

THE LINGUISTIC IMPACT OF PUTTING THE NEWS ONLINE

Research questions

The aim of the thesis is to uncover the impact of on-line media on language use. On the basis of a contrastive analysis of traditional newspapers and on-line newspapers, on the one hand, and a comparative analysis of several types of online media (online newspapers, network journalism, and citizen journalism), on the other hand, we intend to tackle the following research questions:

- Do new mass media technologies have an impact on language use?
- Which linguistic dimensions (both on micro- and macro-level) are affected when going on-line?
- Can the on-line press be described in terms of a new genre and/or does it induce new text types?
- Is there an emerging « on-line norm »?

Conceptual framework: Mass media in a changing setting

Traditionally mass communication is described as conveying messages to very large audiences which are to a large extent unknown to the producers. “However, with the advent of the Internet new forms of communication have developed that blur th[e] distinction [between mass media and interpersonal communication]. Public discourse and private discourse combine in interesting ways (...)” (1995:1). With respect to the communicative dimension, Jucker (2003) distinguishes six main changes taking place between print media and online media: (1) advent of hypermedia, i.e. the integration of different channels of communication (written texts, pictures and photos, movies and videos, sound), (2) personalization and tailoring to the needs and preferences of the audience, (3) interaction and interactivity, (4) changing life span of information, (5) enhanced selective reading pattern, (6) loss of fixity.

Within this changing communication setting, the present research aim is to investigate their impact on the linguistic level(s). Concentrating on both print media and several types of online media, our aim is to bring to light similarities and divergences in terms of linguistic dimensions (lexis, grammar, discourse structure) and structural dimensions (layout and text organization). An open question at this stage is whether this changing setting also induces the definition of a new genre with respect to the online media. According to Trosborg’s (1997) state of the art, three defining dimensions of language use should be distinguished: register, genre and text type. Register refers to variation in language use of a given discourse (familiar, scientific, political, ...) and has immediate influence on the kind of lexis and grammatical constructions used. Genre is not immediately linked to language use but to social context of use and communicative function. Thus, genre determines the way the text will be used, not how it will be constructed. Text type then is a linguistic category based on (observed) common linguistic features leading to traditional types such as narrative, expository, procedural, etc.

Within this context, our working hypothesis is that traditional and online newspapers belong to the same genre, but exploit different registers and text types, whereas the selected online media would belong to different genres responding to different communicative goals. To investigate this issue, we will focus on the linguistic consequences brought about by three of the six changes set out by Jucker (2003): the advent of the hypermedia, personalisation, and enhanced interaction.

Hypermedia and text structure

The overall increase of information contained in modern newspapers is often accompanied by an increasing modularisation of information (Jucker 2003:133). Following Bucher (1996:32), we could speak of “Lego-journalism”, where the front page is no longer intended to be read in its entirety, but rather to orient the reader towards the rest of the newspaper. We hypothesize that this reorganization of the news items has a direct impact on the way the information is structured. Traditional and online newspapers should significantly differ from one another in terms of macro discourse organisation.

Personalisation and linguistic forms

It appears that many news media take a more personal approach towards the reader/hearer. This subsumes, for instance, the use of linguistic forms that directly address the audience. We hypothesize that online media make more intensive use of personalised language, and that this is even more the case in network and citizen journalism. Personalisation will be operationalised in terms of Koch & Österreicher’s (2001) scale from immediate to distant language, which specifies the classical opposition between spoken and written language (cf. Chafe & Danielewicz 1987, Biber 1988) in its account of oralised writing.

Interaction and linguistic forms

Although, mass media communication is generally viewed as one way communication (Morris and Ogan 1996), some form of interaction seems to exist. Readers may interact with the producers of the media product or with other recipients via letters to the editors, fora and weblogs. We hypothesize that interaction differentiates between online media and newspapers, in terms of style (register and text type), as well as frequency, immediacy and peer interaction.

Objectives and originality of the research

There has already been work on the language used on the internet (Anis 1998, Crystal 2001, Holt 2004), and there is also work on the language used in the media, especially in English (Bell 1991, Fairclough 1995, Ljung 2000, Reah 2002, Westin 2002). However, to our knowledge, hardly any systematic studies exist that uncover the linguistic effects of putting the media on the internet (but see Rada 1999). Our main objective is to contrast traditional newspapers (Le Soir and La Libre Belgique) with their online versions, and to contrast the latter with other forms of online journalism in order to determine whether we have to do with distinct genres, or merely distinct text types.

Methodology and research agenda

On the basis of a one-month corpus to be collected manually and by means of rss-threads (Fairon 2006), a contrastive study will investigate how press releases penetrate the different types of media under investigation (so as to guarantee comparability) (see, Jacobs 1999, Lenaerts 2002 for a similar methodology). Parallel to this study of more “objective” information, a study on more “subjective” material, such as letters to the editors, forum contributions, etc. will also be carried out. Quantitative and qualitative, be they manual or semi-automatic should reveal the linguistic dimensions at play.

- Anis, J. (1998). *Texte et ordinateur : l'écriture réinventée*. Bruxelles : De Boeck.
- Bell, Allan. 1991. *The Language of News Media*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Biber, Douglas (1988). *Variation across Speech and Writing*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- Bucher, Hans-Jürgen. (1996). Textdesign — Zaubermittel der Verständlichkeit. Die Tageszeitung auf dem Weg zum interaktiven Medium. In: Ernest W.B. Hess-Lüttich, Werner Holly, and Ulrich Püschel (eds.). *Textstrukturen im Medienwandel*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Chafe, W. et J. Danielewicz (1987). «Properties of spoken and written language ». *Comprehending Oral and Written Language*, 83-113.
- Crystal, David. 2001. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Media Discourse*. London etc.: Edward Arnold.
- Fairon, Cédric (2006). *Corporator: A tool for creating RSS-based specialized corpora*, In: Proceedings of the Workshop Web as corpus. EACL 2006, Trento, 2006.
- Holt, Richard (2004). *Dialogue and the Internet. Language, Civic Identity, and Computer-mediated Communication*. Greenwood Publishing.
- Jacobs, Geert (1999). Newspapers and Press Releases. *Anglistik und Englischunterricht*, 62, 129-141.
- Jucker, Andreas H (2003). Mass Media Communication at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 4, 1, 129-148.
- Jucker, Andreas H. (1995). Mass media. In: Jef Verschueren, Jan-Ola Östman, Jan Blommaert, and Chris Bulcaen (eds.). *Handbook of Pragmatics*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1–14.
- Koch, P. et W. Oesterreicher (2001). « Gesprochene Sprache und geschriebene Sprache ». In G. Holtus, M. Metzeltin et C. Schmitt (éds.), *Lexicon der Romanistischen Linguistik* (vol. I, 2). Tübingen : Niemeyer, 584-627.
- Lenaerts, Gilberte (2002). In Pursuit of the Functional Quality of Political Press Releases. *Document Design*, 3, 3, 211-223
- Ljung, Magnus (2000). Newspaper Genres and Newspaper English. In: Ungerer, Friedrich [Ed], *English Media Texts-Past and Present. Language and Textual Structure*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp 131-149.
- Morris, Merrill, and Christine Ogan. (1996). The Internet as a mass medium. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 1.4 (<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol1/issue4/morris.html>). Reprinted from *Journal of Communication* 46.1.
- Rada, Holger. (1999). *Von der Druckerpresse zum Web-Server. Zeitungen und Magazine im Internet*. Berlin:Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Berlin.
- Reah, Danuta (2002). *The Language of Newspapers*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Trosborg A. (1997) 'Text typology: Register, Genre and Text type'. In A. Trosborg (ed) *Text Typology and Translation*. John Benjamins: Amsterdam/Philadelphia (3-23)
- Westin, Ingrid (2002). *Language Change in English Newspaper Editorials*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.