical of media texts: addressee, addressee, message, contact, context and code. The six factors describe different functions of a language, although it is rare to have a speech act which would fulfill only one function. These six functions are: referential, emotive, poetic, conative, phatic and metalingual (Jakobson, 1987). According to the analysis of newspaper texts the six functions are presented and expressed through different semantic or stylistic methods in media texts. In particular, referential function, which is an expression of factual information, is observed in news. Emotive function is expressed by different linguistic means and shall be expressed by a quote. Metalingual function requires selection of a relevant register and style. In features, I argue, in addition to the above-mentioned three functions of a language, a poetic function (expressed by different stylistic means, parallel constructions, set phrases, phonetic means of expression), phatic function (expressed mainly with deictic forms) and conative function (an author’s attempt to gain attention, call on) are observed. Simultaneous existence of different functions in media texts creates some illocutionary and perlocutionary effects among readers. In communication with each other verbally or in a written form we usually implement an illocutionary act (Searle, 1969). Bach (2006) maintains that “the perlocutionary act is essentially a matter of trying to get the hearer to form some correlative attitude” (p. 6). In communication, similar to media, it is important to set a context, which is sometimes termed as a set of mutual contextual beliefs (Bach, 2006), indicating that the hearer is able to decipher the speaker’s communicative intention (Bach, 2006, 2008). Cornish (2004) outlines the concept of Contextual component as a precondition for consideration of a text or a discourse employing these two terms as equivalent and draws upon the definition of the Contextual component proposed by Hengeveld (2005). The perspective describes the Contextual component “as containing a record of the form and content of the preceding discourse, as well as a description of the relevant features of the utterance situation” (Cornish, 2014, p. 3).
With regard to media text analysis, it is important to consider a concept of background knowledge, as, without background knowledge, it would be impossible to explain media texts. In news discourse analysis several types of knowledge are defined: cultural knowledge; linguistic knowledge; discourse/genre knowledge; concrete, specialised knowledge; personal knowledge and situational/social knowledge (van Dijk, 2004). According to van Dijk, (2004) “journalists can hardly write news reports without some kind of knowledge ‘of the world’, and especially new knowledge of the world” (p. 72). One of the key factors in media text analysis is the concept of macrostructure (van Dijk, 1985). It is argued that subjectivity in media texts is always revealed through theme, semantics and syntax (van Dijk, 1985). Macrostructure is mainly revealed through themes. Knowledge, beliefs, attitude and ideology are usually given in cognitive constructions and presented through macrostructure. Van Dijk (1985) argues that in newspaper articles one can always find a trace of subjectivity, which is best described in macrostructure (theme) through structural elements (headline, lead, conclusion). In analysing media texts, this study draws upon the cultural semiotics, as “a framework for analysing the signs, texts, and signifying practices used by the contemporary mass media” (Danesi, 2010, p. 135). Danesi (2010) maintains that media semiotics is part of the cultural semiotics and studies “mediated signification,” interpreted as employment and perception of signs and texts in media (p. 135). All these factors, briefly discussed above, are vital in media text analysis and represent the theoretical framework of this research.

3. Method

The research is based on qualitative and quantitative methods of research (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Random sampling were employed to collect the data on print media. Based on the literature review, key categories were identified. Documentary analysis, audio-visual data analysis, observation on English and Georgian language media was employed. Coding and enumeration were employed for qualitative content analysis. Quantitative data was analysed in a statistical programme SPSS. Overall, 180 pieces of news and 152 features were analyzed from the British,
U.S. and Georgian quality newspapers. The articles were studied in the period of 2002-2010.

In this study, linguistic analysis of media texts is conducted by considering neighbouring disciplines, in particular, media studies, political sciences and psychology. The object of research is a print media text as an independent system with its rules and elements. The specific empirical research material is the British, U.S. and Georgian quality Newspapers (The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The New York Times, The Washington Post, 24 Hours, Kviris Palitra, Bankebi da Finansebi).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Semiotic signs in media texts

Semiotic analysis reveals that in media texts coded meanings, or a type of message behind a written text, are usually expressed through photography: photo selection and layout. The research adheres to the concept of visual English promulgated by Goodman (Luo, 2018; Goodman & Graddol, 1996), which promotes analysis of visual and verbal elements of a text. Visual English shall be graphic and non-graphic and “the interaction of verbal mode and pictorial mode” is characterized with multiplication of meaning (Luo, 2018, p. 28). This perspective shall be adopted to linguistic and pictorial semiotics analysis of media texts in general (Sonesson, 1989). Well selected photos cause emotions that facilitate perception of an event, occurrence. This perception shall often be subjective, “one thing, with which emotive feeling differs sharply from other types of feelings, is its subjective nature…” (Uznadze, 2006, p. 136). The photograph in comparison with other pictorial signs is grounded on the index (Sonesson, 1989). This perspective underlines the difference between photographs and picture signs, which are considered mainly as icons. The semiotic analysis of photographs in press was first initiated by Barthes (Barthes, 1984; Sonesson, 1989). The approach does not diminish the perspective that information is mainly verbal in nature and expressed linguistically, but opens up the ground to the stance that pictures (photographs) shall include “reproduction of written messages” and could be “assimilatable to the kind of information present in the perceptual
world” (Sonesson, 1989, pp. 9-10).

In this paper, I would like to discuss how several decades later The Guardian covered an attack on a peaceful demonstration in Northern Ireland in 1970s. The context of questioning the reasonability of an attack on a peaceful demonstration on January 30, 1972 in the Northern Ireland was set by the British newspaper The Guardian not only through the provided text, but with the choice of a photograph published decades later in 2010. The article is accompanied by a photo, which depicts a little girl behind an armed soldier. The composition of the selected photograph and a long shot create desirable connotative meaning. By selection of this photo a journalist aimed to underline that a bloody attack was an unreasonable act and create a contrast between the two worlds of peace and conflict. Although this photograph presents less dramatic description of the tragic event with its emotive coloring it conveys the key message to call on peace and supposedly, to trigger the feeling of shame among supporters of the conflict. This perception is intensified with the text, which accompanies the photograph. Similar connotative meaning is conveyed by the headline of the article “Bloody Sunday inquiry reveals mutual hostility that exploded into massacre” (Cobain & Norton-Taylor, 2010). The text accompanying the photograph provides a chronological narration of an event. The caption of the photograph itself is an impersonal depiction of the scene. In addition to the headline and abstract (van Dijk, 1985, 1986) of the article, the photograph with accompanying text represents a supporting component to set the context (Bach, 2006; Cornish, 2014; Danesi, 2010) in order to achieve common interpretation (Danesi, 2010) of the events between addressee/reader (Jakobson, 1987).
Internment and marching ban had stirred up tension, and then soldiers fired towards unarmed people who posed no threat.

A little girl stands next to a British soldier on a Londonderry street on Bloody Sunday - 30 January 1972. Photograph: Christine Spengler/Sygma/Corbis

The second example of the photo reportage of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry Report published by the British media in June 2010 presents a photograph with strikingly different emotive coloring that represents a new context of interpretation (Danesi, 2010) of follow-up events.

Kay Duddy (L), sister of Bloody Sunday victim Jackie Duddy, celebrates the long awaited Saville Inquiry report Photo: GETTY

The article published by *The Telegraph* on June 16, 2010 opts for other choice
to report the story in photographs, picturing a relative of the Bloody Sunday victim joyous of a fair investigation of the case and presentation of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry Report. Saville Inquiry Report was delivered in Guildhall in Derry on June 15, 2010. The report vindicated the victims of the Bloody Sunday. The semantic macrostructure (van Dijk, 1986) of the event is also given in the caption of the photograph by employing such words as “celebrates”, “long awaited”.

The analysis of photographs with accompanied messages is the realm of publicity semiotics (Sonesson, 1989). The clear message constructed both by photography and accompanying linguistic units aim to establish a common connotative meaning and context (Jakobson, 1987; Bach, 2006; Danesi, 2010; Cornish, 2014) in order to ensure creation of the similar perception and interpretation of an event among the audience. The examples of the media texts (photograph and accompanied messages) discussed above simultaneously convey/produce illocutionary and perlocutionary effect (Searle, 1969; Bach, 2006, 2008) on audience/readers.

4.2 Structural and linguistic characteristics of media texts

4.2.1 News structure

In order to further analyse media texts and their impact on human perception, in this paper, I focus on two main genres of print and online media: news and features.

News is a vivid example of mass communication. Any means of mass communication—television, radio, press, mostly—aims to cover news. There is a dual classification of news: hard news and soft news (Mencher, 1993; Hough, 1988). Literature outlines several formats of news structure: inverted pyramid style, delayed identification, list technique, hourglass style, articles with equal facts (Hough, 1998; Brooks, 1996; Fedler, 1997; Itule & Anderson, 1994). The research findings also give ground to define an article with conclusion, particularly in international news section, which summarizes the theme (macrostructure) (van Dijk, 1985, 1986) of a particular media text.

To define which structure is the most characteristic of news in English newspapers, 120 articles were randomly selected from the British and U.S. press and analyzed in a statistical programme SPSS.
Figure 1. Distribution of news structures in the sample

Based on the analysis, it was concluded that an inverted pyramid style is the most common format in the British and U.S. newspapers (British newspapers: 88.3%; U.S. newspapers: 85%).

4.2.2 News lead types

Lead is the first paragraph of an article. A majority of scholars (Itule & Anderson, 1994; Bender et al., 2001; Hough, 1988; Nel, 1999) name a summary lead as the most common. This type of lead responds to the following questions:

- What happened?
- Who was involved?
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- How did it happen?

It is natural that a summary lead may not answer all of these questions, however, out of the six elements several key questions are included in the lead. News leads similar to other written forms demonstrate one of the main referential function defined...
by Jakobson (1987), which includes transmission of factual information. For example,

Barack Obama used his first Oval Office address last night to try to wrest control over the oil spill catastrophe in the Gulf, laying out what he called a “battle plan” to tackle the crisis. (Goldenberg & Webb, 2010)

The example of a summary lead given above provides factual information to key questions: Who? What? Why? How?

Another example of a summary lead, addressing the plans of the Bush administration with regard to the international penalties against Iraq, provides answers to the following questions: Who? What? When? and How?

The Bush administration plans to ask the United Nations, to lift international penalties against Iraq in phases, retaining United Nations of Iraq’s oil sales for now but transferring other parts of its economy to a new Iraq authority in coming months, administration officials said today. (Weisman, 2003)

Van Dijk (1986) maintains that abstracts and summaries “are the verbalization of the underlying semantic macrostructure of a text. They express the most important topics or themes of a text; that is, what the text is about” (p. 160). Similar definition shall be adopted in analyzing the purpose of leads in media texts.

This research showed that a summary lead is the most frequent in news (U.S. press: 68.3%; British press: 76.7%). Relatively less frequent but quite significant is a quote lead, which is given mostly in an indirect speech (U.S. press:16.7%; British press:18.3%). In the research sample, the share of a contrast lead was 13.3% in the U.S. print media and it was 5.0% in the British press. As a rule, a contrast lead describes two contrasting pictures/contexts. For example,

As the standoff over Iraq intensifies and worldwide protest against a United States-led strike to disarm Saddam Hussein grows, American sailors aboard one of the country’s premier aircraft carriers, at sea for longer than any carrier since the Persian Gulf War, are
struggling to maintain morale. (Clemetson, 2003)

In this example, an author describes a situation and makes emphasis on two different facts, in particular, draws a parallel between peace protests and the mood spread in the U.S. naval forces. The contrast, in a given context, is reached in the beginning with a connection “as” and two asyndetic connections.

The key question to be answered by qualitative content analysis is—should we search for a trace of subjectivity in news? As behind the selection of quotes or remarks in media texts, subjective attitude of a reporter or pragmatic intention takes place. Van Dijk (1985) draws upon the perspective that subjectivity is expressed through macrostructure, which is realized in thematic structure of a text comprising of structural elements such as headline, lead, and conclusion. Topics themselves might be subjective (van Dijk, 1985, p. 76), which leads to the fact that not only the media text has a macrostructure, but this “structure is assigned to the text by a writer or reader” and “themes or topics are cognitive units”. According to van Dijk (1985) the microstructure of a text is mostly linked “with the actual words and sentences of the text” (p. 83).

Linguistic analysis of news articles showed that the referential function (Jakobson, 1987) of news is expressed by transmission of factual information. Emotive function (Jakobson, 1987) is present in media texts chiefly through the usage of quotes. Metalinguual function (Jakobson, 1987) is observed by selection of a relevant register and style.

4.2.3 Features

Among media genres, features are the most interesting genre in terms of stylistic analysis. The goal of features is to entertain readers and explore various writing approaches (Mencher, 1993; Berner, 1998). Features are distinguished with the writing techniques, which open up a possibility “to satisfactorily explain the world to readers” and most features are published in the section of news (Berner, 1998, p. ix).

The format widespread in features is the Wall Street Journal formula (Fedler, 1997; Mencher, 1993; Rich, 1999). According to this formula, an article starts with
a specific story lead. Later an author poses a problem (issue), which is generalized (Fedler, 1997; Mencher, 1993; Rich, 1999).

The Wall Street Journal formula promotes human interest in stories depicted through the technique. The example of a story lead below serves as an introduction of the theme (macrostructure) (van Dijk, 1985, 1986). In this example, besides the macrostructure of the article, the specific effect is achieved through semantic and other linguistic means. The narration is facilitated by employment of the parallel construction “they were… But they were.”

They were barely old enough to cross a street by themselves, much less a border. But there they were, alone on a hot August evening at a United States immigration checkpoint, surrounded by law enforcement officers wearing badges and guns. Eight-year-old José Cruz Velázquez held the hand of his brother Sergio, who was 6. (Thompson, 2003)

Similar to news articles, the macrostructure (van Dijk, 1985) of feature articles is revealed through thematic structure (headline, lead and conclusion). Based on the qualitative content analysis, the expression of subjectivity in the article is achieved through the entire macrostructure, which sets the theme of the article and microstructure (connotative meanings of words, sentences) (van Dijk, 1985).

As a result of the research findings, the most common structure is the Wall Street Journal formula (51.7%) in the U.S. print media. Next is the inverted pyramid style (25%). As to the British newspapers, the privilege is given to the Wall Street Journal formula (41.7%). The second most common structure is the inverted pyramid format (38.3%).

The linguistic analysis showed that referential and metalingual functions (Jakobson, 1987) are characteristic of news and features. In addition, poetic function (Jakobson, 1987) shall be expressed in features on the expense of parallel constructions, set phrases and phonetic expressions. Phatic function is expressed through the usage of address forms and deixis. Emotive function is reflected in different stylistically coloured language units, quotes.

The research shows that the most common lead types of features in the U.S. print
media are summary (30%) and story leads (28.3%). As to the British press, in this case, results are not significantly different from the U.S. newspapers. A summary lead is the most widespread in the British press (46.7%). Then comes a story lead (20%).

4.2.4 Usage of first person deixis in features

Phatic function involves the establishment or cessation of communication (Jakobson, 1987) and address forms and deixis in media texts selected by the author shall also reflect this function. Jakobson (Fludernik, 1991) terms a person deixis a shifter. Fludernik (1991) argues that in reality there is a shift not between a speaker and addressee, but between speaker/addressee pair and perspective of the reporting. Sometimes, this perspective involves a shift from the first and second person deixis to more neutral third person deixis (Fludernik, 1991).

In media texts the usage of a person deixis indicates to what extent a journalist is eligible to express his/her individual opinion. In the British press, out of randomly selected 60 feature leads in 41 cases an author employed the first and second person pronouns (I, we, me, you). As to the U.S. print media, out of 60 examples of features we had 39 cases of following personal pronouns (I, we, you). In the U.S. print media a second person pronoun is more common.

Figure 2. Occurrence of personal pronouns in features
According to the research findings, a first person deixis is common in the British newspapers (42.5%), and in the U.S. newspapers we mostly encounter a second person deixis (38.5%). This research shows that the difference is caused by the fact that in the U.S. newspapers features carry fewer expressions of personal opinion of an author/writer. The qualitative content analysis demonstrates that pragmatic intention of an author/writer is more explicit in British media.

5. Genre Characteristics of Georgian Newspapers

5.1 News

According to the research findings, the Georgian press gives preference to news and features. The media texts in Georgian are characterized with a different structure of headlines. There are few occurrences of verbs in headlines. For example,

- Alasania’s Team
- Next Round of Negotiations
- Deficit of Draft Laws in Parliament
- Meeting at Foreign Affairs Ministry (*24 Hours*, 2009).

In the sentences given above there is an example of an identifier-identified. Out of 65 headlines selected by random sampling, 41 headlines did not include verbs. Analysis showed that out of 60 news articles selected by random sampling, 57 articles were given in an inverted pyramid style (Mencher, 1993; Rich, 1999) and three articles were written in an hourglass style (chronological narration) (Rich, 1999).

According to the data, the most widespread lead in Georgian news articles is a summary lead (70%), next comes a quote (20%), descriptive lead is (8.3%) and question lead is rare (1.7%). A lead consists of 31 words on average, a minimum number of words found in a lead is 11, and maximum—106.

5.2 Features

Features have an entertaining and descriptive function in Georgian quality
newspapers. Unlike the British and U.S. print media, the percentage of features in Georgian quality newspapers is comparatively low compared to news articles. In the sample, 122 articles were selected from Georgian press by random sampling and 32 out of them were features. The research showed that Georgian media opts for structures and lead types of feature articles that are common to English language media. The following lead types are characteristic of features in Georgian print media: descriptive lead—43.8%; summary lead—34.4%; story lead—12.5% and quote—9.4%. Similar to British press, the usage of a first person (I) is frequent in features in Georgian media.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this research paper focuses on linguistic and structural characteristics of the British, U.S. and Georgian quality newspapers. The research showed that one of the widespread structures of news in the British and U.S. print media is an inverted pyramid style and a summary lead. News in the U.S. and the British newspapers is impersonal, although pragmatic intention of an author/writer may be given implicitly in theme and microstructure of the media text (van Dijk, 1985, 1986). Similar to the English newspapers, news in the Georgian press is characterized by an inverted pyramid style and a summary lead (70%). Narration in news, as a rule, is in a third person.

The most common structure of features in the U.S. and the British press is the Wall Street Journal formula. An inverted pyramid style is also common to this genre. As to feature leads, summary and story leads are the most characteristic of the British and U.S. press. The first person pronoun (I) is frequently employed in British newspapers, and second person pronoun (you) is encountered in the U.S. press. As to feature articles in the Georgian press, the most common are descriptive, summary and story leads. Similar to British press, the usage of a first person pronoun is common in features in Georgian print media.

The research findings draw upon a perspective that a media text is polysemantic, its interpretation and identification of a speaker’s/writer’s communicative intention
(Bach, 2006) is preconditioned by setting a common context between the writer/speaker and a reader/hearer (Bach, 2006; Cornish, 2014). Media texts that consist of symbols, icons and index (Rayner et al., 2001; Danesi, 2010) produce illocutionary and perlocutionary effects similar to speech acts (Searle, 1969; Bach, 2006) and pragmatic intention of a writer/author is commonly analysed through the concepts of macrostructure and microstructure (semantic characteristics) of media texts (van Dijk, 1985).

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