

## SOME THEORETICAL REMARKS ON INTERPERSONAL AND COMMUNICATIVE ASPECTS IN NEWSPAPER EDITORIALS

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**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on a few theoretical aspects of interpersonal and communicative features in newspaper editorials. The language employed in editorials not only structures them but also foregrounds interpersonal levels of relationship between editorialists and readers thus serving as a tool for establishing interpersonal engagement and managing it throughout interactions. It, at the same time, transmits some kind of content. Language also "constructs and conveys some kind of interpersonal relationship: it has interpersonal as well as ideational meaning" (Ravelli, 2000: 44). Thus, interpersonal communication could be best approached as a (meta)linguistic process involving both (socio)cultural and linguistic factors, present in newspaper editorials as well.*

**Keywords:** *editorials, the interpersonal, communication, cultural aspects*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The motivation for conducting this research is twofold. First, as far as we know, there are no other studies investigating aspects of evidentiality and presence in English editorials. In this regard, this paper aims at exploring these issues from a cross-cultural perspective and in the light of the sociopolitical influence on language use in leading articles such as editorials. Furthermore, it could be a modest contribution to the exploration of many more useful linguistic tools and strategies employed and followed in editorials, especially from a contrastive perspective. Second, the present study considers some very useful (meta)discoursal devices such as hedges, boosters and self-mentions which are often employed to appeal to the editorialist' ethos and which are sometimes neglected as not functioning to create interpersonal effects on editorials. The main concern of some previous studies has been mainly the investigation of pathos and logos elements and some important devices which enact them in the realm of persuasion in editorials (e.g. Virtanen, 2005; Le, 2004, 2006, 2010; Pak and Aceveto, 2008; White, 2006; Morley, 2004; Martin and White, 2005), since they are intended to affect the readership's attitude and to show proper and effective reasoning when (re)constructing arguments. Examples (1) and (2) in the next section exemplify some of these uses.

### 2. INTERPERSONAL ASPECTS IN EDITORIALS

Broadly speaking, interpersonal communication is a form of human communication<sup>1</sup>, either verbal or non-verbal, through which individuals attempt to inform or influence one another in a simultaneous and interactional process. The notion of this ongoing process is extremely important when investigating the interpersonal, since it involves a number of relevant aspects which either affect it or are affected by it. In this study, we focus on only two of them: (socio)cultural and linguistic, given their particular impact on interactions and particularly in editorials. As Corbett observes, individuals involved in interpersonal communication follow certain communicative practices which "result from their socialization into a set of broad and specific 'cultures'" (2011: 308). Similarly, Hargie and Dickinson (2004: 32) state that culture has a bearing on "the different features of the communicative process", specifically characterized by "a complex of perceptual, cognitive, affective and performative factors operating within a person-situation framework" (2004: 11) as well as in the

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<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, this is not a paper on communication, but the term will be used in the first part of this section to facilitate the brief discussion on some characteristics of interpersonal verbal exchanges, although we do not deny that we have to refer indirectly to several aspects of communication in this short paper.

construction of social reality. The linguistic aspect of interpersonal communication is equally important when scholars are interested in exploring the stages which the interactional process goes through. Every act of verbal communication is always interactional and every verbal interaction is always linguistic. Furthermore, “at the same time as conveying some kind of content, language also constructs and conveys some kind of interpersonal relationship: it has interpersonal as well as ideational meaning” (Ravelli, 2000: 44). Thus, interpersonal communication could be best approached as a (meta)linguistic process involving both (socio)cultural and linguistic factors, present in newspaper editorials as well.

Looking at different domains of life, generally from a political perspective (Le, 2010: 1), editorials are considered to be an important and influential genre in the written media. Reynolds (1993: 36) describes editorials as acts of passing judgments on events and people to their readerships for a mixture of purposes<sup>2</sup>, deliberately seeking “to influence and guide public opinions” (Lihua, 2010: 9) by adopting certain positions, usually representing those of the respective newspapers. Inevitably, editorialists attempt not only to involve the audience but also to construct and reflect an appropriate (socio)cultural background along the interpersonal dimensions in newspaper editorials. The interpersonal or the dialogic aspect in editorials becomes obvious and particularly relevant if one considers that they “convey some sense of the public mood or feeling about an issue” (Walton, 2007:202), express certain opinions or attitudes to the audience by carrying “a significant persuasive value” (Le, 2004: 688) in the realm of the “silent” and dialogic (two-way) interactional acts. These claims are also supported by Thompson (2012: 97) arguing that editorials “are more or less effectively shaped to take account of the actual or potential utterances of others, particularly the addressee”.

Needless to say, language employed in editorials not only structures them but also foregrounds interpersonal levels of relationship between editorialists and the readership serving as a tool for establishing the interpersonal engagement and managing it throughout interactions. And we strongly believe that “language as representation, as a projection of positions and perspectives, as a way of

communicating attitudes and assumptions” (Simpson, 1993: 2) maintains these interactions and intersubjective positioning in editorials. In this regard, linguistic strategies adopted by editorialists become very important in the course of the interactions. As Thompson (2012: 78) claims in his study, editorialists “exploit intersubjective choices to enact interaction with their intended audience” and the investigation of these choices “makes it possible to advance more secure claims about the assumptions that different newspapers make about their own socio-cultural role and about the characteristics of their target audience”. In this way, editorialists are not only able to bring their audience in editorials but also to inform, satisfy, direct, influence, or even manipulate the audience.

In the following examples we wish to briefly discuss (in general terms) how the choice of some linguistic strategies<sup>3</sup> enables editorialists to include their audience in the passages, to maintain interpersonal relation with it and to direct it to the intended interpretation of the extracts. Example (1) has been extracted from the first part of an editorial and constitutes one of the many premises that the editorialist forwards to support his/her stance, brought here in example (2).

- (1) The picture of the Syrian civil war *as given by British and French leaders* is either *over-simple*, *imaginary* or *out of date*. The conflict *may have begun* as a popular uprising against a tyrannical government, *but* it has turned into a sectarian conflict between Sunni and Alawites, a Shia sect, inside Syria.

There are four specific linguistic choices in this passage which assist the editorialist to apparently be informative, but who presumably aim at engaging the readership in his/her argument.

First, the writer employs the phrase, or the evidential as Hyland’s (2005) names it, *as given by British and French leaders* to identify the source of the picture given for the Syrian war and to involve a third party in the editorial, namely British and French leaders, as it is often the case in editorials, “to involve three parties: the editorialists, the audience, and the people linked in one way or another to the issue discussed” (Lee, 2004: 688).

Second, the editorialist indicates his/her attitude towards the picture given by using the adjectives *over-simple*, *imaginary* and *out of date*, which convey a rather unpleasant feeling to the

<sup>2</sup> He adopts the description from Jack Rosenthal (1979: 196), as cited in his work, a columnist for *The New York Times*.

<sup>3</sup> We focus only on lexical items in order to be consistent with the devices analyzed and compared in SEC and IEC in the fourth part of this paper.

audience, and what is more, restrict the possibility<sup>4</sup> of attributing any other quality to the proposition of the sentence (note the use of *either* as well, which restricts further the range of choice by the audience). Thus, the audience is directed to interpret the picture provided for the war in Syria in those terms. Further, we believe that the adjectives *imaginary* and *out of date* are unlikely to be accepted by the audience, since, under normal circumstances leaders cannot give an imaginary or out of date account of the situation in Syria. Thus, the audience is made to accept the over-simple description of the situation, which also proves to be the editorialist's stance in the end.

Third, the use of the hedge *may have begun* indicates that the editorialist recognizes the possibility that the conflict began as an uprising against the Syrian government and shows his/her plausible reasoning and prudence with the aim of constructing an argumentation which the audience is willing to follow.

And fourth, *but* marks the transition between the preceding and the following part of the sentence and help the audience to interpret the counterargument of the editorials that what counts after all is that the uprising has turned into a sectarian conflict. Thus, the writer is attempting to drag the audience to his/her point.

Example (2), as mentioned, is the last sentence of the editorial which summarizes concisely the stance of the editorialist. After having enacted interaction with the readership throughout his/her argument, the editorialist indicates his/her position by openly stating it: a *dangerous over-simplification* of picture given for the war in Syria constructing the social reality of events from his/her point of view, and which possibly or likely will affect the readership as well.

- (2) Here the American and Russian approach is much more grown-up and realistic than the *dangerous over-simplifications* coming out of London and Paris.

Although we could have discussed more specific cases of similar linguistic strategies chosen in editorials, the devices analyzed here, particularly the adjectives, enable the writer to forward his/her stance and involve the audience in editorials in an interactional process, as evidentiality and presence devices do.

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<sup>4</sup> Note the use of *either* as well, which restricts further the range of choice by the audience.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This short article attempted to highlight a few theoretical issues related to interpersonal and communicative aspects in newspaper editorials. Although it is a pilot study, it can be used as a theoretical background for future investigations into the realm of editorial discourse. The authors in this paper intended to concentrate on a few relevant features which can be explored from various discursual and metadiscursual perspectives, including lexical, cultural, social influence when addressing the readership in these opinion pieces.

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