

HOW LINGUISTICS MAY HELP IN CASE OF WAR

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Abstract: *The present article is a review of the book Evaluation and Stance in War News: A Linguistic Analysis of American, British and Italian Television News Reporting of the 2003 Iraqi War (2009/2012), edited by Louann Haarman and Linda Lombardo. This is an innovative study combining corpus linguistics and discourse analysis and also taking into account cross-cultural differences in the reporting of an international event. The corpus is formed by the evening news reports presented by CBS, BBC, RAI Uno and TG5 starting from 20 March 2003, when the bombing of Baghdad began. The results show clear differences between the four channels in adopting more or less explicit stances pro or against the military intervention in Iraq.*

Keywords: *war, Iraq, corpus linguistics, discourse analysis.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The volume belongs to the Continuum Research in Corpus and Discourse Series and it presents the findings of a sub-project on television news conducted within the larger research project CorDis ('Corpus and Discourse: a quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis of political and media discourse on the conflict in Iraq in 2003'), supported by the Italian University and Research Ministry. The corpus examined for the sub-project is formed of news broadcasted during the first month of the Iraqi war by four different channels from the United States (CBS), the UK (BBC) and Italy (RAI Uno and TG5). The hardback edition of the volume was published in 2009 and the paperback edition in 2012.

2. SUMMARY

The volume comprises seven contributions preceded by an introductory unit. The editors begin the introduction by providing a general overview of the CorDis project, considered to be 'the first extended comparative study of ongoing television news coverage of a global event' (p.1).

They further review the theoretical literature on stance and evaluation, the methodology used and the characteristics of the present research.

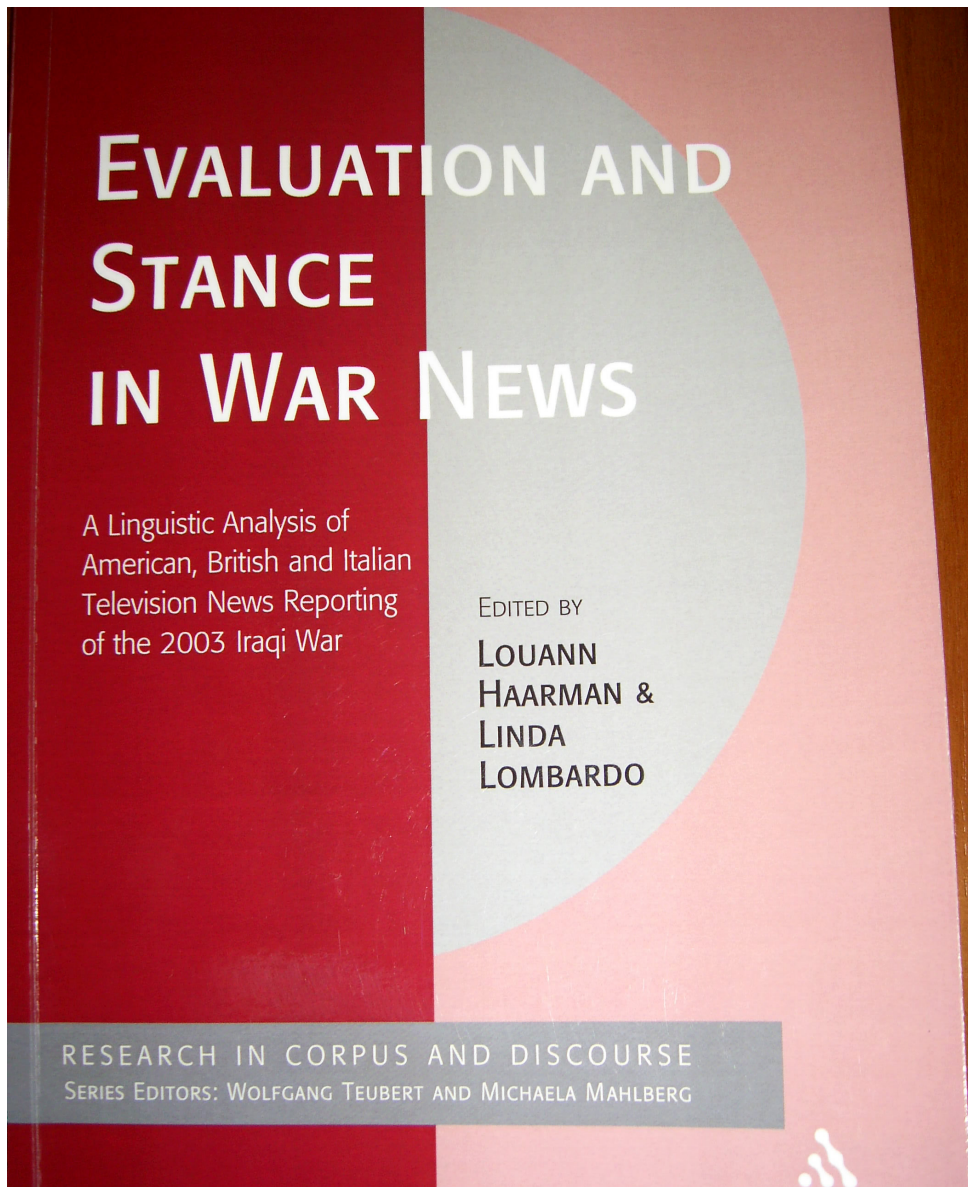
The next section outlines the evolution of the 2003 Iraqi war between 20 March and 9 April and its significance for the three states. The final section of the introduction gives a clear account of each contribution in the volume.

In chapter 1, 'Mark-up and the narrative structure of television news', Anna Marchi and Marco Venuti describe and explain in detail the method used for the analysis of the television sub corpora. The analysis was consistent with the Text-Encoding Initiative (TEI) Guidelines, an international standard for encoding electronic texts and with eXtensible Mark-up Language (XML), the metalanguage of the latest version. The authors highlight the advantages of using mark-up for the examination of multimodal discourse such as television news.

Chapter 2, 'The news presenter as socio-cultural construct', by Linda Lombardo, contains the analysis of the words spoken by the news presenters in the four sub corpora. Quantitative analysis is a starting point, through the realization and comparison of frequency and keyword lists for the four broadcasters.

Lombardo further examines the use of negation as a means of evaluation in the corpus along three parameters: the news coverage of the progress of the war, the coverage of civilian casualties and the representation of the coalition and the Iraqi behavior.

The results show clear differences in the war reporting styles, due to cultural differences but also to the degree of each nation's involvement in the war.



The presenter in CBS relied on official sources and adopted an explicit patriotic stance, by backgrounding negative information or hedging the coalition responsibility for civilian casualties. The BBC news presenter tended to practice an investigative journalistic style, with a greater concern for objectivity and more critical towards the official discourse than CBS. RAI Uno presenters also adopted a more traditional reporting style, trying to present different stances on the topic, while the anchors in TG5 took an explicit negative stance towards the war.

The research on the four sub corpora is extended in the next chapter, 'The news presenter and the television audience: a comparative perspective of the use of "we" and "you" ', by Laura Ferrarotti.

She investigates the use of 'we' and 'you' forms in news presenters' discourse, as inclusive, potentially inclusive and exclusive pronouns. The frequency of these categories and the contexts in which they appear show different modes of constructing the relationship between the presenter and the audience. CBS constructs a more distant relation, except for the 'human interest' stories inserted in the news programme, regarding military personnel and their families.

The high frequency of potentially inclusive 'we' for the BBC presenters shows that they position themselves as representing the audience during interactions with the reporters.

The frequent use of inclusive ‘we’ and ‘you’ forms for the two Italian broadcasters helps to construct a more personal relationship between presenter and viewers. At the same time the presenters are positioned as ‘teachers’ or authority speakers guiding the viewers’ interpretation of facts.

In chapter 4, ‘Wide angles and narrow views: the Iraq conflict in embed and war zone reports’, Caroline Clark shifts the object of analysis from the news presenters’ utterances to the embedded and war zone reporters’ interventions. Comparing the interventions made for BBC and CBS, Clark focuses on three specific aspects: the attribution of utterances to a source which is different from the reporter, assertions made by the speaker-reporter and the use of concession, especially the conjunction ‘but’ as a particular type of attribution. The findings show that BBC reporters express negative evaluation more frequently, especially in regard to the effects on Iraqi civilians. This supports the results of other CorDis subprojects which have found that BBC reporting of the Iraqi war expressed an anti-interventionist stance.

In chapter 5, ‘Decoding codas: evaluation in reporter and correspondent news talk’, by Louann Haarman, the corpus selected consists in edited instead of live reports from all four broadcasters. The term ‘coda’ refers here to the last utterances of a report, which have an evaluative and concluding function. In line with its positive representation of the war, CBS codas were often formed by interventions of US military personnel and their families. The negative stance towards the war was implicit in the stylistically marked BBC codas. Italian television codas were less elaborated and tended to have a brusque ending; they also implicitly expressed ‘a moral commitment against war in general’ (p.135).

Chapter 6, ‘“If it wasn’t rolling, it never happened”’: the role of visual elements in television news’, by Maxine Lipson, is the only one analyzing how images contribute to the creation of meaning in news reports. Lipson presents the methodology and the findings of three studies.

The first one reveals that the most frequent images in BBC news reports during the period 29 March – 11 April were those of machines or other military hardware, which supported the official Anglo-American discourse of the military technical superiority; moreover, ‘the machine emerges as soldier, victim and casualty of the war’ (p.147).

The second study regards the construction of the war participants in BBC and CBS evening news reports during 5 – 11 April 2003. Not surprisingly, the visual elements show a polarization of the combatants: while coalition forces are presented as serious, friendly and helping the civilians, the members of the Iraqi Guard appear as disorderly and emotional. Iraqi men are presented in action, while women appear as still subjects, suggesting sadness and despair. The third study focuses on the representation of coalition forces during 31 March – 4 April in CBS and BBC reports. The results suggest that both broadcasters tend to present the military in the foreground; in the CBS images, the relationship between soldiers and viewers is more direct, while in BBC images it is mediated by the embedded reporter.

Chapter 7, ‘News is reporting what was said: techniques and patterns of attribution’, by Roberta Piazza, aims to investigate how voices of other parties than reporters are inserted in the discourse.

The study is focused on five days of news reports broadcasted by RAI Uno and TG5, in comparison with the two Anglo-American channels. The author examines the frequency of attribution, the identification of the newsmakers, the manner in which different sources are voiced and the reporting verbs in the quoting frames. The findings indicate that the Anglo-Saxon journalists tend to resort to ‘very direct discourse’ more often, letting the interviewed persons speak for themselves, while Italian journalists reconstruct the sources’ discourse verbatim. The Italian journalistic style, especially for TG5 reporters, attributes the reporters the role of interpreters or commentators of the events they witness.

3. EVALUATION

This is a volume addressing especially researchers or postgraduates. Although the scientific terminology and the theoretical framework are clearly explained, some previous knowledge of topics as stance, evaluation or appraisal theory is needed.

The volume is well-structured and highly coherent; the order of the contributions makes them complete each other, as each article refines or extends previous analyses.

Regarding its content, it must be noted that the researchers made a good selection of the corpus, which is not too broad and not too small either. The period chosen manages to cover all main events during the 2003 Iraqi war. The choice of an unitary corpus which is the same for all contributions makes the volume different from other collective volumes on stance like Jaffe (2009) or Englebretson (2007). Haarman and Lombardo propose a complex way of investigating stance in discourse, integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis.

This approach matches other recent opinions on the topic, for instance Hunston (2007) who suggests that the analysis should not be limited to the quantity of evaluative terms, but also pay attention to the contexts in which these terms appear.

The research undertaken by the team is interesting also from the perspective of media and conflict studies, because it proves that linguistics and in particular discourse studies may provide a way of explaining and understanding social and political events. It reveals that the same events and the progress of the war have been depicted differently depending on the broadcast channel's policy and also on the cultural values and the national politics.

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